

Fanfiction by CaraNo

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Chapter 1

NHL = National Hockey League, the major hockey league in North America. World's best hockey league, as well as the most lucrative one.

GM = General manager.

SHL = Swedish Hockey League. World's third best hockey league.

Farm team = An American concept. The clubs in the NHL have farm teams, minors where their younger players can get more experience. If you're good enough, you'll eventually get drafted, either by the NHL or another league. An NHL player can also get demoted and sent down to the club's farm team, so it's not only for juniors.

~oOo~

Anthony made his way through the airport, ignoring the few looks of recognition he received, and hoped he'd find Bella fast.

Goddamn, I miss that girl.

His flight in from Detroit had been fucking miserable, but that's what you got for flying coach.

Up until yesterday, he'd spent the summer in private training, and he'd finally been cleared to play again.

Bringing out his phone that was exploding with messages after having turned it off during the flight, he scrolled down to Mr. Cullen's info and pressed call.

A few teenage girls gasped nearby and started whispering too loudly about Anthony Masen—*or is it Edward? No, I heard he's in Sweden. Like, OMG, there's no telling them apart.*

Eye roll, man.

Anthony was the NHL playboy and fuck-up extraordinaire who'd gone off the grid last season after a slew of minor injuries that couldn't be ignored any longer. And he was fed up with the bullshit concerning his return. Yes, he had partied too hard in the past and gotten a nasty reputation, but he'd always done his job on the ice. Clubs wanted him, though they sometimes proceeded with too much caution, and now they were questioning his pick for the new season.

Hell, he'd been questioning it sometimes, too.

Everyone was anticipating his comeback, and of course they thought he'd play in the NHL. Alas...

"*Cullen,*" Mr. Cullen barked out, causing Anthony to straighten.

Shit, he nearly dropped the fucking phone. "Uhhh, yeah, it's Anthony. Sir. Anthony Masen?" He drew up his hood and hurried as he got closer to the Starbucks where he was meeting Bella. "You called me earlier." He didn't know why Mr. Cullen made his palms sweat. It irritated him.

Anthony was a king. He snapped his fingers and people all but kneeled before him. He was the Detroit Red Wings forward—now loaned out to

Sweden—who played hard *everywhere*. But with Mr. Cullen? Christ on a fucking cracker. He felt like a prepubescent boy who was asking his hero for an autograph.

"Right." Mr. Cullen cleared his throat. There was a lot of background noise, and Anthony knew the team was on their way home from training camp in Austria. *"I was wondering if you'd spoken to your brother yet."*

That would be a no. If Edward found out Anthony was gonna be on the same team soon... "Ah, no. Why, does he suspect anything?" He'd done his best keeping his move a secret, but it wouldn't be *that* hard for Edward to find out. All he needed was the internet.

But he hoped Edward was too busy training across the pond to read NHL news.

"Well, he's in a particularly sour mood," Mr. Cullen said wryly. *"If this goes on, Coach might bench him and let Nordstrom play next week."*

Anthony grimaced, knowing his twin brother was too good to be backup goalie. "Edward's one of the best goalies in the world."

"I'm aware," Mr. Cullen drawled, *"considering I'm the one who signed him."*

Yeah, and the Swedish Hockey League was fucking lucky to have him. Edward belonged with the Red Wings, in Detroit, where they were born and raised. He was Hall of Fame material. But Anthony knew Edward's reasons for playing in the SHL instead of in the NHL.

Edward had been running for seven years now, and Anthony was done. From Edward's farm team days, he'd jumped from club to club, preferring to be a free agent. He'd played in Chicago after Detroit, but that was too close. Then with the Canucks in Vancouver, which Anthony sure as hell

felt was too far away. But Edward felt differently. And now...now he'd gone so far as to leave the fucking continent.

Last season, when Anthony had been focused on getting better, Edward had signed a two-season contract with a team in southern Sweden.

"I'll be there tomorrow," was all Anthony could say. He'd do his best to get Edward back on track, 'cause this shit had gone too far. Up ahead, he spied Bella exiting Starbucks, and he breathed a sigh of relief. She hadn't backed out. "We're boarding soon. I'll call you when we land in Copenhagen." From there, they'd take a cab over the bridge to Sweden and Malmo.

Bella spotted him and smiled—that beautiful fucking girl.

"Make sure that you do, Masen." Mr. Cullen ended the call.

"Bad news?" Bella tilted her head.

Anthony blew out a breath. "That's the first thing you say to me after almost two years?" He crushed her in a tight hug, breathing in her light floral scent. "God, I missed you, love."

Bella squeezed his midsection. "Ditto, motherpucker. Skype hasn't been enough."

True that. Edward wasn't the only runner in their dysfunctional little family; Bella had been MIA, too. Only, she hadn't cut off all communication. In the last year and a half when she'd backpacked her way through South America, she and Anthony had Skyped, called, and emailed as much as possible. And before that, when she'd lived in Texas during her college years, Anthony had visited whenever he could.

It felt amazing having one of his closest with him again. Almost made him mushy, for fuck's sake. When she turned twenty-three in two weeks, he

planned to celebrate big, for the years they hadn't been able to celebrate together.

Bella poked him in the ribs. "If we hug much longer, Twitter's gonna explode with pics of your new girlfriend."

That was actually part of the plan, but Anthony hadn't mustered the courage to bring it up yet.

As good as Anthony was on the ice, clubs were wary of signing him because of his rep. But Anthony had pleaded his case with Mr. Cullen, the general manager with the Malmo Redhawks in Sweden. He'd promised his party days were over, and he'd even told Mr. Cullen he had a serious girlfriend these days. And if he managed to prove himself in Sweden, the GM for the Red Wings would put him back on the ice as soon as he returned to Detroit.

"We'd be good together—you know that." He released her and winked to show he was kidding, which was probably unnecessary. While he swung both ways, Bella knew he leaned more toward men than women. Although, he'd never kick Bella outta bed. She was a sexy little imp.

Edward's a lucky bastard.

And he was throwing away everything he could have with Bella.

"Oh, yeah. Every girl's dream." Bella batted her lashes. "To be your beard."

He chuckled. "I'd make it worth your while." A smirk. "But, anyway...you ready to go?"

"Yeah, no." Bella nodded, then shook her head. "I don't know. Ugh."

Fuck. "But you're *here*. You've done all the paperwork, we have a place to stay—you're holding your damn ticket, Bella." He grasped her shoulders, his eyes pleading with her. "I won't be able to get through to him without you."

Bella was conflicted. "Anthony... I just don't..." She sighed and ran a hand through her long hair. "He made his choice. He doesn't want us in his life." He could see the pain she was trying to hide. "He's just gonna hate us if we show up. If he even remembers us." She snorted in an attempt to come off as indifferent.

Anthony wasn't buying it. He shook his head and brought out his phone. He'd feared Bella was gonna back out at the last minute, so he had one more trick up his sleeve, and this had to work. "You think he doesn't remember?" He found the bookmarked clip from one of Edward's games last season in Sweden. "Here." He pressed play and stayed quiet as Bella watched the video.

For being only twenty-five, Edward's strategic mind outshone the most seasoned players, and Anthony was damn proud of him. Whereas Anthony had turned to booze and faceless puck bunnies when everything had gone straight to hell seven years ago, Edward had lost himself in the game. He was on the ice by day and studied angles and players' shooting styles by night.

Therefore, he had a save percentage of 92% today. When the opposing teams were awarded penalty shots, his percentage was even better.

Many players had goal gestures, and whenever Edward blocked a penalty shot without rebound, capturing the puck in his glove, he had his own little victory routine.

Knowing Bella, Anthony was sure she hadn't seen Edward play in years, even on TV.

"Nice save." Bella grinned a little, but it fell quickly when she saw Edward's signature gesture. One quick peck to the puck before he raised it in the air. "Oh..." She exhaled shakily. "When—when was this?"

"Just last season." Anthony smiled faintly, missing his brother. "You still think he's forgotten us?"

Bella didn't respond, but she did shoulder her carry-on and got a look of determination on her face.

~oOo~

Approximately two hours before they landed in Copenhagen, Anthony had to put his hand on Bella's bouncing knee to calm her down.

"I can't help it." She slumped back in her seat and stared out the window. "I still think this is a suicide mission."

Maybe, but they had to try. Anthony wanted his family back together, goddammit.

"What do we have to lose?" He threaded their fingers together and kissed her knuckles. "And don't say pride or dignity. Fuck that. We swore to each other, remember?"

Growing up in foster care together, they'd had big plans, and they'd been so *fucking* close. Anthony and Edward had recently turned eighteen, and they'd both been picked up by the NHL. Money was coming. They'd make it. Bella was only sixteen at the time, but they were gonna wait it out. And Brady...

Shit.

Bella closed her eyes and rested her head against his shoulder. "Things don't always work out, babe."

This had to, though.

It was gonna be difficult, but Anthony was ready for it.

He had one season—one chance.

To get a better reputation, by focusing on the game and convincing Bella to pretend to be his girlfriend in front of the press.

See? I can be wholesome.

To reunite with his brother.

Simply, to get his fucking family back together.

And if that worked, maybe Edward and Bella could continue what they once started in Detroit all those years ago.

~oOo~

When they landed, Bella wasn't the only one who was nervous. As they waited for their luggage—well, mostly Bella's, 'cause Anthony had shipped his bags before—he tried to come up with the perfect words that would make Bella go, "Oh, of course I'll play your girlfriend in public!"

It wasn't easy.

Next to him, Bella groaned as she checked her phone. "I fucking knew it. Maybe you're safe from fangirls here in Europe, but dude." She shoved her phone in Anthony's face. "You weren't safe in New York."

Well, fuck. Someone had posted a series of photos on gossip sites of Anthony and Bella outside Starbucks. Hugging, obviously—'cause that made good pics. And now Bella was probably pregnant with his baby. No, wait.

Twins.

And only one was his.

Dun-dun-dun.

"I don't know if I should be flattered or insulted to be labeled your flavor of the month." Bella huffed and pocketed her phone. "Actually, that's not correct." She held up a finger. "BunnySpotted tweeted that I'm the *brunette* flavor of the month. That means there's a redhead and a blonde lurking somewhere, too. Hoes."

Anthony grinned and dipped down and bit her finger, then moved away before she could slap him. "Why, Miss Swan. Are you actually following BunnySpotted on Twitter?" He hated that shit. It was basically gossip Mecca for puck bunnies: women who wanted to bang hockey players.

In the past, Anthony had only let those vapid chicks drag him home if he was beyond plastered. Now, though...? Hell, it'd been *months* since he'd gotten laid. Not that Bella would believe him.

But the truth was, he'd gotten sick of that lifestyle.

"Not likely," Bella retorted wryly. "They fucking tagged me."

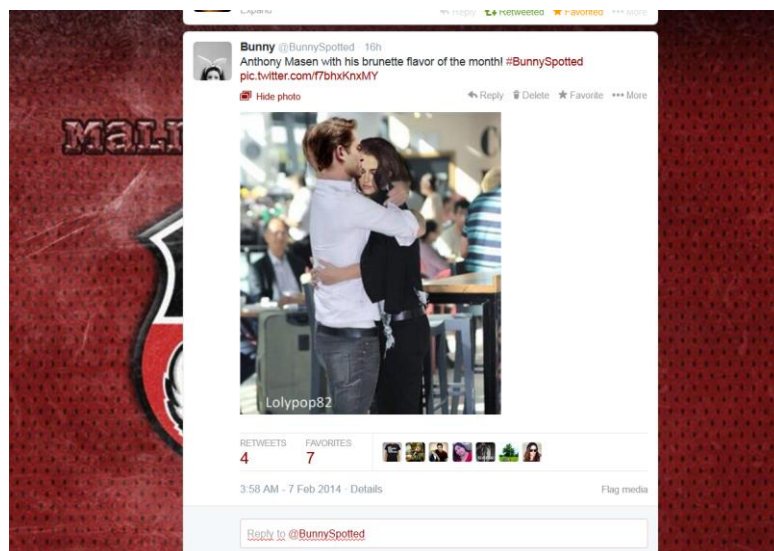
"Oh." Anthony straightened and frowned. "That was quick." Then again, maybe not. All you needed was a good face shot, and then you pulled up free software that compared photos online. And Bella's Facebook was probably public. "Sorry." He was still frowning as he grabbed Bella's luggage off the belt. "But, uh...speaking of being my flavor..." He cleared his throat, nearly chickening out. And then Cullen's voice rang in his head. *"I'm looking forward to meeting this woman who has miraculously set you straight."*

Straight. Heh, heh.

He rubbed the back of his head. "You think you could pretend to be my girlfriend for a while? Only in public, of course!"

Bella's eyes grew cartoon-wide. "YouwantmetoWHATnow?!"

Chapter 2



Center ice = The middle of the rink, in the **neutral zone**, where the ref drops the puck at the beginning of each period. (Each game is divided into three periods of 20 minutes.)

Net = The goal.

Slap shot = A type of shot, the most difficult one to perform. It's also the shot that sends the puck forward with most speed.

Enforcer = An unofficial role that usually a **winger** (a forward position, either left or right) takes on. He's the team's tough guy, and his job is to handle the violence, either by protecting his own players or disturbing the opposing team's players. (There's also something called **pests**, which are players who take "pissing off" to the next level, thus often giving enforcers a bad name.)

KHL = Kontinental Hockey League, based in Russia. World's second best hockey league.

~oOo~

"You don't believe me?" Peter asked incredulously.

Edward snorted and hit the ice. He inhaled deeply, the air crisp, and skated backward. "Oh yeah, I believe you." Or not, considering Peter was a whipped man. He'd never cheat on Charlotte, but he liked to pretend he was still a coveted bachelor. "I *definitely* believe that you bagged *twins* last night." Shaking his head, he turned and glided across the ice to reach the net.

Peter Whitlock was wicked when it came to slap shots, and Edward wanted some practice. Not because he'd be on the receiving end of that slap shot—considering they were on the same team—but Pete had a younger brother who played, too. On another team. Same league. Same damn slap shot skill.

"You ready to be my bitch?" Pete got in position in the neutral zone, a dozen pucks next to him.

Edward smirked and made sure his water bottle was capped, then tossed it on top of the goal and fastened the netted cage of his helmet. "You can try, but isn't it a little too cocky to take the shot from center ice?"

Peter just shrugged and grinned.

By now, more teammates were hitting the ice in the otherwise empty arena.

There was anticipation in the air, especially now with training camp and bullshit exhibition games finished. A lot was at stake, which explained Cullen's presence at most practices. He was the team's new general manager, and he'd made some bold purchases. It only made sense for him to keep track of his investments.

Last year, Edward had played a big part in bringing the Redhawks up from the first division. Now they were starting in the SHL, and while fans and sponsors were thrilled, so-called experts doubted it'd last.

Edward had faith, though. Thanks to new sponsors, Cullen had been able to get a handful of NHL players to Malmo, and Peter was one of them. He was actually half-Swedish, born and raised here, but had an American father. There was also Emmett McCarty, their newest enforcer, from Toronto. Edward had played with him on the Canucks a few years ago, after Emmett had gotten the boot from the Maple Leafs for too much violence.

The money wasn't as good here in Sweden, so most NHL players in this league had their own reasons for leaving North America. Such as minor injuries, age, or, in Emmett's case, a nasty temper that made clubs across the Atlantic reluctant to sign him.

Emmett flew fist-first into fights if there was one. He collected penalty minutes like Peter collected lies about hookups, and there was only so much a club could take before they sacked you.

Fighting was part of the draw, no matter how much some people denied it, but the line was crossed if you knocked someone unconscious, which Emmett had done twice in his career.

"Masen!" Coach Demetri bellowed. Another new purchase right there. The Russian head coach had come here from the KHL last season and had worked wonders with some of the younger players.

Conveniently, a Russian coach meant everything but trash talk was in English instead of Swedish, which certainly made shit easier for Edward and the other Americans. And the lone Czech player, of course.

Skating over to Coach, Edward asked what's up, eager to get back to the net. He'd been in a rut during the preseason games, which pissed him off. He was sure people had noticed. But with the game being his life, could anyone blame him?

He didn't like free time. His mind would wander then, and that only brought pain.

"The GM wants a word." Coach jerked a thumb over his shoulder, then returned to the clipboard in his hands. "He is in my office."

"What the fuck?" Edward scowled. "I just got out here."

Coach only served him a blank look, so Edward sighed, ripped off his helmet, dumped his stick on the bench, then trudged down the corridor toward the locker room.

Reaching Coach's office, he pulled off his catch glove and knocked.

"Come in," Cullen said.

Edward opened the door and crossed the floor, not giving a fuck about his blades possibly scratching the hardwood. He wouldn't be the first one to leave marks.

"You wanted to see me?" He ran a hand over his short hair and eyed the stacks of papers filling Coach's desk. Most of them appeared to belong to Cullen, who had his own office, a lavish one, an elevator ride up.

"Have a seat." Cullen was focusing on his laptop, so he couldn't see that Edward was all geared up, and was therefore unable to sit down in the narrow chairs. The pads covering the front of his legs were too wide. "I wanted to talk to you about—" He looked up. "Oh." *Yeah, I think I'll stand.* "I apologize. I thought I'd catch you before practice. But this will only take a minute." He lifted a bunch of files on the desk, in search of something.

Edward sighed and shifted on his feet, then frowned when his gaze caught on a printout on the desk. What the...? No way. Closing the distance, he pushed between the two chairs and snatched up the piece of paper.

His stomach dropped as he quickly scanned the page—printed out from Twitter.

For years, he had avoided anything regarding his twin brother, but gossip sometimes slipped through the filters. He knew about Anthony's manwhoring and drinking habits, but nothing sliced through Edward as much as this.

"What the fuck is this?" He gnashed his teeth together and held up the page.

Cullen looked up and his jaw ticked. Was Edward not supposed to see this? Cullen considered him with a guarded expression. "Can't you tell?"

Edward glared at the photo. Seeing his brother was one thing, but seeing him with the only girl Edward had ever loved was like a knife in the back.

Get a fucking grip, man. You know Anthony and Bella are close. At least he'd guessed they were. But the photo showed too much affection in Edward's opinion. Too much for childhood friends.

Edward had no right—no claim to Bella, but dammit if this shit didn't hurt.

In an attempt to calm down, he took a deep breath. "Since when are you collecting gossip about my brother?" Anthony played in the NHL, and Cullen hadn't worked in the States in years. Before coming to Malmo, he'd worked in Switzerland and Finland.

"It's not gossip." Cullen cleared his throat and finally found what he'd been looking for. A file. "It's Anthony and his new girlfriend, and I'm saving it for the press conference later."

No. No fucking way. Edward refused to believe that. Bella wouldn't...would she? *God*. And press conference for *what*?

His head suddenly felt like it was gonna explode.

"Anthony is our last-minute trade," Cullen said calmly.

Ka-boom.

"What?!" Edward roared.

Unaffected, Cullen smoothed a hand over his dark hair and adjusted his tie. "He and—" he paused to open the file "—an Isabella Swan, will be here this afternoon. They arrived in Copenhagen yesterday."

Edward shook his head repeatedly in denial and pinched the bridge of his nose. No. This wasn't fucking happening. No way. Never. How he'd

managed to leave Bella and Anthony behind *once* was a goddamn miracle. But doing it twice? *Fuck me*. He couldn't do this. He couldn't.

"They can't come here," he whispered to the floor, his teeth clenched.

"I'm afraid it's a done deal," Cullen said. "Anthony will be with us for this season. He wanted to tell you in person, but then you saw that." He nodded at the paper. "I don't know what beef you have with your brother, but..." He sighed. "This could be a good thing, you know. I've watched footage of you and Anthony—you make an excellent team."

Make—no. *Made*. As in, not anymore. They hadn't been on the same team in ages. Not since the farm team years, and briefly with the Red Wings before Edward left. Plus, this was back when Anthony had been a defenseman. He was the cocky center forward now. He scored while Edward saved.

"They can't come here," he repeated. *Especially Bella*.

He wanted to hit the ice and burn the memory of Bella in Anthony's arms.

Cullen didn't reply.

Chapter 3



Bella was fuming, but she did it behind a sweet smile as she held her *boyfriend's* hand.

Did she have a choice? She adored Anthony and wanted nothing but the best for him, such as getting back in business and leaving his playboy ways behind. And she knew how important image could be. So, no. She didn't have a damn choice. She'd go along with this act until the big shots in Detroit wanted Anthony back.

She was also planning on telling Edward the truth the minute she got the opportunity, but she was afraid he wouldn't hear her out.

Or, even worse, that he didn't care.

I want him to care.

But he hadn't cared when he'd taken off seven years ago.

It hadn't merely hurt when he'd left. It'd been like a gunshot wound to the heart sprinkled with a few stabs with a rusty knife and topped with acid. Because as close as Bella was to Anthony, it paled in comparison to what she'd shared with Edward.

Then again, maybe it hadn't meant anything to Edward.

To Bella, it had been an amazing time. The sweetest surrender after two years of oh-my-God-does-he-like-me-or-not? He had liked her. He'd confessed his love, even, and Bella had done the same.

They'd both tiptoed around each other for a while, afraid of the same thing: that the other only saw a childhood friend, or hell, a brother or sister. They'd grown up in foster care together after all, so it wouldn't have been impossible.

Bella was eleven years old when the Mallorys took her in, and Edward, Anthony, and Brady had already been living there for two years.

In her pre-teens, she had clumsily fallen on her ass too often to count, but from day one, Edward had picked her up and given her a crooked smile that made her blush.

She'd loved all three boys from the beginning, but Edward had wormed his way into her heart in a very different way, and it all culminated in that glorious night when she was sixteen. Two V-cards lost, promises and declarations, twisted sheets, and dreams of the future.

"You'll be this talented photographer who'll come with me on the road," Edward murmured under the covers. "Anthony will be on the same team, of course, and Brady will be our personal chef."

Bella laughed into the crook of Edward's neck and dropped a kiss there. "And every save is for us?"

"Hell yeah!" Edward grinned and lifted his head. "If those who score can have celebration gestures, I sure as fuck can have one for saves. Like, whenever I catch the puck. Without rebound."

Bella hummed contentedly, reveling in her man's large hands lazily roaming her body. "That will be an awful lot of gesturing."

"True..." Edward seemed to ponder that for a while as he kissed her neck, down to her chest. "Okay, how 'bout only penalty shots? I'll kiss the puck for my family—my real family. You, Anthony, Brady."

Bella and her sixteen-year-old heart were goners. "I'll never miss a game."

How naïve she'd been.

Shaking off the pain that gripped her, she sighed and followed Anthony through a maze of corridors in the arena.

It was apparently one of the largest in Sweden, but by American standards, it would need another few thousand seats.

"I'm sorry, love," Anthony murmured for the umpteenth time since they'd left the airport yesterday.

Bella wanted to stay pissed at him, but she could see how much this killed him. "It's a good thing you're hot." She managed to smirk a little.

Anthony's relief was palpable. "I'll make it up to you," he rushed out.

Bella snorted, amused. "Between the imaginary sheets, no doubt."

"Well, yeah. There, too." Anthony winked. "But I was more thinking about your birthday. I'm gonna make it epic for you."

She hugged his arm and kissed his bicep. "I believe you." She really did. And Christ, she'd missed Anthony. Between the flight, jet lag, and revelations, there'd barely been any time to catch up and just savor the moment. "So, how are we on the PDA?"

Admittedly, she was a little nervous about that. Little touches and kisses in public were fine, but nothing too intimate, she hoped.

There was no risk she'd fall for Anthony, but it had been a while since she got some. Women had needs, too. A few drinks too many and she'd destroy everything. Hell, if Edward hurt her again, she probably wouldn't even need drinks, and that was so *wrong, wrong, wrong*.

No. It'd be too weird.

"You afraid I'm gonna make you get over Edward?" Anthony smirked and draped an arm around her shoulders. "I bet I can do it, you know."

"Dream on, buddy." Bella chuckled. There really was no competition. Where Anthony was cocky and arrogant, Edward was humble and less in-your-face. Both boys had possessive streaks, and they were stubborn like no one would believe, but Bella had always managed to tell the two apart. Edward's eyes were gentler.

He was also more of an asshole, considering their past.

Anthony was loyal to a fault, never once abandoning her.

Bella sighed.

"Part of me wishes you were over him."

Bella looked up, surprised. "Why?"

Anthony shrugged. "The way he left? He doesn't deserve you. You don't even deny that you love him, and it's been seven years."

It was Bella's turn to shrug. "It is what it is."

"Just don't tell me you've spent these years pining over him." Anthony looked irritated at the mere thought.

They rounded a corner, finally in sight of the boardrooms. There were also signs of life, unlike the deserted corridors.

"I haven't been a monk—er, a *nun*, if that's what you're asking."

"Good." Anthony nodded firmly and threaded their fingers together.

"Anything serious?"

"Semi." Bella scrunched her nose as she thought about it. "You met one of them when you visited in Texas. My final year. The Christmas party?"

Anthony knitted his brows together and stopped, staring at Bella in thought. Then, "Oh! Jealous Jared?" So, he hadn't forgotten. "How could I forget." He laughed through his nose. "I fucked with him bad. You could almost see the steam coming outta his ears every time I touched you."

Bella hummed, but now she was focusing on the dozen or so people ahead of them. All of them in suits, which made her feel like a hobo in jeans and one of Anthony's Red Wings hoodies.

But Anthony wasn't wearing anything fancy, either. Dark-wash jeans, a new Redhawks t-shirt, and a baseball cap on backward. Yeah, they were here to impress. Or something.

"There was Awesome Alistair, too." Anthony snapped his fingers. "You complained about him for a whole hour on Skype when you were in Chile."

Ugh. Don't remind me.

"Well, how many things can be awesome?" Bella asked, annoyed by the memory. Alistair had been a fleeting thing—decent in the sack and with a hot British accent, but mother of God, everything was awesome to him. Airport bathrooms? Awesome! Stepping in shit for good luck? Awesome! Missing the bus and having to spend the night in the terminal? Bloody awesome!

"You, my love, are awesome." Anthony put on the cheese.

Bella hip-checked his thigh. "That's right. Make love to the camera."

At that point, they were only twenty feet away from the awaiting suits.

"Shit, that's Mr. Cullen," Anthony muttered. "The man on the left."

Well, well. The man who clearly made Anthony nervous was a god. Tall, dark, and deadly? His tailored suit fit him like a glove, and his perfect dark hair probably looked hotter after a night of fucking. Steel blue eyes, a clean-shaven jaw, a sexy-as-hell watch. There was just something about an expensive watch making a man sexier than he already was.

Carlisle Cullen was in his early forties, Bella guessed, and probably the only man in the whole world Anthony had the decency to call "Mr." and "Sir."

Interesting.

"He's got you juiced, huh?" she teased.

Anthony shot her a horrified look and a quick, "Shutthefuckup!" before they reached Mr. Cullen and his posse.

"Mr. Masen." Carlisle raised a brow and extended a hand. "Nice to have you here."

"Glad to be here, sir." Anthony shook it firmly, then returned an arm around Bella's shoulders. "This is my girl, Isabella Swan. Bella, Mr. Cullen—the GM."

"It's Carlisle." Carlisle smiled politely and shook Bella's hand. "I'm looking forward to getting to know the young woman who has turned Anthony's life around."

Bella chuckled and snuck a glance at Anthony. "It's not all me."

More introductions followed—the team's owner, head sponsors, board members, and a few minutes later, Coach Demetri joined, too. They got the show started as soon as a handful of journalists arrived.

Instead of having everyone in a room with too bright lights and to make everyone more comfortable, they began a leisurely walk in the direction of the rink. The journalists in tow, recording everything that was said between Anthony and the suits.

There were jokes, anecdotes, and questions like, "Have you studied the differences between American hockey and European?"

To which Anthony answered in the affirmative, taking things seriously, and looked as eager as he was to get on the ice. But that would have to wait until tomorrow. Today was just to let the country know Anthony Masen had signed on to play for the Redhawks.

As they got closer to the ice, everyone could hear that there was practice going on, pucks hitting the boards, laughter, some yelling, advice from the assistant coach, and Coach Demetri confirmed that a few players were here.

Edward's name escaped Coach's thin lips and Bella became nauseated.

Anthony squeezed her hand, but it did nothing to alleviate her fears. She wasn't ready to see Edward; she wasn't prepared. To everyone else, it was no big deal. They didn't know. They didn't even know that Anthony and Edward had no contact.

A select few did know, and a glance in Carlisle's direction told Bella that he was one of them. But the fact that the internet wasn't packed with photos of Anthony and Edward together meant nothing to the press. Siblings weren't exactly a million-dollar story. Anthony's bachelor ways and rumors about his sexuality, on the other hand? *That* was good gossip. And his stats told serious sports journalists all they needed to know.

"How do you feel about playing with your brother, Anthony?" one of the reporters asked.

"It's gonna be great." Anthony acted well, charming the shit outta the journalists, even though only one was female. "It's been a while since I've seen him—" *Understatement* "—but I've been looking forward to this for months now."

The chilled air from inside the arena hit Bella as they reached the ice, and she shivered at the same time as her hands got clammy. The queasiness wouldn't ease up; she almost felt faint.

"You okay?" Anthony pulled her close, those two words murmured softly with his lips to her temple. His warm body and solid muscles made her feel protected, but there was only so much he could do. He couldn't protect her from the monsters under the bed *and* in the closet.

She managed a jerky nod, and she maintained a smile, albeit forced, on her face, but her eyes were busy scanning the ice. *There*. He was there. Edward. Safe behind goalie gear, hidden. Invisible. Aside from the number 40 that shone like a fucking beacon.

Bella had that number tattooed on her hip, but only Anthony knew. Edward had left before she'd had the chance to show him.

"Itching to get out there, Masen?" the female reporter asked with a seductive glint in her eyes.

Bella nearly rolled hers.

Instead she bit her thumbnail and watched Edward. So far away, yet so close. She couldn't see his face behind his cage and neck guard, but she recognized his graceful movements, quick catches, and fluid drops into the butterfly position.

Four players were working Edward hard, each one firing off puck after puck from various points on the ice. A few obviously went in, but the fucker was good. Great, amazing. One of the best.

"Like you wouldn't believe," Anthony answered absently, also focusing on Edward. "Christ, look at him."

"You need a break, Ed?" One of the players laughed and sent off a puck, the sound cracking through the air. Edward flew up and caught the puck in his glove, causing the shooter to mutter a, "Well, fuck."

"There's my answer, ya fuckin' goon." Edward sounded winded but nowhere near done. "You gotta do better than that, McCarty."

Tearing her gaze away, Bella rested her forehead on Anthony's chest. He hugged her and stroked her back, silently giving all the comfort he could at the moment. A kiss to the top of her head. *Be strong, Bella.* She could almost hear the unspoken words.

"He doesn't care," she whispered, only for him to hear. "He won't care I'm here."

There had always been a part of her that hoped he was missing her, but she had to face reality. If he missed her, he would've answered the phone when she called. Granted, it had been a few years now since she'd dialed his number—she wasn't *that* much of a masochist—but she had tried for the first four years.

"Hey." Anthony tilted her chin up and gazed at her intently, closely. Debating? Then he dipped down and kissed her. Softly at first, just brushing his lips to hers. And by the time Bella unfroze from her few seconds of surprise and shock, he deepened the kiss.

She didn't know what to think.

Across the ice, there was a crack of a stick breaking in half, and the player named McCarty shouted, "What the fuck! Slashing, dude! What did my stick ever do to you?"

The kiss ended slowly, leaving Bella dizzy and a bit slow on the uptake. When she opened her eyes, she met Anthony's that glittered with heat and mischief.

Without a word, he tilted her chin in Edward's direction and rumbled a low chuckle in her ear. "Doesn't care, my ass."

Even from this distance, some fifty feet away, Bella saw Edward's glower.

Bella was caught in the fury of Edward's glare, but she still heard Anthony's quiet voice.

He slowly rubbed his hands down her arms. "One season, then we're bringing our boy home."

Bella swallowed hard, then exhaled shakily. "He saw us." She felt ashamed, exhilarated, angry, and hopeful all at once.

"He *reacted*," Anthony added, brushing a kiss to her cheek. "He cares, Bella. He doesn't stand a chance. It's two against one. And what is the term for when the opposite team has fewer men on the ice?"

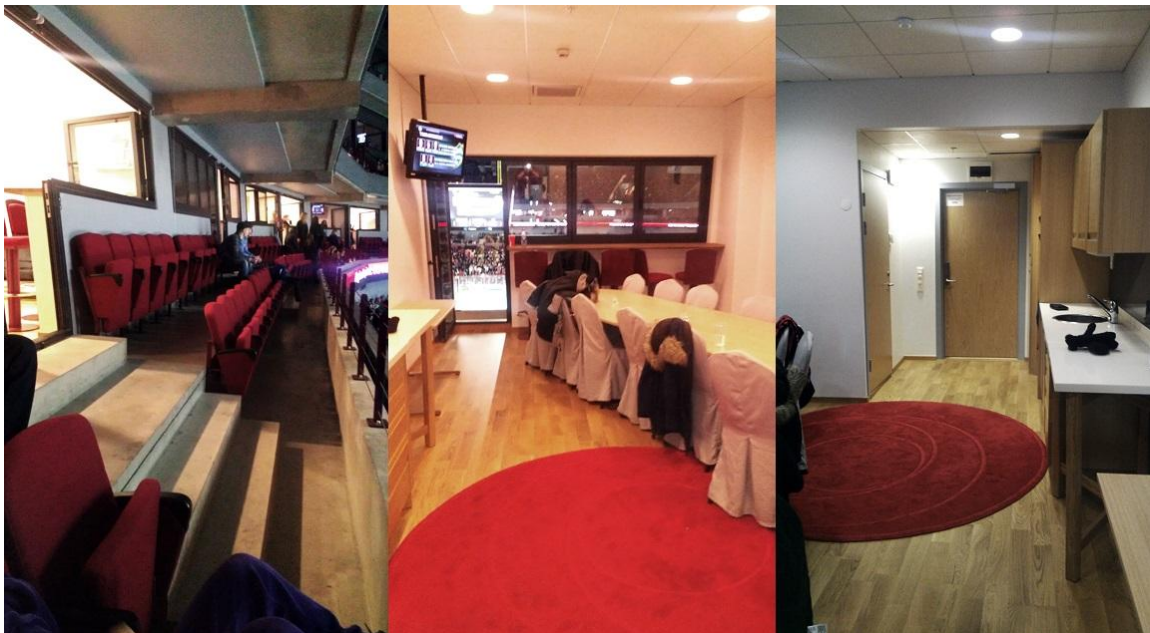
She answered on autopilot. "Power play."

Chapter 4

Turning Torso



VIP box



Translation:

Var det du som satte fem hundra på fight första veckan? = Are you the guy who put down five hundred on them fighting the first week?

Jag och Felix. = Me and Felix.

Du skulle sett Edward igår efter träningen. Där är nåt skit mellan dom två.
= You should've seen Edward after practice yesterday. There's some shit going on between those two.

~oOo~

"Bella!" Anthony shouted with his toothbrush in his mouth. With only a towel around his hips, he inspected his body, satisfied with the muscle he'd put on in the past few months. As his doctor had said before Anthony left Detroit, his thighs could still use some work, but he was now in better shape than ever. "Bella!" Bending over the sink, he took a swig of water, gargled, and spat. Next he ran the tip of his tongue over his front teeth and leaned close to the mirror. He smirked. No one could see two of his teeth were fake.

That's what you get for sleeping with an angry Russian's wife. A Russian who had happened to be a big hockey player and later took his fury out on Anthony's face during a game. But in Anthony's defense, he hadn't known the chick'd been married. Hell, he wasn't *that* bad. Never been.

Just...loose?

Whatever. That had been two years ago. He'd turned over a new leaf.

Since Bella apparently wasn't gonna answer, Anthony decided to seek her out instead. The apartment wasn't big—just a two-bedroom—but it was cool as fuck, and located in the city's one and only skyscraper, Turning Torso. A handful of other players also lived in the building. And if Anthony wasn't mistaken, Edward lived nearby—same neighborhood but closer to the ocean.

Passing his own bedroom, Anthony knocked on the door to Bella's and opened, just sticking his head in. *Found ya.* She was on her bed,

headphones explaining her ignoring him, and her eyes were glued to the laptop on the bedspread.

Bella saw him as he entered farther, and she smiled and removed her headphones. "What's up?"

Anthony shrugged and walked toward her bed. There wasn't much else in the room—just a closet, a nightstand, and a comfy reading chair by the large window. "Gonna head over to practice soon." His new car had been delivered this morning, which was a relief. The cab drivers in Malmo weren't very good at English, probably because they were too busy learning Swedish. "I was just wondering if you wanted to get breakfast with me first. Or I can eat at the arena." He sat down and glanced quickly at Bella's laptop, only to do a double take. "What the fuck, dude?"

Bella merely chuckled, not embarrassed at all to be checking out porn. Gay porn, no less.

"Delicious research." She smirked and adjusted her reading glasses. "I wanna try something new."

Anthony raised a brow, then looked back to the screen. *Holy hotness.* "Something new?" He was well aware of Bella's skills as a writer, but he didn't know that included porn. During her journey through South America, she'd run a popular travel blog, which had resulted in a coffee table book once she'd returned home. And before that, she'd written a couple children's books, one young-adult novel, and now...? What, she was gonna write about dudes?

His fake girlfriend was certainly using her degree in literature and creative writing.

"Erotica." Bella inclined her head and tapped a pen to her chin. "I figured, why not? It's hot, and God knows I've read my fair share. I could write it, too. Under a new pen name, of course. But, yeah."

"Oh." Anthony nodded and swallowed. "You've read your fair share, huh?" Fuck. This was some revelation, and the two men on the screen were really going at it. The porn combined with a sexy Bella, who was only wearing panties and one of his button-downs...? *Jesus*. "So, uh, you..." He rubbed the back of his neck. "You like this? I mean, you watch stuff like this?"

Bella's mouth quirked up in a lazy grin. "Nothing wrong with a little boy-on-boy triple X."

Anthony huffed and adjusted the bulge under his towel. "No shit." He never looked away from the video clip. "This is giving me some serious wood. You wanna do something about it, love?"

Bella laughed and slapped his arm. "You have no shame."

"Shame is boring." At last, his gaze slid to Bella, and he eye-fucked her in the only way he knew: without shame. But no one could blame him. What dude didn't have a dirty librarian fantasy? And right now, Bella was doing it for him—triple X style—with those smooth legs, that shirt, reading glasses, and her sleep-rumpled hair piled at the top of her head in a messy bun—with two pens stuck in it, for fuck's sake!—and those generous curves.

"Wow." Bella widened her eyes and giggled. "*Cosmo* was right. You really do have bedroom eyes."

"Whatever." He pouted instead, hoping that would help him out. Judging by Bella's nose scrunch and quick shake of her head, it didn't. "No?" Another shake of her head. "Damn. So, that's how it's gonna be?"

Whatta pair they made. The Cocktease and the Hard-on.

"Go to practice, boo." She grinned and crawled over to kiss his cheek.
"I'm gonna call B. Lemme know when you're out—I'll meet you there."

Buzzkill.

~oOo~

When Anthony hit the ice, his brother was already there, busy talking to his goalie coach and the two backup goalies.

Chewing absently on the end of his mouth guard, Anthony put on his helmet and his gloves, slowly skating closer to the goal. He'd quickly made friends with Emmett and Peter, promising they'd go out for beers soon, but Anthony was a bit more interested in becoming his twin's friend again.

Edward noticed him and threw him an irritated look before he refocused on his coach's words.

Anthony just grinned and glided closer.

"Is it just me, or is there some tension between the Masens?" Stefan Andrasko, the Czech player, asked.

Benjamin Olsson answered. "Not just you." Then he hollered something to a fellow Swede. "*Erik! Var det du som satte fem hundra på fight första veckan?*"

One of the backup goalies looked up—Nordstrom. He grinned behind his goalie mask. "*Jag och Felix.*" He nodded. "*Du skulle sett Edward igår efter träningen. Där är nåt skit mellan dom två.*"

The goalie coach said something quietly to the three guys by the net, then jerked his chin at Nordstrom and the third goalie, whose name Anthony hadn't learned yet.

The coach and the other two left, leaving Edward alone just in time for Anthony to get there.

"What the fuck do you want, Ant?" Edward fastened his helmet and scowled. "You got some pair..." He muttered something else under his breath and shook his head.

"I'm feeling the love, bro." Anthony chuckled and leaned casually against a goal post. "You don't call, you don't write."

Edward rolled his eyes. "It's not you, it's me; I'm really focusing on my career. Now leave."

Anthony could feel eyes on them, but they were too far away to hear, and he honestly didn't give a shit. "Nah. I'm here for the season. You'll just have to deal."

"I'm trying."

"I can see that." Anthony smiled sarcastically, his temper flaring. "Bet that's why our girl's feeling so fucking welcome right now."

That hit the right spot, and Edward shot him a murderous glare. "You mention her one more fucking time and I'll—"

"And you'll what?" Anthony got in Edward's personal space, the two standing face-to-face at six foot two. "Tell me, Edward. What will you do? Run away again? Huh?"

~oOo~

In one of the VIP boxes overhead, Carlisle was watching the two brothers intently.

He didn't know the details, only that Edward and Anthony weren't close, but Carlisle still hadn't hesitated to agree to the Red Wings trade. If the Masens could only get over their issues, the two would be unstoppable on the ice, thus securing more sponsors for next season.

Granted, Anthony wouldn't be here next year, and Edward could quite possibly find a new team—the kid never stayed in one place for long—but Carlisle was sure the younger players could benefit greatly from the NHL purchases, if only for one season.

"Mr. Cullen?" Rose, Carlisle's assistant, came up behind him with his work phone. "Coach Demetri."

Having expected this, Carlisle took the phone and glanced down at the players' bench where Coach stood. "Let them hash it out, Demetri," he said, smoothing a hand over his dark hair.

"This is my team, Cullen," Coach barked out in a heavy Russian accent. "I will not have two of my star players breaking bones before the first game."

Carlisle wasn't deterred. "It's better they do it now than *at* the fucking game next week." Their first game of the season was against Leksand, an eight-hour bus ride north, and they'd made some good trades this season, too. If the Redhawks could start off with a solid win, everyone's spirits would lift. "The sooner they solve their shit, the better. So, if you want Anthony in the first lineup next Sunday, do *not* interrupt. In fact, put them on opposite teams now during practice." He hung up the phone and blew out a breath. "Coffee, please," he told Rose, not really in the mood for company.

"Yes, sir." Rose left, swaying her hips seductively, but unbeknownst to her, it did nothing for Carlisle.

He kept his personal life to himself, because it was nobody's business. As it was, only his ex-wife, parents, and daughter knew he was gay.

He wasn't in any type of closet, but he saw no reason to "come out" unless it was for a serious relationship. And at the age of forty, Carlisle wasn't holding his breath. Not in the world of hockey.

He'd briefly thought about the rumors concerning Anthony Masen's sexuality, but he'd shot that down fast. While the man was incredibly handsome, he was also a playboy, fifteen years younger, and now he evidently had a girlfriend. Carlisle had no desire to delve into the mind of a might-be-gay-might-be-bi manwhore.

He had hopes for Anthony, though. The team needed him. *Edward* needed him on the ice, no matter how much Edward would love to deny it.

So, Carlisle wasn't sure if he was relieved or disappointed when Anthony skated away from Edward, shaking his head in obvious resignation.

Two hours later, he settled for disappointed.

Anthony was way off his game, not scoring a single goal.

God, give me strength. Carlisle pinched the bridge of his nose.

~oOo~

After practice, Edward stormed into locker room, deciding to shower at home. He got dressed in a rush, nauseated by Anthony cracking jokes with the other guys, saying he was gonna go shopping with his *girlfriend* now and probably end up holding her purse.

Fucking asshole.

Issue 1, Anthony liked to shop more than Bella did. Much more. Edward could remember the day they got their first paychecks and how Anthony blew it all on sneakers and technology, his two favorite things to buy.

Issue 2, Bella never used a purse. Unless she'd changed. But in the past, she'd always tucked things into her jeans. *"I don't need a purse,"* she'd say with an easy smile. *"Got my Visa and my ID, my keys and some change."*

Issue 3, Anthony could go fuck himself. With a hand grenade.

Grabbing his sports bag, Edward made his way through the crowded locker room to leave, only to bump into Anthony as he was on his way to the shower.

"Leaving so soon, bro?" He smirked and adjusted the towel around his hips.

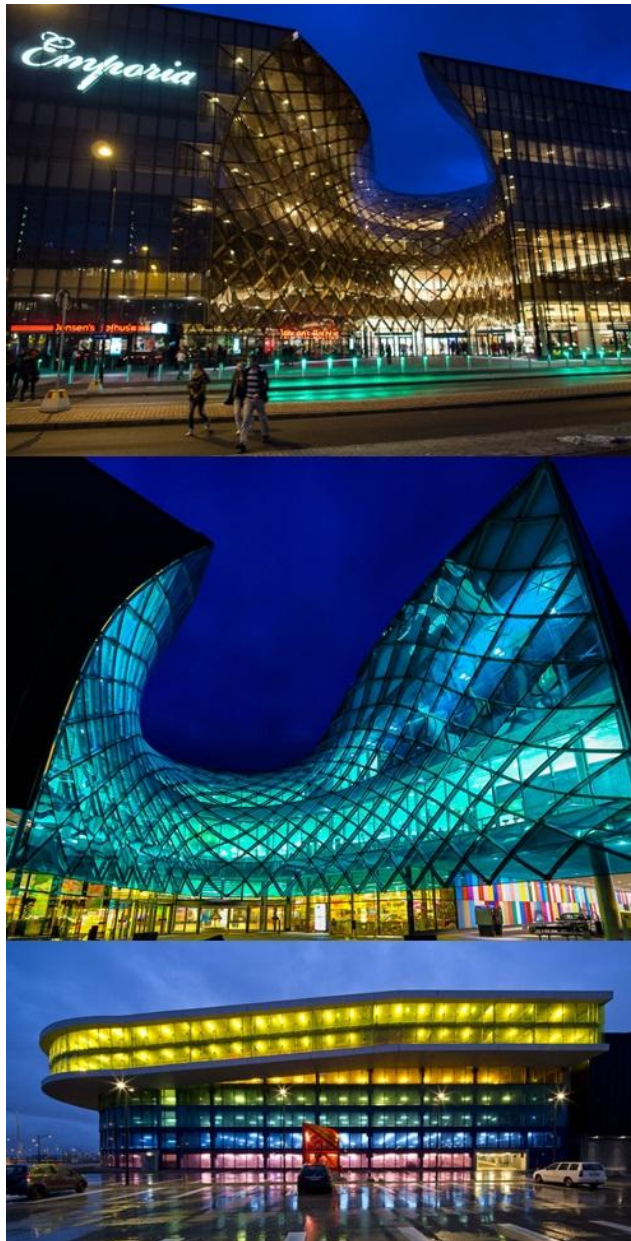
"Get out of my way," Edward warned quietly. The only reason he hadn't smashed Anthony's face in already was because Edward had caught every puck during practice. Had Anthony scored, on the other hand... Yeah, pretty boy would be pretty no more.

What killed Edward even more was that he used to be just as carefree and happy as Anthony was. Sure, they'd been through hell when their parents had died, and they'd ended up with a less-than-stellar foster family, but they'd made it. They'd pulled through, worked their asses off, and been happy together, the four of them. Edward, Bella, Anthony, Brady...

Seeing Bella yesterday in Anthony's arms had only confirmed what Edward already knew: he was still so fucked-up in love with her.

"You gotta lighten up, Ed." Anthony mock-punched his arm. "You could come with me and Bella—we're going over to that Emporia place." He was

talking about the mall across the street from the arena, which was big enough to get lost in.



Edward chuckled and shook his head. "You're un-fucking-believable." With a shove to Anthony's shoulder, Edward walked out and hurried toward the garage.

He just wanted to go home to the loft he was renting and brood in silence. His rent was outrageous, because that twisting building, Turning Torso, had made the neighborhood even more exclusive. Then again, it was

worth it. Edward's place had an ocean-view, *and* there was a gym in the building.

Now that Anthony was on the team, Edward was sure he'd spend more time working out at home instead of coming here.

In the parking garage, he headed straight for the team's gated lot and punched in the code, only to come to a screeching halt when he saw Bella standing in there. Probably waiting for Anthony.

She spotted him right away, throwing the hope of a quick escape for Edward out the window.

Fuck.

Chapter 5



Edward gnashed his teeth together, pissed that his anger was evaporating into thin air. Anger, he could handle. Anger, he could control. But seeing Bella again, up close like this, sent him back to a time where he'd been her boyfriend, her protector, and her best friend.

As an eighteen-year-old guy, he'd loved her quirkiest, honesty, and...well, she'd always been hot. Cute when she wasn't getting her way, cuter when she was mad, and downright hilarious when she'd just gotten up in the morning. But now...? Bella had grown up. She might've been smoking hot at sixteen, but she was fucking beautiful at almost twenty-three.

Her curves were more pronounced, leaving Edward gawking at the sexiest hourglass he'd ever seen.

The most nervous-looking hourglass, too.

Yeah, Bella looked nervous—hell, almost frightened, which Edward hated.

"I'm sorry," was the first thing he heard her say after *he left her* seven years ago. "I—I can go." She jerked a thumb over her shoulder, to the car she'd been leaning up against.

His feet finally started working again, and he shook his head no in answer as he headed for his car. Unfortunately, this brought him closer to her, and by the time he unlocked his black Volvo SUV, there were only two vehicles between them.

Opening the back hatch, he dumped his bag inside and slammed the door shut again. "It's a free country," he muttered.

Bella's expression changed. Gone was the wariness, replaced by a cocked brow and some snark coming his way. "Gee, really? Thanks for letting me know."

Edward sighed and toed a patch of leaked oil on the ground with his sneaker. "Listen, Bella." Now what? What the hell was he supposed to say? *I love you, but can you please disappear?* He already knew he'd never be able to ask her to leave again. "Uhh..." He squinted and looked up from the ground. "Why did you come here?" It didn't sound *too* hostile.

She stared at him silently for a beat and folded her arms across her chest. "I honestly don't know anymore. I guess I smoked whatever Anthony's been hooked on lately."

"What?" Edward narrowed his eyes.

Bella waved it off, suddenly looking tired. "He thought we could...I don't know, be family again? Live on the same continent? Never mind."

Edward couldn't help it; he laughed. It was either that or screaming.

"That's...wow. And he thought getting together with my ex was the way to bring me home?"

"Oh! I thought Anthony told you. It's not really—"

"You know what?" Edward smiled, though it was anything but pleasant. "You don't have to explain to me." He took a few steps forward, unable to help himself. He was so goddamn drawn to her. "But I gotta admit I'm curious." As he reached her, he caught a quick whiff of her perfume, which wasn't the same, but still...her. His neglected dick approved. "Does he make you happy?" By now, he was basically towering over her and had backed her up against Emmett's car. "Does he buy you a piece of your favorite cheesecake every Sunday? Does he score on the ice with only you on his mind?"

Bella exhaled shakily, and Edward had a feeling she wasn't listening to his words. Her gaze flicked from his eyes to his mouth.

She *had* to feel this. The heat, the connection.

Edward sure as fuck felt it.

Around Bella, he forgot rhyme and reason. There were no whys and hows. She *became* the agenda—what the sun revolved around, what everything was about.

"Does he know how to comfort you after a nightmare?" he murmured, then wet his bottom lip. Bella caught the action, and he cupped her warm cheek. God, he'd missed her. He physically *ached* for Bella. "Has he shared his hopes and dreams with you? Do they include you?"

"Wh-what?" Bella swallowed hard and her eyes flickered to his mouth once more.

It was all Edward could take. Dipping down, he kissed her for the first time in seven years. He kissed her as he'd done every day for the single month they'd shared as boyfriend and girlfriend. But even then...it had been enough for Edward to know that Bella was it for him. Years of

friendship had made it clear to him *why* he loved her, and that month he'd been able to show her.

He let out a low moan as Bella surrendered to the kiss, locking her arms around his neck. It encouraged him to take it further. His hands roamed her sides until they found her hips. A squeeze. *I missed you, baby*. His tongue slid along hers. *I've been miserable*.

She clouded his mind, making him forget *why* he'd left all those years ago.

"*Wait,*" Bella gasped, breaking the kiss.

No. Edward captured her soft lips with his again and kissed her hard and deep. Pleadingly. *Don't ask me to stop*. It only reminded him of his brother. Reality sucked.

Jealousy burned like acid in his gut at the mere thought of Anthony kissing Bella like this, and he tore away, breathing like he'd run a marathon. Not a pretty sight with a raging hard-on.

"You can't just—" Bella panted and placed a hand on her forehead. "I mean...*Christ*, Edward."

He tried to play it cool, even though the rejection stung like hell. But he didn't really have the right to be hurt, did he? After all, it always came down to the fact that *he* was the one who'd left. Without a word.

Oh, Anthony and Bella had definitely noticed a change in his behavior in the days before he'd taken off, but Edward had never said a word. He'd waved it off, blaming it on everything to do with Brady. But at the same time, Brady *had* triggered Edward's departure. Or rather, the promise Edward had made and failed to keep.

"Sorry." Edward ran a hand over his short hair and backed away. "That was, uh...*disrespectful* of me—" He smirked bitterly. "I know you're fucking my other half these days." Bella's eyes flashed with the same fury Edward felt. "The *last* thing I wanna do is come between the new lovebirds in town."

"You did *not* just say that," she gritted out in disbelief.

He shrugged. "It's true, isn't it?"

"Considering what a fucking asshole you are right now, you don't deserve the goddamn truth," she spat out. "And I can't *believe* I've missed you all these years."

Edward clenched his jaw, her words hitting him where it hurt. *She missed me?* But it didn't matter. He failed people. Unless it was on the ice, he failed, and he'd continue to do so.

"You shouldn't have," he said quietly, then tried to laugh it off. "Besides, you're with someone better now. Right? The upgrade—the Edward 2.0."

He'd barely gotten the words out before she closed the distance between them and slapped him hard across the face.

"*Fuck.*" His head whipped to the side, and he cupped his cheek.

"Don't you *ever* compare yourself to Anthony again," she seethed, tears of anger welling up. "You're like night and day—hell, you're worlds apart!"

As Bella stormed away, Edward stood there in silence, staring at the ground.

I really do have a knack for screwing up.

Chapter 6



In the plaza in front of the arena, a few curious people stopped to see what was going on, but as soon as the big Redhawks bus parked on the street, they understood the team was off to an away game. A couple paused to snap a photo, but the majority continued on, most of them on their way to Emporia, the large mall across the street.

Tomorrow was the first game of the season, but before that, they had a long-ass bus ride to look forward to. Shit, it was eight hours or something, and Anthony wasn't thrilled. He was used to flying, but North America was a *tad* bigger than Sweden. Here, they took the bus. A luxurious one, sure, but a *bus* nonetheless. Unless they had games farther away than ten hours or if the schedule was tight, then they flew.

But if Anthony could survive a whole week of practices with his broody twin, he could survive this, too.

Right?

A handful of players were standing around talking, a few were on the phone with their families, several were in the restaurant inside the arena, and Anthony and Bella were goofing around and talking about which celebrity pairings would have the ugliest babies.

Naturally.

"Perez Hilton and Courtney Love." Bella danced on her feet and mock-punched Anthony's shoulder, pretending to be a boxer. She looked too fucking cute in a Redhawks signature black and red game shirt three sizes too large. *Call it a dress instead.* Sadly, it hid her ass that was hotter than hell in those jeans.

"Nasty." Anthony dodged her return, then dove left to get her side where he tickled her. "Mr. T and Kathy Griffin."

"Aww, that's just cruel." Bella stopped and wiped a fake tear. "I'd pity the fool—er, the kid."

Anthony laughed and tugged on her ponytail, which got her going again.

"Ummm." She tapped her chin and quickly jumped up to steal Anthony's baseball cap.

"Hey!" He reached for it, but she was fast.

"Carrot Top and Lindsay Lohan," Bella said, jogging backward—away from Anthony.

He wanted his fucking cap back. He hadn't done anything with his hair this morning—fuck it, it was still morning—and there was nothing attractive about bedhead.

"Depends." He grinned and advanced on her. "Which Lindsay? *Mean Girls* era or after the coke diet?"

"Post-blow, of course." She giggled when he managed to grab her by her waist. "She was beautiful in *Mean Girls*."

With her back to his chest, he struggled to get a grip on her stretched-out arm to snatch back his beloved Red Wings cap. "Okay, fuck." He grunted. "You're a strong little shit, love. Uh, Donald Trump—"

"Oh my God, you win!" Bella cried out. Spinning around in his arms, she grinned and peered up at him. "Nothing beats that." He got his baseball cap back.

He smirked right back, but it faded a little when he saw that Edward had arrived and was standing with Emmett and Peter.

"He's here," Anthony murmured, tightening his arm around her waist. "You wanna get outta here now?"

Bella was flying up to Leksand tomorrow morning with a couple of the players' girlfriends, which Anthony envied. It was a miracle that he and Edward hadn't used their fists yet, and an eight-hour bus ride just might tempt fate too much. Especially after Bella had told Anthony about her run-in with Edward in the garage last week.

She'd been a mess, inconsolable, and Anthony had never wanted to punch his brother in the face as much as right then. But he'd promised not to do anything about it.

Ever since, Anthony and Edward had avoided each other, only exchanging curt words when the game demanded it.

Bella deliberated for a second before she shook her head. "No." She was determined. "The reason we came to Sweden might've flown out the window, but I won't let him ruin our time here."

Anthony said nothing, because he was still dead set on getting his family back together, but Bella wouldn't listen to him now, and he understood that completely. Edward was a fucking prick—a damn shame, because he'd been Anthony's rock growing up—but Anthony couldn't give up.

"Time to get going!" the assistant coach hollered.

Bella sighed and dropped her forehead to Anthony's chest. "If I don't see you before the game tomorrow..." She lifted her head again. "Kick ass, yeah?"

"Always." He pressed a kiss to her forehead, then threaded their fingers together to guide her over to the bus. Someone was loading their bags, and Mr. Cullen was standing nearby, talking to two others in suits. "I wonder what he would do if he woke up one morning and found nothing but sweats and t-shirts in his closet."

Bella followed his gaze and gigglesnorted. "Maybe you should ruffle his hair a bit. Get his tie a little crooked?" She waggled her eyebrows. "Undo that fancy leather belt of his?"

"As tempting as that sounds..." And fuck, it really was tempting. Anthony had already jacked off at the thought of having both him and Bella in bed. *Man, oh man.* "I'm faithful to my girl." He hugged her to him and kissed her temple.

"Anthony." Bella tugged on his hand, making him stop. He did, and found her gazing up at him with a soft expression. "I love you. You know that, right?" He nodded, confused. "And I think you're an amazing man. You're sweet, loyal, and..." She smiled. "You're scared, aren't you?"

Well, now he was even more confused. "What? Why would I be scared?"

"I don't know..." She shrugged vaguely and bit her lip, glancing over at Mr. Cullen. "All I'm saying is that you shouldn't use this—" she waved a hand between them—"as an excuse to stay away from everyone else." He opened his mouth to speak, but she cut him off before he could begin. "No, you obviously shouldn't screw around like you used to do in the past, but I'm not *really* your girlfriend. If there's anyone you wanna pursue, on

the other hand...I mean, something serious, then you shouldn't hesitate. I want you to find someone—"

"Okay," he chuckled to stop her. "I get it, I get it. But you're moving a little too fast, Bella. I barely know anyone here yet, and I honestly have no desire to see the inside of a nightclub until your birthday next week." He tapped her nose. "And that night will be all about you, love."

She sighed dramatically, her mouth twisting into a rueful smile. "Okay. But do you get my point?"

Oh, he got it all right. "Loud and clear. Now kiss me and pretend you're madly in love with me."

"I *guess* I can do that." She rolled her eyes before she closed them. There was a teasing smile. "I can pretend you're Ryan Reynolds."

"Ouch." He grinned and Eskimo'd her. "You wound me, woman."

She hummed. "Like you'd kick him outta bed."

True. "Gotta go." He pecked her lips softly twice, three times, then kissed her harder. "If you get bored today, feel free to send me Grumpy Cat pics." He shrugged. "Or porn. Whichever, really."

She chuckled. "I'll see what I can do." Then she sent him off with a light smack to his ass. "Go get 'em, tiger."

Anthony hissed and rubbed the supposedly sore spot. "I feel all violated now. Kiss it better?"

"Go!" she laughed and pointed to the bus.

He went.

Once on the bus, his brows furrowed when he realized his options were limited. On each side of the aisle, players were seated two-by-two in big leather recliners, and he could either sit with the team's juniors in the back...or he could sit next to Emmett and have Peter and Edward across from him.

"Your girlfriend's hot, man," Emmett commented.

That settled it. Anthony could spend these eight hours talking about how amazing Bella was. That oughta piss his brother off, no? "Isn't she?" He plopped down in the empty chair and placed his phone and earbuds on the table in front of him. "A hellcat in the sack, too." He wagged his eyebrows.

"Nice." Emmett bumped his fist.

Edward scowled out the window and put on his earphones.

Across the aisle, Mr. Cullen gave Anthony a cocked brow in warning. *Behave.*

So, Anthony grabbed his phone and sent Bella a text.

I will give you one of my kidneys if you save me. And gummy worms! —Anthony.

~oOo~

Two restaurant breaks and nine gruesome hours later, the Redhawks were finally in Leksand, and Edward felt the temperature drop the second he stepped off the bus.

At some 730 miles north, September was significantly colder.

As they checked in to their hotel, Edward couldn't help but overhear a few of the others who were planning on going out tonight. They were

responsible adults; they knew they had practice in the AM, and going out for a beer was nothing. Only their nutritionists were peeved, but so what. However, Edward knew his brother loved a good party, and he put his resentment aside and hoped Anthony wouldn't drink too much.

Edward's roommate for the season's away games was Nordstrom, his backup goalie, which suited him just fine. The Swede's girlfriend never missed a game, and the two always ended up at the chick's hotel instead, leaving Edward with a room all to himself.

"You coming with us, Ed?" Emmett asked as they got in the elevator.

"Doubt it," Peter laughed. "He's always studying players' tapes."

Edward flipped him off, but he was amused. It was the truth, after all. Edward rarely joined the guys for beers. But this time... He glanced over at Anthony who was on the phone, most likely with Bella.

"We'll see," he said eventually.

~oOo~

After catching some sleep and getting a shower, Edward planted his ass on one of the couches in the hotel lobby. It was nearly midnight, and the guys hadn't returned.

I should've tagged along.

Worry crept up his spine, which was probably ridiculous, but he couldn't help it. He could recall another occasion where he was supposed to tag along but hadn't, and that had ended in disaster.

Just as he was getting ready to search through the entire town, he received a text from Emmett, asking if Edward could meet up. Apparently Anthony was plastered, and there were a few locals itching for trouble.

Edward was outta his seat in a flash and asked the lady at the reception desk for a cab. While she made the call, Edward replied to Emmett's text and got directions to the pub where they were.

Zippering up his hoodie, Edward headed outside and waited impatiently for the cab. In the meantime, he cursed his brother's partying ways to the fiery pits of hell. There was, as far as he knew, no addiction to speak of; Anthony was just a...loud drunk. Cockier than a dick, and he didn't exactly think before speaking.

In high school, Edward had come to the rescue too many times to count.

As bitter as he was because of...everything—Anthony being with Bella—Edward would never back down from helping Ant. He wasn't *that* coldhearted.

Still, as he got into the cab, he prayed it wasn't that bad this time.

Chapter 7

The pub was its own building, so the music was louder than normal when Edward got out of the cab and jogged over to the front door. Had to be nice not to have neighbors to disturb.

Emmett was waiting for him outside. "I didn't know your brother was an animal," he chuckled. "Pete's inside making sure Anthony doesn't start a fight."

"You mentioned locals in your text," Edward said. "Regulars or hockey fans?"

The last thing they needed was a fight that gained the wrong kind of publicity.

"The redneck kind," Emmett said flatly and held the door open. "The, uh, conservative kind?"

Aw, hell. Edward made a face and entered the establishment, which looked more like a British pub than anything else. If Emmett had picked up on Anthony's *preferences*, there was no way of knowing how far this could go. Edward's brother was usually tight-lipped about his sexuality, but the way Emmett had phrased his comments made Edward wonder.

Had Anthony perhaps come out in the past few years? For some reason, Edward doubted he'd have missed *that* piece of information, no matter how much he'd avoided headlines and gossip about Ant.

"Over there." Emmett jerked his chin at a corner where there was a pool table set up.

Anthony and Pete were there, and Edward noticed the dark grin on his brother's face. The four locals were laughing about something, and it was only a matter of time before shit got outta hand.

Every once in a while, Anthony *wanted* to fight. If he couldn't find one, he created one. Usually, though, he did it on the ice.

Muttering a curse under his breath, Edward took the lead and walked toward the corner.

Anthony spotted him and raised his bottle of beer. "If it ain't my broody brother!"

As Emmett had said, Anthony was plastered.

"What the hell are you doing, Ant?" Edward asked, taking the bottle from him.

"Oh, noes. You still PMS-ing?" Anthony slurred. "Seems like wherever I go, I run into people who don't like it when I'm mindin' my own business."

Edward raised a brow, looking for someone to elaborate.

Pete leaned in. "He was trying to cheer up his girlfriend over the phone. Apparently that includes doing the Gangnam Style dance, and those idiots called him a fag."

Edward shot an irritated glance at Flannel Shirts One, Two, Three, and Four.

Anthony had always been a clown; hell, Bella was one, too, and at one point, Edward hadn't hesitated to join in.

"What's wrong with Bella?" Edward asked Anthony. Partly because he wanted to know, and partly because he might be able to distract his brother and get them to leave.

"She misses all'a this." Anthony grinned lazily and pulled up his hoodie to reveal his abs. Edward rolled his eyes. "Nah, she'd just seen some chick

flick that made her cry." He shrugged and scratched his nose. "I wanted her to smile again."

Edward nodded and clenched his jaw, thinking back to when it had been *his* job to make her smile again.

For years, he'd convinced himself he was doing the right thing by staying away, but now he wasn't so sure anymore.

"We should get going," he said, clearing his throat. "Early practice tomorrow."

One of the Swedish rednecks heard that. "Yeah, it's best you run back to your hotel and get some beauty sleep." His buddies laughed with him.

"You have to look great tomorrow when our team wins. Faggot."

"Oh, that's funny!" Anthony barked out a laugh. "You're a real funny guy, you inbred piece of shit!"

"Fuck," Peter groaned.

"Here we go," Edward muttered.

Flannel Shirt Two threw the first punch, getting Anthony in the jaw, quickly followed by Emmett diving into the fight. Anthony rebounded and clocked another dude, and it escalated fast.

Edward and Peter jumped in at the same time; the bartender shouted some shit in Swedish, and the patrons hooted and hollered.

"You motherfucker!" Anthony winced and touched his cracked bottom lip.

Edward saw red and flew into the man who had punched Anthony, delivering a swift punch to his throat. Next he fisted the asshole's shirt, hauled him off the floor, and rammed him into a wall.

"Touch my brother again and I'll fucking kill you," he seethed. Letting go, the dude ended up spluttering and coughing on the floor, so Edward zeroed in on the man Anthony was fighting. At the same time, Emmett came to Pete's assistance.

"Time to go," Peter grunted as he pushed Flannel Shirt Four away from him. "They've called the police."

Anthony's elbow flew up and connected with the last man's chin, and then Edward was dragging his brother outta that place.

"I got one more punch in me!" Anthony argued.

"Trust me, I'll give you one later," Edward spat out and pushed him out the door. "Why the fuck did you drink so much?"

Anthony stumbled a little. "I dunno. The fuckin' bus ride, bro! *Christ*. I was bored." They all started walking in the direction of the hotel, 'cause nobody had the number for a taxi, and they didn't exactly wanna wait around outside that pub. "Dude." He stopped suddenly, squinting at Edward in the darkness. "You're here."

Emmett laughed.

"Sharp as a tack," Peter chuckled.

"No! Ya don't fuckin' get it." Anthony stumbled again but managed to grab on to Edward. "I mean...you're *here*. Why?"

Edward shrugged. "Emmett called me. Said you might get in trouble."

"But..." Anthony really needed to learn his limits. He was slurring and struggling to come up with words. "*Why?*" He swayed a little, then laughed. "So what if I got-got into trouble?" *Hiccup*.

"Hey." Peter nudged Emmett. "Let's go. I think they're gonna have a broment."

Edward shot them a scowl as they snickered and wandered off.

The road was deserted, only half the streetlights working, and they were surrounded by forest on one side and gated warehouses on the other.

"Come on." Edward stuck his hands down into the pockets of his jeans and nodded at the road.

Realizing that Anthony couldn't walk a straight line to save his life, Edward gripped his brother by his bicep and led the way. The cab ride hadn't taken more than five minutes, so he hoped they'd be back to the hotel soon.

"You're mad at me." Anthony grinned crookedly and flung his arm around Edward's tensed shoulders. "Admit it." He poked Edward in the chest. "You're maaaaaad."

"Damn fucking right I am," Edward growled. He blew out a breath, frustrated. "I—Christ." *I was worried.* "Never mind. Let's just get back."

They walked in silence for maybe ten minutes, all while Edward made a mental note of what he needed to do. Firstly, get Anthony back to his room without the coaches or the GM noticing. Secondly, make sure Anthony cleaned the cut in his lip. Thirdly, put ice on his jaw to help with the swelling.

This fight had been kids' play in comparison to hits they'd taken in a hockey rink, but Anthony was already out on thin ice with Cullen, who'd taken a big risk signing him.

Or you can show Cullen that Anthony can't be relied on. If you're lucky, he and Bella are on the next flight.

Well...maybe Edward couldn't fucking do that. He'd already stated that leaving them *once* had been the toughest thing he'd ever done.

In fact, he'd rather listen to Anthony go on and on—and on and fucking *on*—about his and Bella's sex life, which broke his dead heart every time, than let them go.

"You know...I'm ma-mad, too." Anthony belched and pounded a fist to his chest. "You left me. You left *us*."

Edward nodded and kept his eyes on the ground. "I know."

He wasn't sure if Bella was coming tomorrow, but he decided right then and there to find the balls to apologize when he saw her next time. She had moved on, and he was gonna do his best to accept that, which...God, it fucking sucked, but he didn't deserve her.

He wasn't the same man, anyway. The Edward he'd once been...that dude had been happy. Looking into the mirror now—every fucking morning—all he saw was bitterness and loss.

"Finally," Anthony groaned after a while. "The hotel."

Edward looked up and stifled a grin. "That's a gas station, Ant." But he remembered that the hotel was just around the corner from there.

"Oh."

~oOo~

"Almost there—" Edward barely got the words out before Anthony tumbled out of the elevator and landed on his ass.

Anthony started laughing. Hard. Loudly.

"*Christ,*" Edward hissed, pulling him off the floor. "You're gonna wake up Coach." The whole team had rooms up and down this corridor.

Anthony was leaning heavily on Edward when a door a few feet down the hall opened, revealing a disheveled-looking GM. *Fuck.* Cullen wasn't gonna be happy.

Wearing only pajama bottoms, Cullen folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the doorframe.

"Damn," Anthony mumbled, though not very quietly. "Someone works out."

Edward felt a trickle of embarrassment, but protectiveness overpowered it. If Cullen said something stupid now, Edward wasn't sure what he'd do to defend Anthony.

Cullen stared blankly at Anthony but said nothing to him. Instead he addressed Edward. "Celebration usually comes *after* a game, and it doesn't involve a split lip."

Edward nodded. "I'll make sure to tell him." He fished out his room card and deliberated letting Anthony take Nordstrom's bed. The backup goalie was with his girlfriend anyway.

"Wanna compare six-packs, Mr. GM?" Anthony slurred and lifted his hoodie. "My Bella says it's ok-okay. She'll be here tomorrow—my girl."

Edward frowned at...*everything* Anthony had said, then shook his head. He'd gotten confirmation that Bella was coming, and now he needed to get his brother inside his room before—

"At least my dick's not drunk," Anthony laughed. "It works!"

Before *that* happened. Edward groaned. "For fuck's sake, Ant!"

Uncontrollable, Anthony ended up on the floor again.

"Do you need help, Edward?" Cullen drawled.

"You're willing to?" Edward was actually surprised. He'd expected shock, distaste...anger? But not an offer to help. "I, uh...I just need to call Bella." He knew firsthand that she still had the same number.

"Yes!" Anthony sat up and pointed at Edward, or rather, the second Edward Anthony was seeing. A foot or two to the left. "Tell her to bring my hangover kit."

That was the plan.

Having already spent a season in Sweden, Edward had gotten familiar with flight schedules for the games they'd had no time to go by bus and had to fly. To this particular region, he knew Bella would arrive in the next city over tomorrow morning, then take the train to Leksand. In other words, she'd be here plenty in time for Anthony to have a few hours of getting better before the game.

"He has a *hangover* kit?" Cullen raised a brow.

Edward smiled tightly. "You'd be surprised."

"It's worked since I was fifteen." Anthony was proud. Next he whispered to Cullen behind his hand. "It's a secret recipe." He slapped Edward's leg. "How'd'ju know I still used it?"

Because some things never change. "Lucky guess," Edward said flatly. He faced Cullen. "Can you just watch him for five minutes? I'll call Bella and clear out Nordstrom's bed."

Cullen inclined his head, and Edward got going.

~oOo~

Carlisle walked over to Anthony and bent down in front of the young man. "Need a hand?"

Anthony stared at the hand and grinned goofily. "We can start with the hand, sure."

It took a while for those words to register with Carlisle, because...one, he was fucking exhausted, and two, he was focusing too intently on keeping his anger at bay.

But the words did eventually settle, and they left him confused. Or perhaps he preferred ignorance because it kept things less complicated.

Anthony jumped up without assistance, swaying slightly, then walked straight into Carlisle's room.

"Man, this ain't fair. No roommate for you?" Standing in the middle of the modest hotel room, Anthony widened his arms. "You have all this space to yourself." He pointed to the bathroom. "You mind?"

Carlisle lifted a hand in *go ahead*, not entirely comfortable having the young man in his room. Even drunk and crazy, Anthony was incredibly handsome. Well, both Masen twins were, but there was an air of innocence—No, not innocence. Anthony was *far* from innocent. Carlisle couldn't quite put his finger on it, but with Edward... He felt sorry for Edward; the kid was so jaded, whereas Anthony remained carefree and youthful, which Carlisle reluctantly had to admit he was attracted to.

It was a dilemma. Anthony's age both drew him in and made him cautious.

A knock on the door gave Carlisle the break he needed, and he opened it for Edward, who was finally here to bring his brother to his room.

"Two problems." Edward ran a hand over his short hair, his forehead creasing. "Bella's not answering—she's probably asleep—and Nordstrom and his girlfriend are in his bed. Which...fuck, they usually go to her room."

"Ah." Carlisle nodded and cleared his throat. "Well, I can help you take him to his own room." He knew Anthony was sharing with Benjamin Olsson; he just didn't know where their room was.

"Yeah, sure, of course. Where is it?"

I have no idea. Somewhere on this floor. "Give me a minute." Carlisle held up a finger, then walked over to the bathroom door and knocked.

"Anthony?"

No answer.

Carefully trying the handle, he found the door unlocked, and what he saw inside made him want to chuckle and sigh heavily at the same time. Anthony was sitting on the toilet, lid down and pants up—thankfully—and he was snoring. The toothbrush the hotel had provided was sticking out of his mouth, and the boy could snore. While drooling toothpaste.

Edward peered in to see, too.

"Aw, for cryin' out loud..." He groaned and scrubbed his hands down his face.

The general manager in Carlisle recognized Edward for exactly what he was: one of the team's most important players, and he was all but dead on his feet.

"Go to bed, Edward." Carlisle squeezed his shoulder. "Important game tomorrow—you need your rest."

"But..." Edward frowned and gestured at Anthony.

"I'll take care of him. I have an extra bed here."

Edward bit the inside of his cheek, brows furrowed. "You sure?"

No. Not even a little, but it was what it was. "Positive. Go to bed."

Taking his advice, or order, Edward nodded and took his leave.

Carlisle, on the other hand, got a little workout after removing the toothbrush and wiping Anthony's mouth. He wasn't helpful at all as Carlisle hauled him up and guided him to the bed Carlisle had slept in twenty minutes earlier. A hint of possessiveness flared in his gut; he liked the idea of Anthony sleeping in his bed. But the rational part of him argued and said it would be difficult to prepare the bed that was still made, considering Anthony wasn't holding himself up on his own.

"Edward...?" Anthony plopped down on the bed and rubbed his eyes. *Blink...blink.* "You're not Edward."

"How observant of you." Carlisle smiled faintly and watched as Anthony struggled with his hoodie. "Now that you're somewhat lucid, would you like me to help you to your room?"

"Yessir." He yawned and lay down. "That'd be cool... G'night."

In other words, Anthony had no idea what he was saying.

Carlisle stared at him. He tried to tear his gaze away from Anthony's exposed torso but failed.

"He...was nice...tonight," Anthony mumbled, half asleep. "Edward. Forgot to tell him..." He yawned. "...tell him the...truth. Deserved it after...t'night."

"The truth?" Carlisle asked absently. By now, his eyes had traveled south. Down Anthony's defined abs and the trail of hair to where he was fumbling drowsily with his jeans, unzipping them slowly.

"Mm." He grunted and pushed his jeans down his hips. "'Bout Bella and me. Y'know." His eyes remained closed. "S'just for the press, the relation...ship. Edward...and Bella...belong..."

Carlisle swallowed. Anthony's black boxer briefs didn't hide the size of his cock well at all. Half hard, Carlisle guessed. Thick, long.

S'just for the press. S'just for the press. S'just for the press.

Carlisle shook his head to clear the lust-filled haze. His brows furrowed.

What the fuck?

Chapter 8



The crease = The goal area.

Wingers = Forwards working either the left or the right side of the ice.

Officials = Those who enforce the rules. There are **on-ice officials**: one referee and two linesmen. (The NHL go by the *four-official system*, meaning one ref, one assistant ref, and two linesmen.) **Off-ice officials**:

well, in Sweden they're Suits who sit in a booth with pretty headphones, and they have too many tasks to mention.

Lineup/lines = Each team usually has four lines of players. In the **first lineup**, you'll often find the stars, the ones who're put on the ice to score. The **second line** is similar to the first one; they play offensively. The **checking (third) line** is for the more defensive players. Their job is basically to exhaust the opposing team's *first* line. And lastly, the **fourth line**, which is for the goons ;) That's where we see our fighters, the enforcer and the other bigger players, who bring physical strength to the game. While the star players rest, the fourth line finishes the third line's job; they drain the energy out of the opposing team. If your team is lucky, they'll manage to get the first line back on the ice *before* the opposing team has managed to shift, which means the stars will be playing on the offensive against a very tired enemy.

Linemate = Anthony and Emmett are *not* on the same line, not on the ice at the same time, therefore are *not* linemates. Anthony scores; he's a star player in the **first line**. Emmett is the team's enforcer and plays in the **fourth line**. If you're on the same line, you're linemates, and you're on the ice at the same time.

Deke = Stands for decoy. In short, it's when you make a show of going left—for example—but then go right.

TV timeout/Power break = A break in the game, usually only lasts for a few seconds, but it's enough to shove some commercials on to the Jumbotron, and the people watching at home would see commercials, too. *Every minute is for sale.*

~oOo~

Anthony was fucking mortified, and his head was pounding.

One of his many—many, many, many—issues was that he unfortunately remembered things from the night before. No matter how much he drank, he *always* remembered.

His memory failed him a *little*; it was slightly hazy toward the end of last night, but he remembered more than enough. The shit he'd stupidly revealed—that he and Bella weren't really a couple. *And let's not forget that I wanted to compare abs with the man.*

"Someone's finally awake." Mr. Cullen stepped out of his bathroom in only white Hugo Boss briefs while running a towel over his hair. "You should get ready."

"Uh-huh." Anthony nodded dumbly, then tore his gaze away. He'd stand up and escape, but his morning wood kept him seated. At least he'd pulled on his jeans.

Mr. Cullen studied him before he refocused on picking a suit. A charcoal one became the winner, and he didn't speak until he'd put on his pants and a white button-down. "How are you feeling?" He hung a dark red tie around his neck. *Redhawks red.* "Your brother mentioned a hangover kit. I pray it works."

"Uh, yeah..." Anthony snatched up his hoodie and pulled it over his head. According to the clock on the nightstand, there was still time to get breakfast downstairs, but what he wanted most was a shower. "I'll text Bella. Don't think she's left home yet."

"Oh, that's right," Mr. Cullen said mildly, tucking in his shirt. "Your girlfriend."

Fuck me, I think I'm blushing. Anthony adjusted his hoodie so it covered his hard-on, then pushed himself off the bed. "I'll prove myself on the

ice," he promised quietly and dragged his fingers through his hair. Yup, *really* needed a shower.

"Ah." Mr. Cullen nodded, now fastening a watch around his wrist. "Are you afraid I'm going to break our contract, Anthony? That doesn't sound like you, and it's certainly nothing I'm in the habit of doing."

Of-fucking-course the thought had crossed his mind, but like he just said, he'd prove himself on the ice today. Then he'd make a plan to stay away from alcohol.

You mean until Bella's birthday next weekend?

Shit.

"I should get going," he muttered and started walking toward the door.

"Just a second." Mr. Cullen came in front of him, blocking his exit, and narrowed his eyes. They were the same height, but Mr. Cullen was slightly stockier, had a broader chest and shoulders, than Anthony. "Does it hurt?" He grasped Anthony's chin and brushed his thumb over the bruise on his jaw.

It couldn't be too bad, because he barely felt anything. The crack in his lip felt tight, and he'd probably break the skin if he accidentally smiled today, but he'd had worse.

One thing he couldn't really deal with, though, was Mr. Cullen's close proximity. His deep blue eyes were intense, and his aftershave was fucking intoxicating.

The air around them grew thicker with each second that Anthony failed to respond, and he couldn't help but think back on his own behavior last night. He'd acted like a bitch in heat, but Mr. Cullen had barely reacted. Either he was used to that shit, or...could he be gay?

Well...he knew Mr. Cullen had a seventeen-year-old daughter who lived in London.

"Anthony?"

Anthony's eyes flashed to Mr. Cullen's, and he nodded for no reason, then remembered the question. "Right. Um—it's nothing. I'm fine."

Time to get the hell outta here.

~oOo~

The hardcore Leksand supporters booed behind the net as Edward took his position, which only made him grin. 'Cause this...he fucking lived for this, the feeling of being on the ice, the crowd, the mayhem of it all. Hockey had been his only fuel for years now, and he soaked it all up. The trash talk and the booing from the opposite team only spurred him on.

The Redhawks' traveling squad of supporters was smaller, but Edward could hear them just fine across the ice.

While the rinks were larger in Europe and Russia, the arenas were a lot smaller by NHL standards, and only some seven thousand people filled the Tegera Arena. It was a sea of white and blue against the Redhawks red and black.

It was a heady feeling.

The players were introduced up on the Jumbotron while they skated around and got comfortable on the ice. Anthony was focused, Edward was glad to see. He knew Bella had arrived, and there was no trace left of Anthony's hangover.

During practice this morning, it had been kinda awkward between Edward and Anthony, because after seven years of silence, they'd only fought and

glared at each other. But now...eh, it was just sorta stilted, like they were both testing the waters.

"Emmett!" Edward shouted.

Emmett turned and skated toward him, his helmet still in his hand.

"What's up?"

Edward jerked his chin at one of the players in the opposite team. "Keep an eye on number 17. He's known for starting fights around the crease."

Emmett nodded. "Got it. I'll keep him away from you." With a smirk, he skated away again, looking pumped up.

Anthony was next, and he circled the net, focused on the lines and the boards. "The size didn't bother me during practice, but..."

Edward knew what he was talking about. The added fifteen feet in width at a European rink really mattered. Having played professionally—whether it was for a farm team or an NHL team—for the past eight years, since they were seventeen, they knew the American specifications by heart. A minor change, or in this case, fifteen feet of changes, altered the game significantly.

Anthony was a forward with a center position, so he'd be amazed how often he'd find himself working with the wingers along the sides.

He obviously wasn't a stranger to playing along the boards at home, but it was even more here.

"There's more corner play here," Edward told him. "Don't stick to the middle as much as you would back home."

His brother nodded with a dip of his chin, serious. "Thanks. Anything else?" An easy smile slid into place. "I'll take any advice I can get."

Edward chuckled, having a feeling Anthony was dead set on impressing everyone at this game. "One thing. The SHL has less tolerance for violence than we're used to in the NHL."

"Yeah, I heard about that." Anthony frowned. "No fun."

Edward shook his head. "They still fight here—just dirtier. They'll try to rile you up with trash talk and hits to your stick that might go unnoticed by the officials."

"Oh, that's gonna piss me off." Anthony made a face.

"Let Emmett collect the penalty minutes when he gets on," Edward warned. Both Masens could be considered hotheads, but Anthony had been signed to score, not to fight. "Now, go." The game was about to start, and Anthony was in the first lineup. "Own that face-off." He tested a smile, and it worked.

"Look at you, being all nice." Anthony grinned and skated backward toward center ice. "It suits you, bro."

Edward scowled.

~oOo~

The second the puck was dropped, Anthony shoulder-checked the other player and stole the puck, and the season had officially started. He made a long pass to Paul on his left, who sent the puck flying across the ice to Captain. His name was weird, and he'd apparently worked hard to earn the "C" for captain on his arm, so it was what everyone called him.

It had been over a year since Anthony played professionally, so it took him a few beats to get into it, but soon enough it all came back to him. The crowd yelling, the players reading each other, the coaches directing, the international rules he'd studied—everything.

When he got the puck again, another player rammed him into the boards.

"Getting rusty, Masen?" His English was heavily accented. "What did you do last year—eat donuts?"

"Nah." Anthony grunted and body-checked him, gaining leverage and space. "I was fucking your mother. She's loose as a goose now."

"You son of a bitch!" The player pushed his shoulder into Anthony's gut and tried to get the puck from between his skates.

But Anthony was both stronger and faster. He slammed into the younger player and managed to get in a backhand shot that sent the puck to Peter, one of the defensemen. In turn, Peter deked around a player in white and passed the puck to Paul.

Anthony raced across the ice, and the three forwards formed an offensive line. Paul passed to Captain while Anthony crept closer to the goal. Captain got behind the net and distracted two players, then shot to Anthony in front of the goal.

Anthony fired and...missed. Fuck.

~oOo~

Bella was holding her breath. The first period had been intense but hadn't resulted in any goals. Edward had made some amazing saves, and Anthony was always *this* close to scoring.

Now it was in the final minutes of the second period, and it constantly felt like they were seconds away from a goal. So close they could taste it. The Redhawks had dominated the game so far, *but* Leksand had an incredible defense.

The fourth line was on the ice now, and Emmett McCarty seemed to be stalking one of the players who had been pestering Anthony. There were all legal kinds of checking involved—shoulder, back, stick, hip, full body, to mention a few—and they all ended up with the enemy slammed up against the boards or falling on the ice.

Here, up in one of the VIP boxes, Bella and Peter's girlfriend, Charlotte, were the only two women who were paying attention. There were a couple other wives and girlfriends, but they found it more interesting to chat and drink wine. In the meantime, Bella and Charlotte cheered when their team did good, winced when someone took a blow, cursed when the ref made a questionable call, and sighed when it was power break.

"Are you enjoying the game, girls?" Carlisle came up to the large window, eyes on the rink, and sipped on a glass of scotch. Or whiskey. Or whatever.

Bella nodded absently as Anthony and his linemates hit the ice again, looking energized and ready to kill. Or score, as it was. She was damn proud to wear his shirt, only... She'd be a liar if she said she didn't want Edward's number 40 on her back instead of Anthony's 23. She couldn't control that.

"Definitely," Charlotte answered Carlisle, smiling pleasantly. "Excuse me, I'm just gonna refill my soda. Bella, do you want anything?"

"Huh?" Bella looked away from the ice. "Oh. No, thank you." Her attention returned to the game.

Butterflies flitted around in her stomach, as it had for every game she'd attended since her first one eight years ago. Back then, it was just cool. *Hot boys, yay. Scoring, suh-weet!* But nowadays she was more invested. Maybe she didn't read stats, but she kept track of a few key players.

"You must be proud, Isabella. Of your boyfriend, I mean."

Bella's brows knitted together, and she glanced from the game to the GM, then back to the game. "Ummmm." She chuckled and shook her head.

"Okay. Well, yes. Of course I'm proud." She slid him a small smirk before focusing on Anthony and his linemates getting closer to the net. "You should know something, though." She crossed her fingers as Anthony got into position for a slap shot, only he didn't have the puck just yet. "That *boyfriend* of mine tells me *everything*." Such as ending up in Carlisle's room last night, drunk off his ass and spilling the beans.

Bella had laughed so hard.

Poor Anthony; he'd been so embarrassed.

"Does he, now?" Carlisle mused into his glass.

Bella side-eyed him, wondering...and then she figured, she'd never been one to beat around the bush, so she faced Carlisle fully. "Did you like having Anthony in your room last night?"

Carlisle choked on his drink. His assistant, Rose, darted forward to offer a napkin before she backed away again. Bella wondered if Rose had a little crush on her boss and just how unreciprocated it was.

"You don't mince words, do you?" Carlisle cleared his throat and pocketed the napkin.

Bella shrugged. "Waste of my time. So how about that answer?" Her gaze flicked down to the ice, and she winced when the captain of the team missed the goal. Only a minute left of this period.

"I fail to see how that's any of your business," Carlisle said, sounding oddly polite for those words.

Bella just smirked. His answer was not only evasive, but he seemed to know what she was referring to. Someone who had no interest whatsoever in Anthony would say *"I'm afraid I don't understand,"* or maybe that someone would be more direct and say he was straight. Anything, really, but not, *"I fail to see how that's any of your business."*

"What, ah..." Carlisle threw a look around, possibly to see if anyone was within hearing distance. "What about Anthony?"

Bella hid her grin. "What about him?"

A flash of frustration flashed across Carlisle's face, but he was quick to return to his usual composed self. "Could he be hiding something by saying you're his girlfriend?"

Oh, this was *fun*. "I fail to see how that's any of your business." She smiled sweetly.

"Cheeky brat," he muttered under his breath, though Bella heard him and Carlisle appeared to be amused.

"I'm not sure we know each other well enough yet to start with nicknames," Bella quipped and turned to the game. With only thirty seconds left, her hope deflated a bit, but at least there was one more period. "Oh!" Both her hands flew to the glass as she watched the captain turn the game around.

"Come on!" Charlotte hollered, coming up behind Bella.

The captain surged down the ice, Anthony following in a quick race, and it was just the two of them against the goalie. The captain skated left, a move the goalie copied all while keeping track of Anthony, but it wasn't enough for him. The puck was passed to Anthony, who was already in position for a quick shovel shot.

"And he scores!" Bella shouted.

She whooped and hollered with Charlotte, the two bumping hips, and then she laughed when she noticed the song. It was "Gangnam Style," and Bella would bet her life on Anthony having a little somethin' to do with it.

The song was fucking horrible, but it never failed to make her laugh when Anthony did that stupid dance.

Yesterday, Bella had bawled her eyes out watching *Stepmom*, and Anthony had offered to cheer her up. But his little FaceTiming performance with his friends had been interrupted by idiots.

Beaming in pride, she watched as Anthony pointed a gloved hand up at their VIP box and grinned widely. Two cameramen took notice, and soon both Bella's and Anthony's faces were on the Jumbotron.

"God!" She palmed her flaming cheeks and giggled madly. At this point, Anthony was surrounded by teammates, and Bella's smile softened when she noticed Edward congratulating Anthony with a fist-bump and a thump to his back.

Could there be hope?

Bella's heart clenched.

Chapter 9



Lucky Bella.

After the game, she was spending the night at a hotel; meanwhile, Anthony was gonna sleep on the fucking bus. She'd hugged him, congratulated him on an awesome win, and skipped away with Pete's girl. Tomorrow morning, they were flying home, and Anthony wouldn't be surprised if they beat the team to Malmo.

The season had started perfectly; Anthony had scored the first goal, Paul the second with Anthony assisting, and Edward had saved every shot on goal Leksand had taken. So...Anthony was fucking excited, amped up, and totally not in the mood to be quiet and sit still. But after a few hours of celebrating with the team, having dinner and what-the-fuck-not, they were now getting on the bus.

Several of the guys were preparing for sleep. Not a chair in sight was in the upright position, pillows were being punched into perfection, earbuds were inserted, and blankets were fanned out.

Anthony eyed his once-cool, slumbering brother with distaste, shook his head, and continued farther back in to the bus. He knew there was a nook in the back, and he was hell-bent on claiming it. When they traveled by day, the coaches or Mr. Cullen worked there, but even they looked

exhausted by now. Coach had already taken two chairs and pulled a blanket over his head. A couple others were following his lead, and Mr. Cullen had seemed pleased but drained earlier.

Reaching the back, Anthony was happy to find the alcove empty. It really wasn't much, just four chairs, a table, and a setup on the wall for conference calls, but it was secluded. He pulled the curtains together and dumped his bag in one seat, then sat down in the next one by the window.

He managed to pull up the tabletop so he could put his legs in the chair across from him. He had his iPad with him, so maybe he could see if Bella was online.

But Bella wasn't available.

We can talk later, sweetie. I promise! Out with Charlotte right now. Love you!

"Fine. Be that way," Anthony bitched quietly as the bus rumbled to life. Maybe he'd check out Netflix instead. He leaned back, kicked up his feet, and pulled a blanket over his lower body. Next he tossed his baseball cap on the floor and switched off the overhead light—

The curtain was pulled aside, and Anthony met Mr. Cullen's confused expression.

"I apologize," Mr. Cullen said. "I thought you—well, obviously it was your brother sleeping in the front, not you."

A careful smile tugged at the corners of Anthony's mouth. This man made him so fucking nervous. "Uh yeah, we've heard we look alike." And if Edward had his hood up—concealing the fact that his hair was shorter than Anthony's—there usually was no telling them apart. Only a few could.

Mr. Cullen chuckled, then held up his laptop bag, and closed the curtains a bit. "I was going to get some work done."

"Of course." Anthony quickly withdrew his feet from the chair across, but he paused when Mr. Cullen held up a hand.

"That's quite all right." He removed Anthony's bag and sat down next to him instead. "Get some sleep." He busied himself setting up his laptop on his lap, shrugging out of his suit jacket, and attaching a Bluetooth headset to his right ear.

Anthony was no longer in the mood to watch a movie. Or to get some sleep. *Especially* not the latter.

~oOo~

Carlisle could sense the tension in Anthony's posture fading about an hour into the journey. Side-eyeing the younger man, he saw that Anthony was falling asleep, but it sure had taken a while for him to relax.

Yesterday had no doubt made Anthony uncomfortable, and Carlisle didn't like that. Hopefully, they'd find neutral ground in the future.

Turning back to work for a while, Carlisle lost track of time and his surroundings. Snores could be heard all over the bus, as well as the distant and muted buzz of music coming from headphones. It wasn't until Anthony's head lolled to the left and found a resting spot on Carlisle's shoulder that he figured he'd been at it for too long. He checked his watch and noticed it was nearly two in the morning. They'd be home in Malmo in less than four hours.

Without moving around too much, Carlisle tucked away his laptop and tried to reach a blanket. But couldn't. He'd have to wake up Anthony, so he faced the young man and indulged himself with a small touch, just his knuckles brushing Anthony's stubbly cheek.

Seated so close, Carlisle could see every imperfection, every little detail, that made Anthony so goddamn handsome. The slight bump on his nose told of a break or two in the past. There were a handful of tiny scars from hits, one above his left eyebrow, one above his upper lip...a thin scar, about an inch in length, on his cheek where stubble didn't grow.

His eyelashes were dark and long, a trait women probably envied. A dozen or so nearly invisible freckles on his nose. Fair skin. A faint line across his forehead from the baseball cap he usually wore. His bottom lip was just a hint fuller than the upper, and Carlisle wanted to take it between his teeth while he drove his cock into—

Fuck. Carlisle drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly through his nose.

"Anthony," he said quietly, moving his hand from Anthony's jaw to his shoulder. "Wake up."

"Mm...?" Anthony blinked drowsily. His brows furrowed, as if he was confused about where he was. His warm green eyes slid to Carlisle's, and another slow blink. Fucking endearing. "Um. Shit." He lifted his head, straightened in his seat, and pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes. "Sorry. Didn't mean to fall asleep on you."

"Any time," Carlisle chuckled, then realized what he'd said. Well, there was no taking that back unless he wanted to look like an awkward fool. He cleared his throat and leaned forward to get that blanket now, thankful for the insignificant task. "We'll be home in a few hours, but I thought I'd catch some rest as well."

"Yeah, no—I mean of course." Anthony fidgeted a little with his own blanket, then removed his hoodie and rolled it into a pillow. "Just kick me or something if I hog your space," he joked.

Now, Anthony...*he* could pull off awkward and turn it into something attractive.

Carlisle, not so much.

"I wouldn't want to hurt my star player." He enjoyed adding the "my" in that sentence, more than he wanted to admit. Getting comfortable in his chair, Carlisle loosened his tie, closed his eyes, and clasped his fingers together across his stomach. His hope was to feign sleep until Anthony had fallen asleep again. *Then*...maybe he'd relax enough to get some sleep himself.

For a while, he distracted himself by making a mental note to call his daughter soon. Alice had never visited him in Sweden, and London wasn't that far away. Surely she could skip one day of school and join him in Malmo for a long weekend. What seventeen-year-old said no to ditching?

Granted, Carlisle's ex-wife, Esme, would have a fit, but he was used to those.

He sighed tiredly, thoughts of Esme working better than sleeping pills. Perhaps falling asleep would be easier than he thought. Shifting his head to the side, he opened his eyes to see if Anthony had fallen—Nope. He hadn't fallen asleep. Not at all.

Anthony was mirroring Carlisle, head tilted to face him better, and appeared embarrassed to get caught looking. Anthony's eyes had widened; he looked frozen. Lips parted.

If anything, it gave Carlisle confidence. Combining all their little moments and interactions, he was fairly positive now that the rumors about Anthony being bisexual were true. While that opened up a whole new can of worms—what-ifs, consequences, uncertainties, and...exactly what role did Isabella have?—Carlisle was too drawn to Anthony to give a rat's ass.

"You're usually not this tongue-tied." Carlisle held Anthony's gaze while he reached up to press two fingers to the young man's jaw, closing his mouth. Anthony swallowed hard in response. "One might wonder why you're different with me."

Anthony opened his mouth to speak but snapped it shut once more. Opened it. "I, uh...I don't wanna fuck up."

That could mean a number of things, and Carlisle couldn't even begin to decipher it. Now he was too focused on making his intentions clear, such as letting his hand linger on Anthony's chin, then up to his jaw, much like he'd done before when Anthony had been sleeping.

"Shit." Anthony exhaled, and his eyes darkened. Black clouded the green. His lids seemed heavier, as did his breathing. "You're driving me fucking crazy."

Carlisle's desire magnified at Anthony's reaction to his light touch. "Come here," he murmured.

They both moved, and Carlisle slid his hand back to cup Anthony's neck. Tilting his head, Carlisle closed the last distance and claimed Anthony's mouth in a deep kiss.

There was evidently no such thing as "easing into it." Lips parted and tongues met, followed by greedy hands. Carlisle was making an effort to be careful with Anthony's still-tender bottom lip, but the younger man wouldn't have it. He pulled himself closer to Carlisle and pushed up the two armrests between them.

Carlisle paused long enough to recline the chairs as much as possible, and then he made sure Anthony knew who was in charge.

While Carlisle kissed Anthony into submission, he let his hand explore Anthony's toned chest under his t-shirt. He could sense that Anthony was

a man of instant gratification, but Carlisle was intent on taking his time. At least for a little while.

Anthony's impatient huffs and quiet pleas were silenced with a "Not yet" and a deep kiss. Then Carlisle returned his focus to the exploring and learned that Anthony was sensitive along the trail of hair leading to his dick. Every time Carlisle brushed his hand over, Anthony hissed and bucked his hips.

"Patience." Carlisle smirked a little and sucked Anthony's upper lip into his mouth, then claimed a thorough kiss that made them both dizzy with lust. But there was only so much Carlisle could take before he became impatient, too. "Touch me," he commanded quietly, and Anthony's hand flew to Carlisle's crotch, palming the outline of his rigid cock. "*Christ.*"

"Yeah..." Anthony panted and swallowed audibly. "I wanna suck you."

And there goes the last shred of patience.

Along with his patience, Carlisle had lost his composure, too.

He let out a low groan and fell back against his own chair. In the meantime, Anthony slid down to the floor and kneeled between Carlisle's legs. He was a man on a mission, clearly.

No wining and dining for Anthony Masen?

Carlisle wasn't sure how he felt about that. Anthony was one of the hockey world's hottest playboys, according to...sources, and Carlisle was the forty-year-old general manager who was used to proper dating, although definitely not recently. The two men screamed of night and day, but all Carlisle had to focus on now was that playboy on his knees. He could overanalyze later.

With his belt already unbuckled, Carlisle helped Anthony with the rest, unzipping his pants and pushing them down his hips. Anthony took care of the boxers while he stared hungrily at Carlisle's cock.

"Jesus," Anthony whispered, leaning forward. His long fingers snaked around the base, and he dipped down to nuzzle Carlisle's crotch. "Fuck, so sexy..." He brushed his lips along the length, then closed them around the head.

Carlisle sank lower in his seat and weaved his fingers through Anthony's hair, grabbing a fistful. "Don't tease me."

Anthony groaned, his eyes closing, and sucked Carlisle deeper. His chiseled jaw worked with each stroke, hypnotizing Carlisle. There was also Anthony's tongue that he definitely knew how to use, his teeth that grazed Carlisle's flesh, and those soft lips that Anthony tightened on every upstroke. Carlisle hit the back of Anthony's throat, and it was getting increasingly difficult to keep quiet.

"Better than my imagination." He grunted and couldn't stop touching Anthony's face, tracing his jaw, feeling the hollowed-out cheeks... "That's it." He sighed in pleasure as Anthony cupped Carlisle's balls and rolled them gently in his hand.

The build-up was intense and rapid. Shivers ripped through him. His abs tightened, and a warning tingled its way down his spine.

"I want it. Fuck, give it to me." Anthony breathed heavily and jacked the glistening cock, then sucked it into his mouth again.

Carlisle moaned under his breath and clutched the outside armrest that was still lowered. His knuckles turned white. His other hand cupped Anthony's jaw, following each movement.

He only managed a quick, gritty "Now" before his orgasm surged down his body and exploded. Heat flared, he held his breath, his heart slammed against his rib cage, and a light sheen of perspiration covered his forehead.

Anthony swallowed everything and didn't release him until he was only half-hard.

Every muscle unclenched and turned liquid, but the need to taste Anthony overpowered any trace of exhaustion.

After zipping up his pants again, Carlisle opened his mouth to speak, but Anthony straightened and pulled him in for a kiss instead. It was sloppy, salty, full of desperation, and goddamn amazing.

Had he ever experienced such passion?

"Let me take care of you," Carlisle whispered through labored breaths. He nuzzled Anthony's jawline, down to his neck where he nipped at the heated flesh.

"Please," Anthony groaned. "I'm so fucking hard."

Telling Anthony to stand up, Carlisle's mouth watered when he came face to...well, dick, as it was. He leaned in and made quick work of Anthony's jeans, pushing them down along with his boxer briefs.

"Beautiful." Carlisle grasped Anthony's stiff cock and stroked it hard but slowly, mesmerized by the thickness and the length. Perhaps it wasn't as long as his own, but the girth...Christ, he wanted to feel it inside him, and he usually didn't even enjoy bottoming. "Fucking beautiful."

As he closed in and sucked the tip into his mouth, he peered up at Anthony's face to find him staring back, his wide eyes filled with lust and

urgency. He looked so needy that Carlisle almost told him to turn around and bend over.

Instead he sucked Anthony's cock into his mouth, taking all of him.

"Shit!" Anthony pressed his knuckles to his mouth and groaned behind them. "You're gonna—*ungh*, make me look like an idiot by coming too soon."

Ah, to be young again.

Wanting to give Anthony the best climax Carlisle could deliver, he used all the tricks he'd learned in his...actually, his sex life was nothing to brag about, but he'd picked up a thing or two, and he'd blow Anthony's mind even if it was the last thing he did.

~oOo~

Anthony was in fucking heaven.

The biggest star of his fantasies had a magical mouth, *and magical fingers!* Mr. Cullen—oh, fuck that. They had to be on first name basis now.

Carlisle was hesitant at first, caressing the spot behind Anthony's balls. But Anthony's reaction put his mind at ease. Right now, there was nothing that could make this moment hotter than Carlisle's fingers playing with his ass.

To give Carlisle more space, he pushed down his jeans farther and spread his legs as much as the denim around his knees allowed. Carlisle hummed in approval, then released Anthony's cock to soak two fingers in saliva.

All while Carlisle sucked him off, he circled Anthony's ass with those fingers, driving Anthony fucking mad. Finally, when he felt one finger slowly pushing inside, he groaned in relief.

It burns so fucking good.

Being a man's man, built like one too, who played sports professionally, meant that Anthony attracted too many pretty boys. *To each their own.* But Anthony wanted someone who could keep him on his toes. A man in charge, though only between the sheets. Safe to say, Carlisle Cullen did it for him. So much that Carlisle could be considered dangerous.

Feelings and nonsense like that might get involved.

"So good," Anthony mumbled incoherently. He wondered if winning the Stanley Cup could possibly be any sweeter, or if this was what it was like to be on top of the world. "God—so fucking good."

"Fuck my mouth, Anthony," Carlisle murmured huskily.

Anthony sucked in a breath and threaded his trembling fingers into Carlisle's dark, silky hair. One slow thrust had Carlisle encouraging him for more. But could Anthony handle it? Fuck, he was already close as it was. But he was greedy, too.

Every time Anthony thrust his dick deep into Carlisle's mouth, the finger in his ass pulled out. When he withdrew his cock, the finger was pushed in, soon followed by a second finger.

Carlisle was knuckle-deep when sharp jolts of pleasure shot through Anthony, causing every movement to speed up. He returned one hand to his mouth, biting down on his knuckles to keep from making too much noise, as Carlisle swallowed around his cock.

"Fuck," Anthony whimpered.

Carlisle's steely blue eyes darkened, the heated gaze intensifying. Almost as if he knew just how close Anthony was.

"I'm—I'm..." Anthony's head lolled back, and he gasped as he started coming. A final thrust into Carlisle's mouth. The fingers were shoved deep inside Anthony's ass at the same time, curling to reach the spot that made him wanna forget all dreams of the Cup and move in to Carlisle's house. Permanently.

Carlisle hummed around Anthony's dick, his throat constricting around the head until the last drop.

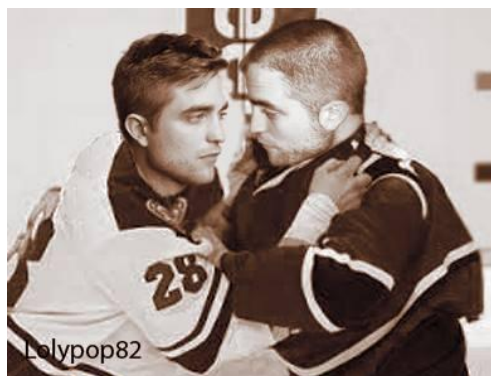
Anthony let out a low groan of exhaustion. His knees nearly gave out.

Okay, I think I can sleep now.

A foreign and unexpected sense of longing settled in his gut. He realized what he wanted, but...the feeling was so strange. Because, what manwhore wanted to cuddle after a blowjob? He was an expert at *Wham bam, thank you, ma'am* and *Wham bam, thank you, man*, but not this. Getting cozy with another person was something he'd reserved for the trips to Texas when Bella had been in college, and now when they lived together. That was *easy*. But this, with Carlisle, left him vulnerable.

Then again, didn't Anthony always go for what he wanted?

Chapter 10



Blue line = In this case, it's in reference to the defensemen, and they play along the blue line on the ice, hence giving them that name.

Crease = Goal area.

~oOo~

When Bella finally got back the day after, she dumped her overnight bag in the hallway and wandered farther in to see if Anthony was home.

It was only eleven AM, so he could be asleep. Or, if their coach was a sadist, at practice.

They'd texted a little this morning before she'd boarded the plane, and she was curious about whatever news Anthony had said he wanted to share.

"Harry?" she called, shrugging out of her cardigan. She dropped it on a chair and aimed for her bedroom. "Haaaaarry boy!"

At last, a sleepy voice replied, and it was, for some weird reason, coming from her room.

"Hermione boo."

Ah, her fellow Potterhead was asleep on her bed.

"You better not be rubbing your dick on my new IKEA sheets." She sat down on the edge of her bed. He was under the covers, so she couldn't be sure.

Anthony frowned and cracked one eye open. "You went to IKEA without me? Bitch."

Bella shrugged and smiled sheepishly. "Well, what else am I supposed to do while you're at practice?" Charlotte was nice and all, but Bella had always been more comfortable with dude friends. "So, what'cha doin' in my bed?"

"C'mere." He lifted an arm, and when Bella didn't move, he huffed and pulled her down. "I didn't wanna miss when you got home, but I was fucking tired." He spread the covers over Bella, too.

She noted that he was only wearing a towel and scrunched her nose. "My sheets are gonna be all damp from your shower." Then she quit the bitching when she saw Anthony wasn't in the mood. "What's wrong?" She rested her head on his outstretched arm and poked his nose. "You not smiling is, like...no. Just no."

He faked one. Then it faded and got replaced by a pathetic pout. "Men suck."

Bella was instantly on edge. "Uh-oh. The good kind of sucking or the bad?"

"Both."

"Oh!" Torn between hope and confusion, Bella went in a new direction and squealed in happiness. 'Cause obviously something had happened with Carlisle! "When?" She pressed. "You sly dog, you." She slapped Anthony's chest, to which he coughed and winced. "Sorry, but—come on! Gimme the deets. Wait—" she sat up abruptly and peered down at him "—do I need tissues or popcorn?"

She felt like doing a little dance. Anthony and Carlisle, sittin' in a tree—

"How about a fuckin' drink?" he muttered and threw an arm over his face.

Bella pursed her lips. When she'd arrived in Leksand yesterday, her first duty had been to mix Anthony's hangover drink and make him his special sandwich, after which she'd listened to him ranting about never drinking again.

Plus, the season had *just* begun. The last thing he needed was alcohol.

"I'll get the vino," she decided and left the bed.

Anthony let out a whine slash growl. It was quite cute—and weird. "I don't like wine!"

"Exactly!" she hollered from the kitchen.

~oOo~

Anthony sighed as Bella giggled.

"Okay, so now we've covered the good kind of sucking." She got giggly after only one glass of wine, and even more so if the wine came with a story that involved dudes hooking up. "You blew his mind; he blew yours—"

"We blew each other's dicks," Anthony drawled, not interested in having Bella turning this shit into a rainbow love story. Because Carlisle—nah, that motherfucker had been demoted to Mr. Cullen again, or just *Cullen*...and *he*, that asshole, had made things very clear. "I got his load; he got mine."

Bella sucked her teeth. "You're so crude."

"I'm a dude."

"That rhymed."

Anthony tried not to smirk. "And thanks for listening. You're very kind."

Come on, love. Make it playful again. His eyes almost pleaded with her. His morning had been a crapfest the minute they'd returned to Malmo, and only Bella could cheer him up.

Bella let out a breath and set her wineglass on her nightstand. "I didn't mind," she rhymed.

They were quiet for a while, and Anthony hugged her close as she absently played with his hair, scratching and massaging. At one point, he was fairly certain she was trying to braid a few strands, but she'd need a whole lot more than two, three inches for *that* to happen.

"You're the best girlfriend ever," he mumbled, scooting down to rest his head on her stomach. "The weirdest and the best."

"Weird beats hipster. I fucking hate hipsters." Bella hummed, and Anthony nodded groggily. Another few hours of sleep wouldn't hurt. "I've hated hipsters since before it was cool."

Anthony chuckled through a yawn. "Don't stop there. I'm sure you meant to say you've hated hipsters since before hipsters knew they were hipsters."

"You're right. Yeah—what you said. Let's go with that. But you're supposed to ask me why I started talking about hipsters all of a sudden. And also, you haven't told me about the bad kind of sucking that men do yet, and—"

"Take a breath." Anthony reached up blindly and clamped a hand over her mouth. "There we go. You were saying?" He removed his hand.

"That men suck," she said.

Anthony nodded. "That, they do."

"No! Ugh." She wormed her way down to his level on the bed. "Tell me why men suck, Anthony."

Do I have to? Anthony really didn't feel like it. *But I don't hide shit from Bella.*

Cullen had seemed pleasantly surprised when Anthony hadn't wanted to forget their hookup and just roll over and fall asleep. Which stung, but Anthony blamed his reputation. Cullen had no reason to think Anthony was a relationship kind of guy. But shit changed.

They'd spent the rest of the trip home talking quietly about the game, and they'd snuck kisses and touches here and there like they couldn't get enough of each other, which was true in Anthony's case.

So, once the bus had rolled in to Malmo, Anthony had taken the opportunity to ask Cullen if they could spend time together, maybe grab a beer or go out for pizza and a game. Because now that Anthony was playing in the SHL, it only made sense for him to keep an eye on the other teams.

You know?

"Aww, you're melting my heart here, sweetie." Bella was tearing up, because she was such a fucking woman. Anthony almost rolled his eyes, but that would've been "insensitive." Or some shit. "So, how did Carlisle respond?"

"Suckily," Anthony said frankly and sat up in bed. "Ego, proving men can suck in a bad way."

Cullen had hesitantly replied that yeah, sure, maybe...they could maybe go out...sometime...maybe. In other words, Cullen had looked like he'd rather swallow a puck than go on a date with Anthony.

Bella tilted her head, puzzled. "Ego?"

Anthony's brow knitted together. "Yeah. You know. Ego, proving my point from before. Or proving what I'd said is...true...?" He was confusing himself.

"Oh!" Bella slapped a hand over her mouth and giggled. "Oh, sweetie."

Anthony's lips thinned. "What?"

"You mean *ergo*."

Well, what the fuck *ever*. "D'ju wanna hear the rest of the story or not?" he asked irritably.

"Yes." Bella was grinning behind her hand. Anthony could tell just looking into her eyes. "I'm sorry. Proceed. Carlisle's response sucked. What did he say, exactly?"

Anthony sighed and averted his eyes. He shrugged. "He hesitated. I think he used the word 'maybe' five times. Dude..." He chuckled humorlessly. "Let's just say dating isn't on his agenda. And fuck it." He scoffed and folded his arms over his chest. "Why do I even care? I can get any piece of ass—"

"You shut your whorish mouth!" Bella blurted out. She scowled. "You know very well why you care, so don't even go there. Your playboy days are over."

"Whatever." Anthony didn't wanna talk about it. Instead he changed the topic to reason number two that proved men sucked in a bad way.

"Edward's back to hating us—or me. He told me to go fuck myself when we stepped off the bus." He pursed his lips. "If I could, I'd probably give it a try."

"Good Lord!" Bella pressed her fingers to her temples. "Too much, too much, *rewind*." She threw Anthony a look of frustration. "You can't go from Carlisle, to Edward, and now fucking yourself, all in one sentence! Sorta." She blew out a breath. "We're not done talking about Carlisle, because I have opinions, *hombre*. That said, we can take five. Why did Edward tell you to go fuck yourself?"

"Why is the sun yellow?" he shot back dryly, then quickly added, "I went with the sun, 'cause when people ask why the sky is blue, I always think that the sky isn't always blue; it's gray a lot too, know what I mean?"

"Good thinking." Bella nodded. "So, Edward's back to being an asshole, huh?" She sighed wistfully. "When he celebrated your goal with you on the ice, I got hopeful for a minute."

"You and me both." Anthony was definitely disappointed. "We were kinda talking like normal people there for a minute, you know? Then bam, I stepped off the bus and nodded at Edward, only for him to glare and tell me to go fuck myself. Then he stalked off muttering about how he hated waking up in the middle of the night."

"What?" Bella squinted in confusion.

Hell, Anthony was confused, too. He shrugged one shoulder. "Who knows? Maybe he regrets coming to that pub up in Leksand. It was the middle of the night. I don't know. I can't read that dude."

"Huh..." Bella bit her thumbnail, lost in thought.

"So, why do you hate hipsters?"

"Huh?" Bella repeated, this time in question, and looked confused for a sec. "Oh. It was nothing. I ended up next to one on the flight. Annoyed the mainstream shit outta me."

~oOo~

Edward was fuming.

He'd kept his mouth shut for the past week—since they got back from the Leksand game—but if he saw Anthony casting another lingering look in Cullen's direction, Edward was gonna blow a fucking fuse.

It was Friday morning, and today's topic at practice was the party Anthony was hosting for Bella tomorrow. The whole team had evidently been invited, including wives and girlfriends. Edward had received his invitation after their first home game this Wednesday; Anthony had jerked his chin in Edward's direction and said, "If you feel like taking a break from your shitty attitude, you should come."

Oh, Edward was gonna be there, no fucking doubt.

"Man on, Whitlock! Man on!" he shouted across the ice. "Watch left!" Peter was on his team during practice, and Pete had McCarty stalking him. Edward breathed a sigh of relief as Pete dodged Emmett's body-check and passed to Olsson, who took it to the finish and scored for their team.

"That's what I'm talking about, motherfucker!" Pete fist-pumped the air.

"Nice play," Coach said. "Remember that next game, Olsson."

They played Peter's little brother's team next week, and they happened to be last season's champions. The Redhawks were gonna need all the practice they could get.

Anthony won the next face-off, and Edward got ready when he saw the determination on his brother's face. Anthony didn't handle loss well, not even at practice, and now he wanted to even the scores.

"With you, Masen!" Nordstrom yelled from the other net, telling Anthony he had backup.

Edward's team's blue line formed quickly to defend, but Anthony was faster. He passed the puck to Andrasko, then skated around the net to receive the next pass. Edward dropped into position and peered around him to see better. Not that it was fucking working. Nearly every player on the ice was gathered around the crease, blocking his view.

"Screen, Olsson!" Edward barked out. "Felix, watch it! *Screen!*" Olsson finally checked the player who was blocking Edward's view, and Felix deked around Emmett, pushed forward, and came in between Andrasko and Anthony.

"Chip it, dammit!" Anthony yelled to Andrasko, and Andrasko complied, shooting the puck against the boards to flip it back to Anthony.

Anthony passed to one of his defensemen, bringing the game to the front of the goal instead. He took a quick shot, and Edward pushed out his leg, blocking the puck with his pads. Good, but...Edward fucking hated giving rebounds, and this puck was already flying back to Anthony.

This time, Anthony skated closer to be a goddamn pest. He took another shot as the other players crowded the crease, but Edward tuned them all out. He was focused on the puck, which he gloved. But the others didn't know that; there was too much commotion. He spat out that he'd pocketed the damn puck, but the game was forgotten. Emmett flew into Olsson, the two arguing about a supposed cross-checking, which was illegal, and Anthony was riled up because he wanted to score.

"If you wanna score, you gotta work harder for it," Edward sneered and pushed up to a standing position, opening his catch glove to reveal the puck. "Better luck next time."

"You think I can't score, bro?" Anthony laughed darkly. "Oh, you have no *idea* how much I score."

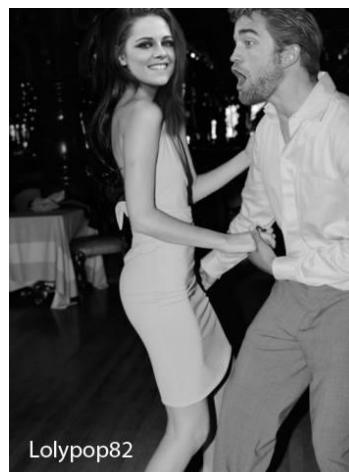
The double entendre wasn't lost on Edward. "Actually, ya *dumb fuck*, I do." He knew that while Anthony had the most beautiful woman in the whole world at home, he evidently needed to get his rocks off with the GM. "How everyone else doesn't see through your bullshit fucking astounds me." He glared at his twin and ripped off his helmet. "But lemme guess, it's your way of *grieving*."

Anthony's amusement faded and was replaced by raw fury. "The fuck you say?"

By now, Edward was in his face. "I'm saying that you make me *sick*."

After that, the gloves came off and the two brothers flew at each other, fists first. With every punch Edward delivered, he remembered how he'd woken up in the middle of the night on the bus to take a piss, only to hear Anthony and Cullen getting it on in the nook next to the bathroom. And with every hit his face and body took, he reminded himself that it was *nothing* compared to walking away from Bella.

Chapter 11



Anthony had gone all out to make Bella's twenty-third birthday a spectacular one. After a private dinner, they'd picked up some of the players and their women and taken a limo to the nightclub he'd rented for tonight. Well, the top floor of the club. It had two.

At midnight, it was still early—at least for clubbing—but almost everyone was already here.

Not Edward.

No. Anthony scanned the crowd of some fifty guests every now and then, but Edward hadn't shown up.

He didn't know if that was good or bad. After their fight at yesterday's practice, Anthony had gone home and told Bella everything, and the two had tried to figure out what Edward's problem was. The only suggestion Bella had was that Anthony had to *talk* to Edward. Without fists.

It was a miracle neither had been seriously injured. Instead they were both just sporting a few faint bruises that were already fading.

That said, Anthony's lip had cracked again, and that's why he thought Bella's idea was crap. He was too bitter, and the last thing he wanted was to be in the same room as Edward right now, but that didn't mean he didn't want Edward to grow a pair and be here for Bella.

"What'chu glarin' at, boo-boo?" Bella smashed his cheeks together and jutted out her bottom lip. She was too adorable. Sexy as hell in that strapless top and skinny jeans, but with the flush in her cheeks and her glassy eyes sort of unfocused, she was fucking cute. "You should be happy!"

He chuckled and covered her hands with his, then kissed her knuckles. "I'm fuckin' ecstatic. Can't you tell?"

Bella didn't believe him. Grabbing one of the champagne bottles from the table, she got settled on his lap and took a big gulp from the bottle. "Whew! Bubbly." She grinned goofily. "Okay, le's get down to b'zness." She leaned forward and grasped his chin.

Meanwhile, Anthony was trying not to laugh at her. "Are you a little drunk, love?" He didn't wanna get down to "b'zness," so if he could distract her, that would be just fine.

The music was loud, the champagne was flowing, and the people were in a good mood. Anthony's beef with Edward—not to mention his one-sided puppy crush on Cullen—had nothing to do with tonight.

"Just a li'l bit." Bella squinted and pinched two fingers together. Behind her, Emmett ushered Whatsherface—Cullen's PA—out to the dance floor. It gave Anthony an idea. "Anyway—"

He cut her off. "Come on. I wanna feel that ass of yours in my hands." Setting down her bottle, he followed Emmett's lead and dragged Bella to the dance floor. Some Rihanna remix came on and Anthony pulled Bella close and smacked her ass. "Let's show the others how it's done."

She laughed, her previous topic forgotten, and shimmied her hips to the beat.

Oh yeah, that's it. Bella knew how to drive him wild. And with her, it was just so fucking easy. Like breathing. She was his best friend, she was gorgeous, and she was funny. In many ways, they were alike. They shared the same humor, they were both carefree, and they liked the simple things in life.

Screw Cullen. Screw Edward.

"We should cut our losses," he spoke in Bella's ear as a calmer song began. He was only half-kidding. "You and me, Bella."

She knew what he was referring to. She always did, and she peered up at him with a cute grin. "You don't mean that."

Anthony shrugged, knowing she was right—deep down—but he was sick of people who didn't know what they wanted. Or did know, but didn't do anything about it. He'd caught Cullen watching him several times in the past week, yet he always walked away, leaving Anthony frustrated and irritated.

Hurt.

Fuck that. Anthony didn't get hurt.

Except...he did. When people left him.

~oOo~

Bella knew how it easy it would be to surrender to Anthony's half-hearted advances. They'd probably rock each other's worlds, but then what? No. It would cheapen everything they had.

Locking her arms around Anthony's neck, she rested her head on his collarbones and closed her eyes. The beat was slower, but still heavy.

The buzz from the alcohol made sure the smile stayed on her face, but the rest...?

To be frank, she was horny and lonely.

She wished she could bitch and moan to B, but Harvard was more important.

"Edward's here."

Bella stiffened before she could feign disinterest. "Where?" Her heart was suddenly doing somersaults, and she was torn between walking up to Edward and slapping the shit outta him for fighting Anthony on the ice, and...no, both options involved walking up to Edward. But the second one belonged in Fantasy Land.

"At the bar." Anthony bent low to kiss her neck. Putting on a show? Ugh. Men. That shit always left Bella hanging. "Cullen's here, too." Wow. That was...huh, Bella didn't know how to react to that tidbit.

She'd received her key card to the VIP box for the next home game; maybe she'd see Carlisle then, and she could give him a piece of her mind. But not now.

Bella shook her head to clear it, but that only made her dizzy. She was too drunk to make good decisions.

"Wanna make 'em jealous?" Anthony asked.

Bella giggled and looked up at him. "What is this, junior high?"

Anthony didn't reply, focused on something behind her. Or two someones, Bella figured. "Fuck." The music nearly drowned out his voice. "Ed's on his way over."

"Shit." Bella grew nervous. "Does he look good? Am I gonna fall for his crap? Is he gonna make me cry like a little girl?"

Anthony frowned at the speed she'd thrown out her questions, then shook his head. "Firstly, of course he looks good. He looks like me. Secondly, he won't get the chance to hurt you. I'm not leaving you alone with him."

At that, Bella relaxed. Slightly. Though, she was quick to tense up again when Edward reached them, looking sinful in dark jeans and a black button-down. Unlike Anthony, Edward didn't shave every day, so he was rocking the sexy hockey beard. Half an inch long, only a little shorter than his hair.

He looked uncomfortable around Bella, which hurt her and caused her to shrink further into Anthony's embrace.

"Can I talk to you?" Edward's question was for Anthony.

No hi. No happy birthday. Not even a glance at Bella.

Anthony's jaw ticked with tension, and he was hesitating.

"Go." Bella faked a smile. "I'mma do shots with Charlotte and Peter."

For a moment, Anthony ignored their guests and focused solely on Bella. He was debating something, she could tell. Then he bent low and spoke for only her to hear.

"Follow us and listen." He dropped a slow kiss near her ear. "This shit ends tonight."

Anthony straightened and jerked his chin toward the back, either to the bathrooms or the balcony.

When he left, Edward followed, leaving Bella behind. Alone in the middle of the crowded dance floor. And it was her turn to hesitate. Around her, she saw they'd garnered attention from Emmett, Andrasko, and Peter. Should she really follow Anthony and Edward? Well...she didn't wanna answer any questions from the team, that was for sure. How Edward did it, she had no idea, but whenever someone asked Anthony about the obvious hostility between the twins, he always said it was private.

This shit ends tonight, Anthony had said.

Bella's curiosity got the better of her, and she took off after the Masens.

Chapter 12

Bella stood in the small alcove between the balcony at the back of the building and the bathrooms, trying to hear something—anything—that was said between Anthony and Edward.

The door was open about three, four inches, and she leaned close, seeing Anthony leaning against the railing while Edward paced. Thanks to some twinkly lights that circled the balcony railing, she could see them, but they couldn't see her.

"If you ask why we came to Sweden, I'll knock your teeth out," Anthony said matter-of-factly.

"No..." Edward stopped and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I know why you're here. I just don't understand why you'd want to, but that's not what this is about." He looked up and leveled Anthony with a glare. "This is about you and Cullen."

Bella frowned, and she could hear the same frown in Anthony's voice as he spoke up. "Me and Cullen? Wow, seriously? You came to Bella's birthday party to talk about me and the GM?"

"You gonna play stupid?" Edward cocked a brow. Bella tried not to let the hotness affect her. "I fuckin' saw you, Anthony. On the bus."

"Oh, shit," Bella whispered to herself.

Anthony stiffened. But then he relaxed and shrugged.

Is he up to something?

She'd asked Anthony to come clean to Edward a couple times now, but Anthony had waved her off every time. *When the time is right*, Anthony had claimed. *And when he deserves it*. At one point, Bella had agreed, but

that had been when they'd first arrived in Sweden. Now she felt that a misunderstanding was the last thing they needed. It only made the rift bigger.

"So?" Anthony chuckled. "Bella understands. I have needs."

Bella snorted to herself and fought a dizzy spell. "My little ho."

Edward didn't find any of this funny, though. He flew at Anthony and fisted the collar of his shirt, then pushed him up against the building's wall. Through it all, Anthony looked pretty unfazed.

Bella, on the other hand, almost intervened.

Please don't fight, please don't fight, please don't fight.

"How fucking dare you?" Edward seethed.

Anthony pushed back this time and advanced on Edward. "No, fuck that." He jabbed a finger at Edward's chest. "How dare *you*? You lost your right to speak up the day you walked out on us." He suddenly looked as livid as Edward did. "If you hadn't acted like a dick, you woulda known that Bella's not really my girlfriend. You'd know she's just putting on an act to save my ass."

Bella covered her mouth with her hand, shocked that Anthony hadn't hesitated to set Edward straight this time. Surely this couldn't be the perfect opportunity he'd been waiting for.

Edward went from confused and stunned to doubtful in a heartbeat, but he didn't say anything.

"You heard me." Anthony adjusted his collar, backing away, and rolled his shoulders. "I told Cullen the lie about me and Bella so he wouldn't think twice about signing me. Otherwise I'd be collecting dust on the bench

back home now." Bella would do anything to be able to read Edward's mind at this point. "I have one season to prove I've got my head in the game. If I succeed, I'll be back in Detroit next year."

Edward stared at his feet, effectively hiding his expression from Bella. It frustrated the shit out of her, and his silence was killing her.

Did he care? Was he relieved? Disappointed?

She'd deduced that her being with Anthony had bothered Edward something fierce, but she hadn't figured out just why. Male pride? Jealousy? Disgust?

"We were gonna tell you, but..." Anthony chuckled a little darkly. "You gave us no fucking reason."

The silence stretched on, tense and uncertain, and it seemed that Bella wasn't the only one who couldn't take it.

"You got nothing to say?" Anthony asked irritably.

"I..." Edward was stuck, at a loss for words. Bella watched as he pressed the heels of his palms to his eyes and blew out a heavy breath. "I have...a *thousand* things to say." He finally raised his gaze, his features marred with regret and weariness. Bella saw the pain he was in. He looked...lost. And lonely. "As much as I hated seeing you with her...Christ, it *gutted* me when I thought you were cheating on her." He shook his head and looked down again. "I only want her to be happy."

Bella pressed her lips into a thin line, resenting his words. They were so heartfelt, but she loathed his way of showing how *he only wanted her to be happy*. In fact, it was all a load of crap.

"You shouldn't have run, Ed." Anthony's voice was quiet, a low murmur, but simple—frank. "If you wanted her happiness, you would've stayed."

To Bella's surprise, Edward nodded. "I know." He stuck his hands down into the pockets of his jeans and kept his gaze averted. "You don't suppose she'll talk to me now?"

That flutter of hope expanded in Bella's heart.

Talk. That was a start.

Anthony laughed through his nose. "Dude, I'm not touching that one. You fucked up—you grovel. It's how it goes." He glanced over his shoulder quickly, maybe trying to see Bella. But it was too dark. She knew she was well-hidden in the shadows. "Personally, I hope she'll bitch-slap you."

Bella rolled her eyes, causing the dizziness to make another appearance.

She knew it was only a matter of time before she got sick. But the good thing was, as soon as she'd, uh, cleansed her system, she'd be back to her tисpy self.

"I know I have it coming." Edward cleared his throat and retrieved something from his pocket. "You mind giving this to her?" It was too small for Bella to see what it was. Hell, was there anything at all? "I wanna apologize to her in person—and talk to her, but...I don't know. It's her birthday party. I'd only ruin it for her."

"Ya fuckin' moron." Anthony folded his arms across his chest. "First of all, I ain't givin' her shit from you. Secondly, you gotta quit assuming. It's like you don't even know her!" He huffed. "Thirdly...? I don't think she's in much of a party mood anymore." *Understatement*, Bella agreed internally. "You can walk up to her and offer her a ride home."

Bella's eyes widened and Edward's head snapped up.

What the fuck?

"But first I wanna know why the hell Cullen is here." Anthony all but spat out Cullen's name. "You came here together?"

"Fuck no." Edward frowned. "He came in two minutes after I did."

Huh. Curious. Carlisle wasn't, as far as Bella knew, on the list of tonight's guests. Did he bribe the doorman or something?

"Oh..." Anthony scowled. "Well. I'll go deal with that prick. Which is why you're gonna offer Bella a ride home."

"You're serious?" Edward asked incredulously, and Bella tensed up. "She'll kick me in the—"

"Pussy," Anthony said flatly.

"I was gonna go with nuts."

Anthony shrugged. "All I see is a big vagina."

Bella hiccupped and smiled ruefully. She was willing to bet no one knew that Edward had once been just as quick on his feet—witty as hell—as Anthony was. In the past, the two would banter back and forth so fast that no one was able to keep up.

"Come on, idiot." Anthony clapped Edward on the shoulder. "Time to put your labia in the line of fire."

Then he opened the door the rest of the way and revealed Bella standing there.

~oOo~

Edward's eyes grew large as he saw Bella just inside the door, looking like she'd been caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

Has she heard everything?

"Oh, that's right." Anthony grinned at Edward. "I forgot to tell you that I told Bella to listen in."

Wonderful. Just fucking wonderful.

Edward cringed internally, recapping everything he'd said. If he'd known Bella was gonna hear it all, he would've, uh...maybe said more, or less, or phrased himself differently, or...hell, he didn't know.

Fuck my life.

"I'm gonna be sick." Bella grimaced and placed a hand over her stomach.

"I'm sorry," Edward blurted out for...everything. If his mere presence made her sick, he figured it was best to start with an apology.

Fuck, he was nervous.

He'd wanted smother her in kisses and hugs when he'd first arrived at the club. He'd been beyond jealous of Anthony, holding her so close, laughing with her, dancing with her...

Then Edward had chickened out when he'd walked up to them.

Anthony stepped forward and kissed Bella's temple, then spoke quietly in her ear, and envy hit Edward squarely in the chest again.

But finding out that Anthony wasn't really Bella's man...?

There was no word strong enough to describe the relief.

Hell, he still wasn't sure it was real. It felt like one of those too-good-to-be-true scenarios.

"If you're sure..." Bella said, looking anything but, and peered up at Anthony. If anything, she looked queasy and nervous.

Edward could relate.

"Positive." Anthony took a step back and touched her cheek. Edward almost looked away. "I'll be home soon. Just gonna see what that son of a bitch wants."

Bella bobbed her head in a small nod and stared at her feet.

Anthony leveled Edward with a glare. "Upset her and I'll shove a hockey stick so far up your ass—"

"I got it," Edward said quickly, his asshole clenching. *Exit only, bro. Exit only.*

Anthony gave him one more look of warning before he left, leaving Edward alone with Bella.

It was impossible not to think about the last time they'd been alone—and how Edward had screwed it up.

"You, uh..." Edward rubbed the back of his neck, anxious. "You wanna get outta here?"

"Oh, God. I wasn't kidding before."

Then, Bella proceeded to vomit all over Edward's shoes.

Chapter 13

So much for giving Bella a kickass birthday.

By the time Anthony reached the bar where Cullen was, he was irritated as fuck. All he'd wanted was for Bella to have a great night, which was why he'd stayed sober. He'd had one beer at dinner, but that was it.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he asked Cullen, knowing he sounded rude. "This is a private party."

Cullen looked up from his drink, stoic. But Anthony could detect something more underneath the surface. As always, polished and composed, lethally sexy in a suit, but...apprehensive?

"I wondered if I could speak to you." Cullen set down his drink and took a step closer. The bar wasn't packed with people, so there was no reason to get up close and personal. Sure, the music was loud, but Anthony could hear him just fine. "If you're busy, I completely understand, but I live nearby, so I thought I'd come over and ask."

Anthony chuckled. "I've been at the arena all week." He widened his arms. "Why come here? You coulda just talked to me at practice."

"I wasn't ready, Anthony," he said patiently. "I apologize for the way I left things between us, but you caught me off guard."

Just because I asked if we could meet up for beer or pizza?

Anthony frowned. He was so fucking sick and tired of people who ran away.

But...he had to remember that his reputation didn't give Cullen a lot to consider. Anthony had only had one game off the ice, and it was to fuck

and duck. Asking Cullen if they could spend more time together might've come as a shock, as Bella had explained to him.

"Maybe he expected nothing but a quick hookup." Bella had shrugged.

"Then you blindsided him. I don't know. Talk to him. God, people need to fucking talk!"

Anthony hadn't really thought about what he wanted for himself, other than...*more, more, more*. What that entailed, he had no idea.

He wanted to find out, though. "Edward's taking Bella home," he said, sticking his hands into his back pockets. "I guess I can spare a minute." He jerked his chin at the exit. "Step outside?"

Cullen nodded, then downed the last of his drink. "After you."

On the way out, Anthony asked how Cullen had gotten past the beefcake at the entrance, and Cullen just chuckled and said that money talked.

The first floor of the club was filling up with people, and it took them a while to get past the crowd at the coat check. There was a long line outside, too. Which made Anthony relieved that he'd rented the second floor for privacy. Even though Bella was...well, on her way home soon, and Anthony was leaving, there were still some fifty people left, and they could party until four.

Anthony would probably rejoin them, actually. He wanted to give Edward and Bella some space, and he doubted this would take long with Cullen.

"Burger King?" He nodded toward the fast-food restaurant next to the club. "I could go for a burger."

"Actually..." Cullen looked to the left, across the large square, with a pensive expression. "I have a small house behind those hotels over there."

Anthony tilted his head, confused. "A house?" As far as he knew, there were only apartment buildings, offices, and hotels in the city center.

"Come on." Cullen bumped his shoulder to Anthony's and started walking. "It's close—we'll have some privacy, and then you can get back to...I don't know, your harem." His hesitant smile held traces of...if Anthony wasn't mistaken, bitterness.

"What the hell?" Anthony instantly tensed up, though he followed Cullen across the square. "That was un-fucking-called for."

"You're right. I'm very sorry." Cullen did look contrite, but not enough for Anthony to quit scowling at the ground as they walked. "It's just difficult for me to...come to terms with. Your reputation, I mean. Not to mention all the people you have vying for your attention."

"What?" Anthony side-eyed Cullen, confused. *And still a bit ticked off.*

He'd been an angel, a fucking choir boy, for months now. Except for the blow-by-blow with Cullen.

"You're telling me you don't notice them?" Cullen raised a brow, a wry smile playing at his lips. "Even up there at the party, where all the women are either married or waiting for their player to pop the question—they'd probably walk away from it all if you gave them the time of day."

They headed down an alley between two hotels, and Anthony stared hard at the ground, Cullen's words going on a loop in his head. Because he'd heard them before. Both he and Edward had gotten a lot of attention throughout their careers, although Edward had never taken the bait or even appeared tempted. He was born for serious relationships, whereas Anthony...*yeah, not so much.*

That said, Anthony had never noticed all the eyes he had on him until he'd looked. Bella was the same now. She was used to being in Anthony's spotlight, but the two had always tuned it all out.

And now...

I'm not looking anymore.

He hadn't for half a year.

"I don't see it." He shook his head, keeping his eyes fixed on the cobblestones. "I know they're there, but..." He sighed. "Doesn't matter anyway. I'm done with all that."

It was the first time he'd said it out loud, and it felt damn good. Bella had figured it out on her own, though Anthony wasn't sure she knew just how serious he was. But that didn't matter. Bella had never held his playboy ways against him.

"Over here," Cullen said quietly, and they rounded a corner to another street. There, between two apartment buildings, four small houses stood wall-to-wall and so out of place. Or maybe not. If Anthony remembered correctly, this was the old part of town, yet there were plenty of newer buildings, too. But, regardless, these little houses would probably look more at home on the English countryside.



There were no front yards or fences, just the cobblestone road and old lampposts. One white house, one yellow, one red, and...Cullen walked up to one that was the same color as Bella's peach sorbet, which *had* to be in the freezer whenever it was her time of the month. *Or else.*

She's got this death glare, man.

Opening the door, Cullen gestured for Anthony to enter first. From the dark hallway, he could see into the living room, then into the kitchen to his right. It was one open space, only a bar separating the kitchen from the living room.

The house was kind of narrow, so Anthony guessed the bedrooms were upstairs.

Probably not what you should think about.

True.

Cullen flipped on lights as he walked farther in, and Anthony noted how empty the house looked. Granted, Cullen was new in Sweden, too; he'd only been here a few months. But Anthony could only go by his own place, the one here in Malmo and the one he still had in Detroit. Bella had already made two trips to IKEA here, and she'd decorated his house at home in the States, too.

In the living room, Anthony spotted a single photo next to the flat screen, and it was of Cullen and his daughter.

That was kinda...surreal. Cullen had once been a family man, and now he lived like a bachelor, sans dirty socks and pizza boxes everywhere.

"That's Alice." Cullen came to stand next to Anthony, one hand in his pocket and the other loosening his tie. "She's coming to visit next week."

Anthony nodded with a dip of his chin, feeling out of place.

He suddenly had a million questions about Cullen's past, but he had no clue about where to start, or if it was okay to ask. He knew Cullen had been married to a woman, and it hadn't been some front—Alice was proof of that.

"She's pretty," he commented, not knowing what else to say. But fathers were probably proud of their daughters, right? Wanted to show them off? Whatever.

"She's seventeen." Cullen turned to Anthony with a frown. "A little young for you, no?"

Oh, for fuck's sake.

"Fine, she's fucking ugly." Anthony was losing his patience, and he'd had enough of the insults. "You know what? I'm done. See ya later, man." He started for the door, but Cullen gripped his arm.

"I'm sorry." He looked like he was battling some demons. Insecurities? "I'm sorry, Anthony." Releasing his hold, he took a step closer, only a foot separating them. "I didn't mean that." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly; meanwhile, Anthony was trying not to get affected by the scent of Cullen's aftershave. His close proximity wasn't helping, either. "I asked you to come here so I could apologize and explain, not to offend you."

Slowly, he lifted his gaze and finally looked Anthony in the eye.

It was freaking Anthony out, the way Cullen's intense blues drew him in.

Swallowing hard, Anthony stood stock-still as Cullen leaned forward and skimmed his nose along Anthony's jaw. Cullen's hand slid up Anthony's chest, and there wasn't a single trace of apprehension left in the sexy GM's moves.

"Look what you're doing to me, Anthony," he whispered. "I lose my fucking mind around you."

"Shit," Anthony exhaled.

~oOo~

"Good evening, Bella." The concierge in the lobby smiled at the sight of the girl in Edward's arms, though it faded when he saw how plastered she was. "Uh, is she all right, Anthony?"

Ah, the twin thing. Convenient at times.

"Yup." Edward nodded and headed toward the elevators.

"Oh, you think..." Bella mumbled, then hiccupped. And giggled, before it morphed into a moan. Shit, was she gonna puke again? "You think he's Anth...th'ny." *Hiccup.*

The cab ride to Western Harbor and Turning Torso had been hellish. Bella had thrown up twice, and Edward had been shocked that the cab driver hadn't kicked them out. But since he hadn't, Edward had tipped the man well, and now Edward was more eager than ever to get Bella in bed. Sadly, for all the wrong reasons. Well, they were right—just not the pleasurable ones.

"Which floor, baby girl?" Edward carried Bella inside one of the elevators.

Bella squirmed and squeezed the hell outta his neck as she tried to hoist herself higher up on his hip. "Mmph, thirty-nine, and my thong is-is ridin' rrright up there."

"Great," Edward muttered under his breath. He pushed the button and hoped to God it would be a quick ride. *Up there. Fuck.*

"My chewing gum's lost its taste now." Bella giggled sleepily and stuck the gum to the elevator's mirror. In her attempt to retrieve some more, she rubbed her delectable body all over Edward's front. "Ta-da!" She managed to pull out another stick and shove it into her mouth. "Wwwrrrefreshing. I told you throwing up would work. I'm better n-now."

This could not get any worse.

Edward was sure of it.

Holding Bella, having her so close...hell, just speaking to her again...

"I wanna shower," Bella whispered excitedly and fist-pumped the air, then nuzzled Edward's cheek. "C'you help me?"

Okay, so maybe it could get worse.

Chapter 14

Edward kept his eyes averted—mostly—as Bella showered behind that clear glass. Sure, it had gotten fogged up now, which Edward wasn't sure was a relief or a major letdown. But just knowing she was there, naked, covered in suds...

"Fuck." Edward adjusted his dick and thought once again about stepping out, but if she fell... No. He'd never forgive himself.

"Are you still here, Edward?" Bella sounded like she was feeling better, no longer sick or all that drunk. Maybe throwing up had helped, as well as the two painkillers she'd taken as soon as they'd gotten inside the apartment.

"Oh, I'm here," Edward mumbled.

"Great! I'm done now—could'ju gimme a towel, please?"

Edward reached over to the towel rack, grabbed the thickest bundle, and unfolded it in front of the shower door. By the time Bella opened it, he was holding it up and staring at the floor.

One little peek, dude. Just one.

Fine... Clearing his throat, Edward glanced up quickly and nearly had a stroke. Her naked body glistened with water. Round, luscious tits. A slender waist. Flawless skin with goose bumps and a slight flush from the hot water. A neatly trimmed pussy and full hips that he wanted grab and—*that fucking hip!*

Edward swallowed hard and widened his eyes at the floor, shocked and...fucking mesmerized. One quick look was all it had taken for him to spot Bella's tattoo. There, on her hip. His number. The number he'd had since he'd signed with his first NHL team.

"Whoopsie daisy!" Bella stumbled giggling into the towel.

Edward hurried to wrap the towel around her and held her close as he guided her down the hall. Two bedroom doors, both open, and Edward took a shot at the one without hockey gear inside.

They don't share bedrooms.

He was still trying to understand that the whole relationship had been a ruse to improve Anthony's rep.

"I wanna brush my teeth," Bella said as Edward entered her walk-in closet. He guessed her PJs were in the dresser. "My Nut shirt, please."

Edward nodded and located a black t-shirt with the text "*Proud Nut with Red Wings*" across the chest. He smiled a little, a lot wistful. Then he shook the remnants of longing and focused on Bella's words. "You brushed your teeth before the shower, remember?" He turned to give her the shirt, only to nearly swallow his tongue when he saw that Bella had dropped her towel. "Jesus Christ, girl. Up."

Bella scowled and raised her arms above her head. "Nothing wrong with my body."

"Don't I know it," Edward muttered, helping her putting on the shirt. Thankfully, it was large and reached her upper thighs. "That's the problem."

Bella scrunched her nose. "It'd be better if I were ugly?" Then she pointed to the dresser. "Panties, please."

Edward stared at her for a second, too many thoughts flashing through his head, and then he complied and opened another drawer. Socks. Okay. Next drawer had the panties. A lot of them. *My God.*

He barely resisted the urge to bring a pair to his nose and sniff away.

"These?" He held up a pair of ruffles with his index finger. Black, soft, silky, sexy.

Bella snatched them up and shimmied into them. She wasn't even swaying anymore, so Edward figured her buzz had all but faded.

"Edward...?" Bella's voice was quiet, and she wasn't looking at him.

Hating that their little link—that tiny connection of eye contact—was broken, Edward picked up the discarded towel and closed the distance between them. He waited for her to speak again and draped the towel around her shoulders, then lifted her wet hair and gently patted it dry. Or...at least made sure it wouldn't drip.

"What?" He hesitantly placed a finger under her chin and tilted her face up, and there she was. Those dark brown eyes screamed of vulnerability, and Edward knew he was to blame.

Bella opened her mouth to speak, then closed it and pressed her lips together tightly. She shook her head minutely and averted her gaze once more. Next, she hooked two fingers into the belt loops of Edward's jeans and took a step backward. And another. Toward the bed.

With each step, the tension grew thicker and thicker, but it wasn't lust. Edward felt lost—and like he was drowning in Bella's sadness. It killed him, and he hated himself for it. But, at the same time, he vowed to make it better. He'd fucked up majorly, but if Bella could just give him one chance, a single opportunity, he would fix it. Everything. Anything she wanted.

When Bella lay down on the large bed, Edward stripped down to boxer briefs and t-shirt, then followed her and got under the covers. He pulled her close and blew out a breath of relief when Bella latched onto him.

Jesus Christ, it felt so fucking good.

She wasn't only the love of his life, she was...silly Bella who'd owned her own Hogwarts uniform, who had squealed in happiness when he'd given her lemon meringue cheesecake on Sundays, who had once created a map of the States using bottle caps, who had a travel mascot named Flubber... She was the clumsy little girl who had grown up to become a beautiful woman. She hadn't become the photographer she'd once dreamed of becoming, but Edward knew she loved her job, and her camera always tagged along.

He'd followed her and her career religiously.

He was a fan. He'd chuckled along her words, studied her blog posts, saved her photos, winced and worried when she'd caught a stomach infection in Brazil, pushed down jealousy when there'd been a guy in a photo, smiled in pride when she'd reached the highest summit of Aconcagua in Argentina, and been first in line to pre-order her coffee table book that held the most amazing photos and anecdotes from her journey.

"I've missed this." Bella's whisper brought Edward back to now. For the first time in seven years, he was reveling in *now*. "Sometimes I dream about this." Edward pressed his lips to her damp hair and inhaled deeply, tangling their legs together. He closed his eyes, more than ready to reveal his own truths. "You don't run away there—in my dreams."

Fuck. "I'm sorry, Bella," he whispered against the top of her head. "I'm so sorry." What a fucking horrible birthday she'd had, and it was his fault. "If I could take it all back, I would."

"Would you?" she asked softly, lifting her head to look him in the eye. "I mean..."

"In a heartbeat." Edward cupped her cheek and rested his forehead to hers, looking deep into her eyes. "Guilt drove me away and shame kept me there. I never wanted to hurt either of you, but I couldn't deal with anything. It became too much—I put too much pressure on myself, but I didn't realize that back then. I guess, in a way...a part of me still doesn't." He knew technically he wasn't at fault, but his heart deluded him into thinking otherwise at times. "You have no idea how many times I've regretted walking out."

Bella released a breath and sank into Edward's embrace again, resting her head on his chest.

Edward was too focused on simply being a family with Bella and Anthony again that it took him a while to notice that Bella had snuck her hand up his abs, underneath his t-shirt.

Regardless, the moment was for affection, not lust, and Edward craved the first one more. While he was gonna be stupid in love with this woman forever, his need to have his two best friends back in his life overrode anything else. Maybe because he didn't really believe Bella would want more. Maybe because he didn't feel he deserved her. Maybe, maybe.

"Will you tell us about what happened back then?" Bella asked cautiously.

Edward nodded right away and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "I will."

He knew it was time.

"Will you be here tomorrow morning?" she wondered next.

"If that's what you want." Like he'd already decided, he would do anything. "I wanna be here, Bella. I promise."

"Okay." She sounded relieved, which gave Edward a spark of hope.

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me, baby girl," he whispered. "I should be thanking you."

And he had every intention of doing so. "Besides, since I fucked up your birthday, I wanna make it up to you." Maybe he could sneak out and find a pastry shop. He could start working his way into the family again by reminding her that he'd been a decent guy back in the day.

Bella hummed, and Edward was pretty sure he could feel a small smile against his chest, but his t-shirt made it impossible to be sure.

"My birthday wish actually came true," she admitted through a yawn. "You and Anthony spoke like civilized people."

Leave it to selfless Bella to have a birthday wish that didn't include herself.

Chapter 15

Anthony wasn't really sure how he'd ended up here. In Cullen's bedroom upstairs. Clothes being thrown on the floor. He didn't even remember stumbling up the stairs. Or being pushed down onto the bed.

What he did remember—and what he was focusing on—was the man on top of him.

"I thought you wanted to talk," he muttered, outta breath, as he pushed down Cullen's briefs. He got two handfuls of firm ass and groaned into Cullen's neck.

"I can multitask." Cullen tossed the last of their clothes on the floor, then captured Anthony's mouth in a hard kiss. "Otherwise I wouldn't have been able to get much done this week." *Jesus*. He turned Anthony on beyond words. "Feels like no matter what I do..." Cullen gave a slow thrust, pushing his cock against Anthony's. "I can't get you off my mind."

"Fuck," Anthony grunted, tugging on Carlisle's dark hair. It exposed his neck, his Adam's apple and day's worth of scruff, and Anthony lifted his head off the pillow to lick Carlisle's skin. "Good. I wanna be on your mind."

"Hold on." Cullen grabbed Anthony's jaw, grazing two fingers over his lips. "Open." Anthony complied, their locked gazes heavy and lust-filled, and sucked Carlisle's fingers into his mouth. "That's it." A third finger was added, and Anthony swirled his tongue around the tips. "Can you take a fourth?"

There was no verbal answer from Anthony. He withdrew, only to suck a fourth into his mouth, too. Having a feeling what the plan was, he licked Cullen's palm and got a groan and a kiss to his jaw of approval.

"Perfect mouth." Carlisle pulled and slipped the hand between them, wrapping his long fingers around—as much as he could, anyway—both their dicks, and stroked them hard. Slowly. *Sweet mother of...* "Perfect cock." He nuzzled Anthony's cheek and closed his eyes. "But—" his eyes flashed open again "—I want more than the fantasy, Anthony."

Nearly lost in his desire for Carlisle, Anthony still got it. This was the multitasking the man had mentioned. He was gonna have the goddamn *talk*...while driving Anthony wild.

"Anything," he gritted out, pushing into Carlisle's hand. "State your terms—I'm wit'chu."

"Are you?" Carlisle lifted a brow and gave the heads of their dicks a slow twist of his palm. *Shit*. Anthony sucked in a sharp breath. "I can be a possessive bastard, and while I'm on board with secrecy—for now—I won't settle for casual."

"Fuck you," Anthony laughed, panting. "You're the one who bailed after we hooked up. Maybe I...*ungh*, sucked the smarts outta ya, but I'm pretty sure you freaked out all—all on your own." He gave Carlisle's bottom lip a sharp nip. "Forget about my reputation for one fuckin' second and think back on what I asked of you."

"Time." Carlisle didn't miss a beat. "You asked to spend time with me." Anthony nodded and tipped back his head when Carlisle dipped down to kiss his neck. "But have you thought further than that?"

No, not at the time. But now... Anthony hadn't been able to stop thinking about Carlisle, either. Anthony was intimidated by these new—not to mention strong—feelings, but he'd never been one to back down. If he had, his half-assed attempts to seduce Bella wouldn't have been half-assed.

"We don't really know each other," Cullen murmured. The words were like a cold shower, but each move, thrust, kiss, and nip kept them locked up in a sauna. "We barely spoke before that night, Anthony." He pressed his forehead to Anthony's, breathing heavily. "So, tell me now. Tell me what you want."

"Time." It was simple to Anthony. "With you." With a light shove, he ended up on top of Carlisle and raked his blunt fingernails down Carlisle's defined torso. "I make you insecure?" He'd deduced as much and Carlisle's nod confirmed it. "Yeah, well, you make me fuckin' nervous." He blew out a breath and sat up, straddling Carlisle's thighs. He looked down at what he wanted—Carlisle Cullen in all his glory, strong, powerful, sexy as fuck, and goddamn beautiful. "I'm an open book, Carlisle. If I say I'm done screwing around, I mean it." He met the man's gaze, serious. "I don't bullshit, I don't make promises I can't keep, and I don't chase unless it's something I want."

Planting his hands on either side of Carlisle's head, Anthony dipped down and kissed him on the lips. Meanwhile, Carlisle seemed to be deep in thought, though he sure as fuck participated with his hands and mouth.

"I'd chase you, though." Anthony screwed his eyes shut and breathed in deeply through his nose. *Yeah*, he thought. *This is what I want.* "Your turn."

Anthony ended up on his back again, and he looked up to meet Carlisle's smoldering eyes. In the dim light, his blue eyes were darker and steelier.

Carlisle hovered over him and slowly lowered his mouth to Anthony's ear.

"I want to smell you on my sheets," he whispered, causing Anthony to shiver. "I want to wake up with my cock between your thighs, and I want to be your last thought before you fall asleep at night." Anthony swallowed hard, about to lose his fucking cool. He was done talking, but at

the same time he was growing addicted to Carlisle's words. *I guess I can listen for a little while longer.* Even if his balls were getting bluer by the second. "I want to get to know you better." Carlisle kissed his way down Anthony's chest and settled between his parted legs. "I want..."

But he didn't say anything else, and Anthony lost his concentration the second his cock was swallowed by Carlisle.

"Oh, *fuck.*" Anthony pushed his fingers through Carlisle's hair and guided his movements. It was give and take, thrust and pull, maddening and intoxicating. "Gimme more—Christ!" He couldn't deal with it. It was too much and not enough. "If you don't fuck me, I'll pin you down and screw you into next week."

At this point, he'd take what he could get, but he really needed to get fucked stupid. Because it'd been close to two years since he'd last been with a man who really knew what he was doing, and even that was paling in comparison to how Carlisle excited him.

Fingers didn't do it for Anthony anymore—at least not his own.

Carlisle released Anthony's cock slowly, taking his sweet-ass time, and chuckled huskily. "Lube and condoms in the drawer."

Wasting no time, Anthony twisted his body and reached for the nightstand, quickly pulling it open. Inside, he found what he was looking for, and... *Interesting.* Judging by the silver vibrator Anthony saw there, he guessed bottoming wasn't out of the question for Carlisle. Fuck, the mere thought of pushing his fat cock deep inside Carlisle's ass made him leak with pre-come.

Fingers trembling with need, he retrieved the lube and the unopened box of rubbers. He almost suggested a flip-fuck, but he knew he wasn't gonna

last, first feeling Carlisle inside him, then return the favor...? Hell no. He was human.

"Have you decided?" Carlisle smirked at him. "I prefer topping, but—"

"Oh, you're topping." No fucking doubt about it. Anthony sat up and leaned forward, pulling Carlisle closer. Kneeling, Carlisle's hard dick was at the perfect level for Anthony's mouth. He sucked the head into his mouth as he ripped the foil of a condom, getting more and more turned on with each gritty moan Carlisle gave him.

The salty flavor spurred him on. It made his mouth water, his cock harden further, and abs clench.

"Lie down." Carlisle brushed a kiss to Anthony's temple, then pushed him back.

Anthony watched hungrily as Carlisle rolled on the condom and poured a generous amount of lube onto his cock. After that, he spent several minutes preparing Anthony's ass with slick fingers and deep kisses.

"Goddamn," Anthony breathed out, pushing back as Carlisle added a third finger. Anthony threw his head back against the pillow and squeezed his eyes shut, pleasure rocking through him.

"You're ready," Carlisle murmured and covered Anthony's body with his own. *And yeah, no kidding.* He was more than ready. "It's..." Carlisle let out a low chuckle. "It's been a while for me, so don't expect me to last forever."

Anthony almost snorted. He'd be lucky if he lasted five *minutes* with Carlisle.

Parting his legs more, Anthony reveled in the fiery hot stretch of Carlisle's cock. Inch by inch, pauses to kiss, taste each other, and breathe. And this

was it. This was what Anthony had craved for a long fucking time: the serene calm that washed over him whenever someone gave it to him good. Only, he hadn't expected that feeling to intensify as much it did with Carlisle.

"More," he mumbled, pressing his forehead to the crook of Carlisle's neck. It was almost dizzying. "God..." A low, drawn-out moan left him as Carlisle buried himself to the hilt.

"Jesus Christ, Anthony." Carlisle panted against Anthony's temple, his lips always lingering. "Fucking amazing."

The first thrusts were slow and measured, a delicious stretch of Anthony's muscles. The burn eventually eased though, and Carlisle seemed to sense when it was okay to move with less caution.

Groans and labored breaths filled the silence.

Anthony slid a foot up the back of Carlisle's calf. His left hand found Carlisle's perfect ass. The other cupped the back of Carlisle's neck. He touched every inch he could reach, and it still wasn't enough. Not enough of *him*—Carlisle. Period.

Carlisle stroked Anthony's cock, squeezing extra hard whenever he pushed into Anthony's ass. Those fingers still held traces of lube, so each stroke engulfed Anthony's dick in slick heat.

"Yeah..." Anthony moaned and fisted Carlisle's hair, pulling him forth for a brutal kiss. "Harder." Anthony pushed his tongue into Carlisle's mouth. At the same time, Carlisle groaned and complied, driving his long, thick cock deep inside Anthony's ass.

Bolts of ecstasy shot through Anthony and caused him to lose his breath. His balls tightened and drew up; hell, every muscle in his body was tightening.

"I want to see you come." Carlisle spoke in a hushed voice against Anthony's lips. "Lick every drop from your body..."

"*Christ,*" Anthony hissed and met Carlisle's next thrust, lifting his hips as far as he could. Carlisle slid even deeper, and the angle triggered a slow trickle of pre-come to seep out from Anthony's cock. "I wanna—" He gasped, getting closer and closer. "I wanna fuck your ass with my tongue." He swallowed Carlisle's moan. "I wanna wake up with my dick in your mouth."

"Consider it done," Carlisle growled, slamming his hips forward.

Fuck!

Pleasure surged down Anthony's spine, and his orgasm took over without warning. Heat flared up, his ass clenched, his fingers dug into Carlisle's hip and shoulder, and he gnashed his teeth together. As the first rope of come landed on his sweat-damp chest, Anthony felt how Carlisle throbbed inside of him, followed by Carlisle dropping his forehead to Anthony's shoulder and rocking jerkily into him.

Throughout their orgasms, Carlisle stroked Anthony's dick lazily, milking it to the last drop. They were both holding their breaths until they collapsed, Anthony melting into the mattress and Carlisle pinning him there.

The air smelled strongly of sex, and Anthony breathed them in as he ghosted kisses along Carlisle's shoulder. Eventually, Carlisle returned to the world of the living too, and tilted his head to kiss Anthony properly.

It felt...fucking amazing. This right here, afterward. Where he usually liked his own space and was already planning his escape, he found himself not wanting to leave at all.

He winced slightly as Carlisle gripped the base of his own cock, preventing the condom from slipping off, and pulled out from Anthony. Then he

murmured something about being back in a sec, but Anthony was too blissed out to focus on words now. Regardless, it couldn't have been more than a minute before Carlisle was back with a washcloth.

Carlisle smirked a little when he lowered himself to the bed and gave Anthony's chest an open-mouthed kiss. Tasting him.

"Stop that shit—it tickles," Anthony chuckled drowsily. He was too sensitive right now.

"I figured." Carlisle used the warm washcloth instead, cleaning up the remnants of Anthony's release. Maybe he spent a minute too long with his lower body, but Anthony sure wasn't gonna complain. He loved having his junk fondled. What dude didn't? "I hope you're spending the night...?"

"Of course." Anthony furrowed his brows, thinking about the party going on five minutes from here. There was no way he wanted to return now, and he was counting on his brother to take care of Bella. "I'll break your face if you're kicking me out." He raised a brow, half-serious. He didn't really believe Cullen would do that, but there had been a lotta things he hadn't anticipated and they'd still happened.

"No..." Carlisle smiled wryly, got rid of the washcloth, and slipped under the covers. "That's the last thing you have to worry about." Anthony rolled off the covers to get in under them, moving close to Carlisle. "Now that I have you here..." He sighed contentedly and let his lips linger on Anthony's forehead. "I've acted like a complete prick, yet here you are." Carlisle moved his face away a few inches. "You're too forgiving, you know that?"

Anthony smiled but kept his eyes closed. He was too relaxed to do much else. "Works in your favor though, right? Don't bitch about it."

"No, I plan on making it up to you." The sincerity in Carlisle's voice gave Anthony a sense of relief. Had Carlisle's words been laced with innuendo

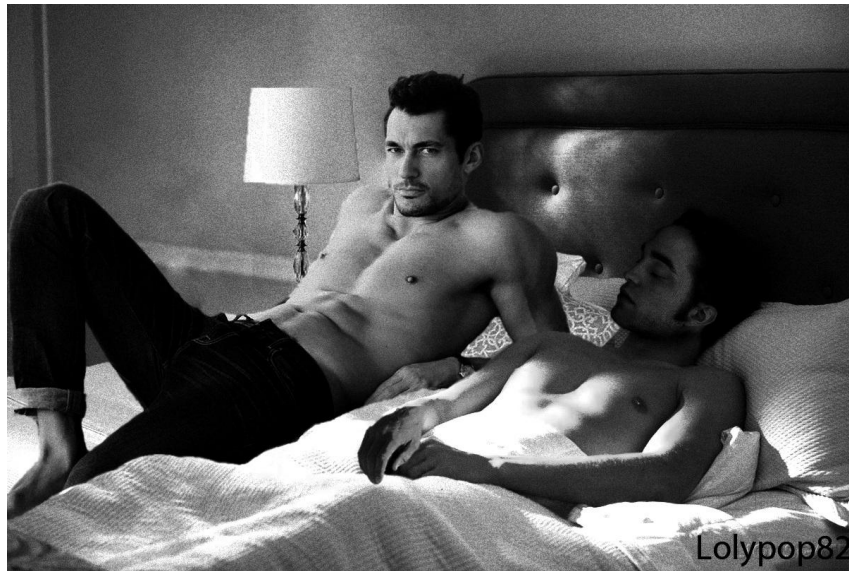
instead, perhaps it would've been more difficult to believe they were on the same page.

Because Anthony knew this was serious. More serious than any other relationship he'd been in, which...well, that didn't say much, but whatever.

"Roses don't work on me." Anthony shifted closer and used Carlisle's right bicep as a pillow. "As long as you don't run away again, we're good." Then he needed to break the tension, 'cause it was getting too much, especially at this hour. "Blowjobs work, too."

But Carlisle didn't laugh. "I'll do my best." He threaded his fingers through Anthony's hair and kissed his forehead. "Sleep, baby."

Chapter 16



Carlisle got rid of his shirt and socks but kept his jeans on and lay down on his bed next to a sleeping Anthony. There was now fresh coffee and breakfast from a café waiting for them in the kitchen downstairs, but Carlisle wasn't going to waste the opportunity to soak in the sight of the man who was now his.

He was still worried, which irritated him, but he couldn't help it.

When Anthony had arrived in Sweden—hell, when the trade first became an option months ago—Carlisle had been cautious. Not about signing Anthony, but about getting to know him. Carlisle had been quick to write him off, and for good reasons. Anthony screamed of trouble. And...now look at Carlisle. There was no going back from this.

In the one week Carlisle had managed to keep his distance, he'd only caused misery for Anthony and himself, not to mention that his feelings had deepened. He didn't only want to get to know Anthony now; he *had* to.

The young man was a breath of fresh air, a far cry from what Carlisle was used to. Well, lately he was only used to his own hand, but... The man

he'd casually dated two years ago when he'd been working in Switzerland didn't hold a candle to Anthony. They were like night and day. Carlisle certainly hadn't seen a future with that other man, and it had been mutual.

But now? His mind wouldn't stop. The word "future" went on a loop along with questions concerning it. Questions like how complicated it would be to keep things quiet, or what the repercussions—both personally and professionally—once they revealed their relationship to the public, would be.

Anthony surged forward without hesitation, and Carlisle had believed him wholeheartedly; this was serious. But had Anthony given the future any thought? He was only here for the season. He still had a contract with the Red Wings in Detroit.

Carlisle chided himself for getting so far ahead—all these damn thoughts—especially when he didn't really know Anthony yet. Then again, he knew enough. Anthony's love for the game, carefree look on life, sense of humor, and obvious loyalty to his loved ones drew Carlisle in like a moth to a flame.

At the same time, it was that youth that scared Carlisle. He was going to do his best not to push, but if Anthony approached everything in life so easily, did he also breeze past them in the same manner? Would he get bored? Would he move on quickly?

Carlisle had thought of Edward as jaded, but he needed to consider that he fit in that category himself. A sham of a marriage, a job that forced him to look at people—young men, players—as commodities, houses that were as impersonal as hotel rooms, being so far away from home...

Did he even have a place to call home anymore?

It certainly wasn't London. He'd only lived in Finland for a year. Three years in Switzerland.

It had been nearly twenty years since he'd called Baltimore home.

"No..."

Pushing himself up on his elbows, Carlisle peered down at Anthony, expecting his eyes to be open. But it looked like Anthony Masen talked in his sleep.

A smile tugged at the corners of Carlisle's mouth, the heaviness of his thoughts easing.

Fuck, he's beautiful.

"Dammit," Anthony mumbled, scratching his ribcage. "Ice the puck..." Carlisle grinned outright, finding Anthony too fucking adorable. He was dreaming about a game? "Man on, man on...fuckin' ice it." Apparently he was tired. A player generally only wanted to ice the puck if the game had been going on for too long, leaving no chance to switch lineups. That was when a player would send the puck flying, either pausing the game or just delaying it.

Sometimes the goalie also requested—read: shouted—for the puck to be dumped, usually if there was too much action around the goal area. Which made Carlisle think about Edward.

Were the twins still fighting? They sure weren't as close as brothers ought to be, and it was okay for Carlisle to ask now. Before, the only thing he could demand was that they kept their personal shit off the ice.

Now was different. He wanted to know why Anthony and Edward had problems.

Isabella was part of it, too. Carlisle was sure.

"Un-fucking-believable." Anthony groaned in his sleep, capturing Carlisle's attention again. It looked like whatever Anthony was dreaming about caused him to rouse from sleep. Slowly but surely. "Um..." He lifted his head, rubbed his eyes, and blinked drowsily, then looked up to find Carlisle's amused expression. Another blink. A silent second where Anthony probably remembered where he was and why. "Oh, thank fuck." His head hit the pillow again. Relief was evident in his features, and Carlisle was more than a little curious. "I thought we were really losing against the Penguins."

Carlisle barked out a laugh and kissed Anthony's forehead. "Good morning to you, too."

"Mornin'," Anthony chuckled through a yawn and stretched his arms above his head. Carlisle was pretty sure he'd never seen him looking sexier. Hair messed up by sleep, a gorgeous torso on display, a sleepy grin in place. "That's not your home team, right?"

Carlisle raised a brow and sank lower to be at eye level. "The Penguins? No." One elbow on the mattress, he rested his head in his palm. "Born and raised in Baltimore."

Anthony hummed, then his eyes flashed with mirth, and he shifted closer to Carlisle. "That's close to DC, so...Caps fan, I take it? You never seem to make it all the way. My condolences." He snickered into the crook of Carlisle's neck while Carlisle slipped a hand under the covers to pinch Anthony's ass. Hard. "Ouch!" He hissed and mock-glared at Carlisle.

"Watch it," Carlisle warned, hiding his grin. "We have Ovechkin, you know. There's still hope."

Anthony snorted, but it was cut off by another yawn. "Solid plan—to have one player carrying an entire team. What time is it?"

Before Carlisle could even answer, Anthony reached for the floor and picked up his jeans and his cell. Then he was back, and he grabbed Carlisle's hand, absently kissing his fingers while he checked his phone.

Carlisle brushed the pad of his thumb over Anthony's bottom lip, earning himself a little nip. "Any missed calls?" He wasn't quite ready for their bubble to burst yet.

"Nah..." Anthony grinned at his phone. "Just a couple texts. Here's one from Bella—" He showed Carlisle the display.

A little redhawk told me you left the club last night with a certain GM. Is this true, Harry?

"Harry?" Carlisle inquired, secretly pleased that Anthony thought nothing of including Carlisle in this piece of personal life.

"We watch the Harry Potter movies every Christmas," Anthony told him, focused on the text he was sending. "She's Hermione, of course. We dress up and everything." He showed Carlisle the screen again. "I typed this back."

Yeah, I think I got myself a man last night. And who the fuck is this redhawk, love?

"Delete 'think' and you have my approval." Carlisle smiled and watched as Anthony sent off another text.

Cullen told me to remove "think." Btw, you hungover? Ed still there? I hope he didn't fuck up.

Maybe their bubble wouldn't burst even if Isabella was included in their first morning together. Anthony seemed very...open with her, which Carlisle liked. Especially the part where Anthony shared the news. Hopefully that meant Carlisle and Anthony wouldn't have to be discreet around her, at least.

"You're going to have to explain your odd relationship with your brother soon." Carlisle brushed a kiss to Anthony's temple. "I'm very curious."

"Sure." Anthony gave him a quick, easy smile. "You give me coffee, I give you dirt."

So simple. Anthony hadn't lied. He *was* an open book. It was...Christ, it was refreshing.

"I can do better than that." Carlisle smirked a little. "While you were dreaming about the Penguins crushing you, I went out and bought breakfast."

"*Nice.*" Anthony slid his phone under his pillow and faced Carlisle fully. "I can get used to this, you know." Leaning forward, he gave Carlisle a chaste kiss. "Bet'chu snuck a peek at the goods, too."

Carlisle laughed through his nose. "If I did, there would be no sneaking. My goods now, remember?"

"Oh yeah." Anthony was about to say something else, but his phone vibrated before he could. "Okay, turning it off." He checked the message he'd received and laughed, then showed it to Carlisle.

Sorry for the late reply. Was busy doing a happy dance. Which of course made my headache worse, so that answers your question about hangover...ness. And yes, Ed's still here. Well, he's out getting breakfast. The redhawk is Emmett; he told Edward who you left with. Btw hi, Carlisle. I have beef with you, but we can

solve that next time we see each other. All it takes is a prank and a good talk. Okay, get back to...being triple (s)X-y.

"I think I like her," Carlisle mused, internally deleting his own "think." But her text had also brought more questions. "Have I offended her in some way, though?" He certainly hoped not.

"Nah, she's just protective of me," Anthony said, switching off his phone. "Sorta like I am of her. You're good. You were only a fuck-up for a week. Although, her pranks can be scary. Good luck with that one." He groaned as he stretched some more. "So...breakfast? *Man*, I gotta take a piss, too."

Carlisle felt slightly dazed, but he was more determined than ever to keep up with Anthony. Because at this point, Carlisle had never felt more alive.

His daughter had showed him what unconditional love was, but Anthony was teaching him how to breathe.

Chapter 17

Bella snickered to herself as she started to write a how-to-get-back-at-Cullen-for-being-a-douchenozzle list.

"Gotta buy glitter," she mumbled, jotting it down. In between words, she took small sips of the Anthony Special, which...sounded a lot dirtier than it was. *It's a type of juice.* And that wasn't better. God. Whatever. It was part of his hangover kit that Edward had prepared for her the second she'd woken up an hour ago.

Edward hadn't run.

No, he'd stayed.

While recovering from that shock, and keeping her excitement low-key, she'd taken a shower. And Edward had *still* been there when she'd gotten out. Granted, it had been a little awkward, neither knowing exactly where to go from there, but Edward had made it better with small talk.

It's a start.

Emmett had texted Edward earlier, asking if they were gonna hit the gym together. Edward had declined, to which Emmett had said he'd tried to reach Anthony, who hadn't answered. In return, Edward had covered for Anthony, saying he might be hungover and asleep. And it had led to Emmett mentioning that Anthony had left around the same time Bella and Edward had. With Carlisle Cullen.

So...Edward and Bella had chit-chatted a little about that.

Afterward, Edward had offered to step out to get breakfast, and since Bella had needed a minute to get her shit straight, she'd agreed quickly. Thank God Edward had the same shoe size as Anthony—*I mean, pretty*

obviously they do—so Bella had asked for the building's concierge to have Edward's sneakers cleaned while Edward was out.

Still can't believe I threw up on his shoes!

She was mortified.

Anthony would get a kick outta that once he found out.

Cranking up the music on her laptop, Bella continued to scribble furiously into her little notebook, and a little while later, she heard Edward returning, having borrowed her keys.

He joined her in the kitchen and grinned carefully as he set a bag from a nearby coffee shop on the counter. "Ashlee Simpson, Bella?"

Bella smirked and bobbed her head to the music. "*You make me wanna la-la,*" she sang.

Edward chuckled, the tension fading before it even became an issue, and joined her at the kitchen island, taking a stool next to her. "There's a blast from the past. You used to have her poster on your wall."

Bella smiled and averted her eyes, remembering. "You know..." She shifted her gaze to Edward and nudged his bicep with her shoulder. "You're sort of a blast from the past, too."

The kind of blast I don't want to disappear again.

"I know." Edward sobered and looked down at his lap, fiddling with Bella's keys. "I have an explanation but no excuses. If that makes sense."

It did, and Anthony had already shared his guess as to what Edward's reason for leaving was. Bella knew it had everything to do with Brady, but there had to be something—details—that she'd never been privy to.

"Will you run again?" That was all Bella needed to know right this instant. Everything else could wait—at least a little while. But she knew her heart wouldn't be able to take another disappearance.

She remembered what he had said last night, vaguely... If he could take it all back, he would. *"Guilt drove me away and shame kept me there."*

"Christ, no." Edward blew out a breath, his shoulders drooping. *Defeat.* "I still don't know how I managed to leave the first time." When he faced her, hesitation was written all over his features, but it had nothing to do with what he was saying now. Bella saw it clearly; he wanted to come home. Perhaps not home-home; she couldn't know *that*. But he was done fighting his demons alone. "It did me no good, anyway. I've missed you guys like crazy." He touched her cheek but quickly let his hand fall away again. "I doubt I'll ever understand why you came after my miserable ass."

Bella offered a one-shouldered shrug, 'cause to her it was simple. "You're family, Edward," she whispered.

First and foremost, he was family.

Was Bella in love with Edward? God, yes. To stupidity and beyond, but simply having Edward back in her life was more important. Much more important. More than half her heart had been missing, but maybe—hopefully—it could mend now.

The years they'd had together back in Detroit had tied them together forever. Bella had a unique bond with each Masen, and she was learning now that some things hadn't changed. Right this moment, she could sense that Edward needed something. Comfort? Reassurance?

"Hug me," she said firmly.

"Oh, thank God." Edward was out of his seat in a flash and pulled Bella in for a tight hug. She smiled as her eyes welled up. She closed them and basked in Edward's warmth. His muscular arms were wrapped around her tightly, but all that strength and solidness aside, both Masen twins had always exuded comfort and heat.

"Besides, that miserable ass of yours is still fine," she whispered.

Edward laughed quietly, shakily, and mumbled, "I've been out of it for too long. I don't have a quick comeback."

Give it time, Bella wanted to say. Because she knew it was there. She'd seen glimpses of it.

~oOo~

Some time later, Bella and Edward settled in the living room to eat their breakfast and just chill out. Bella picked out a decent movie—the kind you enjoyed somewhat but could still talk during—and munched on a smoked salmon and cream cheese bagel while Edward devoured two helpings of pancakes and one sandwich.

"I can hear your nutritionist screaming somewhere," she teased.

"Eh." Edward patted his stomach and licked jam off his fingers. "Nothin' a couple hours in the gym won't fix."

Oh, to have a hockey player's metabolism.

"I gotta head over to the arena in a few hours and pick up my helmet," he said, reaching for his coffee. "Maybe I'll meet up with Emmett and work out."

"Your helmet?"

Edward nodded and sipped his beverage. "I'm adding something to it before the next game."

Bella's eyebrows rose. "Artwork?" Another nod from Edward, which shocked Bella. "Dude. Bad juju!"

A goalie simply didn't fuck with his helmet, and definitely not during a season.

"Consider this my fuck-you to the hockey gods." Edward gave a fake gasp.

Bella's was real. "What the hell is wrong with you?!" she cried out. "Shut your trap and knock on wood." She pointed to the coffee table, which...was made of glass. "Ugh." She shifted closer to Edward, grabbed his hand, and brought it to his head. "Knock-knock, idjit."

"You're too fucking cute."

"You're too fucking cocky," she retorted. Was only Anthony superstitious these days? Bella had gotten the same mentality over the years, and to learn that Edward had stopped... "I'll have to pray for your soul now."

"Don't worry, I still rock the playoff beard," he laughed.

Hell yeah, you do. Bella loved that Edward didn't shave everyday like Anthony did. Anthony could be worse than Bella in the bathroom, but Edward was more...casual. I-don't-give-a-fuck, like. And hella sexy that way.

Although, when it came to the playoffs, even Anthony let his scruff grow.

"Do you still tap your stick to the goalposts before a game?" Bella asked curiously.

"Yup. Ten times. Not during regular games, but for the playoffs? Definitely." Edward leaned back against the cushions and grinned lazily. "I still gotta have an iced coffee before the third period, too."

Oh, Bella remembered that one. He'd started that one early—back in the farm team days. During a game, the opposing team had scored three times, and for some reason he'd taken a sip of someone's iced coffee in the break between the second and third period. The opposing team hadn't scored again, and Edward insisted it was what kept his save percentage as high as it was.

"Any new superstitions since you became a ghost?" She kept her tone light and was thankful Edward took it the right way.

"Two," he admitted. "On a game day—not only during the playoffs, but every game day—there are three songs I gotta listen to in a specific order."

"Which ones?"

"First, 'Sirius' by The Alan Parson Project," he said, keeping a straight face. Because to him, and all other hockey players, superstitions were as serious as a heart attack. Bella was always amused by them, but...heck, she'd never make fun. Like she'd stated, she'd become superstitious over the years, too. "Second, 'Enter Sandman.'" This one, Bella had heard. She liked Metallica as well. She nodded. "Third, and this is a recent addition, 'Luck' by American Authors."

"Huh." Bella sat back, silently committing the titles to memory. She was gonna have to download them later. "And the second routine?"

Wow, was Edward blushing? It sure looked like his ears were tinting red. "Uh..." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah, so maybe I gotta have a certain scent for my bodywash."

"Oh, wow." Bella smirked behind her hand and poked Edward in the side with her free one. "And is this scent by any chance usually more popular with women?"

"No comment." He pretended to scowl at her, but the mirth in his eyes gave him away. "That's between me and my bodywash."

"Aww, come on!" Bella finally let her giggles out, and she poked him again. "Tell me. What scent?"

"Quit it." He chuckled, but instead of batting her hand away, he grabbed it and linked their fingers together. That worked for Bella. A lot. "I mean, it could be worse," he said pointedly. "It's not vanilla or roses or anything."

"Of course." Bella composed her face. "I bet it's a manly fruit. Like...banana."

Edward's forehead creased and he furrowed his brows together. "Because it's shaped like a bent dick?"

"Naturally."

It made sense to Bella.

"Well, it's not." He huffed. "Imagine hittin' the ice smelling like a banana split."

"Oh, man. Now I want one." Bella sighed in longing and lolled her head to rest it on Edward's shoulder. "I think we have ice cream and bananas, but no whipped cream or chocolate."

"Tragedy."

"You said it."

They were quiet for a beat, and for once, the silence was totally chill and comfortable. It was just Edward and Bella, two people who knew each other so well but had forgotten how easy things were. Could be. Had been. Still were.

Edward draped an arm around Bella's shoulders and rested his chin on the top of her head. Maybe he was looking out the window; the view was spectacular from the thirty-ninth floor. Or perhaps he was watching the movie. Or maybe he was just reveling, too. Like Bella was.

"Want me to go out to buy cream and chocolate syrup?" Edward murmured after a while.

"Nah..." Bella was too comfortable. She didn't want to leave her spot. More importantly, she didn't want Edward to leave his. "We can tell Anthony to pick it up on his way home. If he has plans to resurface today."

Edward snorted softly in amusement. "The fact that he hasn't left Cullen's place yet..."

"Yup." Bella was so happy for Anthony. "It's definitely serious."

Edward hummed. "My gaydar must suck, 'cause I never would've guessed Cullen's gay."

"You'd never guess Anthony's into guys, either," Bella chuckled. She remembered back when she was fourteen or fifteen. Anthony had dropped the bomb at the dinner table. *"Yeah, so there's this guy at school. He's fucking hot. So...I think I swing both ways. You cool with that?"* The Mallorys had been stunned into silence, to put it mildly.

The topic had never really been broached properly. The Mallorys were too focused on their careers, and they liked sweeping things under the rug. Bella knew being foster parents looked very good for two lawyers, though. Perhaps that was their excuse for never taking pro-bono cases or

whatever. They threw out the foster-family card instead. Made them look good, like helpful, sacrificing, upstanding people.

"I envy him, you know," Edward said quietly. "I wonder if nothing scares him."

"One thing," Bella replied softly. "Being abandoned."

The sad thing about Anthony was that he smiled and cracked jokes even when he was down. Like, genuinely upset. He'd fake a pout, bitch and moan, but he never revealed how much it truly hurt him when people ignored him or left.

"I have a lot to make up for." Edward pressed a kiss to Bella's hair. "I hope—"

That was all he could get out before he was interrupted by the door opening. "Honey, I'm home!" Anthony called from the hallway.

"Quick, answer," Bella whispered to Edward.

Edward blanched as he tried to come up with a response, but then Bella grinned in triumph as another piece of his old self returned to him.

"Fuck, switch the channel!" Edward moved the remote noisily on the coffee table, then leaned close to Bella and spoke for only her to hear.

"Pretend you're flustered."

Bella caught on quickly and mussed up her hair, stifling her laugh as she heard Anthony hurrying from the hallway. At the same time, Edward dropped a pillow over his crotch and did a marvelous job of looking guilty of stealing cookies. *Or watching porn.*

Anthony barged in and stopped short, surveying the living room suspiciously.

"Hi," Bella squeaked and made a show of smoothing down her hair. "Um, you—you're home early."

She noted that he was wearing the same clothes as yesterday, and his button-down was all wrinkled.

Anthony narrowed his eyes. "What the hell did I interrupt?" His gaze flicked between Bella, Edward, the remote, the TV, the pillow on his brother's lap... And he cocked a brow at Bella. "Were you watching *porn*?"

Bella and Edward glanced at each other before they smirked and bumped fists.

"Syke," they said in unison, which obviously came with: "Jinx!"

Bella's heart was soaring. *This is how it's supposed to be.*

"Aw, you guys..." Anthony was shaking his head, looking like he'd tasted ass. For all Bella knew, he had, but he probably liked that shhhh...stuff. Bella sure liked watching it on tumblr! "That was sweet—and nauseating." Walking over to the couch, he forced Bella and Edward to separate by wriggling his ass into the cushion. "That's it. Consider me your chaperone."

Bella smiled wryly, knowing there was no need for a chaperone.

The memory of the time Edward had kissed Bella in the garage under the arena still messed with her, but she figured it was best to not read into it. Maybe Edward had only been pissed because she'd been Anthony's "girlfriend," which might've wounded Edward's ego. Or maybe he'd been caught up in old memories. Maybe there were still feelings on Edward's side, too.

Maybe, maybe, maybe.

"So..." Bella shifted to make more room. "How's Carlisle?"

"Big." Anthony coughed and widened his eyes. "But that's probably not what you wanted to know."

Bella shrugged. "Big works." She grinned and mock-punched his shoulder. "Congrats."

"Whatta weird thing to congratulate someone for," Edward mused. His gaze slid to Anthony's. "I won't do that."

"Probably best Bella remains the only weirdo." Anthony chuckled and draped his arms along the back of the couch. "So, what's up? This is nice. My brother and my girlfriend."

"Keep dreaming," Edward muttered.

"I know *you* are, bro." Anthony smirked, his words confuzzling Bella. "But seriously, what have I missed? Are we all okay now? I'm just here to pack a bag—I'm spending the night at Cullen's, but I wanna catch up with you, too."

"See how he dropped that line about spending the night with his man all casual-like?" Bella asked Edward, leaning forward. "Dude," she said, pinching Anthony's nipple, "how about you gimme deets about you and Carlisle?"

Aside from being crazy curious, she also wanted to know how they were gonna proceed. If it felt weird being Anthony's pretend girlfriend now, it would be downright uncomfortable if he wasn't really single. Plus, she didn't want Carlisle to get hurt.

Anthony had a counteroffer. "How about we sit down and have dinner together after the game on Tuesday and hash it all out?"

"I don't think my brother's sex life is my kind of dinner topic," Edward deadpanned.

Bella giggled.

Anthony grinned. "Look at'chu." He grabbed Edward's jaw and faced Bella. "My reflection is cracking jokes, love."

"You adore your reflection." Bella stuck out her tongue.

"That I do." Anthony chose to ignore Bella's jibe at his vanity and planted a loud smooch on Edward's bearded cheek. "Even if he has a big vagina. That needs a shave."

"Fuck you, Ant," Edward laughed, his eyes shining with relief and newfound joy. "Go kiss our GM with that mouth instead."

Bella just smiled. Super wide and all.

"I will." Anthony clapped his hands together, then rose from the couch. "Gonna take a shower first, 'cause let's just say the shower I took with Cullen wasn't about getting clean." He waggled his eyebrows. "If you know what I mean."

Bella snorted and hugged her knees to her chest. "We always know what you mean, Anthony." But the shower thing reminded her... "By the way, before your next game, can you sniff Edward to see what his bodywash smells like?"

Anthony cocked a brow at Edward. "Do I even wanna know what she's talking about?"

Edward's shoulders were shaking with silent laughter. "No. No, you don't."

"Right." Anthony scratched his side and eyed both Bella and Edward. "Be good, kids. And set up that dinner or whatever. We'll talk—be all adult and shit."

"Consider it done, Daddy," Bella said.

"Not my kink, love." Anthony winked and headed for his bedroom. "But don't think I don't know what'chu read on your laptop!" he called over his shoulder.

Bella flushed as she met Edward's stunned expression.

"It's research," she said quickly.

"Uh...right..." Edward coughed into his fist, his ears tinting pink again.

"Wh-wh—I mean, uh, research for *what?*"

Oh, right. Bella hadn't exactly mentioned what she did for a living, nor was it public knowledge that she was gonna leave children's books and hobby photography behind for dudes who love buttsex.

Well, this oughta be interesting.

Chapter 18

Akta för helvete = Out of the way, goddammit.

Målvakt = Goaltender.

~oOo~

While Edward had been ready for this day to come for a while now, it still arrived too fast.

The past few days had been fucking spectacular. When Anthony wasn't with Cullen, he hung out with Edward and Bella. And it was casual. They had tonight, after the game, to talk things out and be serious, but in the meantime, they'd just enjoyed chillin' together.

There had been plenty of moments of awkward silence, especially when Brady came up in conversation or any topic that reminded them all of Edward's leaving, but Anthony was always good at smoothing things over.

Today had probably been the best day. Cullen had been stuck in pregame meetings, so the two Masens had taken Bella to the aquarium outside of Copenhagen in Denmark. Granted, they'd only had a few hours together before Anthony and Edward had to be at the arena, but...yeah, it'd been cool. Casual, relaxed. Plus, it was an experience to see Bella losing herself in her hobby. She'd taken some awesome photos.

Edward smiled as he secured the pads over his thighs, finding it difficult to focus on the game right now. But he fucking had to, didn't he? Just...it'd been a while since he'd had a genuine reason to smile, and Bella and Anthony were giving him one—hell, several—now.

Head in the game, Masen.

After Coach's strategy speech and the assistant coach's pep talk, Edward jumped a little when someone approached him from behind and took a whiff of his neck. Eyes wide, he whipped around and found his smirking brother standing in the middle of the locker room.

"Coconut." Anthony fired a pistol shot with his fingers, then proceeded to walk over to his spot. "I wonder what that information is worth to Bella." He grinned as he sat down and started re-lacing his skates.

"*Akta för helvete*—watch out!" Peter clamped a hand over his mouth and darted for the bathroom.

Edward shook his head, his gaze sliding back to Anthony. "It's probably worth a laugh and a half."

"What's with him?" Anthony jerked a thumb in the direction of the bathrooms.

Emmett spoke up as he was taping his stick. "He's nervous about losing to his kid brother."

"Well, that's not the right spirit," Edward said, sharing a chuckle with his brother. "He should be thrilled about *winning*."

Emmett gave him an odd look. "Are you all right, man?"

That confused Edward. "Uh, yeah?"

"Ah, he's probably not used to seeing you in a good mood, bro," Anthony said and addressed Emmett. "It's cool now. Bella and I just had to take the stick out of his ass."

Edward scratched his eyebrow with his middle finger. "Maybe Comedy Central is your next stop."

"Nah, I'm too good for that." Anthony secured the helmet on his head and retrieved his mouth guard from a small case. "I could create a gap between my front teeth and take over for Letterman instead. That fuck's getting old."

Edward smirked, placing his catch glove under his arm. "Wait a few years and you'll have enough grays to do Leno. He's funnier, and he loves chicken."

"Man, now I want a bucket of wings." Anthony stood up, ready to hit the ice, and pulled out his phone from his jacket. "Is that why you keep it short, by the way?" He ran a hand through his hair. "Cuz you've already got grays?"

"Okay, you two are too fucking weird," Emmett muttered. At that point, Peter returned from the bathrooms, and the two left the locker room together.

Edward ignored that, wanting to check his phone as well. In the past, he'd never had a reason to. But now...

Smiling softly, he read the text from Bella where she wished him good luck on the game and told him she was proud to wear a Masen shirt with two sets of numbers on it.

He was wondering where she'd gotten a custom Redhawks shirt that fast, considering it had to be specially ordered online, when Anthony cursed a few feet away.

"What's up?" Edward asked. The locker room was pretty empty now, only a handful of players lingering.

Anthony eyed the others, then grabbed his stick and walked over to his brother. He kept his voice low. "Carlisle's daughter was supposed to visit

this weekend, but look." He showed Edward the display of his phone. "I got this an hour ago."

When I got home after my meetings today, there was a note stuck on the door from Alice. She flew in this morning, but since she couldn't get ahold of me or have keys to my house, she had her mother get her a room at a nearby hotel. She will attend the game with me tonight. I'm sorry I couldn't let you know sooner.

Edward pursed his lips to hide his grin, but a snort became a chuckle, and soon he was full-out laughing.

"I don't see what's so fucking funny," Anthony gritted out. "We haven't even talked about that shit. Am I supposed to meet her? I mean, of-fucking-course I will, but—"

"Time to go, guys!" The assistant coach stuck his head in, then said something in Swedish to the other players.

Still chuckling, Edward made sure he had everything before he trailed out with the others, Anthony following. "Don't be nervous, InstaDaddy. She'll love you."

"I'm not—for Christ's sake," Anthony hissed.

"What *have* you talked about?" Edward was curious. Anthony had spent most nights with Cullen, and while there was work, practice, and hours at the gym getting in the way, there was also plenty of free time.

Edward figured family history, likes, and dislikes woulda come up in convo by now.

All Edward and Bella had learned was that only Cullen's closest family knew he was gay, daughter included, but Edward sin-fucking-cerely hoped Anthony knew more than *that*.

"You know...stuff." Anthony shrugged under his gear. Edward raised a brow, having a guess, but his brother was evidently fast to shoot that down. "We've talked." He got a little defensive. "Childhoods and shit. His college years, my farm team days. Where and how we grew up." He shrugged again, and they could hear the distant roar of the supporters inside the nearly sold-out arena. "D'ju know he's a rich kid? Old money and everything."

No, Edward didn't know that—obviously. But at the mention of "rich kid," he did remember what Bella had called Cullen. So, he turned to his brother with a frown and said, "Bella said he's a Daddy type."

Anthony barked out a laugh. "Yeah, she's told me that, too." He tapped his stick to Edward's left pad and leaned close. "You still hung up on that? The Daddy kink?"

Yes. Yes, he fucking was. Learning that Bella was planning to write explicit stuff was hot as hell, but the, um, fetish put too many question marks in Edward's head. Considering how short their relationship had been back in Detroit—not to mention both Edward and Bella had been virgins and young—they'd hardly thought about "experimenting." But now Edward was worried that Bella had turned into some sexual deviant. Not only did he find it intimidating and way outta his comfort zone, but it made him doubt himself.

He knew Bella hadn't been celibate, and the two embarrassing encounters Edward had had in the past seven years had only taught him how women reacted to a dick that wouldn't get hard and...how saying the wrong name got you bitch slapped.

If he'd ever get the chance to be with Bella again, he didn't wanna be...lacking.

"Dude." Anthony stopped them in the long corridor leading to the arena. "You're not serious, are you?"

Edward shrugged, scowling at the concrete floor.

"Oh, my God." Anthony started laughing, and he clapped Edward on the shoulder and squeezed. "Oh, Edward, Edward, Edward." He waited to speak until they were alone. "Look, she told you what it's about, right? You know, that whole porn thing?"

"Yeah." Edward's jaw ticked. "*Research and, you know, it's hot to read.*" That was what she'd confessed.

"So, you automatically think she's looking for someone to call—*that*?" Anthony made a face, all while smirking. "It's fucking fantasy, bro. Also, she's into stories that have two men; that doesn't mean she wishes she had a dick!" Edward blinked, trying to process. "Jesus, you gotta relax, man." He grinned and threw an arm around Edward, tugging him toward the other guys. Inside the arena, they could hear the mascot riling up the crowd, which meant they only had a minute or so left. "You want our little Bella back, huh?"

Edward felt all sullen, and his brother's question was stupid. Anthony knew very well that Edward wanted Bella back.

"Well, don't worry." Anthony stuck the end of his mouth guard into his mouth, chewing on it. "She doesn't want a Daddy."

Emmett looked back at them over his shoulder and cocked a brow. "Who doesn't want a daddy?"

"My girlfriend," Anthony replied smoothly, totally unfazed. "I want a woman who calls me Daddy-o while riding me, and Bella just refuses. I may have to break up with her."

Edward killed his amusement and punched Anthony in the side where he'd feel it. "Jackass."

"Only a fool would break it off with her." Emmett let out a whistle, which irritated Edward. Now that he knew the truth, he could handle Anthony joking about it. Other men, not so much. "I hooked up with the GM's assistant after Bella's party. Man, she was a frigid one. The Canadian winter is a sauna compared to her."

"Rose?" Anthony snickered. "Last I heard, she has a crush on the GM himself." His grin turned a little dark, and Edward wondered if there was an itty bit of jealousy there. Maybe Anthony was possessive?

Up ahead, the doors flew open, so Edward and Anthony quickly got rid of the rubber covers on their blades and got ready. It ended all conversation too, and focus landed on the game.

At last.

One by one, the players were introduced as they hit the ice through an inflatable Redhawk passage.

"Center, Anthony Masen!"

Anthony glided out before Edward, the crowd cheering wildly. Edward could feel it in the foundation of the arena. It was heady, addictive, and helped him center himself.

"Målvakt, Edward Masen!"

Edward pushed down his helmet and skated into the arena, breathing in the crisp air. The arena was cast in a red glow, spotlights flashing, heavy music playing, and supporters going nuts.

The away team got a less enthusiastic introduction, and Edward lined up along the center blue line with the rest of his teammates.

The English-speaking players didn't exactly follow the bullshit about today's sponsors and whatever, so they just stood there until it was done. Then Edward made his way over to the net, looking up to the VIP box where Bella was supposed to be watching. It was directly up and behind the net, and he spotted Cullen and the team's owner fairly quickly. Outside each box, there were private seats for those who didn't wanna watch the game behind a window. Cullen was standing with the owner in the doorway, hence seeing them so easily. But when he narrowed his eyes and concentrated, he finally spotted Bella, too. She wasn't alone; another girl was sitting with her. The GM's daughter, maybe?

Edward took a sip of his sports drink before leaving the bottle on top of the goal. Then he spent a minute or two giving advice to the younger players who often sought him out right before a game.

Everyone knew Edward was religious about studying other players' shooting styles and techniques.

"Ed!" Anthony circled the net, warming up, and spun to skate backward. "I forgot to tell you something."

"What?" Edward eyed Pete's little brother—Jasper—across the ice. He was a fast little fucker, a center like Anthony.

Next season Jasper Whitlock would play for the Blackhawks in Chicago, having been drafted last year. He was green, though. Only eighteen, which was why the Blackhawks were waiting.

"I like the new art on your helmet." Anthony had his attention again. He smirked and shook his head in amusement. "If we lose, I'll blame you."

Yeah, well. "If you don't score, I'll blame *you*." He hadn't wanted to wait 'til the end of the season to add Bella's name on the side of his helmet. After seeing Bella's tatt, this was the least he could do. For now. Even if it was far from subtle. "Get up there now." He jerked his chin at center ice. It was face-off time.

"Yessir." Anthony skated away, showing off for his fans.

Chapter 19



IIHF = International Ice Hockey Federation. (The majority of the hockey nations—except for those in the NHL—go by IIHF specifications. They host various international tournaments, such as the World Cup.)

~oOo~

Bella slid her key card into the lock, and the door to Carlisle's VIP box opened. At first, she'd thought she'd had to stay with the other players' girlfriends, but it turned out not many cared to watch their men play. Instead, Anthony had said she could stay with Carlisle.

Which suited Bella just fine. She had some unfinished business with Carlisle, anyway.

Shrugging out of her cardigan, she walked over to the kitchen counter and picked up the menu. Then she called in her order of a Sprite and a hot dog for the first period break.

The VIP box was empty so far, so she passed the table that seated twelve and opened up the door and windows to the arena. Just outside the box, there were three rows with private seats, and she left her cardigan and small paper bag by one of the red, cushioned chairs.

The arena was filling up nicely, and since she felt a bit weird walking around in a space that wasn't hers, she sat down and people watched.

A few minutes later, she heard voices coming closer. Standing up, she peered inside the VIP box and saw Carlisle and a teenage girl.

"So, you'll talk to her?" she was asking, ripping off a knitted beanie to uncover dark hair—same color as Carlisle—short and stylish, reaching her jaw. Was this his daughter?

Bella felt underdressed in her game shirt, jeans, and ponytail, but then she thought *fuck that*. She was proud to wear the shirt Anthony had specially ordered for her with both Masen numbers on it. This girl was the one who was overdressed. Had she not been as short as Bella, she would've belonged on a runway.

"I'll do my best, pumpkin." Carlisle spotted Bella in the doorway and smiled. "Alice, I want you to meet Isabella Swan. Isabella, this is my daughter Alice. She flew in from London this morning for a surprise visit."

And surprise, surprise to Anthony!

"More like my mum's driving me bloody mad and I couldn't wait for the weekend, but whatever." Alice grinned cheekily and extended her hand to Bella. "Nice to meet you, Isabella."

"You too." Bella smiled politely, feeling out of place. With Carlisle in a sexy suit and Alice all chic in a short dress and leggings—*Jesus, those heels don't look cheap*—Bella doubted she'd feel comfortable anytime soon.

With the Mallorys being high-profile lawyers and Anthony's fame, not to mention her own moderate success, Bella was hardly a stranger to money and lavish things. But she was still a simple girl.

"When does the game start?" Alice asked her dad. "Is there time for me to run down to the shop?"

Carlisle checked his watch. "You have fifteen minutes, but there's usually a long line."

Alice waved that off, though. "I'll make it." She turned to Bella with a grin. "I can't possibly watch a game and not wear a single team color!"

O...kay? Well, that made Bella relax at least a little. Could Alice maybe be a hockey fan?

England couldn't be a great place to live, then.

Alice left the VIP box in a blur, leaving Bella alone with Carlisle.

"I, um, ordered soda and food for the break," she said lamely. "I didn't know if you guys wanted anything."

"Oh, good call." Carlisle walked over to the phone. Then he ordered three burgers and two hot dogs, sodas too, for the next break. By the time he was done, he turned to Bella again, who was smirking. "I'm hungry," he admitted.

"You're kidding," she chuckled.

"Hey, one of the burgers is for Alice."

"How kind of you." Bella grinned, and she really wanted to prank him now, if only to break the ice, but there were more pressing matters to deal with before Alice came back. "So...what am I allowed to say? Around Alice, I mean."

The last thing she wanted was to put her foot in her mouth, and she hadn't discussed any of this with Anthony. Did he even know Alice was here?

"Good question." Carlisle sighed and smiled ruefully. "Alice wasn't supposed to be here until this weekend, so Anthony and I haven't talked about it. But I did tell her that you're a childhood friend to the twins, and I hope we can include her in the truth soon."

Bella was glad. She was done with the charade anyway. "Definitely—"

There was a knock on the door, so Carlisle gave her an apologetic look, then opened the door to let in another man in a suit. Carlisle introduced the two, and Bella learned it was the team's owner. Business talk followed, so Bella excused herself to go outside the box and wait for the game to start.

If that owner dude had plans to stick around for long, Bella was gonna have to rethink the prank. It was one thing to joke around, but she didn't exactly wanna embarrass Carlisle in front of people he worked with.

With three minutes to go before the game, Alice returned and plopped down in the seat next to Bella, now wearing a Redhawks t-shirt big enough to cover her short dress and a matching scarf around her neck.

"I feel so much better now," she said with her cute, posh accent. "This is one of the reasons I want to attend university in the States." She nodded at the ice. "I haven't been to a game since Dad lived in Finland."

Bella smiled, relaxing further, and figured a few innocent questions couldn't hurt. "Was he a general manager there, too?"

"Oh, no." Alice pursed her lips and shook her head. "He was employed by the IIHF. He was a representative. "

Huh. "But he used to live in London, right?"

"Yes, he started as a sports journalist," Alice revealed, and Bella was soaking it up. So far, Anthony hadn't told her much at all. "But he missed hockey, so when I was a little older, he took a job in Zürich with the IIHF. Plus, after Mum and Dad split up, there was really no reason for him to be tied to London." She spoke so casually about her parents divorcing, which...Bella wasn't sure if she admired it or if she was just puzzled. "He visited me often, and sometimes he brought me with him, too." She paused, then smiled in what appeared to be embarrassment. "I'm sorry, I'm not sure how well you know each other, so for all I know I'm rambling about things he's already told you."

"Oh, we don't really know each other yet," Bella admitted. "I met him through Edward and Anthony." She figured it was best to include Edward's name. "He seems very nice, though. And we Americans gotta stick together." She grinned slightly at the end.

Alice laughed as the arena became dark, which meant the players were coming out soon. "Well, long and dreadfully boring story abbreviated, Mum and Dad met when he was in Europe after his first year at university. They had a long-distance relationship until he graduated and moved to London." She shrugged a little. "They got married, and I was born a couple years later."

Bella knew there was a *lot* left to be said, most importantly how Carlisle went from being married to a woman to now dating a man, but it wasn't the time or place—and she wasn't the right person—to push. So, instead

she asked about Carlisle's interest in hockey and learned that he'd played as a kid, then dreamed of either writing about the sport or being involved with a team.

Well, he's involved with a player now!

After that, Bella and Alice both turned their heads as the announcer started introducing players on the Jumbotron. The heavy bass of Vangelis' "Conquest of Paradise" nearly made the arena vibrate. The supporters went crazy. The first player hit the ice in a swirl of spotlights and smoke, and Alice smiled widely, cupping her own cheeks.

Bella knew exactly what Alice was feeling.

Her heart thumped erratically as the final two players skated out, first Anthony then Edward. Looking up over her shoulder, she caught Carlisle watching the Jumbotron where Anthony's determined expression lit up the screen.

Carlisle looked like...he was halfway in love already. It was a mix between pride, admiration, and the kind of *"I'm paying attention to you and only you"* that one only gave to someone they were devoted to.

Bella knew what it was like, and the second Edward's face ended up on the same screen, she felt it, too.

"Can I ask you a question, Isabella?" Alice asked with a curious look. Her gaze slid from Carlisle to Bella, who nodded. She also mentioned that Alice could call her Bella. "Bella, then." Alice smiled. "Do you know if my dad is seeing anyone?"

Oh...maybe, yes, definitely? "Uh, why?" Bella was stalling. "I mean, has he said anything?"

Alice snickered and smoothed the fabric of her shirt down her lap. "He's said lots of things, just not the right ones. But he seems..." She looked back at her father, then once again at Bella. "Happier. On the way over here, he also spoke a *lot* about the Masen twins."

That caused Bella to choke on a breath, and she coughed into her fist.

"I see." Alice looked practically gleeful. "So, which one is it? Oh, never mind." She pointed to the Jumbotron as the camera zoomed in on the players one by one. And it was right there—Edward's helmet. The image was grainy but still clear enough. "At least I hope it's not Edward, lest we want drama on our hands."

Bella wasn't breathing. By now, the camera had shifted to the next player, but all Bella saw in her mind was that helmet. Black and red, team colors, with a simple but cool design, and along the side of it was Bella's name in a fancy white script. Simply "Bella."

The prank she'd planned on Carlisle was long forgotten.

~oOo~

"Nice try, kid." Edward chuckled through heavy breaths as he gloved the puck. Throughout the game, Jasper Whitlock had tried to score, but Edward had saved every time. Unfortunately, he'd failed to save one, too—though it hadn't been Jasper who'd scored. But with less than a minute left of the last period and a scoreboard that said 4-1 to the Redhawks, Edward wasn't too pissed.

"I'll get you next time, Masen," Jasper panted and skated away.

Anthony was on the bench for the last face-off, so the center in the second lineup took it and won the puck, though they didn't play on the offensive anymore. Instead they passed the puck between themselves as

the clock ticked, and Edward followed every movement. As secured as the win was, he never relaxed until the game was over.

For the last ten seconds, the crowd stood up and counted down with the clock on the Jumbotron, the victory theirs. Anthony hit the ice with his other resting teammates, and he met Edward near the blue line, both grinning.

"Well played, bro." Anthony placed a gloved hand on the back of Edward's neck and pressed their helmets together. "Did you know there're scouts are here tonight? Both from the KHL and the NHL."

"No..." Edward's brows knitted together, and he automatically looked up at Cullen's VIP box. But it was only him, Bella, and that other girl, Alice, there. So, he looked over to the owner's box instead, and he spotted several men in suits. "Whatever. Well played to you, too." He was enjoying being on the same team as Anthony more than he thought was possible.

Despite the years they'd lost, they read each other well on the ice, anticipating each other's moves and needs.

They had one more game in Malmo—this weekend—before they headed out on their first road trip. They'd be gone for a week and a half, and playing four away games. Hopefully, that would give the two brothers some more time to reconnect through their mutual love for hockey.

~oOo~

After showering, going over the game with Coach, and waiting for Anthony to fix his hair "just right," Edward flung his bag over his shoulder and left with his brother in tow. They were having dinner now at Bella and Anthony's place, and while Edward was nervous as fuck, he wanted to get

this night over with. He was ready to lay all the cards on the table and expose his fears and secrets.

Well...just one secret.

"Stop being so jumpy, bro." Anthony was fiddling with his phone as they headed toward the garage. "Look at it this way: after tonight, you can focus all your energy on winning Bella back."

If she'll want me after I've said my piece.

Edward honestly didn't believe they had a future, but if they did...

"Yeah, yeah," he muttered, reaching his SUV. "You spending the night at—" he gave his surroundings a quick scan to make sure they were alone "—at Cullen's place?"

"Doubt it." Anthony made a face, opening the trunk of his own car. It was parked next to Edward's. "Who knows when we'll be done—it's gonna be late, and Alice is there." Dumping his bag in the trunk, he closed it and turned to Edward. "Bella took a cab, so she's already home. Meet you there?"

Edward nodded, and on the drive toward Western Harbor, he kept reminding himself to breathe. His fingers flexed around the wheel, the color of his knuckles telling him when to ease up. Unfortunately, he couldn't tell his heart to calm the fuck down. It kept pounding away in his ribcage.

I need them to forgive me.

Chapter 20

By the time Bella heard Anthony and Edward in the hallway, she was slicing up the two pizzas she'd brought home with her. She'd even managed to take a quick shower, hoping it would've eased the tension in her shoulders.

It hadn't.

She was so damn nervous about tonight. Hence only buying two pies. 'Cause she doubted she'd manage to stomach more than a slice.

Yesterday, while Anthony was busy doing phone interviews with various sports journalists, he'd wondered why Bella hadn't just made reservations at a restaurant, to which Bella had shaken her head at him. She was girl enough to know beforehand that there would be tears tonight. She was also perceptive enough to know there would most likely be some shouting between the brothers.

Hotheads, both of 'em.

As she grabbed plates to bring to the living room, Anthony walked in with a swagger he was too white to possess, and Edward shuffled after, looking like he was next in line at the gallows.

"Hi," Bella said hoarsely, clearing her throat. She'd evidently been too loud at the game. Four goals had made sure of that, and Anthony had been responsible for two of them.

She'd underestimated Alice's love for the game. The two had had a blast, and for being only seventeen, Alice was smart and really funny.

"How you doin', love? Someone's showered." Anthony grinned and took a whiff of her hair, then proceeded to walk to the kitchen. "It's not coconut, but good enough! Beer, Ed?"

Bella cocked her head, confused.

"Um, yeah," Edward muttered, facing Bella with a wry smile. "My big secret is out. Coconut-scented bodywash."

Oh... Oh! "Gotcha," she giggled, and her stomach knotted up. Her humor felt strained and uncomfortable. It was mostly because of their reason for being here tonight, but also because she couldn't get the grainy image of her name on Edward's helmet off her mind.

She wanted to say something about it; art on a goalie's helmet was of course meant to be seen. This wasn't something he intended to keep secret. There was no way. And he *had* mentioned he was adding something to it.

"Um..." She scrambled for something else to say. "Why coconut—"

"Come on, guys. I'm starving." Anthony walked past them with glasses, drinks, and a stash of napkins. "Bring the pies!" He disappeared into the living room.

"I'll get 'em." Edward gave her a quick smile before he went in the other direction, to the kitchen.

Letting out a breath, Bella joined Anthony and set the plates on the coffee table. She deliberately chose the recliner instead of the couch, needing to keep a clear head for this discussion. Which meant she couldn't sit next to either of the twins, but definitely not Edward. He tended to cloud her judgment.

"You're as fidgety as Edward is." Anthony frowned at her as he sat down on the couch. "We know why he left—it's all Brady." He shook his head and lowered his voice. "He's acting as if he's a criminal, and you're acting like you don't know why he bailed."

"You gotta quit assuming, too," Bella whispered, keeping an eye on the doorway. "You told Edward the same, but what about you? There might be more to the story."

Anthony didn't look like he agreed with her, but he kept his mouth shut, and Edward joined them with the pizzas shortly after. He kept his gaze averted and sat down on the other side of the couch; meanwhile, Anthony plated a few slices of pizza and dug in, the picture of ease.

"Who's not eating?" he asked around a mouthful of food.

Bella made a face and grabbed one slice, not hungry at all. "That would be me. I won't eat all of this."

Edward raised a brow as he leaned forward and started eating. "You gotta eat, baby—um." He looked to his food, his jaw ticking. "Sorry."

Anthony smirked.

Bella looked down, too. She vaguely remembered that he'd called her "baby girl" the night he helped her home after the party. The term of endearment brought her back to when he'd been her boyfriend and called her that. It meant something then and it meant something now.

"I'll eat later," she said quietly, racking her brain for a simpler topic to begin with. Carlisle and Anthony seemed safe enough. "Um, Anthony...have you and Carlisle talked about how you're gonna go forward with your relationship?" She felt all stiff and formal, out of place, and...God, she wasn't used to this feeling of unease. She simply didn't do stilted and tense. Neither did Anthony or Edward. "I mean with the publicity and stuff."

They were safe from a lot of that here in Sweden. Hockey players weren't gossip-worthy unless there was a massive scandal, but back home...? The media across the pond soaked up everything about Anthony.

"Yeah, we're gonna lay low for this season." Anthony washed down some pizza with beer. "We kinda have to."

"Oh?" That sucked, in Bella's opinion. Sure, same-sex relationships were all but unheard of in the hockey world, and it wasn't much better when you included football, baseball, and basketball, but Anthony had never given a shit about what others thought. His reason for being secretive about his sexuality thus far was more because it'd be another "spectacle" to his name. "Is there like a non-fraternization policy with the team?"

Anthony shook his head, chewing and swallowing before he spoke. "No, no. That's not it at all. It's me—I gotta secure my position back home first. I wanna renew my contract before I attract the media again."

Well, that made...sense. And it was an oddly responsible—albeit sad—decision to make.

"What about Cullen?" Edward looked to Anthony. "Is he gonna stay here when you head back home?"

If Bella wasn't imagining things, she could've sworn Anthony's cheeks heated up.

"Ah, no... I don't think so, anyway. I may have *hinted* that there're plenty of jobs within the industry in the States..." He cleared his throat, looking fucking adorable. Bella couldn't help but smile. "I don't know—he didn't answer verbally, but, uh..."

Edward smirked and bumped his shoulder with Anthony's. "He gave *some* kind of answer, I take it?"

"Yeah, maybe." Why Anthony was trying to hide his happiness was beyond Bella. "Shut up. Fuck you. Next topic."

Bella laughed.

Edward chuckled. "But what about Cullen's daughter?"

"He's gonna tell her the truth tonight," Anthony answered, grabbing another slice. "I talked to him on the way home. We'll let the closest know, and...yeah, that's that."

It was Bella's turn to speak up now. "Alice already knows." That definitely gave her Anthony's undivided attention. "I didn't tell her anything. She could tell something's different with Carlisle, and evidently he likes to talk about you—and Edward." She glanced quickly at Edward before grinning at Anthony. "Um, she guessed it was you." A small lie. There was no way she was bringing up Edward's helmet *now*. "So..."

"Huh." Anthony scratched his forehead in thought. "All right."

That was that.

Because Bella couldn't stand any more awkward silences, she launched into next subject, this one totally random. "I talked to B earlier. She wants to visit some weekend, maybe around Christmas in a few months."

"Bree? From high school?" Edward asked, surprised.

Bella nodded, remembering that Edward had been close with B's older brother Fred. "You're not allowed to call her that, remember?" she teased. Bree had been called String Cheese all through junior high. She'd been skinny; and Brie, Bree, ha-ha. Very funny. Kids were cruel. So, when Bella and B had started high school, Bree had become B, and they'd had Edward, Fred, and Anthony there to protect them.

"Yeah, yeah." Edward laughed through his nose. "Wow. I didn't know you guys were still friends. What's she up to? She still in the closet?"

"Far from it." Anthony snorted, though he was grinning. "She's engaged to some Russian model, and yours fucking truly introduced them."

"She's studying law at Harvard," Bella added, smiling.

Edward nodded, his grin faltering. "And Fred?"

They were officially hitting home. It was about the past now, even more than talking about B.

Bella and Anthony exchanged looks, both recalling Brady's dream of becoming a chef. *You gonna tell him or should I?* Bella's eyes asked. Anthony let out a breath and tossed a crust onto his plate, setting it aside.

"He lives in California," he answered, leaning his elbows on his knees. He tilted his head to Edward. "Married, first kid on the way... He's a chef. Just opened his own restaurant."

Edward stared silently at Anthony, then swallowed hard and averted his gaze to the floor between his legs.

Bella's heart cracked, sensing Edward's struggle. But Brady had been Anthony's little brother too, not just Edward's. Of course, everyone grieved differently; Anthony had been devastated, openly broken and lost. He'd also been angry, and he'd started partying too often, drinking too much.

Edward had become withdrawn. He'd put on a charade that only Bella and Anthony had seen through. They'd tried to get through to him, but Edward had backed off to the point where he'd grown cold and too focused on hockey.

Bella had felt him slipping through her fingers. She'd pushed aside her own grief because Edward's had felt more important. She'd only been sixteen, but she'd known even then that she'd love that man forever. But as days turned into weeks, hopelessness had seeped into her. Edward was no longer her happy-go-lucky boyfriend. He'd become a stranger who was rarely home.

Anthony turned to parties. Edward spent all hours of the day on the ice.

Without support—and she certainly hadn't found any comfort with the Mallorys—she'd grasped at straws. Not only had she lost the little spitfire that had been Brady Masen, but she'd now also lost Anthony and Edward. She'd been dumb, although she didn't regret it, and she'd turned to B's brother, who had a friend who was a tattoo artist. *All I'd wanted was a small smile.* Maybe a hint, a glance, a look that told her she hadn't been forgotten. That she was still Edward's girlfriend. That he just needed time.

She'd gotten his number inked on her hip.

She'd headed home, hurrying to make it before curfew, only to find Anthony alone in the house. The Mallorys had been working late—as usual—and there hadn't been a game or anything to explain Edward's absence. Too late for the rink to be open. A 24/7 gym? But no... Then why was a lot of Edward's stuff gone?

No note.

The day after, Anthony had received the answer after practice with the Red Wings.

And a week later, they saw Edward on TV, playing for the Blackhawks in Chicago.

Bella's stomach churned as she thought back on those days. Anthony's fury. Her own despair.

Edward had been eighteen, and while the Mallorys had been angry—even going so "far" as to hunt him down—there wasn't much they could've done, and they surrendered quickly. Edward had severed all ties. He didn't answer the phone, he didn't accept visitors...and whenever Detroit had an out-of-conference game against Chicago, Edward's name wasn't on the roster.

Conveniently for Edward, he also moved too often. Teams wanted him, threw millions at him, even if Edward never stayed for long. One season here, half a season there...

With each season, he'd drifted farther away, and Bella had dialed his number less frequently.

He never answered anyway. Didn't matter what number she called from.

Peering over at the twins now, she saw Anthony clenching his jaw, watching Edward, trying to be patient, and...even after all these years, hiding the fact that he was hurt. Hurt by his brother who'd left.

"As—" Edward cleared his throat, that one raspy sound breaking the tense silence. "As I told Bella, I have an explanation but no excuses." Bella swallowed hard, and her heart gave an extra *thump-thump*. "I-I felt guilty—"

"I knew it." Anthony narrowed his eyes accusingly. "Jesus fucking Christ, it's not like you pulled the trigger—"

Edward flinched.

"Anthony!" Bella was horrified, pissed, and pleading. *Let him talk, for God's sake*. And to mention Brady's death like that?

Anthony showed his palms, his surrender, and sat back with a scowl.

"You know what I was doing when Brady died?" Edward asked suddenly, sounding tired and older than his twenty-five years.

"Jerking off?" Anthony drawled.

Bella cursed him for being insensitive. "I swear to Christ!"

"No, no." Edward shook his head, his mouth in a grim line. "If he wants to crack jokes—"

"Actually, I'm dead-fuckin'-serious." Anthony stood up and started pacing in front of the coffee table. "Whatever happened in the world—I mean, fuck, we were two eighteen-year-old dudes, Ed. Chances are, whatever happened at the same time, we were either jerking off or thinking about jerking off. You're putting too much pressure on yourself—on *us!*" He widened his arms. "Brady was our *brother*, not our child."

Bella chewed on her thumbnail as her eyes welled up rapidly, and her gaze flicked between the two brothers. Part of her agreed with Anthony; they shouldn't feel guilty one bit, but it was Anthony's approach she worried was too harsh for Edward. But at the same time, Edward was a grown man, and this was a moment for truth. No sugarcoating.

"I know. You're right, but there's more to it than that." Edward's voice nearly cracked. He glanced at Bella, pained. Ashamed. "He asked me to go with him that night." At his admission, Bella covered her mouth with her hand. *Oh, God.* Elbows on his knees, Edward pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes. "He asked me, Anthony. He asked me."

Memories came flooding back. She remembered the movie night Edward had suggested that dreadful Thursday. Bella had been grounded for only getting a C on a paper, so Edward had wanted to cheer her up and have a date in her room.

That's what he was doing when Brady died. Edward was with me.

"Oh, Edward..." Bella whispered, heartbroken for him. Standing up, she left the recliner and sat down next to Edward on the couch. With one hand, she wiped her cheeks; with the other, she stroked Edward's back, and she looked to Anthony for guidance. Because it was clear that this was why Edward had felt so guilty. This was what he'd kept bottled up all

these years. "That doesn't mean anything," she told Edward, sniffing. "It's still not your fault." She swallowed a sob. "If anything—" God, the mere thought gutted her. "If you had gone with him..." *Maybe you'd be dead now, too.*

Edward shuddered, his face still buried in his hands, but he seemed to know what Bella hadn't said out loud. "Or maybe I could've saved him."

Bella turned to Anthony again, pleading with her eyes. He *had* to say something, but he stood stock-still. Like he was in shock, or processing Edward's confession.

Edward groaned and wiped at his cheeks, then let his hands fall, but he turned his head away. *Because it's not cool for a dude to cry.* Bella wanted to smack him. And hug him. And never let go.

"You know Mom *told* me—"

That was all Edward got out, and it was all it took for Anthony to snap back to reality.

"Fuck what she said!" Anthony exploded. Bella swallowed her anxiety, no longer seeing her carefree friend. "We were ten years old when she died, Edward!"

A heavy silence took over as the brothers stared at each other.

Bella struggled to come up with anything to say, but she was stuck. Completely at a loss for words. She was confused too, because she thought she knew all there was to know about Edward and Anthony's parents.

Elizabeth and Anthony Senior had died after a car crash. Anthony Senior had died on the scene, but Elizabeth had hung on for several hours, long enough for the boys, who'd been staying with a family friend, to see her

one last time at the hospital. But Bella couldn't recall Edward—or Anthony—telling her anything about what Elizabeth had allegedly said to her sons.

After their deaths, the Masen brothers had been volleyed around for a while until a foster family took them in—the same family who later took Bella in after her parents had died.

"I was there, too—at her fucking bedside," Anthony gritted out. "She told you to look after Brady; she told *me*—" he pointed to his chest "—to look after both'a you." Then he smiled wide, but it was *heartbreaking*, and his eyes glistened. "That has to mean I fucked up *bad*. Majorly, fuckin' royally. I failed *both* my brothers—"

"No, fuck that!" Edward stood up now too, fuming. "Don't you dare put this shit on *you*. I fucking get it, all right? Ma probably didn't mean it literally, that I was gonna watch over him like a hawk—"

"You don't fuckin' say," Anthony drawled.

Edward spoke over him. "—but I still felt like I failed him, Ant. Can't you fucking see that? He asked me to go with him, and I brushed him off, said he could go alone." He wiped angrily at his cheeks again. "Fuck."

Bella watched helplessly, having no clue what to say. She knew reassurances would fall on deaf ears, and maybe...maybe it was best they just got it all out?

Anthony found the floor interesting, and he stuck his hands down into his pockets. "He asked me, too." At that, Edward's head snapped up. He obviously didn't know about that, and neither did Bella, who sucked in a sharp breath. Anthony went on. "Before Brady came to you, he asked me if I could go with him to the store. I said no and told him to ask you instead."

Edward didn't reply to that, but Bella could see that his thoughts had flown in a new direction all of a sudden. She knew he wouldn't blame Anthony like he probably blamed himself. Or had. Bella sincerely hoped the wrongly-placed blame wasn't screwing with Edward's life *anymore*. Because he'd told her...*guilt drove him away and shame had kept him there*.

Blinking back another round of tears, Bella looked up to find Anthony staring directly at her. His gaze was practically searing into her, but it was hard and distant, filled with unshed tears.

"I'm sorry, Ant." Edward drew in a breath and scrubbed his hands down his face. "I didn't know."

Anthony folded his arms across his chest. "Of course you didn't." His gaze hardened further. "How were you gonna find out? You shut us out completely!" Bella felt like she was being split in half. Actually, she fucking wished for it, so one part could comfort Edward and one go to Anthony. "Before you left, did you even notice your girlfriend? Huh? Did you see the shit you put her through? What shit you put *me* through?" His voice rose with each sentence. "Your only job back then was to keep your goddamn promise. Remember what we swore to each other?"

Edward nodded in defeat and looked down. "That we'd stick together," he whispered.

Bella whimpered into her hands and squeezed her eyes shut.

"But then Brady dies, and that promise suddenly means *nothing*?"

Anthony growled. "You pack up your shit and just disappear!"

"I'm sorry," Edward rasped. "I'm sorry—you gotta believe me, bro. I was..." He let out a ragged breath. "I was so fucking ashamed."

"Why?" It was Bella who spoke up. She'd lowered her hands and was now staring at the floor, refusing to face them, but she needed to know this. The specifics—every single reason, every detail. "I get the guilt, misplaced as it is, but the shame...?" She whimpered again and wiped her tears. "Please tell me it had nothing to do with me and Anthony, that you thought we would judge you."

Because if that was the reason...Bella didn't know how she'd handle that. That Edward would give them so little credit...?

"No!" Edward was next to Bella on the couch in a flash, then hesitated before he carefully placed a hand on her back. "Christ no, Bella. I—" He cautiously lifted her chin. "Please look at me, baby girl," he whispered. His thumbs brushed away the tears under her eyes. "I was ashamed because I *didn't* come to you, because I shut you out." Staying close to Bella, he faced Anthony. "After I'd left, after I'd realized what a dumb move that was... I never wanted to hurt either of you, but I convinced myself it was best to stay away—'cause you two deserved better. Someone who didn't bail. I was a coward; I'll be the first one to admit that." He swallowed hard and turned to Bella once more. "Initially, yeah, I was ashamed 'cause I'd turned him down, and I was afraid you'd blame me, but I was an eighteen-year-old kid. I wasn't thinking clearly."

As much as it pained her, Bella understood. Grief turned the sanest person crazy; hell, it could alter a person completely. Some people smiled on the outside and screamed on the inside, some broke down, some buried the pain, some dealt with it in healthier ways, some turned to medication...

Closing her eyes, Bella rested her forehead on Edward's shoulder.

To her right, she heard Anthony's sigh and felt the couch dip with his weight as he slumped down.

She reached back blindly, grabbing his hand, to which he laced their fingers together.

"You still want my sorry ass with you?" Edward asked, failing at keeping it light.

Bella lifted her head and scowled at him, only to lean back against the couch and close her eyes again. "Don't be stupid." With her free hand, she went for Edward's, and he threaded their fingers together, too.

"We're here, aren't we?" Anthony's voice was quiet. "Start treating us like family again, and we just might get along."

"I will." Edward leaned back as well, close enough for Bella to feel his body heat. "Christ, I have too many regrets. I guess..." He swallowed. "Blaming myself was easy."

"To punish yourself," Anthony muttered, knowing his brother too well. "It's what you do, you masochist." Bella would've cracked a smile if the situation wasn't so serious. "But you know now that his death's not on you, right?"

"I..." Edward let out a breath of frustration and sat up again, and Bella opened her eyes to watch him. "Yeah. I know. But sometimes...I gotta blame *someone*—"

"Edward, for fuck's sake..." Anthony groaned and straightened, facing his brother. "We didn't let him go out after dark. Lauren and Garrett did." Bella sniffled and brushed her fingers under her eyes. "*They* let a fourteen-year-old kid go outside at night. But even that—maybe they weren't even decent foster parents, but how the hell were they supposed to know that the corner store was gonna get robbed? Huh? Think about it." He paused. "Brady went to that shop all the time, bro. The only one you can ever blame is the fucker who shot him."

"I *know*." Edward hung his head. "I know, Ant. I swear, I don't blame myself anymore. I just get this fucking what-if feeling sometimes, and it sucks."

Bella squeezed his hand in silent comfort.

"I get it." Anthony drained the last of his beer, then slouched back, looking lost. "Whatta fuckin' night."

Bella almost asked if they wanted privacy. She felt they needed it, but she also knew they'd shoot her down. She was as much part of the family, they'd say. And...they were partially right, but these two men were still brothers. Twin brothers. They needed to spend time just the two of them.

She vowed to make sure they did that, and not only on the ice.

Maybe...maybe it was best she stayed here when the boys went on their road trip next week. She had work to do anyway, and she'd been slacking.

With the roughest part over, Bella found herself making plans for the future. Outings, parties, movie nights...and the best part?

The plans included both Masens now.

Chapter 21

Anthony blinked sleepily, gaining his bearings, then remembered why he was in the living room. Edward and Bella had shifted in their sleep, and now the two sickeningly sweet lovebirds were spooning on the couch. Sure, it was a large couch, but the fact remained: Anthony had woken up because he'd nearly been kicked off it.

I love you too, Bella.

Groaning, he stood up and rubbed the kinks outta his neck. He rolled his shoulders and checked the time—4 AM. Christ. They'd been up talking most of the night, exhaustion having won over an hour ago or something. Maybe two.

Regardless, it had fucked with Anthony's back, and now he was looking forward to an appointment with the team's massage therapist. But that would have to wait 'til daylight hours. Looking down at the two people who gravitated toward each other even in their sleep only made Anthony want to go to bed, although not his own.

He cracked a small smile at Edward and Bella, knowing they wouldn't need interference. They were both lost to one another, and it wouldn't be long before they'd stop tiptoeing around each other and got down to business.

After nearly seven years of hurt, anger, grief, and having questions unanswered, they could finally move on—all of them.

Making sure he had his car keys, he gave Edward and Bella a last glance before he snuck outta the living room. He probably should've texted Carlisle, but fuck it. He'd take a chance, and if Carlisle hadn't been able to tell Alice the truth yet, Anthony could always turn around. So, he packed an overnight bag, workout clothes included for the gym tomorrow, then made his way out to the hallway.

His chest felt tight, but he didn't know why. Everything was about to get better now; they were heading in the right direction. Slow reaction? Fuck if Anthony knew.

"Ant?"

Anthony whipped around and dropped his shoe, spotting Edward walking toward him.

"Where're you goin'?" Edward scrubbed his hands down his face, yawning. "You're too old to sneak out."

Anthony grinned a little and resumed putting on his sneakers. "Eh. I figured if you're gonna sleep with Bella, I should sleep with Carlisle. Fair's fair and all that."

He was all about fairness.

"There're so many things wrong with that sentence." Edward huffed a chuckle and leaned his shoulder against a wall.

"There're so many things wrong with *you*, bro." Anthony shot him a smirk as he laced his shoes. "How dense are you?" At Edward's look of confusion, Anthony went on. "The artwork on your helmet? You know Bella's seen it by now. She's just too chickenshit to mention it. And the ink on her hip? *I* know *you* have seen that. And—" he smiled wide as he stood up "—surprise, surprise, you're just too chickenshit to mention it."

"Um." Edward threw a look over his shoulder, presumably to make sure Bella wasn't close. "How'd'ju know I've seen it? Her tattoo, I mean."

"Because I can put two and two together." He shouldered his duffle and spun his key ring around a finger. "She told me you'd taken care of her after her party." He raised a brow. "How *sweet* you were to help her shower? How *gentlemanly* you were to help her put on her PJs?" Oh, this

was fucking hysterical. Anthony's brother was *blushing*, his ears all red. "Yeah...I'm pretty sure Bella showers naked."

"Fuck," Edward muttered, running a hand over his head. "I didn't look!"

"Yes, you did," Anthony laughed. "Don't even try." Edward had always been a terrible liar.

Anthony, on the other hand... He could lie just fine.

"Okay, okay. Shit." Edward cast another glance over his shoulder, then lowered his voice. "I peeked—like I could fucking help that shit. But..." He hesitated. "When did she get it? She's gotta regret it, right?"

Always so quick to assume. "If she did, don't you think she would've had it removed by now?" Anthony asked dryly, folding his arms across his chest. "You want the truth? She had it done the day you left." Edward reacted as if he'd been slapped. "*But—*" he stressed, irritated with the someone-kicked-my-puppy look on Edward, not to mention the self-hatred "*—like I said, if she'd wanted it gone, it would've been gone.*"

Anthony believed wholeheartedly in Edward and Bella getting back together, but, that said, he also knew his girl. Just because Bella was stupidly in love and *wanted* Edward...that didn't mean she was gonna let it happen right now.

"One more thing about Bella," he said, and he had Edward's attention immediately. "Don't give up." That shit was important. "Whatever she says, whatever she does..." *She'll do it to protect herself.* He sighed. "Give her a chance to realize you're here to stay."

Edward nodded soberly and looked down. He pinched his bottom lip, probably processing. "She doesn't trust me anymore."

That was true, and Anthony was glad his brother seemed to understand it. "Give her time and reasons and she'll get there." He paused, having one last thing to say, and he rubbed his chest, wondering what the fuck was going on with him. "Also, don't read too much into hugs and cuddling and whatever-the-fuck."

It was just how Bella was, which Anthony adored about her. She was crazy affectionate with people she loved, and he didn't want Edward to get his hopes up *too soon*.

"I remember." Edward showed a ghost of a smile. "It's difficult, though. Spending the night with her...? Being so close to her, and she's doing it as friends—"

"*Family*," Anthony corrected. "We're all she has—and family comes first."

"You're right." Edward nodded again, this time firmly. "I'll be whatever she wants."

Good. As long as Edward could be patient, Anthony had faith in them. "Am I done Dr. Phil'ing you for tonight?" He was anxious to leave, and the tightness in his chest was accompanied by an iron lump in his stomach. He just...he wanted... Fuck. He didn't even know.

Edward seemed to snap out of his own misery, and he frowned. "You're really leaving in the middle of the night?"

Anthony shrugged. From where he was standing, he could see a sliver of a window in the living room. "Sun's gonna be up soon." The sky was painted in pinks, purples, and oranges. "I'll call you guys when I wake up."

"Hang on." Edward stops him before he can leave, placing a hand on Anthony's shoulder. "Something's up."

Again, Anthony shrugged, 'cause he couldn't fucking speak. The tightness kept building; it felt like his chest was about to cave in.

What the fuck?

They'd talked all night long, hashed things out, and Edward had apologized over and over. Not only that, but the forgiveness Anthony had given in return had been genuine—still was. After hearing his brother's explanation tonight, so much hurt had vanished, because he knew...he fucking knew that if Brady had asked Anthony to tag along to the store and told his little brother he could go alone, Anthony would've run, too. Possibly. Of course, he wasn't sure, but...it sure as fuck wouldn't have been unthinkable.

Brady had never asked Anthony.

It was something Anthony had told Edward to ease his brother's pain, because Anthony had almost felt it as his own. And Anthony didn't regret the lie one bit. He'd do it again.

So, nothing explained why he was feeling like shit right *now*.

"Hey..." Edward's voice had softened, and he gave Anthony's shoulder a squeeze. "Christ, Ant." Without another word, he wrapped his arms around Anthony.

Anthony blew out a breath, and despite his arms suddenly feeling like lead, he returned the hug. In fact, he tightened it. Closing his eyes, he shut out the world for a minute. He felt younger, like a damn kid, but he couldn't bring himself to care.

"I'm not going anywhere," Edward said quietly, not letting go. "Never again, Ant."

Anthony's eyes burned behind closed lids, but as emotions rolled through him like a freaking thunderstorm, Ed's words were soothing. He needed to hear them.

Maybe Bella wasn't the only one who needed to let this settle, but for Anthony, the tightness in his chest was already fading, and the knot in his stomach loosened.

"I'm sorry." Edward seemed to know it, too—what Anthony needed to hear. "I don't plan on only making things up to Bella. I hope you know that." Backing away a few inches, he cupped Anthony's neck and looked him in the eye. Shit, they were both being all emotional. "It fucking broke me every time I saw you in the gossip rags, and then I just stopped looking. I couldn't handle it, knowing it was partly my fault—"

"Shut up," Anthony bitched and wiped at his eyes. "Even 'partly' is wrong, dude. *I* chose to go out too much, drink myself into oblivion, and...whatever. That's not on you." He'd started doing that when Brady had died. When Edward left, Anthony had just...continued.

He'd really only taken breaks between parties to score on the ice and be there for Bella.

"I could've been there for you," Edward pointed out quietly. He hugged Anthony again. "Better late than never?" Anthony nodded, his forehead on Edward's shoulder. It was amazing how much easier it was to breathe now. "Thank you, Ant. I mean it." He inched back once more and leveled Anthony with a serious look. "I'll never stop being thankful for you and Bella coming after me."

"Okay. Good. Yeah." Anthony looked down, feeling so much better. But the seriousness of the situation was getting to him.

"You wanna crack a joke now, don't you?" Edward asked accusingly. Anthony peered up again, only to see his brother trying to hide his own grin. "Nice," he huffed, "when we were having a moment and all."

"Fuck you," Anthony chuckled. "Go back to your girl. I'mma—" He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "You wanna hit the gym tomorrow?"

"You callin' me fat?" Edward smirked at patted his abs. "But yeah, sounds good. Text me with the time."

Anthony nodded and made a move for the door, then hesitated and glanced back at his brother.

Edward's mouth quirked up. "Love you too, Ant."

"Yeah." Anthony dipped his chin and cleared his throat "Love you. See ya later."

~oOo~

On the way to Carlisle's place, he felt tons lighter, and he shook his head at himself and the smile that wouldn't leave his face.

Ed's staying. He's staying.

Anthony found a parking spot on the street next to Carlisle's, then walked the last bit, and after his talk to Edward, he wasn't even nervous about Alice being there. It felt like nothing could ruin this day.

The air was fresh and smelled like fall was approaching, but judging by the clear sky, it looked like it was gonna be a sunny day.

After knocking lightly a few times, he waited a minute and raised his hand to knock again, but before he could, Carlisle opened the door wearing only a pair of light blue pajama bottoms.

"Fuck me," Anthony mumbled, absently lowering his hand as he eye-fucked his man. It had to be illegal to look that good. Carlisle's usually perfect hair was mussed up from sleep, and he had a cute fucking sleep line on his scruffy cheek. There were a few more along his defined chest.

"Anthony? What're you doin' here?" Carlisle asked sleepily and scratched his collarbone. His nipples constricted with the slight chill in the hair, and Anthony had to swallow against the desire that flared up. "Did something happen?" Carlisle seemed more alert now, concerned even, which broke Anthony outta his haze.

"Huh? Oh. No. Definitely not." Anthony took a step forward. "I, you know...I missed you." Fuck, he'd never admitted anything like that before. Not to anyone outside the family. "That okay?"

Carlisle shook his head, amused, and pulled Anthony into the house. "*That...is* always okay." He brushed a kiss to Anthony's lips and closed the door behind him. "I'd keep you here day and night if I could."

"I'd drive you crazy." Anthony leaned back against the closed door and drew Carlisle close. "But before we get down and dirty, is your daughter here by any chance?"

Carlisle rumbled a chuckle as he nuzzled Anthony's neck. "You're in luck. She met a some people her age after the game last night, and she called to tell me she's spending the night at her hotel." He paused to meet Anthony's gaze. "She checks out at ten today; we have plans to meet up for lunch. Will you join us?"

Anthony swallowed, and *now* he was fucking nervous. "Uh...have—have you told her?"

'Cause he wasn't sure he'd want to be there while Carlisle broke the news.

"I have, yes." Carlisle smirked, probably sensing Anthony's struggle. "You have nothing to worry about. She's happy for me."

"Oh..." Anthony let out a sigh of relief, not just because Alice knew, but because there wouldn't be any drama. "Then, yeah." He grinned carefully, hoping he wouldn't fuck up. "Count me in."

"Excellent." Carlisle closed the subject by kissing Anthony hard on the mouth. "Come to bed."

~oOo~

Five minutes away from Carlisle's house, Edward was done pretending the couch was comfortable enough to sleep on. He'd dozed on and off earlier, but it didn't work anymore. He slid his arms under Bella's limp body and picked her up, relieved that she didn't even stir, and headed for her bedroom.

He was too tired to go home, even though it didn't take more than a minute to get there, so he figured he'd take Anthony's bed for a few hours. Well, he'd rather sleep with Bella, but he wouldn't do that unless there was an invitation.

Gently lowering Bella to the bed, he eased his arms away and held his breath as her eyelashes fluttered. She didn't open her eyes though, thank God. But now she was lying on her covers, and Edward wasn't sure yoga pants and a snug t-shirt would keep her warm enough. Certainly not her bare feet.

He could always fold the other half of the covers over—

"Edward?"

"Shit!" He looked down, wide-eyed, to see Bella squinting sleepily at him.

"Fuck. Sorry. I didn't wanna wake you up."

"Um." Bella pushed herself up, appearing slightly disoriented, and looked around herself. "You carried me here?" She rubbed her eyes and automatically slipped under the covers.

Edward nodded dumbly, stuck on stupid. Why? Because Bella was shedding her clothes. First, she shimmied outta her pants under the covers and dropped them on the floor by Edward's feet. Then she got rid of her bra and slid it out of the arm of her little t-shirt, and Edward watched it fall to the floor.

Well, all right. That's one way to do it.

"You're not leaving, are you?" Bella asked.

"Uh, no..." Edward forced his gaze off the bra to meet Bella's sleepy eyes. "I thought I'd take Ant's bed. He left a little while ago to spend the night—well, the rest of it—with Cullen."

"Oh, but..." Fuckin' hell, Bella actually pouted at him. "After the night we've had..."

Please don't remind me, baby girl. Edward was a complete mess after their talk. He felt torn up, having talked about things he'd kept buried for the bigger part of a decade, and at the same time he was drowning in relief because he'd never expected forgiveness and acceptance.

Anthony and Bella had given him a second chance, and he was still waiting for the shock to settle.

Knowing what Bella wanted, Edward drew in a deep breath and steeled himself for another night of the sweetest torture.

Being her friend—correction: *family*, as Anthony had reminded him—and staying a gentleman were one thing, but doing it while sleeping in the same bed was a whole other clusterfuck. It was a miracle he hadn't

embarrassed them both with his morning wood the last time they'd spent the night here.

"Scoot," he murmured and pulled his shirt over his head. His pants and socks followed, and then he joined Bella under the covers. He wondered idly if he should start wearing his jockstrap under his boxer briefs when coming over to Bella and Anthony's place, because it might do him a favor. Especially if he kept ending up in Bella's bed.

Bella lifted Edward's arm and snuggled close, using his shoulder as a pillow, and it sure as fuck didn't make things easier.

It's who she is, he reminded himself. Because what Anthony had told him earlier wasn't new. Edward knew very well that Bella was affectionate.

"You know what we need?" she mumbled through a yawn.

"What?" Edward asked, although he had several other answers to her question. Like...getting back together, losing the last of their clothes—*Probably best to stop there.*

"A vacation." Bella hummed and slid her leg up Edward's thigh. *For fuck's sake, girl.* She was driving him bonkers. "Y'know, to reconnect and relax and stuff." She sounded half-asleep already.

"And stuff," Edward repeated under his breath. He inhaled through his nose, willing his cock to stand down, but the light, floral scent of Bella's bodywash or perfume wasn't helping. "Uh, maybe during the holidays...?" There weren't many options for a hockey player. The regular season started in early September and ended in May. Then add playoffs, preseason games, training camp... "I don't know if Ant's got anything planned."

Considering how tired Bella sounded, he didn't expect a reply, but it came fairly quickly. "No...like, just you and me. You need alone time with both of

us, you know?" Edward was stuck on "just you and me" but forced himself to listen to all of it. "B was talking about visiting in December, so I was thinking you and Anthony could do something then, assuming Carlisle will uncuff Anthony from his bed—" they both chuckled drowsily "—but you and I need something, too. Like a weekend away or something." She lifted her head and faced Edward. "What do you think?"

Edward swallowed against the dryness in his throat. "Um, yeah." *Fuck, yeah.* "If we're only talkin' about a couple days, I can go sooner, too." And shit, if they could go away just the two of them, maybe he could muster enough courage to give Bella what he'd intended to give her on her birthday.

It was actually a good thing that Anthony had turned Edward down that night in the club, stating that if Edward wanted to give Bella something, he could do it himself. In not so many words.

Since then, Edward had added several things to the...well, he wasn't gonna call it a gift, but whatever; he'd added enough for him to chicken out. A running theme when it came to Edward.

"That's great." Bella gave him a sweet smile before she lowered her head to his shoulder again. "Do you have any plans tomorrow?"

Edward shook his head slowly, absently twirling a lock of Bella's silky hair around his fingers. "Just a workout with Ant—probably later in the afternoon." Another little whiff of her scent had him struggling against his desire for her again, but he stomped that shit down. "What about you? Any, uh, writing planned?"

Goddamn, so not a safe topic. Now that Anthony had calmed his ass down and assured him Bella wasn't into some freaky stuff Edward wouldn't be able to keep up with, it was just plain sexy to think about her new path.

"No," Bella giggled sleepily. "I was more thinking we could make plans for our getaway. What say you?"

Edward smiled and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "I say abso-fucking-lutely."

Chapter 22



When Anthony woke up a few hours later, he could hear Carlisle moving around downstairs. Knowing they had the house to themselves, he went to the bathroom, then grabbed his clothes and aimed for the kitchen, dressed in only a pair of white boxer briefs.

My poor ass. He winced and chuckled to himself, vowing to get Carlisle when he least expected it. 'Cause Anthony sure as hell hadn't expected Carlisle to get rough last night—or this morning, technically—but fucking hell, it had been spectacular. Anthony had even come *twice* before Carlisle was done.

Entering the kitchen, Anthony spotted Carlisle by the coffeemaker. "Mornin'." He leaned back against the kitchen island and smiled as Carlisle came to him. "Already suited up, huh?" The only thing missing was the jacket, and the tie was still hanging loose around Carlisle's neck.

"Good morning, yourself." Carlisle kissed him slowly and slid his hands up Anthony's chest. "How're you feeling?" He lifted a brow, amusement tugging at his mouth, and trailed a hand down to Anthony's ass.

Anthony hooked two fingers into Carlisle's belt and pulled him closer. "Like I should think twice about begging for more next time." He nipped at Carlisle's chin. "But I can't really help myself around you."

Carlisle let out a quiet groan and closed his eyes. "I know the feeling. I would apologize for my...*eagerness*...but it's actually your fault."

"Oh, really? How?" Anthony chuckled.

"Lately, I've been thinking...*fantasizing*..." Carlisle slipped a hand between them to palm Anthony's semi, causing Anthony to hiss. "Fantasizing about having this thick cock inside me—" Anthony shuddered violently, a haze of lust clouding his judgment—"and it makes me so *fucking* hard." Carlisle ended his admission in a dirty whisper.

Anthony swallowed dryly, almost dizzy. "That, uh...yeah, that can be arranged."

Like right fucking now.

"Soon, I hope." Carlisle grabbed Anthony's chin and kissed him hard. "Regrettably, we have to go in twenty minutes." Anthony wanted to fucking scream. Who knew his man was a goddamn cocktease? "But perhaps you can spend the night here tonight, too...?"

Oh, nothing could keep Anthony away. Not even Alice—who had decided to extend her stay.

"Consider it done." Anthony smirked heatedly, already in planning mode.

~oOo~

But half an hour later, that planning was pushed aside for the time being. Since they didn't have to worry about paparazzi here, Anthony and Carlisle didn't need to be too careful, and so they didn't stress about the public location. They weren't holding hands or anything, but had this been back home, everyone would've wondered what a player was doing meeting the GM's daughter.

Walking into the Swedish version of Starbucks—called Espresso House—they ordered coffee, juice, salads, and a few sandwiches before heading back outside to find seats and wait for their order to be ready. Alice would be there any minute, and Anthony was doing his best not to show he was nervous as fuck.

Carlisle was at ease, content, and seemed engrossed in the old buildings that surrounded the small square—appropriately named Little Square.

"Stop fidgeting," Carlisle murmured, not even looking at Anthony. There was a smile playing on his lips as he tilted his head slightly toward the beaming sun. "Alice already likes what she knows about you."

Anthony let out a breath and tried to relax. "It's still a big deal. I'm not taking this lightly." He turned his baseball cap around backward and leaned back a little.

Carlisle's gaze found him fast, now serious. He looked like he wanted to reach out to Anthony, which Anthony really fucking wanted, but that would've been too much.

"You're really serious about us." Carlisle said it as a revelation, as if it was just now hitting him.

"Like a heart attack." Anthony knew he was falling for Carlisle. No bones about it. He'd never had strong feelings toward anyone before, but it was kinda unmistakable. He just knew.

"Now I wish we were someplace private." Carlisle sighed and smiled ruefully. "There are countless things I want to tell you, but for now, I'll go with this: I'm moving to Detroit after this season."

A wide smile threatened to split Anthony's face, and his relief was palpable. Carlisle had already showed him what he felt when Anthony had hinted about Detroit, but to have the words felt pretty fucking amazing.

"Excuse me?"

Someone burst Anthony's bubble, and he forced his eyes away from Carlisle to see two girls and a guy standing there.

"Yeah?" he answered, squinting due to the sun. To see better, he flipped his cap around again.

"Are you Edward or Anthony Masen?" a redhead asked, gesturing at Anthony's black Redhawks t-shirt.

It was the only one he'd brought to Carlisle's, since he was heading to the gym later. "Anthony, yeah," he replied.

A blonde perked up and beamed at him. "Can I have an autograph?"

"Um, sure—yeah." Anthony was a little ticked off that they'd interrupted, but he was used to it. Much more frequently in the States; here the fans usually asked around the arena, like before and after games. In fact, this was the first time Anthony had been approached without it being a game day or something.

Standing up, he grabbed the marker the redhead offered to him, then the notebook Blondie produced from a messenger bag.

"On the cover, please." She was definitely excited. "Can you make it out to Anna?"

Anthony nodded and scribbled out a quick "To Anna," then his name.

"By the way, I totally think you are going to win," Blondie added, to which Anthony looked up in confusion. "I saw it on Facebook this morning, and my friend here—" she nudged Redhead, who smiled sheepishly—"has a thing for Edward, so she thinks *he's* going to win Bella." Anthony's eyebrows shot up. "But I think you're going to win."

"Uh..." Anthony turned his expression of helplessness to Carlisle, who was frowning and already pulling out his phone. Presumably to check in with the team's publicists.

Should I call mine, too?

"Thank you so much for this." Blondie grabbed her notebook and smiled brightly at him.

Dazed and fucking confused, Anthony just nodded and returned the marker. At the same time, the buzzer blinked and vibrated on the table, so he grabbed it and went inside to get the food and beverages.

Carlisle was on the phone when Anthony returned, and of-fucking-course, this was the moment Alice chose to turn up.

"I'm almost done, pumpkin." Carlisle kissed Alice's cheek, then stepped away with an apologetic look for Anthony.

So, that left Anthony and Alice while Carlisle was on the phone.

Fuckin' A.

"Well, let's not make this awkward." Alice grinned and stuck out her hand. "It's lovely to meet you, Anthony."

Bella was right. Alice was English through and through.

"You, too." Anthony smiled politely and shook her hand. "We, uh, ordered lunch."

"Great!" Alice plopped down in a chair.

Following suit, Anthony sat down and picked out a sandwich for himself while Alice dug into a salad as if she hadn't eaten in weeks. Anthony eyed her cautiously, still afraid to fuck this up, but her easy demeanor did help.

He took a bite of his sandwich, then coughed to hide his laughter when he spotted a hickey on Alice's neck.

So...meeting up with some people after the game, as Carlisle had said, evidently meant this chick had scored. *That* was why she hadn't slept at

her father's place. Because she wouldn't have brought a boy there. But to her hotel, on the other hand...

"Is something the matter?" Alice tilted her head.

Anthony smirked a little and pointed to his own neck. "You might wanna hide that before Carlisle returns."

Alice's hand flew up to her neck as her eyes grew comically large. She obviously knew what Anthony was referring to, and she was blushing furiously.

"Oh, bugger." Panic flashed in her eyes as she scrambled to untie the scarf she had attached to the straps of her bag. "Please don't tell Daddy. He'll go mad."

This gave Anthony leverage. He was smart. And ready to collect cool points with Alice.

"Your secret's safe with me." He winked.

Alice looked beyond relieved, and by the time Carlisle sat down, there was a scarf around Alice's neck, and she launched into a story about how brilliant and amazing Anthony was.

~oOo~

Bella was in heaven.

All morning, she and Edward had stayed in her bed and watched movies on her laptop. They ate junk food they'd had delivered, they argued over the Netflix selection, and they blamed each other for the crumbs that ended up on the sheets.

Then when the movie watching was over, they started talking about their little vacation coming up. Lunch had just arrived in form of two sizzling

hot lasagnas, so they sat up against the headboard and cruised online vacation catalogues while their food cooled on top of the covers.

"We have another road trip coming up in a few weeks," Edward said pensively, checking his schedule on his phone. "If we want a long weekend, like Thursday to Sunday, we gotta wait 'til the end of October."

Bella was fine with that, though. It meant Edward and Anthony could focus on themselves for the coming month. Two road trips, each one taking them away from Malmo for at least a week...yeah, Bella was gonna miss them, but she felt they needed some time alone.

She wanted them all to find equal ground again. As family, as best friends.

Besides, some distance would do Bella good. She could focus on her writing for a while, and she could process everything that had happened lately and let it settle.

Of course, there was also the small matter of being crazy in love with Edward...

She still wanted everything with that man, and she wanted it yesterday. She wanted the family they'd talked about under the covers in her old room at the Mallorys'. She wanted their dreams to come true.

But she wasn't ready. Far from it. Because understanding one's reason for leaving was one thing, but it was a whole other to heal your heart. Edward could've left with the best intentions, but that didn't remove the hurt.

For once in her life, she held all the cards. She wasn't gonna delude herself into thinking Edward wasn't at least a *little* interested, because then...why would he have added Bella's name to his helmet? Only Bella's name. Not Anthony's, not Brady's. Just Bella.

That said, even if she now allowed herself to believe Edward might have real feelings for her, it was highly possible he wasn't ready for anything more, either. In fact, she was banking on it. They'd been through too much to rush things now.

No, family came first. She'd treat Edward and Anthony the same, because to her, there was no real difference between them *right this moment*. She was up-front, at least with herself, about what she felt and ultimately wanted, but she finally had the luxury of thinking *down the road*. Not everything had to happen immediately.

"Do you have any specific dates?" Bella tested the lasagna as she clicked on to another site on her laptop. "Hot, hot, hot." She put down her fork and pressed the tip of her tongue to her cold soda can.

Edward's mouth quirked up. "I'm guessing it's too hot to eat?" Bella nodded, the can still pressed to her tongue, and pointed to the screen. "Right." He nodded and checked his phone. "Yeah, there are a couple options. The last weekend of October is completely free, and the first weekend of November is somewhat free. I have interviews on Sunday, but I have the previous Wednesday off, so we could leave then and return early Sunday morning."

"I'm good with either." Bella smiled and set down her soda again. "What do you feel like doing? I kinda wanna go to a water park or something."

Edward chuckled. "A water park?"

"Yes." Bella was very passionate about these things. "They're like being in the Caribbean—" No, she stopped herself at that. Having been in the Caribbean, she knew there was no comparison. But... "SeaWorld, I mean. Only without the animal imprisonment."

That cracked Edward up. "You go from the Caribbean to SeaWorld? That's a big leap. You don't even swim at SeaWorld."

"Yeah, well...both have loads of water." She waved it off to get back on track. "But in a water park, you don't have to fear sharks coming to get you, and you don't gotta carry around a 'Save Tilikum' sign."

"You lost me, baby girl," Edward laughed.

Bella let the term of endearment slide—and ignored the warmth rushing through her—and surged forward. "The point is: water parks are a fucking *delight*. You get all that gorgeous water and...stuff...but without the fish and seaweed."

Edward shook his head, eyes alight with mirth, and tapped a finger to the keyboard. "You don't have to sell it to me. I'm game for whatever. Find us a water park."

Bella barely resisted the urge to fist-pump.

And some twenty minutes later, they were both looking forward to a few days at an enclosed water park in Denmark. It had several pools, wave machines, slides, caves, and restaurants, and Bella was amped up as hell, wishing they could go tomorrow. She also liked that there was a village of cabins instead of a hotel complex.

Edward was fast to pull out a credit card and book their trip, complete with their own cabin and passes for the park.

"What?" He gave Bella an innocent smile when she scowled.

"Doesn't really seem fair that you pay for everything," she pointed out.

He shrugged. "Fine. You can buy me new trunks, and we'll call it even."

"Oh—" She nodded. *The nerve of this guy* "—I guess I'll find you a pair with diamonds, then."

"See?" He smiled. "I'll be the flyest motherfucker there with all my bling."

Bella gigglesnorted and shoveled some lasagna into her mouth. "Whatever you say, Fly Guy. Now we gotta make a playlist to listen to when we drive down there." She paused to sip her soda. "I suggest a theme—"

Before she could finish her sentence, Edward's phone rang on the nightstand.

"Ant's ringtone," he explained and grabbed his phone, answering it. "You cancelling our workout to be with Cullen?" Bella smirked at Edward, doubting Anthony would actually do that. "Wait, what?" Edward frowned, causing Bella to do the same. "Um, okay. Yeah, we're here."

He was still frowning when he ended the call, and Bella was fucking curious.

"What's up?" she asked.

"Anthony and Cullen are coming over—said we gotta talk about something that's leaked out online."

Chapter 23

Edward had all but jumped at the chance to add Bella's name to his helmet, and now he had to admit he hadn't thought things through for shit. Not that he regretted it—he'd do it again and again—but it wasn't easy sitting in a living room with his brother, the woman he loved, and his GM, all of whom were dancing around a topic that needed to be addressed head-on.

Edward's first appearance on the ice with his new artwork was all over the internet, and Bella was caught in the middle of a bizarre love triangle. Who was gonna win Bella's heart? Edward or Anthony? Both?

Gossip sites were digging into their history, trying to flesh out the past. None of them believed the so-called reporters would find anything, 'cause Edward hadn't been all that newsworthy before he'd left Bella. No one really knew their story. But they did know Edward, Bella, and Anthony had grown up in a foster family together.

All they had to do was ask old classmates and they'd learn about Edward and Bella, but that was about it. No one knew specifics about the seven years they'd spent apart, nor did they know that Anthony and Edward hadn't talked to each other during that time.

"I see." Cullen was on the phone, not for the first time since he and Ant had shown up half an hour ago. "Well, bring up every press release, article, and interview you can find." He tugged on his tie and sat down next to Anthony on the couch. "No, he doesn't think he has mentioned her like that specifically, but he's not sure."

Bella perked up, seated on the armrest of the chair Edward was sitting in. "Mentioned who like what?" she whispered to Anthony.

"You," he replied in a hushed voice. "Like my girlfriend."

"Oh..." Bella frowned. "In the media, you mean?"

Anthony nodded.

Edward understood the direction Cullen was taking, but...there were a lot of "buts." He leaned forward in his seat and spoke quietly to Ant. "If you haven't mentioned Bella directly as your girlfriend, you're saying you're gonna make a statement about you guys only being friends?"

Another nod from Anthony. A little shrug, too. "It's the easiest. We gotta talk to the team, but as long as it's not printed in black and white, there's no proof."

"Aside from us kissing and hugging in public," Bella pointed out.

Edward winced internally.

"As far as I know, there's no photo of us kissing," Anthony replied, his brows knitting together. "Hugging can be explained. We're best friends, for chrissakes."

Sighing, Edward leaned back again, and he tried to contribute something—since this was his goddamn mess—but the only thing he could think of was to add Anthony's and Brady's names on his helmet.

He suggested it, and around that time, Cullen got off the phone only to shake his head in response to Edward's idea.

"I'm afraid it's too late for that," he said patiently. "It would look like a cover-up."

Edward was both defeated and secretly pleased. He didn't wanna add any other names. That was for Bella. Still...this was his fuck-up. "I'm sorry," he muttered, side-eying Bella and then Anthony.

"I honestly don't give a shit." Anthony laughed, absently linking his fingers with Cullen's. "I've dealt with gossip before, and they can say whatever they want." He shrugged, then jerked his chin at Bella. "What about'chu, love?"

Bella smirked a little and slid down to sit on Edward's lap. "Being caught in the middle of a Masen sandwich...? There are worse things to suffer through." She wagged her eyebrows at Edward, who fucking melted. This was now a moment for humor, not for being a lovesick pussy, but fuck if Edward had control of anything right now. "I'm willing to be called slut and heartbreaker for that."

Well, that killed the humor, and Edward cringed. He also grew pissed at the thought of people labeling Bella as...those things.

"Stop." She flicked Edward's forehead, causing him to jump slightly and face her. "You're your own worst hater, and haters are gonna hate. I hate haters." Edward opened his mouth to explain he couldn't help it—and to apologize—but Bella shushed him and, like in a bad TV movie, placed two fingers over his mouth and soberly shook her head. "Don't be a hater, Fly Guy."

While Cullen chuckled softly, Anthony laughed out loud, and Edward could feel their eyes on his and Bella's stare-down.

He stared like a fucking king, like a trooper.

Bella stared harder, better than one of those UFC fighters.

"You can't hide from this," Edward pointed out quietly. He knew how vicious reporters could be, and the last thing he wanted was for Bella to get trashed publicly for something she was innocent of. "It's not enough to just stay away from the internet for a while."

"Don't tell me what I can and can't do, Edward Masen." Bella's nose wrinkled adorably with her scowl, but the glare in her eyes was fucking scary. "It's pretty damn simple to me. The internet—yes, of-fucking-course—is off-limits, and I'm not stupid. I get that a few reporters might fly over here to find out more, but you forget that I've been friends with the manwhore over there for the past seven years."

"I object, your honor." Anthony cleared his throat and dodged the wry expression on Carlisle's face. "Not relevant. And frankly, you're dirtying my character—unless you use *alleged* or, preferably, *reformed*."

Carlisle patted his hand.

"Overruled." Bella shot Anthony down fast, then turned to Edward once more. "I'm no stranger to paparazzi and how intrusive they can be." She gripped Edward's chin. "They can call me whatever they want; *I* know it's not true."

"Some shit will get to you," Edward argued. "You can only be called a whore so many times before it breaks you, and I won't fucking stand for it." It wasn't the first time he felt helpless, and he despised it.

"But that's what cake is for!" Bella threw up her hands. "When I get sad, you and Anthony buy me cake and tell me I'm beautiful." She paused to eye Cullen. "That goes for you, too. If you wanna be part of this family, you get me cake."

"Naturally." Cullen inclined his head and smiled. "I'm not a cake person, but—" He stopped when Bella's eyes grew wide in horror.

Even Edward was shocked. *What the fuck?* He hugged Bella to him in comfort and stroked her back.

"He didn't mean that," Anthony said quickly, then turned to a confused Cullen. "What're you doing?" he whispered, as if Edward and Bella couldn't hear. "Tell her you were kidding."

"Why?" Cullen asked curiously. His gaze flicked between Anthony and a distraught Bella. "Truth be told, I don't have much experience in the past twenty years. My ex-wife insisted on fruit salads and—"

"Oh, God," Bella moaned in misery. She pressed her forehead to the dip between Edward's shoulder and neck. "This isn't *happening*."

"There, there." Edward shook his head at the GM and continued to stroke Bella's back. "Don't listen to him, baby girl. Don't listen to him."

"I'll teach him our ways," Anthony promised Bella.

She nodded pitifully. "It's the only way."

"Of course it is," Edward murmured. "Hey, you know what might make you feel better?"

"Cake?" Cullen guessed.

Anthony grinned and snorted.

Ignoring that, Edward leaned closer and whispered in Bella's ear.

~oOo~

Edward is a genius!

Bella was giddy as she rushed to her room to get the stuff she'd bought for Carlisle's prank. Now was definitely the perfect time.

Bella wasn't worried about the shitstorm that was brewing; either they'd deny everything, or they'd go out with a statement. There would be a

media circus, but people got bored and moved on quickly, and Bella honestly didn't care about her own reputation.

YOLO and all that.

Focusing on pranks was much more fun.

Grabbing the binoculars and the glitter, she racked her brain for a good excuse that wouldn't seem forced and fake, and eventually decided that the view from the living room would provide everything she needed. Carlisle's despicable comment about not liking cake—good fucking God—would give Bella the opener, and the fact that they were in a skyscraper would give Carlisle the reason.

She joined the guys in the living room again and blew Edward a kiss. In return, he twisted his mouth to hide a grin, and he was feigning casual with reddening ears.

Love that bastard.

"I know that face, love." Anthony narrowed his eyes at Bella.

"Good for you, boo." Bella crooked a finger at Carlisle and walked over to one of the windows. "C'mere, Mr. Cullen. I'm gonna show you something."

Not a cake person...

Scoff.

Carlisle was definitely confused, but he complied quickly, probably sensing this was a weird Masen-Swan thing that he didn't understand but wanted to be part of. Which made Bella love him just a bit.

"Here." She handed Carlisle the binoculars, then pointed toward the marina almost forty stories below them. "If you look through those, you'll see one of the houseboats—it's a pastry shop. They sell the most delicious

cakes in Sweden." There was no pastry shop. There was no houseboat—well, there was, but they were in another part of the marina. "Come, come." She waved him closer and peered down toward the ground. "If you want, I can list all my favorites."

Carlisle placed the binoculars to his face—pure win—and did as instructed. "I don't see any houseboats. Only regular sailboats."

Bella glanced at Anthony, who was laughing silently and shaking his head at her. But for being thoroughly amused, he spoke with a normal tone. "You know, Bella, I think they moved to the other side of the marina. The pastry shop, I mean."

"Yeah, I thought you knew that." Edward threw in his two cents, his shoulders shaking with laughter. "Don't you get their newsletter?"

Bella smirked to herself as she pulled out the bag of glitter from her pocket. "I do, but it's in Swedish. I haven't translated it on Google yet." She hummed and grabbed a handful of sparkly pink glitter... "Are you guys sure, though?" ...and reached up to sprinkle it carefully in Carlisle's hair, some on his shoulders, and down his back. "You don't see anything, Carlisle?"

"No, sorry." He shook his head and straightened, returning the binoculars to Bella. "Anthony and Edward are probably right."

"Yeah...probably..." Bella cleared her throat to hide the giggles that bubbled up and stared at her feet. And of course she held the binoculars in a way that made sure she didn't get the pasty, black paint on her fingers. "So, yeah...I should go, um..." Okay, she was usually better at this, but she couldn't help it. Perfect Carlisle Cullen, always so dapper and not a hair outta place, now had raccoon eyes and he was covered in pink glitter. "I should..."

Jesus Christ, say something, girl!

Edward coughed loudly and rubbed the back of his neck. "Weren't you gonna buy me diamond-studded trunks?"

"That's what I was gonna do!" Bella practically shouted, pointing at Edward. "Yes! Diamonds, swim trunks—for the fly guy."

"I'm the fly guy." Edward pointed to himself as Anthony's eyebrows rose.

"That needs an explanation." Anthony WTF'd. "But—" He pursed his lips at Carlisle—"it can wait. I'mma go get cake with my man, unless there's anything else we need to talk about right now...?" He glanced around, waiting for objections.

There were none.

"I will call once I know more," Carlisle said, holding up his phone. "About how we're going to proceed with the media, I mean."

"Right." Bella looked anywhere but at him. Cullen Raccoon Face.

A giggle escaped her, and Edward shot her a look of warning. "Control yourself, woman."

She sobered. *I can do this.* "Yessir." She saluted him.

Anthony stood up and clapped his hands together, taking the spotlight. "So, let's get you home," he told Carlisle. "Alice is waiting."

Communicating in their weird twin way—which entailed a few brief looks, nods, and jerks of their chins—Edward got took the hint, whatever that was, and asked Carlisle for a minute in the hallway.

On their way out, Bella heard Edward ask Carlisle about random hockey stuff, and she turned to Anthony.

"Come here, my genius." He chuckled and pulled her in for a tight hug.

"How long until he's off the hook?"

Bella finally set the giggles free. "I'd love it if Alice got to see it—Oh! And if you can take a cute photo of the two of you."

Anthony grinned and kissed her on the forehead. "Consider it done. But you know, there are an awful lot of mirrors I gotta make sure he doesn't look into."

"You'll figure it out." Bella pinched his side, and the two broke away and walked toward the hallway. "I love seeing you happy, you know."

Anthony didn't answer verbally, but he did smile and kiss her again, this time her temple.

Then he said, "My brother's a good guy. You'd make adorable kids. Since they'd look like me."

Bella laughed. "Hold your horses, Masen." They rounded the last corner and reached the hallway where Carlisle and Edward were discussing next week's road trip. "You should make plans for your own kids instead."

Anthony smirked at Carlisle, then raised a brow at Bella. "You think he'd be up for that again? I mean, with Alice and all..."

His question was so honest that Bella's heart did a flippity-flop thing. She peered up at Anthony, knowing he'd always wanted a kid of two of his own. And knowing him, he'd never let anything get in his way. But...could love be the one obstacle?

"I think anything's possible," she murmured.

He nodded with a dip of his chin, which Bella took a sign of the convo coming to an end.

"What are you two whispering about?" Carlisle smiled as Anthony joined him by the door.

"Your future children," Bella said and leaned against a wall. Carlisle's raccoon eyes bugged out, Anthony shot her a shut-the-fuck-up look, and Edward chuckled and took his position next to Bella.

"She's kidding," Anthony insisted, glaring at Bella. "Tell him you were kidding."

Carlisle let out a strained laugh and tugged on his tie.

Bella was totally at ease. Because she knew better. After Carlisle had had his little freak-out, he wouldn't be able to stop picturing having a child with Anthony. That was how love worked.

"I'm a woman." She shrugged and flashed an easy smile. "We think about babies a *lot*."

"Yeah, we're gonna go." Anthony opened the door and stepped out. "Gym at seven, bro?"

Edward nodded. "I'll be there."

"Hey, Carlisle." Bella's voice made Carlisle stop halfway out the door. She grinned and fired off a pistol shot. "Welcome to the family."

He smiled back, though a whole lot of confusion lingered. It had simply been a weird hour.

Once the two lovebirds had left, Bella and Edward sighed contentedly.

"Carlisle thinks we're batshit." She put her fist up.

Edward bumped his to hers. "No doubt."

It was only a matter of time before Carlisle was just as weird, though. After all, it was contagious.

"So..." Bella smiled up at Edward. "Wanna watch a movie?"

The left side of his mouth turned up, and he touched her cheek. Bella sensed uncertainty in the air between them, which confused her. Edward's eyes filled with a wistfulness that made her stomach clench, but she couldn't look away. She had a feeling the tiptoeing was about to stop, and she wasn't sure she was ready.

"We can't ignore this, Bella," he murmured. "We should talk about the helmet. And...your tattoo."

Chapter 24

Don't think about Edward.

Bella picked up the pace on the treadmill, running in a daze and with unseeing eyes facing the ocean.

She preferred the gym near Carlisle's place, but that was impossible now. A handful of Swedish paparazzi hired by American magazines followed Bella wherever she went, which was why she didn't venture outside much at the moment. The boys were on their first road trip and had been gone for almost a week, so she focused on work—or tried to.

I miss—

She shook away that thought.

Everything she needed was in the building. Right now, the gym.

Bella had never been a gym person, but it had turned into a necessity. 'Cause Carlisle was now sending her a piece of cake *every day*, and of course she had to eat it all.

That prick.

Bella'd had no idea Carlisle Cullen was a competitive man, but she was learning otherwise.

His text message to her after she'd pranked him read: ***Isabella Swan, 1. Carlisle Cullen, 0. It'll happen when you least expect it. Game on, princess.***

Edward had scowled at the text—no idea why—but Bella had been giddy with anticipation. Maybe she'd finally met her match in the prank department. Edward and Anthony made excellent sidekicks, but they didn't really initiate pranks themselves. But, regardless, so far Carlisle was

just killing her with daily cake and vague threats, so she would just have to see what happened.

Amusement and anticipation aside, Bella was also genuinely taken with Carlisle. With the cake that was delivered to the lobby every day at noon, there was also a note that included his own review of today's flavor, because he was a cake person now.

Poor man had been denied cake for so long, and after his divorce, he just hadn't changed his ways.

If Anthony didn't marry Carlisle, Bella just might. He was so...so...*witty*, clever, charismatic, and...*yeah*. He could come off as sorta formal, but with these notes that arrived every day, Bella was beginning to believe there was a mischievous little monster waiting to be reawakened.

As her goal on the treadmill was reached, it slowed down on its own, and Bella swiped up the towel on the handlebar and panted into it as she wiped her forehead.

It was nearing noon, so she might as well take the elevator down to the lobby before she snuck back to her and Anthony's apartment. Yesterday's cake had been blueberry vanilla, and Carlisle had liked it while Bella had loved it. His favorite so far was chocolate and banana cream, which had caused an extra-long note that day.

Stretching halfheartedly, Bella took the elevator to the first floor and entered the lobby with her towel thrown over her shoulder. The guy at the desk appreciated the low cut of her tank top, but Bella was more interested in the paper box next to his computer screen.

"Hi. Is that for me, by any chance?" She pointed to the box. "Isabella Swan?"

The guy forced his gaze away from her breasts. "Oh, uh, yes. Yes, it is for you." He fumbled with the box and a clipboard. "Please sign here."

Bella signed for the box, then thanked her ogler and got back into the elevator with her cake. On the way up to her floor, she read and grinned at Carlisle's note.

Isabella,

I tasted this cappuccino chocolate cake a few days ago and thoroughly enjoyed the first bite. You'll have to ask Anthony and Edward about the rest, as they stole it from me while I was getting coffee. Anthony's defense was, "Su cake es mi cake." And Edward said something along the lines of, "Oh, noes. What are you gonna say to your princess now?" There was a heavy emphasis on "princess," and I fear the young man has a little bit of misplaced jealousy.

Bella giggled and shook her head, ignoring the twinge of longing. She really fucking missed—

Stop!

Right. Back to the note.

By the time you get this note, we'll be in Stockholm, where I'll have better access to bakeries and don't have to resort to pre-written notes. While the boys practice, I'll go out and find more samples. Then I suppose I'll have to find a gym.

Until next time,

Carlisle.

PS: I thought I should tell you that Anthony and Edward have expressed their envy. They don't receive the daily emails that I get from you. I admit I was a bit smug.

Oh yeah, Carlisle was definitely part of the family now. Bella unlocked the door to her apartment and stepped inside, curious about the lack of playful threats in this note. Because in the previous notes, Carlisle had encouraged her to "keep an eye out" or shared a not-so-random anecdote like, "Did you know the TV show *Punk'd* was once my guilty pleasure?"

~oOo~

After taking a shower and writing a lengthy reply to Carlisle while devouring her delicious cake, Bella found herself wandering aimlessly around the apartment. She picked up some laundry in Anthony's room and tossed it into the basket in the bathroom, then continued on to sort the movies in their DVD collection.

It took all of one minute, since they only had ten movies.

Damn Netflix for saving time.

She'd already emailed the synopsis of her next book to her publisher, so there wasn't much she could do until she got a response. She did have another story she was working on where she was still developing her characters; it was a book she had plans to self-publish, which meant there was nothing stopping her from writing *something*, but...

She whined to herself and stalked to the kitchen. Ice cream, that was what she needed.

"I can't pretend I don't love you, Bella. I failed at showing you for seven years; it's physically impossible to do it again."

"No—stop it!" Bella stomped her foot, forcefully pushing away the memories of her and Edward's big talk. Well, she was *trying*. She'd *been* trying for more than a week now, and she *sucked* at it.

With a growl, she ripped the door to the freezer open and grabbed herself some Ben & Jerry's.

She aimed for the living room again. Ice cream, a bottle of wine, tissues, Netflix on her laptop hooked up to the flat screen, pajamas...blah, they weren't even her own pajamas: a t-shirt that belonged to Anthony and a pair of boxers that were Edward's.

Sliding the drapes shut to close out the sun, Bella settled in for a movie marathon.

"Please hear me out," Edward had pleaded with Bella. "The helmet thing—maybe it was a dumb move, but I don't regret it. I can't. I'd shout it from the fucking rooftops if you'd let me. It's all I want—for you to believe I love you."

Bella bit down on her trembling bottom lip as her eyes welled up. For years, she'd dreamed of hearing these words, but now...they left her torn into shreds. Even if she reciprocated every feeling and wanted what Edward evidently wanted, she couldn't. She wanted her best friend, not her ex-boyfriend. At least not yet.

"I have no expectations whatsoever," he promised, then cleared his throat and ran an anxious hand over his head. He was fidgeting and blinking fast. "I don't even believe I deserve a second chance," he went on, "but I can't change how I feel. And, fuck—" he blew out a heavy breath—"I know it's selfish of me to lay this on you like that, but if you wanna know why I added your name to my helmet, that's the only answer I can give you. It's because I never stopped loving you."

"Shut uuuuuup!" Bella shouted and punched the cushion next to her. The ice cream nearly went flying, but she saved it and clutched it tightly. Then she picked her first chick flick for the day. "Shut up, shut up, shut up."

She was losing her fucking mind.

~oOo~

"I love you," Tom Cruise whispered tearfully on the screen.

"You...complete me." Bella sniffled and shoved some ice cream into her mouth. *"And not just—"*

"Shut up." Renée Zellweger's voice cracked, as did Bella's heart. No matter how many times she'd seen this movie... God. *"Just shut up."* Zellweger smiled through her tears. *"You had me at hello."*

"Same here," Bella cried, fruitlessly wiping away tears. "But then he left without s-saying goodbye!"

~oOo~

Edward approached Bella cautiously, and she wasn't sure what was best. She kinda needed the coffee table between them, but at the same time, she hated the distance.

"I wanna be your best friend again," he murmured thickly. *"You know the truth now, but family comes first. I don't want any tiptoeing just 'cause I'm in love with you."* Bella's heart shattered and unshattered every time he uttered those words. *It was like ripping open an old wound, but it was soothing at the same time. "I've had seven years of being the coward who never stopped missing you—same with Ant. Don't think this is an all-or-nothing deal to me. I'll take whatever I can get from you, and I'll be fucking blissful."* His eyes burned with honesty and the need for Bella to believe him.

She did believe him, and she was also relieved. But she had doubts, which weren't all Edward's fault. She was doubting herself almost as much. Because...how could they go back to being friends with this—all this—hanging between them?

Was she a fool for even considering it?

It would've been easier before, when no feelings had been declared, but now... Now she knew—she knew and she fucking felt it—that Edward was in love with her.

~oOo~

Fuck drinking like a lady. Or a civilized person. Bella was chugging wine from the bottle as she watched a friendly ghost fall in love on the screen.

Casper hovered over Christina Ricci, who was asleep. "Cat?" he asked softly. "Can I keep you?"

Bella started weeping again. "Make sure to tie her up so she doesn't disappear, Casper."

~oOo~

Unable to respond verbally, Bella threw herself into Edward's arms and hugged him tightly while she cried. Warm teardrops that didn't belong to her dampened her shoulder, and she clung a little harder.

Edward didn't ask about her tattoo.

Bella didn't take the initiative.

A part of her was desperate to let him know she'd never stopped loving him either, but something held her back. Maybe it would've made everything even more difficult. Maybe it would give Edward hope she wasn't ready to give him.

Was it selfish? Was she hurting him by not saying it back?

But on the other hand, she could still feel Edward's honesty. He prioritized family as much as she did, and he wanted their friendship to take first place. Exactly what Bella wanted, too.

"We're okay," she heard herself whispering.

Edward's shoulders sagged with relief.

~oOo~

FaceTime time.

"What's wrong, love?" Anthony frowned.

Bella widened her eyes and put on her most innocent expression. "You know, most people start a conversation with hello."

"I'm not most people," he pointed out impatiently. His face took up the screen of her phone, but she could see he was geared up for the game that started in half an hour. "Now cut the shit and tell me why you look like roadkill."

"Gee, thanks." Bella grimaced, and when she heard Edward in the background asking about roadkill, Anthony looked away from the screen for a beat.

It gave her a few seconds to smooth down her hair and brush a finger under her eyes. In the small window in the corner showing her own face, she sighed at the sight of her bloodshot eyes and blotchy skin. For chrissakes. She looked like she'd been crying for days.

But there was nothing she could do right now, and of course that's when Edward appeared on the screen, too. He wore the Masen frown and pushed up his goalie helmet.

"Did something happen?"

You happened, Bella wanted to say. She was trying her hardest not to tear up all over again, and her name on his helmet wasn't exactly making it easier.

"I'm fine," she insisted hoarsely. "Are you guys in the dressing room?"

Anthony nodded. *"Some dudes are naked. You wanna see? It might cheer you up."*

She choked out a giggle as Edward smacked the back of Anthony's head.

"Maybe another time," she said, sniffing but smiling at the same time.

"I'm gonna go change into my game shirt."

Edward turned his worried expression to her. *"You not gonna tell us what's wrong?"*

Bella shook her head quickly. "I'm just being a girl."

"Well, thank God for that." Edward smirked a little.

Anthony slapped his brother's arm. *"Hey, you don't know what you're missing."*

"Who's missing what?" That was Emmett, who forced his big head between the twins. He grinned goofily at Bella, and she saw the black eye he'd received after a fight on the ice a couple days ago. *"Hey, Bella."*

"Hi, Emmett." She grinned back. "You look hot in purple."

"Don't I?" he laughed. *"That's what I get for protecting Anthony's cocky ass."*

That was true. Anthony loved to rile up the players he was up against, which led to fights that Emmett usually took care of, much to Anthony's

dismay. He wanted to fight his own fights, but Emmett was the enforcer. Anthony's job was to score.

"You love it," Edward retorted, shaking his head in amusement at Emmett. *"I've been on the same team as you before, remember? Don't even try to pretend you don't play for the fights."* With another shake of his head, he faced Bella again. *"You sure you're okay?"*

Bella managed a small smile. "Maybe some Gangnam Style will make me feel better. In the locker room after the game. When all of you are naked."

Edward cracked up.

Anthony smirked. *"That's pushing it, love."*

Bella made chicken noises.

Chapter 25

It was common knowledge that the team was returning to Malmo today, and since Edward and his brother were being hounded by paps these days, they were being dropped off in the next town over. As had become the norm, too many photographers lurked near the arena.

In Lund, some twenty minutes north of Malmo, the big-ass bus rolled in to the parking lot of a fitness center.

Edward was eager to get off the bus and away from the lovebirds that were his brother and general manager. To the rest of the team, Anthony and Cullen were close, like best friends, but Edward obviously knew better.

During this second road trip, Anthony had changed his signature gesture for every goal he scored. Instead of skating past the supporter section with a fist held high, that gloved fist had opened and formed a "C."

No one was speculating about the minor change—as far as Edward knew—but he'd noticed it right away, in tune with his brother, as had Bella. And Bella's reaction had involved calling Anthony and pressuring him into telling her the *deets*.

Edward had been in the same hotel room as his brother when Anthony had admitted to Bella that he and Cullen had exchanged their "I love you"s, and the memory of Bella's squeal—the sheer *sound* over the phone—still made Edward cringe and grin at the same time.

The early November air was chilly and crisp, but it was nothing compared to the northern part of Sweden—or, hell, a winter in Detroit. Slinging his sports bag over his shoulder, he side-eyed Anthony, who was waiting for Cullen to get off the phone.

Across the lot, Edward saw Bella exiting his car, and a smile lit up his face. *Goddamn, I've missed her.* His smile matched hers, and he wanted to run over to her and ask what the hell she was doing here at the same time as he wanted to hug the shit outta her.

He'd told her about their new drop-off zone, but the plan had been to take a cab. It had not been for Bella to pick them up, although he certainly preferred this. He just hoped she hadn't been followed by paps who wanted to know who she was dating.

At this point, the team only knew what Anthony had told them. *"Bella isn't really my girlfriend. I needed an image boost, and she was there for me. That's all we wanna admit right now, and I'm sorry for not being up-front with you guys, but I had a lot at stake."*

Emmett, that big oaf, had straightened and grinned. *"Does that mean Bella's single?"*

To which Edward had gnashed his teeth together and Anthony had said, *"Speculate all you want while you take a good look at my brother's helmet. Story time over."*

Some were curious, some didn't give a fuck, some were annoyed, and some simply accepted Anthony's words and left it at that.

Regardless, the team wasn't full of vultures, which couldn't be said for the media. Cullen and the team's publicists had instructed the Masen-Swan clan to go with "No comment," and Anthony was the only one who'd issued a public statement. With the tabloids' biggest argument being the photos of Ant and Bella being fairly affectionate in public—and the single interview where he had referred to Bella as "My girl Bella"—he'd simply said that Bella was his girl, as in, his best friend. He'd been all shrug-like. *"Yeah, she's my girl—my friend."*

Edward couldn't wait for tomorrow. He'd already arranged to rent a car instead of driving his leased SUV when they took off for Denmark in the morning. *No paps will follow us—I'll make sure of it.* He'd have three whole days with Bella—away from the media, hockey, and workouts.

"Finally," Anthony muttered as Cullen hung up the phone.

In return, Cullen smiled apologetically at him. "I need a word with Edward, I'm afraid."

Anthony smirked and shook his head. "You know what? We'll just meet up at home later. I'll go over to Bella." His smirk grew a little as he gave Cullen's arm a quick squeeze. Then he shouldered his bag and started crossing the lot.

Edward wanted to follow, but instead he turned to Cullen. "What's up?"

Cullen gestured to his phone before he tucked it into the inner pocket of his suit. "That was the GM in Detroit I just talked to."

"Oh?" Edward glanced over at Bella and Anthony, who were hugging. His gaze slid back to Cullen. "About you or about Ant?" He knew Cullen was leaving Sweden when the season was over next spring, but he didn't know if Cullen had landed a job yet.

"This concerns you, actually." Cullen lifted a brow. "The first goalie's out for the rest of the season. Injured in a game a few days ago."

Edward stiffened, sure he could suddenly hear his own heartbeat. "I'm listening." Understatement. It went without saying that Edward had plans for getting back home after this season too, but he wasn't as delusional as to believe he'd get a position with the Red Wings. The team was solid. But he had other offers, mainly from Chicago and Toronto, two teams relatively close to Detroit.

However, if the goalie in the Red Wings was injured...

Too good to be true, he was quick to think.

"Your stats are significantly better than the backup goalie's," Cullen said, which Edward was aware of already. "If you call them to let them know you're interested, you wouldn't just be considered. They'd jump at the chance." Edward had a feeling about that, too. "But there's a catch."

And there it is. Edward let out a low, hollow laugh and shook his head. "Of course there is."

Cullen smiled ruefully. "I'm fairly certain they'd buy you out of this contract with the Redhawks. And, for the record, I suggest you get over your aversion to agents, because you need one, Edward."

Edward sighed, reluctant to agree, but he did. Then he frowned. "Why would they buy me out?" But as the last word left him, he understood. "Never mind," he said quietly, grimly. He stared at his feet. "If the team makes it to the playoffs, they're not gonna want to rely on a backup goalie in the net."

Cullen nodded soberly, ignoring the driver who wanted to get back on the road. "If you think about the future, this is the opportunity you've been waiting for." Edward dipped his chin, fucking aching for this. It was what he'd wanted for so damn long. But the timing sucked. "They'd want you as soon as possible, but if you get good agent, maybe he'll be able to push it 'til after the holidays."

Edward would be a fool if he didn't take the offer—once there was an official one—but leaving Sweden six months before he'd planned to meant he'd have to spend that time away from his family.

He'd managed seven years, so maybe it was ridiculous to mope about half a year, but...

"Thanks," he said quietly, then mustered a smile. "Really, Cullen. Thank you." It was about time he stopped viewing Cullen as his GM and his brother's partner—or boyfriend, whatever term they went with. He was way more than that now. Like Bella had said, *family*. "It means a lot."

"Any time." Cullen inclined his head. "Think it over, then talk to Anthony and Isabella. I'll get more details for you."

After thanking him again, Edward walked toward Bella and Ant in a daze. He was excited at the prospect of playing with the Red Wings again, but yeah, he did need to talk to his family.

By the time he reached his car, he shook off his worries for now and caught Bella when she jumped into his arms.

Being away from this another six months...?

Fuck.

"I missed you," he mumbled in her hair.

"Me too." She hugged him harder. "And before you ask, Anthony's already interrogated me about the paparazzi. No, I wasn't followed." She lifted her head to grin at Edward, and he rested their foreheads together. "I was just so bored at home." He smiled when she absently scratched the scruff on his cheek. "There's only so many BuzzFeed quizzes I can take before I lose my mind."

Edward chuckled and kissed her nose. "So, how many of those quizzes have you sent to me and Ant?"

Bella widened her eyes, pretending to be innocent. "Only a few."

Yeah, right. Edward had a feeling his phone was gonna explode with messages when he turned it on.

~oOo~

Anthony grinned with a mouthful of pizza as he watched Edward and Bella flit around the apartment to pack for their water park trip.

There were quick glances when the other wasn't looking, secret smiles, and "accidental" touches as they passed each other. And Anthony was enjoying the show immensely.

Now that he and Carlisle were done with the does-he-or-doesn't-he, Anthony found it even more amusing to witness his brother and best friend's tiptoeing.

Speaking of Carlisle... Anthony's phone vibrated in his pocket, and he pulled it out to see the now-familiar photo of Alice kissing her raccoon of a father's cheek. Which never fucking failed to make him laugh. He'd remember that forever.

It had been hell to avoid mirrors on the way over; it seemed like one could find his or her reflection everywhere, but it was damn worth it. Because when Alice greeted them in the hallway and Anthony saw her face...

Priceless.

Eyes wide. "D-Daddy?" she stuttered.

Anthony discreetly shook his head at her, silently telling her to play it cool.

"Hi, pumpkin." Carlisle looked Alice over, pensive. "Why do you look guilty?"

Alice was thankfully quick to get her act together, and she smiled and made up a bullshit story about not expecting the guys back so early.

After that, Carlisle said he was gonna go wash up, and that just wouldn't do. Not yet. So, it was Anthony's turn to be quick on his feet, and he asked for father and daughter to pose for a photo.

"Since Alice is going back to London soon and all..."

Judging by Carlisle's expression, he was probably mind-fucked after this day. A batshit crazy Bella, a broody weirdo named Edward, a stuttering Alice, and now an Anthony who was suggesting family photos the minute they got inside the house.

Nevertheless, Carlisle complied, and Anthony snapped off a couple shots of the two Cullens.

"Am I allowed to go to the bathroom now?" Carlisle asked, running a hand through his hair. Anthony coughed through a laugh at the confusion on his man's face as the hand that just went through his hair returned very pink and sparkly. "What the...?"

Alice slapped a hand over her mouth to hide her laughter.

"What's this?" Carlisle held up his hand, his eyes narrowed.

"Glitter," Anthony supplied helpfully.

"I can see that." Impatience laced Carlisle's tone, and he spun on his heel to check the mirror in the half bath in the hallway.

"Then why did you ask, sweetheart?" Anthony laughed.

Both he and Alice followed Carlisle and reached the bathroom just as the mirror revealed everything.

"That cheeky brat!" Carlisle exclaimed. "Isabella—I can't believe her!" Alice was doubled over, laughing so hard she could barely breathe. "And you, Anthony—you let me walk around like this?!"

Anthony cracked up almost as hard as Alice.

Carlisle dampened a towel in the sink and started scrubbing vigorously, pausing every now and then to scowl at Anthony. "I'll get her back, you know." Anthony's laugh grew louder, 'cause he knew Bella was gonna love that. "I'll kill her with kindness at first." Then he cursed when he got soap in his eye. "Oh, that little... When she least expects it..."

His ego had definitely taken a hit, but what made Anthony smile instead of smirk was the fondness Carlisle was trying to hide. Carlisle knew this was more than a prank; it was an initiation.

Anthony shook his head, laughing silently at the memory, and answered the phone.

It was a brief call; Carlisle asked Anthony to pick up some drinks on the way, and Anthony promised he'd be there soon. As he hung up the phone, Edward appeared from the hallway.

"I didn't even know I had my laptop and extra battery here," he said, frowning to himself. "Or my button-downs and undershirts..."

Bella got a panicked look for a second before she darted into her bedroom.

Anthony snickered, having the feeling that Bella was slowly but surely moving all of Edward's stuff in here. In fact, Anthony was sure of it, 'cause there was a new dresser in his room that wasn't his. He had, however, seen it at Edward's place.

Bella reemerged from her bedroom again, this time with the luggage Edward used when he wasn't traveling with the team. "I, uh...I took the liberty of getting your bag from your place."

"Oh..." Edward furrowed his brow for a beat, and Anthony could tell the instant it dawned on his brother. A slow smile formed on Edward's lips before he composed his face and nodded. "Thanks, beautiful. You shouldn't have." Bella shrugged and ducked her head, then disappeared into the bathroom. Edward turned to Anthony at the kitchen island and grinned. "Am I moving in?"

"Looks like it," Anthony chuckled. "You can take my room." It was his subtle way of saying he was gonna spend more time at Carlisle's place.

But instead of agreeing, Edward's eyes clouded with something—Worry? Uncertainty?—which Anthony didn't understand. If anything, he'd expected Edward to be thrilled.

Anthony had been relieved as hell when he'd heard about Edward and Bella's big talk. He'd gotten both versions and firmly believed Bella had made the right call not to confess her feelings yet. Because if she had, Anthony knew his brother was gonna drive himself crazy thinking about when Bella was going to fold and take Edward back. But now, Ed could focus on reconnecting as friends, which was what he'd wanted in the first place.

But was Edward worried that sharing a place with Bella would be *too* much?

"What's up?" He jerked his chin at Edward.

Edward sighed and made sure they were alone before he joined Anthony at the kitchen island. "The starting goalie for the Red Wings was injured last game," he said, keeping his voice low. "Cullen thinks they might want me."

"Holy shit," Anthony whispered.

Chapter 26

The morning after, Anthony woke up hard as a rock, wrapped around a still-sleeping Carlisle. For several moments, Anthony just enjoyed his man and let his hands roam Carlisle's defined torso. He breathed in the smell of laundry detergent and sleep, unable to keep from groaning quietly against Carlisle's neck.

Anthony fucking loved this. All through both road trips and the few days in between, they'd woken up together in one position or another. It was no wonder he'd blurted out that he loved Carlisle one morning, because there really wasn't anything that topped waking up with the man you couldn't stop thinking about.

He remembered the surge of nervousness that had buzzed through him at his confession, but he'd stood by it and lifted his chin to look Carlisle in the eye, determined. And then Carlisle had brushed a kiss to Anthony's lips and whispered those three words back.

Bella had joked—or not joked—about kids, but Christ, Anthony and Carlisle had barely crossed the two-month finish line. Declarations of love and the knowledge of Carlisle moving to Detroit next year was plenty for now. For the first time in Anthony's life, he saw—and wanted, fucking ached for—a future with somebody; there was no rush. Down the road, hopefully. A couple years from now. Maybe.

That said, Carlisle's words on the topic last week still made Anthony love him even more. *"I can see it, you know. Actually, it's impossible not to. One day."*

Sighing contentedly, Anthony brushed kisses along Carlisle's shoulder and slowly pressed his cock between Carlisle's thighs. At the same time, he found Carlisle's morning wood and stroked it lazily.

"Mmm..." Carlisle hummed drowsily. He pushed back a little.

Anthony flushed with heat. "Yeah?"

Another hum from Carlisle.

Wasting no time, Anthony reached over to the nightstand and grabbed the lube. They didn't bother with rubbers anymore, thank fuck, and it seemed Carlisle had developed a thing for having Anthony's cock inside him.

Anthony *usually* preferred to bottom, but he was happy he didn't have to pick one or the other. 'Cause right now all he wanted was to drive his dick into Carlisle's tight ass.

He shoved away the covers and spent the next several minutes watching Carlisle stroke himself slowly, all while Anthony kissed and licked and rubbed and fingered and prepared.

"Now," Carlisle moaned.

"Fuck." Anthony sucked in a sharp breath, coated his cock with lube, and pushed himself inside in one long stroke. Carlisle hissed and reached back to grab Anthony's ass. They were as close as they possibly could be, Carlisle's back to Anthony's chest. "You like it when I go deep, sweetheart?"

"Christ, yes," Carlisle groaned. "More."

Anthony shifted a few inches lower, ignored the lube sticking to his fingers, and lifted Carlisle's leg. Then he pulled out, only to thrust in again.

They both lost track of time that morning.

They took it nice and slow and got twisted in the sheets, changing positions so often they lost count of them. When Anthony was close at one

point, he rolled Carlisle onto his back and kissed his way down his body and sucked Carlisle's cock into his mouth. Carlisle moaned and tugged at Anthony's hair.

"So fucking amazing," Carlisle muttered, out of breath.

Anthony hummed and didn't stop until he had enough of Carlisle's flavor on his tongue. Then he moved higher up again, encouraged Carlisle to lock his feet around Anthony's hips, and slammed deep into Carlisle's ass.

"I love you." Anthony swallowed hard, his orgasm threatening to take over again.

"I love you, too. I love...*everything*...about you." Carlisle palmed Anthony's cheeks and kissed him hungrily. "Everything, Anthony."

A shiver ran down Anthony's spine. It wasn't the first time Carlisle had said that—*everything, Anthony*. And he knew why now. Carlisle's story wasn't one of a kind: in the closet, married a woman, forced affection, had a child, felt like a man... Anthony hadn't gone through that; he'd been up-front from the beginning, but Carlisle had had a lot more at stake, too. Religious, uppity parents, judgmental family friends...but Carlisle had caved eventually, and to his surprise, his parents had accepted it fairly quickly.

Now, whenever Carlisle said "everything," he was mostly referring to Anthony's honesty and fearlessness.

"You're true to yourself now," Anthony murmured, his lips ghosting over Carlisle's. "Focus on that."

"Yeah—oh, fuck." Carlisle gasped when his cock was fisted by Anthony, the strokes hard and fast. Instead of saying he was close, he sucked in a breath and nodded quickly, his eyes closing.

Anthony took the hint and sped up, chasing both their orgasms now. His body ached with the need to come, and he felt more heat flaring up. Pleasure pooled in his groin and built up rapidly. Long thrusts turned shallow, moans morphed into gritty gasps, and both their bodies tensed up at the same time.

Carlisle let go with a drawn-out groan as his cock released several streams of come between them, and Anthony spat out a curse as he started coming, too. He rocked deeper into Carlisle's ass and managed to keep milking Carlisle's cock.

Black spots filled his vision when he cracked his eyes open, and he collapsed on top of a panting Carlisle.

"Goddamn..." Anthony muttered hoarsely.

A shower was next, but not before he'd gotten his fill of the sex-scented bedroom. The afterglow was like the best motherfucking dessert, in his opinion.

Catching their breaths, they kissed sloppily, lazily, and tasted each other without a care in the world. Carlisle had some work later, but other than that, they had the next three days free.

~oOo~

Bella sniffled and discreetly wiped at her cheeks as she stared out the passenger side window.

An hour into the drive, they were somewhere in the middle of Denmark, surrounded by fields and wind farms, and this wasn't how Bella had pictured the beginning of their vacation playing out.

"I'm sorry." Edward's voice was full of remorse and guilt, which just made Bella feel bad.

"Don't apologize," she croaked, grabbing his hand. She linked their fingers together and squeezed. "This is a good thing. A great thing." Edward glanced at her quickly, seemingly doubting her. "I mean it. It's a dream come true." More emotions bubbled up, but she stomped them down. "I'm just..." *Gonna miss you so fucking much.*

"The timing sucks," he finished quietly with a nod. They were getting close to a bridge and there was some traffic ahead, so Edward needed his hand again. "I can always turn it down, but—"

"Don't you dare," Bella was quick to say. "You're gonna say yes." She wanted to ask if she could move with him, but she'd been around hockey long enough to know that Edward was gonna be busy around the clock. SHL was a great league, but it didn't compare to the NHL. When Edward wasn't at a game, he'd be working and studying players. Because back home, players sure as hell would give him a run for his money.

"You can visit me, right?" Edward asked hesitantly.

"Are you kidding me?" Bella scoffed and wiped the last of her tears. "I'll be there whenever you have a free minute." In an attempt to lighten the tension, she added, "I gotta be there to fend off all the puck bunnies, right?"

As soon as the words were out, she regretted them. A knot formed in her stomach, 'cause now she couldn't help but actually worry about that. So much for joking. Jealousy burned in her veins.

Edward snorted. "That's funny."

Bella didn't think so.

For the rest of the ride, she kept imagining Edward meeting someone better—someone who didn't keep him waiting.

She wasn't gonna start with something she wasn't ready for, but she couldn't have her cake and eat it, too. Edward deserved better than that.

Something had to give.

~oOo~



The water park was like a gated community, and after checking in, Bella held the map they'd been given while Edward drove slowly toward the village of cabins.

"Our cabin's supposed to be black," Bella mumbled, studying the map. Right now, they were closest to red cabins, big enough to house families with several children.

"Down there." Edward jerked his chin toward the end of the dirt road. The cabins looked funny. Like two-story tents, like roofs without walls on the sides. "So...the roof is touching the ground. Is that a Danish thing?"

"No idea." Bella chuckled, but she was still feeling blue.

Edward parked in front of their cabin, then the two unpacked the car in silence. The downstairs of the cabin was basically a big, open space with a

kitchenette, a dining area, and a seating area, TV and two couches included. There was also a small laundry room in the entryway, and there were supposed to be two sleeping areas in the small loft above them.

They'd stopped on the way to buy food and whatever else they might need, and as Bella stocked the fridge, she suddenly felt like drinking three days worth of alcohol in one sitting.

"I put our luggage upstairs." Edward hopped up to sit at the kitchen counter, and he nodded in thanks when Bella handed him a beer. "It's only little past noon. You wanna go swim?"

No...I wanna drink.

Chapter 27

There were a few words to describe this dome-shaped water park: big, exotic, jungle-like, family paradise, and fucking awesome.

Bella was having a blast.

It was all thanks to Edward. Maybe he hadn't noticed her mood earlier—or maybe he had—but before she could even suggest a day of drinking, Edward had changed his question and turned it into a statement. *Let's go swimming.*

Having read that the place was popular for families, Bella had opted for a modest bathing suit—simple black, no boob magic. But if Edward wasn't gonna play fair, then so be it. Tomorrow, Bella was wearing a sexy bikini instead.

She needed to experiment; she needed to see if, love aside, there was lust and desire for Edward, too. Maybe that was mean, but she had to know.

For now, she was the one who was struggling with lust and desire. Because Edward in nothing but dark blue trunks...? *Oh, fuck me.* Bella had bought them—one pair in black, too—but it was Edward's sexy body that made her squirm.

Edward Masen wasn't an eighteen-year-old boy anymore. As he'd sung earlier when he'd managed to stay underwater longer than Bella: *"Girl, you can tell everybody...yeah, you can tell everybody...go ahead and tell everybody...I'm the man, I'm the man, I'm the man. Yes, I am; yes, I am; yes, I am. I'm the man, I'm the man, I'm the man."*

Add water trickling down his abs, making his skin glisten...

But the fucker was hiding now.

Crouching behind a fake boulder and some palm trees, Bella scanned the three closest swimming pools and tried to find him before he could find her. The game was simple: sneak up behind your opponent and tap him or her on the back.

She looked over her shoulder to make sure he wasn't behind her, which, thank fuck, he wasn't. Edward had already won the first two rounds, and Bella refused to go down a third time.

Taking in her surroundings once more, she narrowed her eyes at the pool with the wave machine first, but she only saw kids and their parents there. Next she moved on to the pool with the cave and the greenery around it, and she paused. *Could that be...?*

She stayed low and crept forward, passing a tiki-themed hamburger bar, and found another hiding spot behind a gigantic pot filled with fake bamboo. The place was noisy and full of life, but she managed to focus on the man who lurked near some greenery on the other side of the pool before he quickly dove into the water. *Oh yeah, totally Edward.*

While he was swimming underwater toward a nook next to the cave, Bella took the opportunity to get closer. The whole point was to catch him off guard, so she hurried to round the pool and crouched behind another set of boulders.

She stifled a giggle, spotting Edward easier now. He had his back to her, and he was using the outside wall of the cave to search the area for the girl who was about to fucking win. The pool's edge wasn't more than a few feet away, and once she got in the water, she only had some ten feet to reach him.

Sitting down on her butt, she scooted toward the edge and took a deep breath before she slipped soundlessly below the surface. She opened her eyes underwater, and though it was blurry as fuck, she could see

Edward's legs, trunks, and waist, so she knew he was still facing away from her. So with no time to waste, she planted her feet on the wall and pushed away from the edge, quickly slicing through the water.

She broke through the surface and startled Edward with a *whoop!* as she threw her arms around his neck from behind.

"Jesus!" Edward spun around, but Bella clung on to his back.

She squealed and pressed a wet kiss to his scruffy cheek. "I win." Then she ended the game officially by tapping his shoulder blade.

Edward groaned a laugh and reached back to tickle her sides. "It's still two to one." He managed to grab ahold of her and pull her to his front. "If it's best outta three, *I* win."

Oh, no. "But it *wasn't* best out of three." She batted her lashes and found herself pressed up against the outside of the cave. Which made it very difficult to ignore how good he felt against her, *in all the right places*, but she did her best. "The winner's the woman who won the last round." She grinned.

Edward's own grin was like sin. "Is that a fact?" He kept his voice low and Bella felt his palms ghosting along her thighs. Soon, he had her legs circling his waist. It brought them eye to eye, which was nice, but the horny part of Bella preferred it when it was crotch to crotch. "You don't play fair." Bella nearly snorted, since she'd thought the same about him ten minutes ago. But for a nine-inch reason instead of a game. "I thought rules were meant to be followed."

A spark ignited in Bella, and she realized they were touching on dangerous territory. She wanted to find out if he still wanted her physically as much as she ached for him, but she didn't wanna be a complete cocktease.

Yet, her words contradicted her wants. "Fuck the rules."

Edward's eyes darkened. "You shouldn't have said that, baby girl."
Leaning in, his nose skimmed her jaw before he reached her ear.
"Especially since I'm trying *very* hard to be good right now." A pause.
Bella fought and lost against a shiver. "And I think I'm failing."

Then he dunked them both underwater.

~oOo~

An hour later, Bella and Edward had returned to the cabin, showered, gotten dressed, and decided to try one of the restaurants in the makeshift "village center" of the water park. It was basically only a few alleys with twinkling lights overhead, restaurants and souvenir shops lined up along the cobblestone paths.

The setting was romantic, and it was everything Bella wanted and didn't need. Or did she? No. She still had so many fears about Edward disappearing again without a word, but...try telling her heart that. Especially after the charged moment they'd shared in the pool earlier. Hell, Bella was still revved up, and she wasn't sure whether to be relieved or disappointed at Edward's restraint.

"How about this one?" Edward stopped in front of a small Italian restaurant.

Bella peered inside the large windows, smiling at the mom-and-pop feel of the place. "Cozy. Let's do it."

Edward opened the door and placed a hand on her lower back, ushering her inside the establishment, and they were seated fairly quickly. Bella had barely removed her jacket before a waitress dropped off two menus that thankfully were in English. As well as Danish, German, Swedish, and Dutch. *Christ.*

As Bella studied her menu, it hit her how much this felt like a date. Much like in the water park, there were families everywhere, and Edward and Bella had both dressed casually—jeans, a black button-down for Edward, and a cute wraparound top for Bella—but they could've dressed in garbage bags and it still would've been a date. The setting was just too romantic to ignore: a corner table by a window, a candle between them, and Italian love songs floating out through the speakers.

"Hey, look." Edward nodded at the window, and Bella looked out to see that snow had started falling.

It meant winter was just around the corner, and after the holidays Edward, was probably leaving.

She forced a smile, then refocused on her menu.

"So I guess I get to see what the grown-up Edward Masen is like on a date, huh?" Her smile became teasing as she looked up.

I'm curious as fuck; sue me.

She was clearly a masochist.

Edward rolled his eyes and muttered something Bella couldn't hear, so she asked him to repeat himself.

He sighed and smiled ruefully, focusing too intently on his menu. "I said you'd be the first to experience it."

Bella opened her mouth, then snapped it shut. *Wait, what?* The first to...um. Then it dawned on her and her heart sank a little. "Great," she mumbled at her menu. "You went the Anthony route with one-nighters." Or maybe that was better? Finding out Edward had had a serious girlfriend would most likely hurt more.

Edward frowned at her, but before he could speak, a waiter arrived at their table. He said something in Danish, but every waiter's first question was always something along the lines of, *"Have you decided or do you need another minute?"*

They placed their drink orders first, and the waiter switched to English. For their meals, Edward went with spaghetti bolognese, and Bella opted for the shrimp ravioli.

The second the waiter left, Edward leaned forward. "Have I ever given you the impression of being a guy who fucks around?"

A sudden surge of anger flashed in Bella's eyes, and there were a lot of things she could say about impressions and assumptions. She hadn't thought Edward was the kind of guy who abandoned his family either—no matter the reason—but the joke was on her and Anthony.

That said, the family member in her had genuinely forgiven Edward, and it felt so damn good. The ex-girlfriend part of her, however... She was still hurt.

There was a lot to consider and take into account. "People change," she said quietly, and that was her biggest fear. At the same time, it was a comfort, because while there were a million aspects of the old Edward she wanted forever, she could do without the insecure boy who ran away instead of letting his family help him.

It was a mind-fuck and a half. She was afraid he'd changed too much at the same time she feared he hadn't changed enough.

Bella hadn't been the driving force when it came to reuniting with Edward; Anthony had. Which could be reworded to say that Edward hadn't tried, either.

If it wasn't for Anthony, they'd still be on different continents.

The tension broke as their drinks were delivered, but once alone again, Edward spoke up.

"I'm not perfect, Bella," he said, keeping his voice down. "I got plenty of shit to work through, but when it comes to you...?" He chuckled, a low and hollow sound, and stared at his beer. "My feelings have only grown. I appreciate every minute you wanna waste on me, and whereas I used to find your smile beautiful, now I see it as a fucking gift." Bella sucked in a breath, unprepared for the onslaught of emotions. Edward glanced up again, his eyes holding traces of both sorrow and determination. "Not giving you the chase you deserve will always be one of my biggest regrets, but if you one day decide to give me another shot, I'd...I'd show you. You have no *idea* how much I'd show you."

Bella grabbed her wine glass and took a few greedy gulps. Maybe that was it...? Maybe she needed the chase. Actions spoke louder than words, and perhaps Bella wouldn't ever feel ready to commit to him unless she could feel it deep in her bones how much he wanted her. She felt love radiating from Edward every single day, but he...but he... Yeah, that was it. He needed to do something about it. He needed to prove it. *Bella* needed him to prove it.

If he could just take that first leap, then it would be easier for Bella to follow.

"As for my love life...?" Edward smirked and rolled his eyes, sitting back slightly. The smirk faded and he blew out a breath, absently fidgeting with the napkin rolled around his silverware. "I have two highly embarrassing stories, and that's it." Bella's eyebrows knitted together. "About four years ago, I saw you, Ant, and another guy in a tabloid. I stayed away from gossip best I could, but I saw that, and..." He exhaled heavily again. "The guy, I don't know his name, was all over you. Anthony was the main story, but you were right next to him—you guys were coming out of a club

in Texas." Must've been one of the times Anthony visited Bella at college. "And you and that other dude were fooling around."

Bella made a face, remembering bits and pieces. The memories were hazy, but it must've been one of her lame attempts at moving on, something Anthony had encouraged. Of course, nothing had worked. She'd had a few semi-serious relationships, but she hadn't cared when they'd ended.

"I felt like shit," Edward said bluntly, "and I'm not proud of what I did. I was three sheets to the wind, thinking if you could find someone new, so could I." He laughed through his nose, but it wasn't exactly humorous, and Bella was on pins and needles. "Let's just say I was wrong. I don't even remember how we got to her place, but I do remember her fumbling with the zipper of my pants, then slapping me across the face when I said the wrong name."

Bella's eyes grew large, and she was thankful she wasn't drinking right at that moment. *Oh, my fucking God.* "Said the wrong name like...Jessica, Jennifer or Amber, Amanda...or...?" *Or, or, or, or?* She fidgeted nervously, feeling flustered under Edward's amused gaze that pinned her into place.

"Or *Bella*," he said slowly, as if Bella was a child. Or mentally challenged.

"Oh," she mouthed, a phantom blush heating up her cheeks. Or maybe it was really there and that's why Edward was fighting a smirk. "So, uh..." She cleared her throat. "She didn't like that, I take it?" Did she just squeak? Fuckin' hell.

Edward chuckled wryly. "Ah, that would be a no. She kicked me out, which...which was definitely for the best."

Bella nodded jerkily and traced the stem of her glass. "That's one of the stories." And it didn't end with sex. Evidently, Edward didn't even get out of his clothes.

She shouldn't be so pleased at that, but dammit if his words didn't soothe the jealous bitch inside her like cool balm on a sunburn.

"The other one's worse," Edward muttered. Even in the dim lighting of the restaurant, Bella was pretty sure his ears tinted red. "For my ego, anyway." He grimaced. "It was a year later, I think. Met a chick during a road trip, and she could probably sense I didn't wanna leave the bar. So, she suggested the bathroom." He paused, seeming embarrassed. Then he caught sight of something behind Bella, and he leaned forward to rush out the words. "The chick grabbed my crotch and cracked a joke about having thought I was gonna be bigger." Bella choked on nothing and coughed into her hand. "I was half-tempted to pull down my pants and show her I'm plenty big, that I just couldn't get it up. But I was already feeling like a fucking fool, so I bailed instead." Edward sat back again. "I gave up after that, and here's our food. So, what do you think about this weather we're having? I kinda miss the Michigan winters."

Bella gaped at Edward.

Chapter 28

When they got back to the cabin, Edward was quick to open the fridge and drain a whole beer while Bella went to the bathroom. He'd promised himself to be completely honest with her, and that evidently meant putting himself in embarrassing situations only alcohol could cure.

It had taken Bella half the meal to recover from what he'd told her, but now she knew. She knew she was the only one—*had* been the only one. Ever.

Edward wasn't stupid. He could feel there was something between them—something scorching hot—but he'd fucked up too badly in the past seven years to even have the slightest bit of hope it would lead somewhere. But if he got the green light to pursue her...?

Wound tight, he grabbed another beer, then paused. *We need to relax*. He nodded to himself and started checking the cupboards and the fridge for more stuff. Chips, glasses, vodka, mixers...

By the time he'd set it all down on the table in the living room area, Bella joined him, having changed into more comfortable clothes.

She looked hot in his t-shirt and God knew what she was wearing underneath.

"Oh, I approve of *this*." She sat down on the couch with a wide smile and began to mix drinks. "I want to toast." Edward sat down next to her and shrugged outta his shirt, leaving him in a wifebeater. "Well, I guess we can toast to those..." Bella stared. "Hello, abs." She patted his stomach.

Edward's brows rose, and he chuckled at her silliness. "Can I say that about your rack without the feminist claws coming out?"

"Of course." She grinned and pushed out her chest, and if Edward wasn't mistaken, those bad boys weren't confined in a bra. "I believe in equal objectification." If she hadn't backed away and started giggling, Edward would've been more than happy to give her a thorough pat down. "But in all seriousness, I have a real toast to make." She held up her glass of fifty/fifty vodka and Sprite.

Edward smiled and humored her, holding up his beer bottle.

"To you." Her expression softened a bit, and Edward's smile turned into one of confusion. "You've opened up a lot lately, and it's made me realize a few things. It's also helped me, and...and you deserve the same honesty in return." She smiled sheepishly. "I just need some liquid courage. Hope that's okay."

Edward didn't really know what she was talking about, but his answer was the same for whatever she had to say. "Whenever you're ready."

"Oh, some parts have been ready for a while," she mumbled into her glass. "Yikes, that's strong. Whew." Bella had always been a lightweight when it came to alcohol, and Edward could see the signature glaze in her eyes already. With the two glasses of wine she had for dinner, she'd be drunk in no time. "So, let's play a drinking game."

Edward was all ears. Not 'cause he wanted to get drunk, but if it helped Bella get whatever off her chest...

"What're the rules?" He tipped back the beer bottle and took a swig, then watched as Bella filled two shot glasses with vodka and poured a few drops of lemon concentrate in.

"If I veto a question, I gotta take shot," she answers. "Ask me anything—personal stuff about you and me." Edward nodded slowly, his mind spinning, and God knows he had questions. "If I do answer, you take a

shot." She pointed to the glasses. "And, I mean...the drunker I get, the more personal questions I'll answer, so if I refuse early in the game, you can always ask again later. What say you?"

There was no doubt in Edward's mind. "I say let's play." He leaned forward and set down the beer bottle, thinking of his first question. If he was smart, he'd go for real personal shit first, which Bella might veto, but she'd get tipsy a helluva lot faster. However, there was one question he wanted answered while she was sober. "Did you love any of the other guys?"

It physically pained him to ask, but he needed to know.

She shook her head no, eyes soft. "Not even close, Edward. No comparison, not worth trying."

Thank God.

He swallowed hard and let out a breath, relieved beyond words. "Okay, so I take a shot now?" She nodded minutely, and he threw back the shot of vodka, grimacing slightly. "And—fuck." He coughed and chuckled into his fist. "I ask all the questions?" Another nod from Bella. "All right. Uh..." He scratched his jaw, pondering the next one. Now he wanted her to throw out a few vetos, which meant he had to push her outside her comfort zone. Only, he had to leave his own comfort zone, too. "Um, how often do you get off?"

"Edward!" She gaped at him.

And since she was too busy worrying about her own mortification, she didn't seem to notice Edward's.

She scowled. "Veto." And down went the shot.

He kept the questions sexual, and Bella downed another two shots before he figured it was safe to end their misery.

"I'm starting to regret this game," she groaned.

She had nothing to fear. It was Edward's turn to do shots, hopefully.

"Did you ever regret your tattoo?"

"Finally a question I can answer!" Bella was giggling, tipsy enough that she didn't see the pins and needles Edward was on. "No, never."

Edward gladly took a shot.

Warmth spread throughout his body, loosening his muscles, but he was nowhere near drunk. Just...relaxed.

"Do you wish I'd never kissed you in the garage?" he asked next, noticing his voice had lowered.

It was months ago now, but he'd never forget that kiss, ill-timed and inappropriate as it had been. He'd had no right to do that, yet he couldn't regret it.

Bella hesitated, cheeks flushed. "Um." She filled both their shot glasses and debated. "No, fuck it. I'll answer." Her gaze slid to Edward, and he saw both trepidation and lust there. He was sure of it. "I was so mad at you, but I was more angry with myself, because...because—God, Edward. You have to know that I *liked* it." She flushed a deeper shade of pink and ducked her head. "You were there, weren't you?"

"That's not what I asked." Shifting closer, Edward reached out and lifted her chin. "Do you wish I'd kept my distance?"

She sucked in a quick breath and shook her head, staring up at him as if she was trapped. "I can't."

Edward closed his eyes and rested his forehead against her temple. "Good." When he opened his eyes again and reluctantly went for his glass, Bella grabbed his arm to hold him still.

"Next question," she whispered.

Fuck. Edward stayed still—mostly. He shifted a little to discreetly adjust his thickening cock.

"Do you believe me when I say that I'll never leave like that again?"

Bella nodded slowly, choosing her words. "I think I've believed you from the first time you said it, but now... I've needed time to feel it—accept it."

"To let it settle," Edward murmured.

"Yeah." Bella looked down and gathered one of Edward's hands in her lap. "I trust you. I just get scared sometimes." Another apology sat ready, but Bella continued before he could speak. "Can I ask you a question now?"

Fuck the game. "Anything."

"Before, at the water park when we grabbed a soda, I mentioned something about the humidity." She peered up and searched Edward's eyes. "I made a joke, said it was like when I was in Brazil." Shit. Edward had a feeling he knew where she was going with this. "You said you *remembered*."

Okay, more honesty from Edward. He didn't mind; he just hoped Bella wouldn't say he was a creepy stalker. "What I meant by that, uh..." He released a breath and sat up a little straighter. "I meant I remembered when you wrote about it—your trip in the rain forest."

Bella looked at him quizzically. "You followed my travel blog?"

Edward let out a low laugh and dragged a hand down his face. "I think *followed* is putting it mildly." He smiled wryly and occupied himself by playing with her fingers. "I read every update, bought every book—autographed, by the way—researched every place you visited, listened to every podcast, and tried to cook using the recipes you posted." He ignored the disbelief in Bella's expression. "Emphasis on *tried*." He grimaced, recalling how he'd nearly burned down his kitchen in an attempt to fry plantains.

Bella had been too fucking cute in that blog post. She'd been invited to cook with a local chef, and they'd cooked outside, despite the ridiculous downpour. Under a tent in the middle of a marketplace, Bella had been charmed out of her yellow raincoat and polka-dotted rubber boots by an old man who'd introduced her to plantain cooking.

"What did you call that plantain thing you did in Ecuador?"

"Oh my God." The disbelief vanished, and a big smile broke free. "You're serious. You actually followed my work." She grinned and shook her head. "*Patacones*, by the way. That's what they're called, the fried plantain slices."

He nodded with a jerk, slightly embarrassed. If only Bella knew how Edward had acted when his phone had dinged with an alert from her blog. He'd dropped every-fucking-thing to see what she'd posted.

"I, uh...I have something for you." Edward stood up before he could chicken out, 'cause he knew he wouldn't get a better opportunity. "I'll be right back."

He disappeared to the loft above them and dug through his bag until he found the toiletry bag in which he'd hidden the USB stick. Once Bella had this, there was nothing else for Edward to reveal.

He'd lost count of the times he'd arranged, rearranged, added, and edited the contents, but in the end, he had opted to show her everything. The journal, the photos, the anecdotes, the messages.

Returning to the couch, he sat down and opened his palm to reveal the stick. "Ask me about the damn coconut bodywash."

Bella frowned in confusion, which looked fucking adorable when she was intoxicated. "Okay...um, why coconut bodywash on game nights?"

"Because when you were in Brazil, you did a workshop on homemade spa products or something," he said. "You were all supposed to pick local fruits and whatever as your scent, and you went with the coconut." Bella's mouth formed an "o," and Edward trudged forward. "Maybe it's lame, and if I hadn't been such a fucking coward, I woulda stopped running from you, but...anyway, I was missing you particularly badly that day, and I wanted to feel closer to you, so I went out and bought coconut-scented bodywash. It happened to be a game night, and we won."

That was how superstitions were born.

"God, Edward..." Bella's eyes were filled with unshed tears.

But Edward wasn't done. Almost, but not yet. "The story I just told you is written in a note on this thing." Looking away, he held up the USB stick for Bella, who accepted it. "Along with other stories, like what I was doing when you published your coffee table book, or random journaling from road trips when I missed you and Ant the most, photos from our childhood, photos from my failed attempts at cooking, some pity-partying, and a couple playlists with songs that reminded me of you and...home."

Chapter 29

The black halter-neck bikini *definitely* had boob magic.

Still a bit hungover, Bella left the dressing room at the water park with enough cash to buy a soda and a serving of French fries at the burger bar. It would be another half hour before Edward joined her, so she figured she could eat her weight in grease while she waited.

When she woke up earlier, it had been so tempting to creep under Edward's covers and cuddle up with him—she'd done it before, always drawn to his warmth—but after all the revelations lately, she couldn't sit around and do nothing. It was time to up her game, take the plunge, and find her balls.

This bikini was gonna help her.

The plan had been to tell her own truths during the drinking game, yet it had turned into another session of Edward Masen Tells All.

Sure, she'd confessed a little bit, but not nearly enough.

At the end of the night, all she'd been able to do was hug Edward until she'd fallen asleep.

As Bella ate her fries and sipped her Coke, she scanned the pools around her and looked for hiding spots and little nooks where they could have at least some semblance of privacy for her confessions. That's why she'd come here before Edward, to prepare.

She'd set Edward's alarm, written him a note, and left him with the black trunks she'd bought, as opposed to the other pair he'd worn yesterday.

The black ones are funnier.

When she got home after this trip, she'd take some time going through the USB stick Edward had given her, but she knew it wasn't needed. She'd already made up her mind.

Living with regrets wasn't her thing, and she wouldn't allow herself to get stuck with what-ifs and fears. Instead she wanted crazy love, trunks with rhinestone swirls, cake, and fun.

Speaking of rhinestones...

Bella grinned as she caught sight of Edward, and she quickly wrapped her towel around her upper body, wanting to save that revelation for later.

She hadn't been able to make good on her joke about finding diamond-studded trunks—obviously. But she had, however, tracked down rhinestone swirls—the adhesive kind—that she'd attached to the left leg of those black trunks currently moving toward her.

Giggles bubbled up inside her the second Edward noticed her, but instead of scowling or getting all wah-wah-you-torture-me about it, he owned that shit. Just like Anthony would've done. Just like Edward used to in the past.

"You look so hot." Bella bit her lip and gave him a dose of fuck-me eyes. "Who're you wearing?"

Edward smirked, dipped low to kiss the top of her head, then plopped down in the plastic chair next to her. "Oh, this old thing?" He smoothed a hand over the sparkles along his thigh. "It's a Bella Swan creation. Makes me feel so fucking fly." He grinned and stole one of Bella's fries. "So, what's with the wake-up call? Were you too intimidated to walk next to my fly self?"

"Yeah, that's it." Bella laughed. "Or maybe I wanted to show up early and make sure it was safe for you, Your Flyness."

"You coulda made me a hangover cocktail." He chuckled and glanced at the burger bar behind them. "You think they have a blender I can borrow to make an Anthony Special?"

"You can always ask." Bella shook her head in amusement. "But kidding aside, I got here early to scout hiding spots, and I'm ready now." She stood up and pushed the rest of her fries to Edward's side of the table.

"The rules are simple. When you find me, I'll tell you something. Without liquid courage."

Edward deserved the truth without her getting tipsy.

"Another game?" His mouth quirked up. "All right, I'm down."

Understatement. Maybe Bella was the game maker, but Anthony and Edward weren't professional hockey players solely because they enjoyed the camaraderie.

"Or we can just sit here and have a nice talk." She smiled sweetly.

Edward's brow furrowed. "Where's the fun in that?"

There we go.

Holding Edward's stare, Bella began to remove the towel. "Give me a twenty-second head start." She tossed the towel onto a chair.

"Jesus." Edward's jaw clenched as his eyes roamed her body slowly.

"Will you chase me?" she asked, choosing her words deliberately.

Edward looked her in the eye, his gaze throwing off heat that made her heart drum faster.

His voice was husky, commanding, and quiet. "Run, baby girl."

A shiver ran down Bella's spine. "Tsk, tsk." She managed to keep it light, albeit breathy. "You're not supposed to run in a water park."

Edward merely leaned forward in his seat and raised a brow.

Bella hauled ass toward her first hiding spot, and on the way, she got her shit together.

I'm in charge. Well, for now.

~oOo~

Edward stood up in a daze. He threw away the fries and the soda, then grabbed their towels and tossed them over a fake boulder near one of the swimming pools. He had no idea how many seconds had passed, but he didn't care.

No one needed to cool off more than Edward, so he dove into the water and hoped it would clear his head. *Big. Fat. Fail.* His mind was spinning. Bella's question, the way she phrased it, combined with the threads she was wearing...?

Jesus fucking Christ, that bikini.

Bella wasn't being a damn *friend*.

Edward couldn't have mistaken the hint.

Not finding Bella in the first pool, he pushed himself up the edge and waded through the crowd of newly-arrived park guests to reach the pool with the wave machine. He didn't get in, 'cause he could see the whole pool from where he stood, and no sign of Bella. Which left Edward with one more place, not counting the Jacuzzi area.

Anticipation buzzed through him as he saw her. In a shallow corner of the pool, Bella was sitting down in the water and leaning back against a fake tree log, surrounded by several palm trees and rock formations.

Her smile was wicked as she spotted him.

Edward joined her, the water barely reaching his knees, and sat down beside her.

"Hi." Bella shifted and moved to straddle him, which...fuck. This was a family resort. "Ready to hear my first confession?"

Edward swallowed and pushed down his desire. "Yeah." He was tense—too tense—but calming down was outta the question until he knew what this was really about.

Sliding forward on his lap, Bella cupped his shoulders and murmured low in his ear. "If I ever wanna get off really fast..."

Edward didn't know if his "*fuck*" was spoken or if it just went on a loop inside his head; regardless, it was *loud* and came with no small amount of shock and hope. And Bella wasn't done.

She pressed her luscious tits to his chest and finished her sentence. "...all I gotta do is imagine you in your goalie gear...all sweaty and pumped up with adrenaline after a game..." Edward let out a quiet groan as Bella nipped at the spot below his ear. His cheeks flushed with heat, and his hands somehow found their way to Bella's hips. "God, Edward...the things you could do to me in the locker room..."

"Shit." Edward shuddered, dizzy with lust. "I think—"

"I think I need to get away from you if I wanna tell you everything before I combust." Bella looked as flushed as Edward felt, reluctantly moving off his lap. "Count to twenty."

Then she was gone.

"Fuck." Edward stared down at his lap, then back to Bella's retreating form. "I'm gonna need more than twenty, Bella!"

~oOo~

It was easy to find Bella the next round. Sitting on the edge of a pool with lots of greenery surrounding them, she smiled softly when he sat down. Considering the number of kids having fun nearby, Edward figured this "confession" would be less sexual.

He didn't know whether to be relieved or disappointed.

"I'll have good days and bad." Bella linked their fingers together. Edward squeezed. "There'll be times when I think back on these past seven years and can't help but be a bitch. I apologize in advance. But, that said, I want you to know something."

Edward regarded her carefully. "What?"

She leaned up and kissed his cheek. "I've forgiven you. For everything."

With that statement, she kinda stole Edward's breath. Disbelief was the first emotion that swept through him, but the sincerity in Bella's eyes was impossible to doubt.

Relief took over. Like a tide, taking more and more.

It was as immense as the gratefulness.

Edward would be content to sit there a while and revel, but Bella seemed to have other plans.

"Count to twenty."

~oOo~

The next time Edward found Bella, she was waiting for him in a small circular part of a pool that had jets running and orange and red lights illuminating from below. With the high cliffs surrounding them and a smoky gray ceiling hanging low, it created the illusion of a volcano.

She stood in the middle, the bubbling and swirling water teasing the underside of her full breasts.

A grin stretched across her lips. "We meet again."

Edward laughed through his nose, approaching slowly. He was fucking giddy—there was no other way to describe it.

"I'll chase you forever, if that's what it takes." He was only being honest. "You can run, but..."

"You'll find me?" she asked, and he nodded. "You only have to find me one more time after this." She paused. "Confession number three: sometimes I wish you could read my mind."

Edward smirked and sank deeper into the water, only his head and shoulders visible. Unconsciously, he'd started circling her in his slow approach, and it made him feel like a predator.

"Of course you do, baby girl. You're a woman."

Maybe he hadn't experienced that for himself, but he'd shared a locker room with hundreds of men over the years.

They liked to gossip.

"See? You get it. It's in my DNA." She followed his movements, twisting her body to face him. "You think you can read my mind now? I'm thinking about something I want. Something you've done before."

Edward knew what he *wanted* to see, what he wanted her to want, but that was about it. And he didn't answer, because...well, for obvious reasons. She knew he couldn't read her mind. Yet, there was something...

Perhaps he couldn't open her up like a book, but he *could* put two and two together.

"I'm thinking about something I want."

Something he'd done before.

But she didn't want to ask for it? Maybe it was part of the chase; it could be something she wanted *him* to do. To take the first step...? Or perhaps he was reaching, 'cause it inched closer and closer to what he wanted—oh, fuck this.

Closing the distance, he grabbed her by the waist and made his move before he could chicken out. He kissed her hard, swallowing her gasp, and pulled her flush to his body. She tasted like soda and water park, all soft, wet, and warm in his arms.

Without breaking the kiss, he picked her up and—

And a bunch of kids swam into the "volcano" at that moment.

"No," Bella whined breathlessly.

Edward panted against her shoulder, strung tight and hard as a fucking rock.

"You have five seconds," he said huskily, "then I'm coming after you." He lowered her into the water again. "Go to the cave." He gestured to a neighboring pool that had a cave behind a waterfall.

Bella nodded quickly and dove underwater, swimming out of sight and reach.

Edward cursed, then turned his back on the kids and took a few deep, calming breaths.

There was nothing he wanted more than get back to their cabin, but he was afraid he'd get too fucking eager. What he'd told Bella weeks ago about taking whatever she wanted to give was still true. If this was a one-time thing, he'd live with that. But he knew Bella. This was so far from casual, and now he was thinking that maybe she'd want to be wined and dined properly before they...took things further.

He'd have to be honest and ask her. He would give her anything she wanted, but she had to lay down the law in the beginning. Because after being celibate for seven years and now being back with the girl he loved, there were countless things he wanted to do, but most of them involved them being naked.

Some heavy making out in a cave worked for now.

He took off after Bella and left one pool for another, swiftly swimming under the waterfall that worked like a curtain in front of the secluded cave.

When he came up for air, there were no words. They met in the middle of the small dome-shaped cave and continued where they'd left off.

If someone entered the cave at this point—which was too fucking possible for Edward's liking—he wasn't sure he'd give a shit.

Heavy breaths, echoes of dripping water, the rush of the waterfall right outside, and moans filled the air. And this time when Edward picked Bella up, there was no one interrupting. He pinned her to a wall, greedy in his kisses and touches, and felt her...everywhere.

Christ, that perfect ass in his hands.

Bella whimpered as their tongues mingled, and she clung to Edward for all she was worth. He felt her nails, the heels of her feet, her tits, her roaming hands, and...

"Fuck, Bella." He groaned when she rolled her hips over his cock.

The sweetest fuckin' reunion.

Releasing her ass, Edward thrust against her hot pussy and slid his hands up her ribcage. Bella's breathy *yes, yes, yes* encouraged him to close the gap and palm both breasts in his hands.

Bella moaned. "God, I've missed you. This. Your hands on me."

Edward shuddered violently and took her mouth with his again. At this point, he couldn't form words. He was fucking lost in her.

Reminding himself where they were, Edward shifted Bella higher up to take some pressure off his cock, because there was no way he could blow in the goddamn water.

Instead he made it about Bella, so when she protested about their new position, he took it further. One hand returned to her ass, and the other slid down her front.

"Oh my God." Bella gasped and buried her face in Edward's neck as he gently cupped her pussy.

It was all the permission he needed. He slipped a hand beneath the fabric and found her bare and slick with wetness that was so different than the water.

"Can you be quick?" he whispered, breathing hard. He pressed his palm to her clit as his middle finger teased her slit, down to her hole.

Bella nodded jerkily and bit down on Edward's shoulder to muffle her sounds. "I think—" Another bite. "I think quick is all I have right now."

In response, Edward pushed two fingers deep inside her.

His brain had shut down a while ago, which was probably a good thing. It let him focus solely on Bella instead of overanalyzing everything. With an unpracticed touch, he listened to Bella's muffled whimpers and hitched breaths for clues on what she wanted. When he applied pressure to her clit, she stiffened before shuddering and moaning. And then she was moving with him. She pleaded in breathless whispers and swiveled her hips, rocking into Edward's hand.

"That's it," he whispered. "Fuck my fingers." He added a third inside her and pushed down his palm on her clit even more. "You have no idea how bad I wanna fuck you right now." Drowning in lust, his unfiltered thoughts came out as he began finger-fucking her faster and harder. "I wanna taste you everywhere and make you scream."

"Edward—" Bella choked out a moan and latched onto his neck.

"Fuck you until you're delirious." He gritted his teeth, the skin around his cock so tight it nearly hurt. "Make love to you until the only name you can think of is mine."

He was gonna make good on his words one day. Practice made perfect, right?

"Close," Bella whimpered.

Edward blew out a curse and hitched her another few inches higher up. And as he twisted his fingers inside her to stroke every spot he could find, he lowered his head to her tits and sucked a covered nipple into his mouth.

It was all Bella could take.

She fell apart with the rush of the waterfall right outside silencing her muffled cry.

Chapter 30

The Stanley Cup: For a team in the NHL, there's nothing greater or more prestigious than winning the Stanley Cup. It's basically what the whole season is about, making the cut to the playoffs, then winning the cup. It's every player's dream (much to the frustration of the rest of the world, where we wish the Americans and Canadians would join the rest of us and start giving a fuck about the World Championship that happens to take place around the same time as the Stanley Cup playoffs.) The only thing that rivals ol' Stanley would be winning the Olympic gold. But that's only every four years, dammit!

~oOo~

Bella knew she had one last confession to make, but it was pretty damn difficult to concentrate when she and Edward were busy wrecking their cabin.

Edward cursed when he accidentally threw their bags into the door of the tiny laundry room in the hallway. Apparently wet towels and swimsuits combined with a hockey player's strength caused cracks.

The hallway table was clearly in the way.

"Oops." Bella giggled at the death of a lamp.

Edward merely grunted into the kiss and tried to steer her in the right direction.

Passing the kitchen nook, he pressed her up against a partition wall slash bar, and a pitcher of water crashed to the floor.

"Upstairs," she panted as he sucked and nipped at her neck. "Oh fuck, upstairs." She felt like whining. That was how much she craved him.

Edward's fingers fiddled with the hem of her top, and he broke the kiss to look her in the eye. His green eyes were filled with so much desire that it made Bella's knees weak.

"If you don't tell me to stop..." He raised a brow, the warning clear.

Bella's mouth quirked up as a shiver ran down her spine. "I'd never dream of telling you to stop."

"Fuck." Edward grabbed her jaw and kissed her hard, but it was over in a second. Then he wrenched away and scrubbed a hand down his face.

"I'mma be honest with you. I need to get off before." He gave her a small smirk and a pointed look. "Otherwise it won't be much fun for you."

Bella stepped up to him and unbuttoned his jeans. "Only one person is allowed to get you off."

Indecency flashed in Edward's predatory gaze as she slowly pushed down his pants and boxer briefs. Even with that scruffy beard, she saw how his jaw clenched.

"How do you want me?" Bella palmed his stiff cock, but she refused to glance away from his eyes. Her mouth watered at the feel of the smooth skin around his cock, yet his reactions turned her on even more. It was all in those eyes, that face. "Don't hold back," she said softly. "That's the last thing I want." He nodded tightly, understanding. "I'll do anything you want. I want the same."

His features relaxed slightly, and he took the small step forward that closed their distance. Gaze soft but full of barely-restrained need, he dipped down and kissed her neck before whispering in her ear.

"I want you on your knees, baby girl."

Bella melted. Forceful shivers rushed through her, and she sank to her knees without another thought. And for the first time in so long, she let her eyes take in a sight she'd missed so damn much. She leaned forward and licked the underside of his cock, feeling all giddy at his hissed curse. His fingers were suddenly in her hair, and he groaned when she grasped him tightly before sucking him slowly into her mouth.

"Christ..." Edward blew out a breath, his eyes never leaving hers.

When she tasted his pre-come, she eased away only to sweep her tongue over the head and taste more. She hummed and closed her eyes, focusing solely on Edward's cock. The taste, the texture, the size, the smell...fuck, she was a goner. She had been since she was sixteen.

With every minute that passed, Edward's breaths came out quicker. But what Bella reveled in was how he let go. He'd definitely been more careful in the beginning, most likely worrying about hurting her or being too rough. Such an Edward thing to do. He'd been the same back in the day, though he'd stopped that shit fast.

And now... Bella braced her hands on his muscular thighs, inching inward to cup his balls, and took pleasure from Edward's shallow thrusts into her mouth.

"Almost there." His voice was gritty and rough, contradicting the gentle touch of his hands in her hair. He slid one of the hands down and cupped her jaw, brushing a thumb over her hollowed-out cheek. "You want it, Bella?"

Oh, that specific question. Talk about déjà vu. She looked up at him, just like seven years ago, and nodded as best as she could. *You know I want it, baby. I always want it.*

The muscles in his face and neck strained. "Oh God, Bella..." A final groan, a gasp, and then his head tilted back as his climax took over. He pushed deep, spurts of come hitting the back of her throat.

~oOo~

A deep sense of calm washed over Edward with that orgasm, along with satisfaction he'd forgotten existed, determination to be everything Bella deserved, and a fierce demand to show her how much he loved her. How much she owned him, and...*let's be honest, how much I wanna mark my fucking territory.*

If she was giving him a new chance, he'd make sure she'd never regret it.

After kicking off his jeans completely and pulling up his boxers again, he lifted Bella off the floor and kissed her until she was gasping for air. His tongue stroked hers, his teeth teased her bottom lip, and his lips latched onto her flesh.

"Is it weird to say thank you?" He let out a chuckle and decided it was best not to let Bella answer. "Better yet, lemme show you." Considering that the stairs leading to the loft were as steep as a ladder, he couldn't go caveman on her ass and carry her up there. So, he opted for guiding her and taking off her clothes in the process.

By the time Bella climbed the stairs ahead of him—her sexy ass in his face—she was giggling and wearing only a pair of flimsy panties and a matching bra.

Bella paused in front of the first sleeping nook and turned to raise a brow in question. But, no. That was where Edward slept, and he wanted to be in the bed that smelled like his girl.

That said, he had plans to be with her wherever he could.

They passed the partition that separated the two areas and Edward pulled Bella close once they reached her bed. He kissed her slowly and deeply as he reached around her to unclasp the bra. In the meantime, Bella stepped out of her panties and pushed down Edward's underwear as well.

"This is where you tell me you got a stack of condoms somewhere," he murmured, secretly wishing she was on birth control. Oh, who was he kidding? He knew she was on birth control, but was that enough for her?

"You crack me up." She grinned and dropped a kiss to his sternum.

His relief and elation was probably written all over him. "Lie down. I wanna look at you."

She complied and lay down on the bed, beckoning him with a crook of her finger.

He was more than happy to follow, but he didn't lie down. Instead he sat back on his heels between Bella's parted legs and stared unabashedly at the body that had changed a lot since she was sixteen. If he thought she'd been sinful back then...

He shook his head in wonder, his cock already coming back to life for more. Stroking himself lazily, absently, he slid his other hand up her smooth thigh until he reached the ink on her hip. The mere thought of his number on her skin was enough to cause a surge of possessiveness to settle in his gut, but to actually see it like this? Fuck, there was nothing like it.

Eventually, he moved on and hovered over her. With a hand supporting his weight next to the pillows, he abandoned his dick for Bella's tits. He teased them with his fingers and mouth until Bella was panting and a sexy flush of arousal blanketed her chest and cheeks.

"Please, Edward..." Bella arched her back and moved her fingers through his short hair as he kissed his way down her stomach. "I'm so ready."

But Edward wasn't. He had plenty of rediscovering to do, plenty to kiss and tease, plenty to touch and...lick. Dropping a featherlight kiss to her tattoo, he got settled between her legs and smoothed a thumb over the baby soft skin where her inner thighs ended.

He nuzzled the spot gently, and Bella stiffened and let out a breathy laugh at how his beard tickled her.

Edward grinned a little to himself, then pressed closer, ending the teasing.

That earned him a hitched moan.

Breathing her in, Edward swallowed against the dryness in his throat. The smell of her arousal—the sight of the wetness along her slit...his pulse skyrocketed, and he inched close to finally taste her. *Fuck me*. He groaned and eased his tongue between those bare lips, getting lost in her flavor.

He had no fucking clue on how long he ate her out, but what had begun as a test to find out what she liked had morphed into him not getting enough. He touched and licked her mercilessly, manipulating her flesh until Bella was trembling and crying out. He learned that she preferred to have her clit teased with fingers instead of his tongue, which gave him the opportunity to taste her inside.

He also learned that if he fucked her gently with his tongue and circled her clit with the pad of his thumb, she came hard.

And then he had to get his cock balls-deep in that tight pussy.

~oOo~

Bella melted into the mattress, a panting mess, but Edward was on a mission. She saw it as soon as they came face-to-face and he kissed her aggressively, his steel-hard cock pressed between them.

"Now," he gritted out.

All air left Bella's lungs, Edward's need evidently contagious. She nodded quickly and lifted her head to kiss him hard and deep, and at the same time, she slipped a hand between them and grasped Edward's cock. He shuddered; she whimpered.

Sliding the head of his cock through her wetness, she felt him teasing her entrance. All she had to do was manage a small nod against his neck, and then he thrust forward. Hard.

Wanted: ability to breathe.

Carnal passion she'd never felt before shot through her and set her on fire.

"*Motherfucker.*" Edward stilled inside her and dropped his forehead to her shoulder. She felt his breath coming out in quick puffs against her skin, raising goose bumps all over. "Too good, Bella. Too fucking good."

But Bella needed more now. It was Edward's fault, really. He stretched her out so amazingly, filled her so perfectly.

"Give it to me." She moved her feet up along his calves and her hands up his muscular arms. "Please, baby. I need you."

"Yeah..." Edward blew out a breath and withdrew slowly, then pushed back in. "*Fuck—Gimme your mouth.*"

He kissed her breathless and eased into a rhythm that had her moaning and clawing at Edward in no time. He seduced her, fucked her into a

hypnotic state, with long strokes, gentle pinches to her sensitive nipples, passionate kisses, and murmurs about how beautiful she was, how much he'd missed her—missed this.

Time and space had no meaning, and she was a little startled when Edward slowed down after...who knew how long?

He grinned widely and rolled them over. "I don't wanna lose it yet. Ride me."

Bella grinned back, her hands landing on his chest. "What's with the smug on your mug, Masen?"

Edward chuckled as he sat up and kissed her collarbone. "You want the sappy version or the—"

"Both," Bella was quick to say. She swiveled her hips and brought him deeper, earning herself a groan from Edward. "Start with sappy."

His smile was lazy, lopsided, and unapologetic. "I'm with the woman I love. She's mine again. Of course that makes me fucking ecstatic."

"Awww." Bella's heart did that flippity-flop thing Edward was known to cause, and she dipped down for a kiss. It was *an* opportunity to tell him she loved him too, but not *the* opportunity. "And the other version?"

He shrugged, busy kissing his way to her breasts. She gasped when he caught a nipple between his teeth and sucked on it. "I'm getting laid, dude." His frank words made Bella laugh, outta breath, which in turn made Edward moan as she clenched down on his cock. "Fuck, I'm scoring with the hottest chick alive. Can we talk about that for a moment?" Still wearing that big smile, he flipped them over again and pushed deep inside her.

"We could," Bella giggled through a moan. "Or we could just keep scoring."

"I do love scoring." He looked down between them, where Bella was already staring, and they both watched how his cock came out all wet and glistening, only to disappear inside her pussy and continue to set Bella ablaze.

"You—you picked the wrong position, then..." Bella was finding it more and more difficult to form words. The pleasure was building up rapidly, with a force she hadn't known in years. "Shouldn't be a goalie..."

Edward hummed and started rubbing her clit. "Speaking of positions, I need you to come—like fucking stat—so you gotta tell me which position that'll get'chu there fastest."

"The position your dick is in right now," she groaned. "Oh my God."

"Yeah?" Edward increased his pace and screwed his eyes shut. "Fuck, fuck, fuck." As he applied pressure to Bella's clit, she knew he was close, too.

Feverish and teetering on the edge, Bella moved with him as much as she could. She dragged her fingernails along his back, something that seemed to trigger Edward to go even rougher, and nipped at his shoulder. Feeling all that muscle, his cut abs and defined biceps, seeing his already-sharp features tightening...it was heady to have him moving on top of her.

It became too much for her, and the orgasm soon rolled in like thunder. She cried out his name right before she was thrust into ecstasy.

Moments later, Edward rocked into her a few more times before letting out a gritty growl and stilling, buried as deep as was physically possible.

"Oh, holy shit..." Bella swallowed dryly and shivered. She couldn't breathe; hell, she could barely think. "Damn, Edward..."

He gave a final groan as he slipped out of her, collapsed on the bed, and pulled her into his arms. Resting her head above his heart, she could feel it beating as fast as hers was.

While catching her breath, Bella closed her eyes and pressed her lips to his pec. Her fingertips drew aimless circles through his sparse chest hair, and she shifted closer until the next thing would be to get under his skin.

"I don't think this day can get any better." Edward's chest rumbled with a low laugh, and he kissed her on the forehead. "Goddamn, baby girl. I have no words."

The opportunity was just handed to her on a silver platter. She lifted her head, a smile tugging at her lips. "Wanna know my last confession?"

The corners of his eyes crinkled, and he tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. "Hit me with it."

She turned to nuzzle his palm. "I never stopped loving you, Edward." He froze, and when Bella looked him in the eye again, she saw disbelief and cautious hope. She reached up and kissed him. "I never fell out of love with you."

After a few seconds of silence, Edward exhaled shakily and hugged her tightly, burying his face in the curve of her neck.

"Are you serious?" he mumbled into her hair.

She smiled into the kiss she dropped on his shoulder. "As serious as the Stanley Cup."

Chapter 31

The AHL: The American Hockey League. If the AHL is Edward and Anthony Masen, the NHL is Edward and Anthony Masen—naked.

A month later

The lobby at Turning Torso had been transformed into a winter wonderland since Anthony had last been here. It was early December, and considering that he lived with Carlisle now, the Christmas spectacle startled him a bit as he walked toward the front desk. But he composed his face fast, ready to act the part of his brother, who saw this on a daily basis.

"Hey, you had a delivery for me?" He smiled politely at the dude on the other side. "Edward Masen on thirty-nine," he clarified.

Anthony was wearing a beanie, so the fact that his hair was longer than Edward's wasn't an issue. And the beard...? Well, maybe Eddie had fucking shaved.

Which, in reality, Bella would never allow.

"Of course, Mr. Masen." The guy opened a cabinet or something below the desk. "Just a second."

Anthony checked his phone while he waited and saw a text from Carlisle, which was weird. They'd left the underground garage together less than two minutes ago, here to have dinner with Bella and Edward. Carlisle had headed up in the elevator with the takeout food while Anthony had come here to sign for Ed's delivery.

I'll just wait for you outside the apartment.

Again, weird.

"Here it is." The guy reappeared from under the desk with a padded envelope.

Anthony signed for it and raised an eyebrow as he recognized the return address—the Red Wings headquarters back home. But it couldn't be Edward's contract or anything. A couple reps from Detroit were coming here tomorrow to catch the next game, then kiss Edward's ass with an expensive dinner before a contract was handed over.

Grabbing the envelope, Anthony nodded in thanks and made his way to the elevators. He rode up to the thirty-ninth floor and saw Carlisle leaning casually against the wall outside what used to be Anthony's apartment.

Carlisle smiled wryly. "So, I've learned that Edward's ass looks like yours and that both Masen twins like anal, although he's definitely a top."

Anthony laughed, shocked but too damn amused. Ever since Edward and Bella had returned from their little trip a month ago, Anthony had witnessed plenty of PDA, but sure as hell not sex.

He was incredibly happy for them, but those two were nuts.

As soon as Edward and Bella were behind closed doors, they were sucking face, Anthony and Carlisle's presence be damned. But yeah, this was different. And still fucking weird, 'cause they'd all agreed to seven o'clock.

"Guess they have a lot of catching up to do...?" Anthony snickered, oddly proud of his little brother. Then again, Bella was the freak—and no doubt the instigator, 'cause she'd asked him a few times over the years what anal sex was like. "Did they notice you?"

Carlisle smirked and shook his head no. "I heard some screaming before you got here though, so maybe they're done."

"Jesus." Anthony snorted and walked over to the door. "Ready or not, I'm going in. I'm fucking starving." Not that he'd get the chance to taste the Chinese food Carlisle had bought. That was only for him and Bella, 'cause Anthony and Edward were on a strict protein diet.

They had been for the past two weeks, and it was making Anthony cranky. But Ed wasn't the only one who needed to show off for Detroit tomorrow; Anthony had to prove himself, too. His stats were solid, but the reps needed to see that he still played like an NHL player.

Edward even more so, since he'd been here a lot longer. The SHL was a great league, but the tempo didn't match what they were used to back home, and Detroit needed a goalie who was quick on his feet.

Opening the door, Anthony barged into the apartment, ready to tell the lovebirds to cover up, but then he heard laughter and water running in the bathroom. So yeah, they were most likely done.

Both Anthony and Carlisle headed to the kitchen, one to plate delicious Chinese food and one to make two protein shakes.

Anthony cursed at being the latter.

"Good God, what is that?" He eye-fucked the box that looked like a cake box.

Carlisle smirked but didn't answer until Anthony switched off the blender.

"Dessert, of course. Now that I know Isabella a little better, I wouldn't dare turn up without it."

"Fuckin' Bella," Anthony muttered, jealous. He added the protein powder to the vegetable smoothie and switched on the blender again. The noise was bound to let Edward and Bella know they weren't alone anymore.

"This fucking shit is so fucking gross." Dinner was done.

But hey, at least he was on his A-game the second he hit the ice.

Additionally, when the team shot the photos for their calendar next week, Anthony and Edward would be ready to show them how abs were supposed to look.

"Is your mood flaring up a bit again?" Carlisle stopped what he was doing and hugged Anthony from behind. Anthony closed his eyes and sighed contentedly. "I'll take care of you when we get home."

"You gonna gimme a blowjob and a big, fat burger with fries?" He turned in Carlisle's arms and leaned back against the counter. "I'm like a kid in Africa."

Carlisle smacked him upside the head and laughed. "You spoiled, millionaire brat. Comparing yourself to a child in *Africa*?"

"Or in Detroit, because I'm not sure there's a difference." Anthony shrugged and scratched his nose. "Concrete jungle vs regular jungle."

"Let me shut you up before you take it further." Carlisle leaned in and kissed Anthony, smiling into the kiss until it grew hotter.

Anthony swept his tongue into Carlisle's mouth and palmed his ass, pulling them flush together. It'd been days with nothing more than a kiss and some cuddling—which Anthony blamed his extra workout sessions for—so he was in serious need here.

How the hell did Edward do it? Anthony was fucking *spent*.

Oh yeah...Edward had been a monk. He'd probably fuck even if he were paralyzed.

Right now, all Anthony could think about was smearing a pizza all over a naked Carlisle and licking it off.

He groaned. "God, or...or tacos...oh, yeah..."

Carlisle chuckled into the kiss and cupped Anthony's cheeks. "Baby, are you fantasizing about food sex again?"

"Fuck, yeah." Anthony wasn't the least bit ashamed, and Carlisle knew him by now. "What're your thoughts on dipping your cock in ice cream?"

Carlisle hissed, then laughed. "That's cold."

"It would be, yeah." Anthony nodded, his eyes glazing over with lust and hunger. "And fucking delicious. Shit, I'm hard."

"I can feel that." Carlisle's husky murmur was accompanied by a slow thrust of his hips.

"Hey!" Bella's voice burst their bubble, and Anthony turned his head to see her in the doorway. She grinned, dressed in yoga pants and one of Edward's t-shirts. Her hair was wrapped in a towel. "Get a room, you two. My innocent eyes can't take it."

Anthony and Carlisle exchanged a look, because Bella was the last person to talk about innocent eyes and PDA. But before either could comment, Edward joined them, wearing only a pair of sweats and running a towel over his head.

Carlisle smirked and averted his eyes to the floor.

Anthony whacked his arm, 'cause it seemed his man had noticed that Edward was more than just a player—and Anthony's brother.

"Don't even think about it," he warned Carlisle, chuckling. Then he turned to his brother and told him, "Put a fucking shirt on, bro."

"Take yours off!" Bella countered gleefully. At three sets of raised eyebrows, she turned sheepish. "Sorry. I got a little excited. But," she continued frankly, "clothes are redundant on men."

Carlisle faced an amused Edward. "Is she writing?"

"Researching," Edward sighed, though he looked anything but displeased. "There's porn everywhere, man."

"Speaking of porn—" Bella walked over to the Chinese food "—I can't wait for the photo shoot next week. Edward promised I could be there."

"She bribed me," was Edward's defense.

"Whatever." Anthony needed some nutrition now, even if it was a disgusting smoothie. "Let's eat. Or chug."

The four gathered at the table, and while Carlisle and Bella stuffed their faces with egg rolls, fried shrimp, and noodles, Edward and Anthony smiled bitterly and sipped on their protein drinks.

"By the way, I picked up the package downstairs." Anthony shuddered and set down his glass. "Or envelope, I guess. It's on the hallway table."

"Oh, thanks." Edward disappeared for a moment, only to return with the parcel. He grinned when he'd opened it and pulled out a piece of paper.

Carlisle appeared to know what it was. "I'm guessing there're some digits?"

"Yeah." Edward laughed through his nose. "It never ceases to amaze me the kind of money they throw at athletes."

That clued Anthony in, and he snatched up the piece of paper from his brother. "If your salary's bigger than mine, I'll pitch a fit." He read the number Detroit was using to lure Edward in and relaxed. It wasn't bigger,

but that was mainly because Ed's contract was only for the rest of the season. That said, Anthony and anybody with a brain knew the Red Wings would ask Edward to sign on to play for the team for a longer period soon enough.

It was a dream come true for Anthony and the rest of the Masen-Swan clan. Detroit, as home base for all of them. It was where they were supposed to be.

"Have you found an agent yet?" Carlisle asked.

Edward hesitated, then exchanged a look with Bella, who nodded subtly in encouragement.

"About that..." He cleared his throat and sat forward. "You ever considered being an agent?"

That's the solution we've been looking for, Anthony thought immediately. After having worked in high positions all over Europe, Carlisle deserved more than being assistant-anything. But at this point, the only lucrative offer he had was a GM gig for a team in the AHL. And it wasn't even in Michigan.

"You could do publicity, too." Anthony threw his two cents in. "I hate my publicist. She's a cunt."

Carlisle looked pensive. "That's...huh. Interesting. I haven't thought of that."

"You should," Bella agreed. "Edward wouldn't give *you* attitude, and you're capable of keeping Anthony in line."

"I'm feeling the love," Anthony drawled.

"Me too." Edward bumped Anthony's fist.

Bella blew them kisses.

"I'll definitely consider it." Carlisle nodded, and Anthony was pretty sure some of the tightness had eased in Carlisle's shoulders. He knew Carlisle had fretted a bit about finding a job with flexible hours that he'd really enjoy. "So, what are your plans?" He waved a fork between Edward and Bella.

To Anthony's intrigue, Bella blushed and ducked her head.

"Well...the thing is..." She didn't get farther than that before Edward cut her off, which was probably a good thing, 'cause she was taking forever.

"I finally manned up and asked her to move with me when I leave after New Year's."

Anthony grinned and shoved Edward's shoulder. "I knew you had it in ya." Then he turned to Carlisle, smug as shit. "You owe me a blowjob."

Because Carlisle had believed that Bella would stay here and then move to Detroit with Anthony and Carlisle next summer. But Anthony knew better. This was how it was supposed to be. He'd miss his Bella and Ed, but he'd have some alone time with Carlisle before they were thrust into the world of media again, and privacy was exactly what they wanted.

The party boy was a party boy no more.

Still...he kinda missed Bella already. Anthony was reconnecting plenty with Edward, and he had Carlisle too, but...

"I'm assuming you said yes?" He smiled crookedly at Bella and ignored the small pang of...he didn't even know what it was.

Bella's smile was rueful. "Sorta, kinda." Edward reached over and squeezed her hand affectionately. "Carlisle, tomorrow after the game, do you mind if I steal your man away for a couple hours?"

Anthony's brow furrowed as he studied Bella, wondering if something was going on. But if Bella wanted to talk to him in private, he'd have to wait—apparently.

"By all means." Carlisle inclined his head and placed a hand on Anthony's thigh. "I have a Skype date with my daughter; she wants to tell me all the *fabulous* reasons I have to send her to Northwestern in Chicago next fall."

"And Carlisle's gonna play tough guy for about five minutes until he crumbles," Anthony chuckled, even though it wasn't funny at all. It only reminded him of last week when Alice called and Anthony had answered the phone.

How they went from talking about Christmas to Anthony promising Alice that he and Carlisle would visit her in London sometime still had him reeling.

She had this pout in her fucking voice. It had scared the shit outta Anthony. Only Bella was known to have that effect on him. But Alice? *Man*. Anthony was in trouble.

And Alice's future boyfriend...? But that thought irritated Anthony. It was also ludicrous. Alice was only a kid—way too young to date. Then he remembered the hickey he'd seen on her neck...

He was fucked.

But at least these thoughts kept him from worrying about whatever Bella wanted to tell him tomorrow.

Chapter 32

Kom igen, täck vänster = Come on, cover left.

Roughing = coming at an opponent who doesn't have the puck. Basically, a fight. Unless there are major injuries, it's a two-minute penalty.

Crease = the goal area.

~oOo~

Anthony circled the net, focused as hell on the game starting in a minute or two against a team from Stockholm. His brother was just as focused, because a lot was at stake. In Carlisle's VIP box above them, two reps from the Red Wings were watching their every move while schmoozing with Carlisle, the Redhawks' owner, and a few other fat cats.

Bella and Charlotte were sitting in one of the three rows of private seats just outside the box, and when Anthony looked up at them, Bella was fidgeting nervously. Nervous about the game, Anthony guessed.

Fuck, Anthony was nervous, too. He'd proven himself here in Sweden all season, but was it enough? Would the Red Wings renew his contract?

They better.

"You okay?" To distract himself, Anthony skated to a stop in front of Edward and figured some mindless convo would relax him.

Edward nodded tightly, in the zone, as he worked the ice around the crease. "Bella bought me Superman briefs."

Well, all right. Anthony checked the tape on his stick.

Edward dropped into butterfly position, then back up, down, up—bendy motherfucker. Hockey was a man's sport, brutal and rough, but it sure

took more than brute strength. Especially for the goalies, and Anthony's groin always hurt with sympathy pains when Ed did moves that belonged to preteen Asian girls in the Summer Olympics.

"With the softener she uses...?" Edward stood up and pointed to his dick. "My crotch is all snugly."

"It's not broken?" Anthony tilted his head, as if he'd see through Edward's gear. "I figured if Bella hadn't gotten the job done by now, the splits you just did would."

"Dude, that girl is *nuts*." Edward widened his eyes and lowered his voice. "I don't wanna go into details, but man, what we did yesterday...?" He whistled. "It kinda made me wanna propose too soon."

Anthony grinned wryly, thinking that he already knew the details. But yeah, he had to admit he was a little surprised. Not that Edward and Bella had been at it like bunnies, but that they *really* weren't wasting any time getting reconnected. In every hol—way possible.

"Well..." He cleared his throat and peered out over the ice. "You may not wanna pop the question while you're popping her, um, caboose cherry."

Edward's jaw dropped. "How did'ju—"

Anthony interrupted. "Carlisle caught the show." Amused, he shook his head and started skating backward, circling the net again. "Okay, consider me sufficiently distracted. Now I'm thinking about Bella's ass."

"Fuck that. It's been stamped with my name." Edward scowled. "Now get the fuck outta here. I gotta focus. *You* gotta focus, Ant."

Anthony took off with a two-finger salute.

~oOo~

The first period sucked, but Anthony made a comeback in the second. Two minutes in, he got the puck from Peter and deked around a player in white. Passed it to Captain, got into position, and yelled for Felix to screen the opposing goalie.

"Push it!" Edward shouted across the ice. "They're tired—fucking push it!"

Captain chipped the puck against the boards and sent it flying back to Anthony, who checked a player and got behind the net. The goalie yelled at his players to remove Felix, all while looking back at Anthony. Captain pushed his way to the middle, and the player coming after Anthony broke his path to help his goalie.

"Kom igen, täck vänster!" The opposing team's defenders were getting pissed, trying to keep up with the Redhawks' first line of forwards.

Anthony passed to Peter but got it back just as the goalie inched upward from his position, and Anthony acted immediately, the puck going in between the pads—the goalie's legs.

The arena erupted in cheers, and the familiar song "Chelsea Dagger" began blaring outta the speakers.

He laughed, outta breath. "That's how it's done, bitches!"

"Fucking beautiful, Masen!" Peter rammed into a grinning Anthony, as did the rest of the team on the ice.

When his teammates eased away, Anthony skated over to Edward, the two bumping their helmets together, before Anthony got off the ice for the second line to take over.

~oOo~

He'd infuriated the other team plenty by the time he scored his second goal for the evening. And one assist when Captain had scored.

There were twelve minutes left in the third period; a lot could still happen, but Anthony was in his element. He fucking owned the ice.

So did Ed, actually. At four to nothing, the two Masens were doing a good job of saying they were ready for their NHL return.

When Andrasko got two minutes for roughing, Coach broke the lineups and told Anthony and Peter to get on the ice with Emmett and Felix. With one more player on the ice, the opposing team had power play, which meant they'd play on the offense. It also meant their defense was gonna be weaker, and Coach wanted to exploit that with Anthony and Peter.

Anthony joined his brother at the net to tell him what Coach had said, and Ed nodded before Anthony skated over for the face-off.

Peter got the puck, and Anthony backed away fast to receive it. Together, the two tried to push the play farther away from Edward, but they eventually lost the puck to three opponents.

"Anthony, behind! He'll go behind!" Edward barked out commands and warnings as his head whipped from side to side to catch every movement. "Felix, screen! Emmett, back him up!"

Not giving up, Anthony chased after the guy with the puck and caught a glance of Emmett coming from the opposite direction. They met in the middle behind the goal, and Anthony came to a stop that sprayed snow from his blades as Emmett body-checked the player from Stockholm.

Anthony snatched up the puck, but lost it again—*god-fucking-dammit!*—and he growled in frustration. Sweat trickled down his face and plastered his hair to his forehead. Adrenaline surged through him, numbing the throbbing ache in his thighs. Racing along the back of the rink, he closed

in on the fucker who had the puck and shoulder-checked him into the boards. And three things happened at once: Anthony looked down to find and steal the puck, the other player dropped, and the official blew the whistle.

Incredulous, Anthony watched as the asshole signaled for elbowing, which was both illegal and ridiculous.

"Are you fucking kidding me?!" He was too pissed and riled up to mind his language in front of an official.

Several feet away, Edward seemed just as angry. "He led with his shoulder; it was a clean goddamn hit!"

"That's why he's still down?" An opponent skated up to Anthony, glaring.

Anthony laughed darkly and got in the motherfucker's face. "Anyone with eyes could see he dove." And that was a minor offense, too. "But he should go back to Hollywood and practice a bit before it looks believable."

The official joined them to push them apart. "Two minutes, Masen."

"Un-fucking-real," he spat out.

~oOo~

Jesus Christ.

Edward was in deep shit. Looking up at the Jumbotron, he saw that he now had forty seconds of charging to look forward to. Forty seconds before Andrasko was back on the ice, two minutes 'til Ant returned. Forty seconds with three Redhawk players—not counting himself—and five from the other team.

He breathed deeply and pushed up his cage to chug some Powerade. Bella had left her seat to stand up and keep her hands clasped under her chin, and Cullen walked down the few steps to join her and Charlotte.

Edward zoned them out and dumped his bottle in its holder, pushed down his cage again, then turned to get ready.

He only had Emmett, Felix, and Peter.

"Pete, I want you on them like a fucking leech," Edward told him.

"Emmett, don't let anyone block my view."

They nodded, and Emmett and Felix stayed back as much as possible while Peter skated off to take the face-off, which he won, but there was no-fucking-one to pass to.

~oOo~

Bella could barely breathe. The instant the official dropped the puck, Bella's hands flew to her face. She peeked between her fingers as Peter tried to hold onto the puck for as long as he could.

34 seconds.

"Come on, Edward." Carlisle pressed a fist to his mouth, and he even bit his thumbnail. "You can do this."

32 seconds.

Bella squeaked when number nine of the other team fired. *Too close.* But Edward shot up from his position and gloved the puck, allowing Bella one shaky breath.

In her periphery, she could see the Detroit people watching intently, looking pleased but not surprised. They expected this spot-on performance from Edward.

26 seconds.

Two players circled the net, and the puck was passed between the four opponents. Closer and closer, to crowd Edward.

Another shot, and Edward pushed his leg out to block it. The puck rebounded to an opposing player who delivered a fast-as-hell snapshot, but Emmett threw himself to cover.

"Oh my God," Bella moaned, wishing it was fucking over already.

20 seconds.

"They have a great dynamic," one of the Detroit guys muttered to his buddy. Bella recognized them both vaguely. "Mark, pull up McCarty's stats. They've played together before, haven't they?"

"Briefly in Vancouver," Carlisle supplied, keeping his eyes on the game.

14 seconds.

Bella tented her hands together in front of her mouth, her thumbs under her chin, and watched helplessly as Peter lost the puck again. He had three players on him, for fuck's sake.

Charlotte bounced on her feet. "*God, let this end!*"

The next ten seconds were hell for Edward. They came at him from every angle, each puck rebounding because Edward never had time to catch it. The opponents were relentless, but so were Felix, Emmett, and Peter. Peter did a good job of chasing and being a pest, Emmett checked every player who tried to screen Edward, and Felix worked outside the crease to block shots.

They were so tired; Bella could see it clearly. So when Edward finally gloved a puck, he stayed down for a couple seconds extra to catch his

breath and let his teammates do the same. And then Andrasko hit the ice again.

"If I'm spent, how the hell do they feel?" Bella laughed shakily.

Carlisle nudged Bella and nodded at the Jumbotron that showed a fuming Anthony from the penalty box. *No, wait*, Bella thought. Not fuming. She'd seen that look on him before.

"Nothing's gonna stop him," she said confidently. She knew Anthony only had one thing on his mind now, and that was to embarrass the other team. "Look there." She pointed as Anthony garnered Edward's attention for just a second. It was enough for them to exchange a quick nod.

"Edward knows what to do."

"What do you mean?" Carlisle asked.

Bella answered when the official stopped the game for an offside, which provided time for Emmett, Felix, and Peter to get off the ice. A new lineup came out, and Edward called attention to Paul.

"He just told Paul to assist Anthony."

Carlisle side-eyed her, his mouth quirking up. "You really know Anthony, don't you?"

Bella shrugged. "He's my best friend."

True to Bella's word, when Anthony's two minutes were up, he was a force to be reckoned with. Energized and determined, he skated across the ice, body-checked a player, stole the puck, and drove the crowd wild with cheers.

He passed to Paul, who was on him like a tail, and then raced closer to the goal.

Bella held her breath as Anthony received the puck from a long pass. Being so close to the goal, he feigned a shot but never fired it. Instead he rounded the net and didn't give the goalie enough time to block. With a quick flick of his wrist, the puck was pushed in between the goalie's skate and the goal post.

The game ended five nothing to the Redhawks. And with Anthony's dominance during play and Edward's shut-out, the Detroit reps knew everything they needed to know.

~oOo~

"Let me just clear it with the coach again." Carlisle smiled apologetically before disappearing into Coach's office, but Bella didn't mind.

The locker room was only a corridor away, and she could hear celebrating going on farther down the hall. Which...fuck, Bella was only human. Would it be so terrible if she snuck over there to witness some of this naked celebrating?

Edward and Anthony, among a few others, had press stuff soon, so Bella was gonna have to wait until after Edward's dinner with the Detroit people to get him naked. That was why, even before the game, Carlisle had offered Coach's office, so she could wait there for Anthony to get ready. But...the locker room. The locker room called to her.

Unfortunately, Carlisle appeared again too soon. "All clear. He's not here." He smiled and opened the door wider, gesturing at the chair behind the desk. "Have a seat. You can watch the interviews from there." He nodded at a small flat screen. "They'll air live on Channel Four in twenty minutes. Remote's right there on the desk, and there're sodas in the mini fridge."

"Thank you, kind sir." Bella grinned and did a curtsy, 'cause Carlisle cracked her up. He was always being so damn nice, so chivalrous. And, let's be honest, hot.

She sat down and Carlisle gave her a smirk. "Oh, it was my pleasure, Isabella."

Bella's eyebrows rose at the sexy satisfaction in his voice.

"Here, allow me." He got her a soda and turned on the TV. "It's scheduled to change the channel when it starts." But for now it was a blank screen. "Okay, time for me to stand up against my daughter."

Bella chuckled and popped open her soda. "Why even pretend? You want her in the States next year, don't you?"

"True," he conceded, placing the remote on a shelf on the wall. "But I don't want to make it too easy for her. After all, I'm the one who has to deal with Esme's moods. She doesn't want Alice to leave London."

"Ah." Bella nodded in understanding. "I'm sure you and Alice will have a lovely Skype session, then."

"Indeed." He chuckled and stuck his hands down into the pockets of his dress pants. "I'll tell Anthony he can find you here after he's done."

"Thanks." Bella smiled and was soon left alone. She checked her phone for a bit and fired off a text to Edward, congratulating him on an awesome win and saying she loved him.

Edward's reply was instant.

Thanks, baby. Love you more. And Emmett just grabbed my ass.

Bella gasped, her fingers flying over the screen.

Really?!

Edward wrote back, and Bella could practically hear him laughing.

No, but I figured that was what you wanted to hear. My dirty fucking girl.

"Bastard," Bella mumbled.

Then there was another text from Edward.

Cullen just asked me if Michael Bolton really is the worst singer you've ever heard. Random. Okay, time for interviews. See you tonight! Miss you already.

Bella ducked a few inches on instinct, and she was instantly alert. Narrowing her eyes, she peered around the office, seeing nothing suspicious, but what the hell did she know?

Fuck, why would Carlisle ask something like that? It was...really weird. Wasn't it?

Everyone close to Bella knew she couldn't stand Michael Bolton's voice, and now she wondered if Carlisle had something up his sleeve. Was he planning a prank? Shit, Bella was gonna make sure to keep an eye on that man from now on. 'Cause there was plenty of crap Bella disliked, and it wouldn't take many sexual favors for Anthony to give up dirt.

She leaned back and swiveled the chair slowly, maybe a bit paranoid—

Before she could even finish that thought, a static sound slipped out from the speakers next to the TV.

"Hello, Isabella." The recorded voice belonged to Carlisle fucking Cullen, and it was so damn *loud* that Bella froze. *"I have a fitting song for you while you wait. It's called 'Nowhere to Run.'* And for the record, it took me

a long, long time to wash off the black paint after your little binocular trick." A pause. Bella began shaking her head and chanting no, no, no. Nooooo! *"You picked the wrong man to prank, princess. Enjoy."*

What followed next was torture. Pure, Bolton-induced, loud *torture*.

"What the fuck, what the fuck, what the fuck!" Bella wriggled in her chair, realizing she couldn't stand up. Nor could she lift her left arm from the armrest. Jeans stuck, long-sleeved t-shirt under her game shirt...*stuck*. She was stuck. "Oh my God! That BASTARD!"

She was superglued to the chair.

Chapter 33

Derby: Not a specific hockey term, but often used in sports. It's when two teams meet that are from the same region/city/state. Called a derby.

~oOo~

Anthony groaned internally, relieved as fuck when the interviews were over. He, Edward, and four other players made their way outta the press room, and Anthony was glad he was done. Signing autographs for the lingering fans outside had never bothered him, except he was all but dead on his feet, and he had big plans with a hamburger. And Bella.

Edward was gonna sneak out, too. He was having a late dinner now with the people from Detroit, and the next time they saw each other, Ed would be an official Red Wings player again.

"Sign that contract good and hard, bro." Anthony looped an arm around Edward's shoulders as they made their way down one of the million corridors in the arena. "And if you decide to put in a good word for me, I won't hate you."

Edward grinned and shook his head. "You worry for nothing. Your stats make you a gold mine."

Anthony knew that, but...eh, with everything he wanted—and more—so close, some already his, some within grasp...maybe a part of him was waiting for the other skate to drop.

"Where are you and Bella going?" Edward changed the topic.

Anthony shrugged. "I think we're just going over to your place. All I know is I'm picking up a fuckload of food on the way. No more protein shakes for me until the playoffs next year."

His home was in Detroit and his hockey heart belonged to the Red Wings, but he was gonna make sure the Redhawks got far before he left. They were third in the series so far, so there was certainly potential, and the backup goalie was in hard training to take over for Ed after the winter break.

With the Swedish league ending a lot sooner than the NHL's, maybe Anthony would even accept the offer to play in the World Championship next May. It had been a while since the US team put in any real effort, and Anthony had only been on the team once before. Edward had always been busy.

"I'm gonna order a big, fat steak," Edward muttered, switching on his phone. "And if they don't gimme dessert, I won't put out."

Anthony snickered and let his arm fall to his side. "If Mark and Phil give you cake, how far will you go?"

"As much as I love cake..." Edward pondered, then shook his head. "That's Bella's thing. I want something with a French name and loads of caramel."

"So, caramel gives them a couple hand jobs." Anthony figured he should turn on his phone again, too.

"I'm not that easy." Edward tsk'd. "Kiss on the cheek and a pat on the ass for the first date."

Their joking came to a stop, as did their steps, when both phones exploded with messages from Bella.

"What the hell?" Edward was instantly worried.

But Anthony had a hunch of what was going on, and he smirked when he read a few of Bella's texts.

Help me!

I'm being earally violated by Michael Bolton and I've been superglued to the fucking chair!

SAVE ME, GODDAMMIT.

I know you helped Carlisle, you fucker. Admit it. Admit it!

I've been Boltonized. GOING MAD!

I'mma punch you right in the babymakers, Masen!

Oh, God. Third-degree Bolton burns. Your man does not love this woman.

By now, Edward had caught on. "Superglue is a new level of crazy." His gaze slid to Anthony, brows lifting. "I'm guessing Bella's met her prank match?"

"Little bit." Anthony nodded. "You wanna check in on her with me, or should I deal with this alone?"

Edward tried to hide his amusement. "Nah, you can take this one. Then when I get home tonight, I'll be the hero after taking care of her and agreeing when she calls you and Cullen demons from hell."

"I just gave Carlisle some info," was Anthony's defense, his eyes glazing over at the memory of his man's lips wrapped around his cock. Oh yeah, that'd been a great night. Shaking his head, he snapped back to the present. "I didn't know it was gonna go down tonight—only that he was planning something."

"They're gonna play us both," Edward laughed, opening his sports bag. "We don't stand a chance."

Anthony tilted his head. "What do you mean?"

Edward pointed to Anthony's face. "That look on your face. Cullen knows how to work you just like Bella does with me."

Oh yeah. Blowjob.

"Our lives are awesome," Anthony said with a goofy grin.

Edward snickered, and in no way did he disagree. "Preach. By the way, here. In case she needs clothes that don't have superglue on 'em." He handed Anthony a hoodie with Edward's number 40 on the back and a pair of drawstring shorts. "Go save my girl and tell her I love her. I'll be home in a few hours."

Anthony smirked. "Enjoy your steak."

"And caramel, man." Edward appeared exasperated, if not affronted and wounded, that Anthony hadn't mentioned the dessert. "Don't forget the caramel. Damn."

Yeah, Edward and Bella were a match made in a bakery.

~oOo~

Anthony couldn't help but chuckle when he reached Coach's office. A Michael Bolton song was nearly making the door vibrate with how loud it was playing.

Trying the handle, he found the door unlocked, and he opened it to cringe at the volume and smile sympathetically at the sight. *Poor girl*. Bella sat in the chair looking completely shell-shocked, and her lips were moving.

The song ended, allowing Anthony to hear what she was whispering over and over.

"Make it stop. Make it stop. Please make it stop."

Anthony withheld his laughter and dumped his bag on the desk. Then he turned off the music before the song could start over and approached Bella as one would approach a scared animal.

"How you doin'?" He squatted down in front of the chair and tried to lift her arm, but it was stuck to the armrest. At that, he had to press his lips together to keep his amusement at bay.

It took a few tries, but he managed to rip off the part of fabric of her long-sleeved t-shirt that was glued to the chair, and it seemed to gather Bella's attention.

Her gaze slowly made its way to Anthony. Wide eyes. Not entirely present. "Is it over?"

"Yeah. It's over, love." Anthony coughed to mask a laugh and stood up to pull Bella's game shirt over her head. Which left the official casualty in this war with its ripped sleeve. "How well can you move?"

Bella swallowed dryly and glanced down at herself. "I can get outta the shirt, but not the jeans. They're the kind I gotta lie down for to put on."

Right. Anthony eyed Coach's desk and grabbed a pair of scissors. "You wanna do the cutting...?"

She shook her head no and looked away. "You do it. I can't. They're my favorite."

Well, that was simply not true. Anthony knew Bella and her clothes, and she was just doing this for effect. But he played along for now and began cutting up her jeans.

"You know he's probably counting on paying you back, right?" He focused intently as he got close to her hip. "This can all be over if he takes you shopping for new threads."

"Oh, no." A smile crept into Bella's still-distant voice. "That's not how it works, boo. In the world of pranks, you strike back."

That's what Anthony feared, and since he had technically helped Carlisle—*slightly*—he had a feeling Bella wouldn't hesitate to include him in the next prank.

"In fact, I already have a plan." Bella tilted her head at Anthony and grinned like a devil. "You're fucked, Masen."

Anthony pointed the scissors at her face, a little scared, though he didn't show that shit. "You got your crazy eyes on."

And they lit up. "I know. You wanna know the theme for my prank?"

Anthony swallowed hard and returned to his task. "Sure," he mumbled.

"Fun house."

Shit.

~oOo~

It took freedom, the ride back to Bella and Edward's place, and a hamburger meal with a large milkshake before Bella was back to her normal self.

Seated on the couch in the living room, busy devouring his second burger, Anthony relaxed when the last ounce of crazy left Bella's eyes.

"Are you excited about the photo shoot for the calendar next week?" she asked, popping a fry into her mouth.

Anthony cracked a grin as he chewed. "No more than you are."

"Well, obviously. That goes without saying." Bella was definitely excited about the damn calendar. "Edward even promised me I could bring my camera." Anthony's brows rose, and Bella hurried to clarify. "Not for the other guys, but for him. I'm gonna make my own calendar with Edward, and it won't be suitable for charity...or for children."

That got Anthony thinking. Christmas was coming up, and he needed an extra gift for Carlisle. He'd already bought a trip for them as the main gift. *Hmm*. He had no desire to go full frontal, but maybe Bella could help him with something semi-nekkid.

"Which month did you get, by the way?" Bella asked. "Edward got January, 'cause he's agreed to come back for the derby on the twelfth or something."

Yeah, it didn't really make sense for Edward to get any other month since he wouldn't be here. And for that same reason, Anthony had gotten a month before he left Sweden, too.

"April," he answered, the day catching up on him. While tired and content, it was kinda impossible to forget that Bella had asked for some alone time for a reason. "You looking forward to moving back home?" Edward wasn't the only one who hadn't lived there in a long time. Bella had been off to college in Texas, and then gone from there to South America.

Bella set down her milkshake and smiled tightly. "I would've looked forward to it more if I wasn't leaving you behind. And Carlisle." She scrunched her nose, fiddling with the drawstrings of the shorts she was still drowning in. "This is what I wanted to talk to you about—our move. I'm so torn."

She looked conflicted and heavyhearted, which was enough for Anthony to abandon his food and shift closer to her. He draped an arm around her shoulders and drew her to his body.

"You're not leaving me behind, love," he murmured and kissed the top of her head. "Carlisle and I will follow in a few months." But he had to admit it was nice to hear that Bella and he were on the same page. They'd only had each other the past seven years, and they'd grown really close. If she left without even looking back, it would kinda suck. But he didn't want her to feel *bad*. Because... "This is for the best, when you think about it."

Bella lifted her head to peer up at him. "How?"

Anthony shrugged faintly. "Carlisle and I can be a little more free here for now. Detroit's keeping an eye on my stats and my health records, but that's about it. There's no real media to worry about." Bella nodded slowly, absently playing with Anthony's fingers. "Then when we move home next year, I'll hopefully have a contract, and after that, he and I can go out in public for real."

Bella hummed and made a slight grimace. "You really think the Red Wings would give you the boot for being with a man?"

"No, not officially." But it was tricky in the sports world. On the outside, many wanted to claim they were open-minded. "But they could use my previous behavior as an excuse. It's just a precaution; we'll hide nothing once I got a contract in my hands, but before then, we don't wanna risk it."

"Such a responsible decision." Bella grinned and patted Anthony's cheek, to which he chuckled. "You've grown up a lot lately."

Truth be told, Anthony had left his partying ways behind him months before coming to Sweden. But yeah, maybe he'd matured further.

Regardless, he refused to jeopardize anything: his soon-to-be open relationship with the man he loved, the move to Detroit after the spring, and his spot with the Red Wings.

"So, you see now?" He tugged on a strand of her hair. "Before I get my contract, Carlisle and I can do whatever right here, and then the four of us can go out guns blazing when we join you in Detroit."

Bella gigglesnorted, then groaned. "I'm so not looking forward to that shitshow. Charlotte asked tonight if Edward and I are together, and I felt a little bad when I told her I wasn't ready to answer."

Anthony didn't really understand that, and he said as much. "I don't see why you and Ed are discreet."

"It was actually his idea, and I agreed." She shifted away a little to face him better. "We think it's best if all things Masen stay as low-key as possible for the time being. And since I'm still linked to you, we figured Edward and me going out together in a public place would just rile up the vultures. Plus, it's a solidarity thing." She shrugged, a silly smile on her lips. "We come out when you do."

Anthony laughed through his nose. "You're too fucking cute, Bella. But you do realize the jig will be up when you leave with him, right?" Bella only gave a *"whatever"* at that, so Anthony decided continue to where his mind had already headed. "Where are you gonna live, anyway?"

He could always hand over the keys to his condo for now, as long as he got them back later. That place was his home, his sanctuary. It had never been the location for parties or hookups, and he missed it like crazy. He couldn't wait to move back in there—with Carlisle.

"Edward's already bought a place for us," Bella admitted, a faint blush spreading on her cheeks. "He was so adorable when he asked me to move in together."

Anthony smiled and leaned his head back against the cushions. "He treatin' you right?"

"Understatement." She beamed. "We're getting to know each other again, but at the same time, we're still us. He has his broody moments, but he's really become a great man." She sighed softly and leaned back too, her shoulder to his bicep. "I never thought I'd feel this way again, Anthony."

Anthony wasn't surprised. He'd called it from the beginning, hadn't he? "We can't all be as smart as me."

"I," she corrected with a giggle.

"Spoken like a true troll," Anthony laughed. "When you don't got shit to say, you go with grammar."

"Okay, I'll give you that." She snaked an arm around his and hugged his bicep, putting up her feet on the table. "Edward and I owe you a lot."

Anthony released a breath, totally relaxed and at ease. This was what he needed, what had made him feel off yesterday. Just some quality time with Bella.

"I'll collect one day." He grinned and closed his eyes. "It's kinda cool that we pulled it off, isn't it?"

"The coolest." There was a smile in Bella's sleepy voice. "You know what else is cool?"

Anthony yawned. "Ed's new Superman briefs that supposedly make his crotch snugly?"

"No!" Bella gasped through a laugh. "He said that?" Anthony nodded. "Ha. That's funny. But no, I was thinking about your man. Bet you never saw *him* coming—into your life."

"Did you just add 'into your life' so I couldn't make a pun?"

"I did."

He could feel himself drifting off. "You know me so well."

Bella shrugged. "You're my Harry."

"And my Hermione has found her Ron Weasley." Anthony couldn't help but laugh a little.

Bella seemed to find that funny, too. "Fuck that. Hermione brings Cedric back to life and marries him."

"All right. Who's Carlisle gonna be?"

"Well, Dumbledore is gay, so...and he's awesome."

Anthony snorted. "Daddy Dumbledore?"

"Oh, yes." Bella appeared to wake up a little at that. "You know, our men need costumes if they're gonna join our Potter marathon this Christmas."

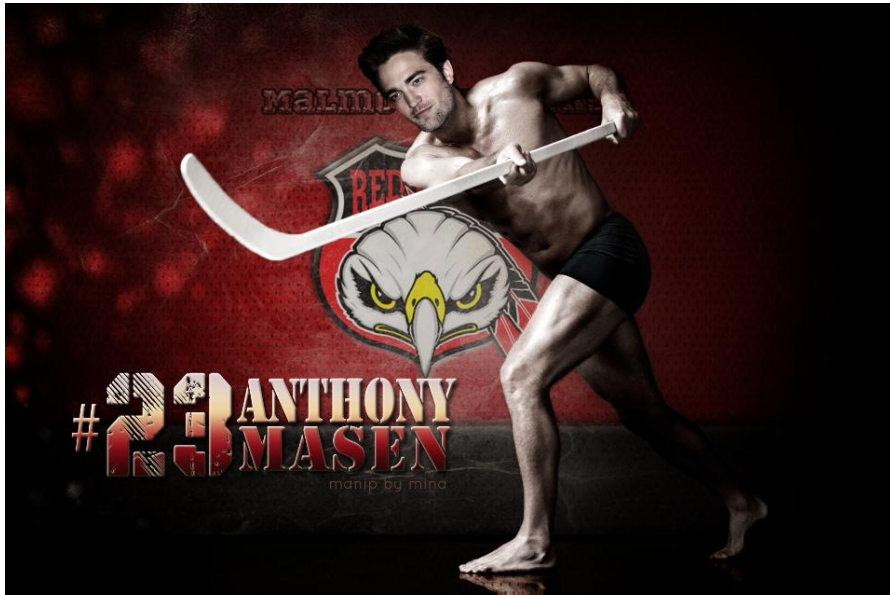
Yeah, Anthony was way too tired to care about that now. But Bella wasn't. She straightened and started rambling about rhinestones and glitter, and Anthony drifted off more and more.

Content didn't come close to describing it, and he didn't think he could feel better until an incoming message on his phone roused him from sleep and turned great into fucking glorious.

Come home to me.

Chapter 34







Oh my God, the day is finally here.

The photo shoot.

Bella was in heaven, and heaven was a large loft-like studio in the northern harbor in Sweden. The twelve players who had been elected to be in the calendar, very included.

Hockey gear and photo equipment was all over. The guys were in a nearby room getting ready, and the photographer and his two assistants were setting up. The massive backdrop with the Redhawks' logo and colors covered a wall, and a glossy black mat had been rolled out over the hardwood floor.

Bella and Charlotte sat on one of the four low couches that lined one of the walls, both itching to see their guys.

Carlisle—the prankster bastard—was here too, under the pretense of making sure everyone behaved.

Yeah... 'cause that's a GM's job these days...babysitting.

He made good work of being suited up and trying to look busy on his phone over in a corner, but come on. He was here to ogle Anthony.

"I think we're ready," the photographer told Carlisle, then turned to his two assistants and spoke in Swedish. Lastly, he spoke up to...everyone or no one, Bella wasn't sure. "We can bring out January!"

Bella bounced in her seat and pulled off her oversized hoodie. It was kinda cold in the large studio, but her man was about to heat her up.

Well, after the first shot was over. What Bella hadn't known was that they were shooting two projects. Collector's cards, suitable for kids. And one calendar, suitable for the kids' mommas. Nothing nude, but...underwear and random hockey gear. All proceeds were going to breast-cancer research, so that was cool.

Edward walked out in full gear, the helmet pushed up on his head, and greeted the photographer with a nod. As he took instructions from the photographer—who, for the record, seemed a little too interested in Bella's man—the light was tested, and one of the assistants taped an X on the floor where Edward was supposed to stand.

"Helmet up or down?" Edward scratched his bearded jaw, getting into position. He bent down to remove the rubber covers of his skates and tossed them aside.

"Up, I think." The photographer pondered some more as he took his spot behind the camera. "We'll try that first."

Seeing her name on that helmet, Bella knew it was gonna be even more difficult to stay unflustered. It was a power trip drizzled with love and romance to have her name on all that muscle and strength.

And then that deadly serious look Edward flashed to the camera...?

Fuck me upside down.

~oOo~

By the time Edward was done with the first shoot, he was told to undress, and he pretended it was a common locker room. Not a studio where his girlfriend was squirming in her seat watching him.

"What's on the wardrobe list for you?" The photographer asked him.

Edward released a breath and continued to strip. "The pads on my legs, my gloves, and white briefs." His skates and stick were gonna be in the background of the shot, too.

Once he was done, he studiously ignored Bella, knowing he was gonna get turned on if *she* was turned on, which...she probably was. And he didn't feel like giving that much of a show.

He stood on his mark, facing the camera, and held the gloves in his hands while the two blushing assistants organized his gear.

Edward wasn't a damn model, so he didn't really know what to do. He'd posed for promo stuff before, but it was mostly in full gear and he usually had a helmet to hide behind. This was his first calendar.

"Just act natural." The photographer wasn't helpful at all. "Move slowly, no acrobatics."

"Damn, I was thinking I'd do a backflip," he deadpanned, scratching his exposed chest.

Bella and Carlisle chuckled.

The photographer didn't get it. He started snapping off photos, so Edward did his best to do...something. He went for casual and folded his arms across his chest, the gloves hanging down along his ribcage. He turned after a while, facing the changing room where the other guys were, and he heard Bella's intake of air. *Fuck*. Maybe they needed music or something, because the last thing Edward wanted was to get riled up.

Running a hand over his head, he twisted his upper body a little and peered back where Bella was sitting. He couldn't see her directly, but he had her in his peripheral vision.

Fuck, she was horny. She'd pulled her—or his, as it was—hoodie over her knees as a blanket, and she couldn't sit still. Unable to help himself, he looked to her fully and saw the flush on her cheeks and her lust-filled eyes.

He fisted his gloves a little harder and felt his restraint slipping away. A slow, dark smirk spread on his lips. There was a new agenda, and he couldn't wait to see if Bella went for it.

It was bold, nothing he'd normally consider, but he couldn't fucking help himself.

~oOo~

"We're ready for February!" the photographer called.

Bella wasn't paying attention to that. Her eyes were glued to Edward as he got rid of the last of his gear, then pulled on a pair of loose sweats and a t-shirt.

Charlotte giggled and stood up. "I think I'll move to another couch."

Probably a good thing, although it wasn't like anything was gonna happen. Afterward, however, when Bella and Edward had the studio to themselves...? *Here's to hoping.*

Edward hadn't even hesitated to rent the whole place for a couple hours post-shoot, photo equipment obviously not included, but Bella had her own camera, and she was dying to play with it. And her man. All she had to do was wait until it was just the two of them.

Edward joined her, and he sprawled out over the couch before motioning for Bella to sit between his legs.

"Hi." She exhaled shakily and leaned back against him, tilting her chin up to get a kiss.

She expected something sweet, so she was taken off guard by the rush of desire when Edward grabbed her jaw and kissed her until there was no air

left. He pushed his tongue into her mouth and rumbled a low groan, deepening the sexy assault further.

When he eased away, Bella's whole world was spinning.

"Hey." His voice was husky and quiet as he brushed his thumb over her bottom lip. "You wanna play, baby girl?"

Wrapped in a fog of lust, Bella nodded dumbly, not really knowing what she was agreeing to.

Edward smirked crookedly and returned the hoodie to her lap. "Scoot as close as you can." He nipped at the spot below her ear. "And be quiet."

Shit. Bella blew out a breath, feverish and soaked.

His hand slid down into her jeans.

His fingers were magic.

As were the guys being photographed.

~oOo~

...but Edward never let her come. Four hours of finger-fucking in short intervals was enough to keep Bella turned on the entire time.

She was a mess. The photo shoot was over, which meant the real torture hadn't even started. Because when all was said and done, only four people remained in the studio.

Bella tried to put on a professional face for Anthony's and Carlisle's sakes, but she wasn't sure she pulled it off. Every now and then, Edward would flash her a sinful smile and discreetly bring his talented fingers close to his mouth. A brush against his lips, a scratch to his nose, a rub of his jaw. And his eyes got darker and darker.

She cleared her throat and unpacked her camera, then turned to Anthony who was up first. "I thought it was gonna be a gift." It was what Anthony had told her, anyway—this calendar thing. A sexy extra gift for Carlisle.

"He overheard me when I spoke to you on the phone," Anthony said, shooting Carlisle a wry grin. "So he insisted on being here."

Carlisle loosened his tie, looking oddly ticked off. "As a part of the gift."

How was Bella gonna survive?

~oOo~

Edward kept a close eye on Bella when she started taking photos of Anthony. Being in the same room as his brother wasn't ideal, and the "play" Edward had suggested earlier only involved him and her. But he couldn't help but feed off the charge in the studio, and one look at Ant told him his brother wanted to do the same. Except, Anthony needed to know it was okay, Edward could tell.

Edward gripped Bella's hips and pulled her back to his semi, earning himself a shiver from her.

"I'm trying to do a good job," she whispered.

"You are." He shifted her hair to the side and kissed her neck. "You're doing a fucking fantastic job."

Anthony had paused anyway, Cullen helping out with Ant's shoulder pads that were coming off. It was hardly a task that demanded a second pair of hands, but that just told Edward what was going on.

"I can't keep my hands off of you," he whispered in Bella's ear. "You don't want me to stop, do you?" His fingers played with the sliver of skin between Bella's top and jeans. "I bet you're still wet from earlier."

"Fuck you, Masen," she breathed out.

Edward chuckled quietly. "Oh, I intend to fuck you very hard."

~oOo~

Anthony was trying so damn hard to focus on the fact that he and Carlisle weren't alone, but it wasn't easy when Carlisle kept touching him.

"I think I can wrap a towel around myself without assistance," he urged in a hushed voice.

Carlisle didn't reply verbally but took the towel and brought it around Anthony's hips. There were boxers underneath, but they were doing very little to mask the problem that was growing.

Glancing over at his brother, Anthony received a subtle nod from Edward. It was permission, confirmation, and reassurance all at once. None of which Anthony *really* needed, but it made him relax. Anthony could let Carlisle take over and Edward wouldn't get weirded out or anything.

Carlisle leaned close and ghosted a kiss over Anthony's brows. "Or maybe you want that photographer to come back and assist you?"

At that, Anthony frowned and tilted his face to look Carlisle in the eye.

Carlisle went on, quiet and...possessive? "You think I didn't notice how he enjoyed the Masen twins?" Anthony certainly hadn't noticed. Carlisle grabbed Anthony's jaw. "I want you hard as a rock next time you change gear," he murmured, to which Anthony shuddered forcefully. "You can remind me of who owns this." He palmed Anthony's cock over the towel. "Any problem?"

Anthony swallowed against the dryness in his throat and shook his head dumbly. "Uh...no. No problem." Fuck, in two seconds flat, he'd lost the ability to speak properly.

Carlisle offered an indecently sexy smirk and stepped back to roll up the sleeves of his dress shirt.

Anthony flicked a glance from Edward and Bella to Carlisle. "They're gonna see, you know."

It was a half-warning, half-statement, but Carlisle wasn't affected. "They don't bother me, baby. A stranger leering at you like it's his right, though...?" He chuckled darkly and walked away another few feet. "Please continue, princess."

Anthony watched as Bella was wrenched back into reality, having been thoroughly distracted by Edward's hand down her pants, and she gulped while Anthony blew out a breath to get his shit together.

He had to admit Bella was gorgeous, and he liked that the two of them seemed to be in the same position here. 'Cause it was clear that Carlisle wasn't the only one in charge—with plans. Edward was, too.

"I'm sorry," Bella blurted out, flushing. By now, Ed's hands had moved up to her stomach, and he had her leaning back against him. "Edward, can you...I mean—what I mean is, I'm trying to concentrate—"

"No." Ed gripped Bella's hips to hold her still. "I'll stay right here. Don't mind me. Keep going."

And so they kept going.

~oOo~

Carlisle had had it. He'd spent the hour prior to this being forced to watch a photographer enjoying his hands on Anthony's body, and now Carlisle couldn't take it anymore. He needed his own hands on Anthony, as if it would wipe away the memory of the overfamiliar photographer.

When he stepped forward to help Anthony with the third or fourth change of clothes, he merely shook his head and stopped Anthony when he was going for his jockstrap.

"You won't need that," Carlisle murmured. With a glance over his shoulder, he saw Isabella leaning back against Edward, eyes closed, while he touched and kissed her. One hand disappeared up her top, another roamed the side of her thigh. Isabella was gone. So was Edward. Which made it easy for Carlisle; he didn't have to wait. He didn't have to get Anthony home first.

"What're you talking about?" Anthony's cheeks were flushed, pure need radiating off of him. How he was only semi erect, Carlisle could only assume was all about sheer willpower, and Anthony was close to throwing in the towel.

"I think that's a wrap, Isabella," Carlisle said, grabbing Anthony's hand. "You can go ahead with your shots of Edward."

She whimpered at something Edward did, too gone, and Carlisle led Anthony over to the couch nearest the corner. It would have to be enough distance and privacy, and truth be told, Carlisle didn't care.

"Here?" Anthony whispered. Carlisle gave him a nudge, and Anthony ended up on his back, the ridge of his cock growing in his black boxer briefs. "Oh, fuck."

Carlisle covered Anthony's body with his, grabbed Anthony's chin, and kissed him hard. Anthony groaned and parted his legs, his hands coming up to unbutton Carlisle's shirt.

"I want my cock in your mouth." Carlisle gave Anthony's jaw a sharp nip.

"Fuck, yes," Anthony breathed out. "Give it to me."

Carlisle's shirt ended up on the floor, as did his belt. "Is that how you ask for it?"

"Shit—give it to me. Please." Anthony moaned, working on Carlisle's trousers. "You don't really need the reminder. I'm all fucking yours, and you should know by now I'm hooked on that dick."

Carlisle hummed, pleased and aroused beyond explanation. He'd never take Anthony's affection and words for granted, so whenever there was a declaration like this one, Carlisle's chest expanded with gratitude, love, and possessiveness.

Kneeling between Anthony's legs, Carlisle pushed himself up and watched as Anthony followed and released his cock. The way Anthony sat, the angle, looked uncomfortable, but Anthony didn't seem to notice. He fisted Carlisle's cock and lowered his face with hunger in his eyes.

Carlisle cursed and weaved his fingers through Anthony's hair. His eyes closed as Anthony's wet, hot mouth swallowed him down, and aside from the occasional click of a camera across the room, there was no other sound.

~oOo~

Bella couldn't go on. She'd done her best to take shots of Edward over the last half hour or so, but he was too fucking sexy, and she was too fucking

horny. Her hand had grown unsteady, and there was no use in even trying to work the camera anymore.

Edward appeared to sense her struggle. "You done, baby?" His abs were all tense, and he was just standing there in front of the backdrop, barely wearing anything.

Bella shivered as she packed her camera with shaky hands. "Oh, I'm done, all right." She'd gotten some great shots, for which she was glad, but photos weren't enough right now.

Edward took over, set down the camera bag, and picked Bella up, causing her to yelp in surprise. Instinctively, she grabbed onto Edward's shoulders and wrapped her legs around him.

"What's gonna happen?" She needed it all, but only if Edward was comfortable with it. She was pretty sure he was, from a physical point of view, but she couldn't be sure because he was wearing a jockstrap. It just seemed a little...smaller, snuggler, tighter...than it had been while she'd taken the shots.

Edward lowered her to one of the empty couches. "Take a wild guess."

"Jesus fucking Christ." Bella bit her lip, her eyes traveling down Edward's defined torso as he got rid of the jockstrap. And yeah, he was hard as steel.

Joining her on the couch, Edward kissed her stupid while getting rid of her clothes. His fingers manipulated her flesh—licked, nipped, sucked, and kissed—until she was squirming underneath him and begging for his cock.

~oOo~

On another couch, Anthony was being pushed back to lie down after swallowing every drop of Carlisle's release. He moaned, the flavor still

triggering him to want more, as Carlisle kissed his way down Anthony's body.

"I fucking need you," Anthony whispered urgently.

Carlisle hummed as he licked the underside of Anthony's cock. "Always so impatient."

And he proceeded to drive Anthony mad. Firm but lazy strokes, deep but slow thrusts of his mouth that made Anthony's cock hit the back of Carlisle's throat. He swallowed around Anthony but took his sweet-ass time, breathing through his nose. Another swallow, squeezing the head of Anthony's dick.

"Oh, fuck." Anthony let out a whimpered breath and bit down on his knuckles. "I gotta make you hard again. I want you in my ass."

~oOo~

Edward was fucking addicted to eating Bella's pussy. Even as she came down from her first orgasm, he kept going. Fuck, she'd come in a damn minute—which maybe wasn't weird after hours of teasing—but that was his excuse to continue. A minute wasn't enough.

"Enough." Bella gasped and stiffened, failing to get a grasp on Edward's short hair. "Oh, God."

"Get through it," he murmured huskily, sucking lightly on her clit. "You know it'll pass." He hummed as a few drops of her juices slid down his throat. Sweet and addictive. "I want you drenched and desperate."

Bella hissed, then moaned when he reached a good spot. "I'm fucking there already."

No. Not yet. He didn't plan on slamming home until she was on the edge of another orgasm.

And several minutes later, when she was there...? His mouth tugged upward in a small smirk that promised indecency, and he stroked himself as he rubbed the head of his dick along Bella's soaked slit. She writhed under him and clawed at his arms to bring him closer.

"I can't, baby," she panted. "Fuck, Edward...please, please...don't tease me anymore."

"You're so goddamn sexy, Bella." He devoured her with his eyes. That gorgeous face of hers, her heavy tits, slender waist, and full hips. And her pussy, man... "I can do this all day, watch you squirm for my cock and soak me in your juices." He inched forward, the head of his cock pressing inside, to which Bella started chanting breathless pleas. "Do you know how sexy this is? You get me hard as fucking diamond—so wet and hot and tight. The way you squeeze me? Perfect for my cock to just..." And he slammed forward.

~oOo~

Anthony was vaguely aware of a breathless wail filling the silence, but he was too busy focusing on Carlisle's cock pushing into his ass to pay attention. He kissed Carlisle passionately, meeting his thrust, always needing all of his man right away.

"You want more lube?" Carlisle whispered into the kiss. But Anthony shook his head no; the one-time packets they always carried these days were more than fine, and Anthony shuddered in pleasure every time he heard the slick noises they made together. "Fucking amazing." Carlisle groaned and drove in a bit harder. "Sexy, beautiful—fuck, every time. Can't get enough of you."

Anthony sucked in a breath, staring up with hooded eyes at Carlisle as he lost himself in the moment. "I love you." He brushed a kiss between Carlisle's eyebrows, the tenderness contradicting how aggressively he pushed to get Carlisle deeper.

Carlisle cursed and stole a hard kiss. "More for each day, baby."

~oOo~

Bella had no idea how long they'd been at it; she only knew her body was beyond spent and that, at the same time, she wanted more. At this point, she was kneeling on the couch with her hands grabbing onto the armrest for support, and it took Edward's hand covering her mouth to shut her up.

In muffled whimpers, she begged for him to stop, but when he did—with that damn worry written all over him—she got frustrated *because* he stopped. So in the end, she'd just clamped his hand over her mouth.

"You good, baby girl?" He groaned against her neck, his breaths coming out in hot puffs that raised goose bumps. She nodded jerkily, 'cause *God* yes, was she good. The angle he was in...so deep...and she felt like she was tighter this way..."good" didn't come close to describing it. "I'm almost there." Edward's other hand slid up her stomach, her breasts, until it rested loosely around her throat. It turned Bella on like nothing else, and she started tensing up without even touching her clit. She was too sensitive as it was, and Edward's hard thrusts were enough to get every nerve in her body buzzing.

Add in Edward's dirty talk, and she was done for.

"That's my girl," he growled, ramming into her over and over. "I can feel you. Fuck, if only you could see it—feel it. Your sweet pussy milking me. Whatta fuckin' sight." He disappeared from her, leaving her moaning helplessly for more. "Look at that." He fingered her for two seconds, then

spanked her pussy once, twice, three times. Before he shoved his cock deep inside again. "Christ, I can't wait to mark you with my come."

Bella could already feel the orgasm crashing down on her, and when Edward abandoned her mouth to rub her clit, she lost all strength to hold herself up. Her climax was so forceful that everything else ceased to exist.

~oOo~

Carlisle knew Anthony's tells by now, so when he clamped his mouth and eyes shut, every muscle straining, Carlisle worked Anthony's cock a little harder, a little faster.

The first stream of come pulsed out of Anthony's cock, and it sent Carlisle over the edge. He took a deep breath and went as far as he could, and he found his second release for today inside Anthony's tight ass.

Jesus Christ, Anthony was sexy when he came. Carlisle groaned, still stroking Anthony's come-slicked cock, and rubbed in the hot liquid all over. It made Carlisle's mouth water, and as soon as Anthony hissed, a sign that he was too sensitive, Carlisle brought two fingers to his mouth and tasted his man as he reveled in the last of his own orgasm.

~oOo~

Edward gathered Bella close in his arms, both still breathing hard, and reached for his hoodie on the floor to give her at least a semblance of a blanket.

Since he could barely breathe yet, there was no use in attempting to speak. Instead he tucked her against his chest, kissed her face, and caressed her damp skin.

In return, Bella was doing pretty much the same, which...fuck, Edward would never get enough of Bella's affection. As a friend, she was amazing, but as a girlfriend? Nothing could top it. She was the sweetest thing.

When their lips met, he kissed her softly, then deeper, coaxing her tongue out with his. He smiled tiredly, a voice in the back of his mind reminding him they weren't alone, but this time with Bella was too good to interrupt.

"Love you." She grinned lazily and kissed his nose.

His smile grew and he held her impossibly closer. "I love you, too. Always have, always will."

Bella hummed and stretched out beside him, her fingers coming up to scratch his beard softly. She loved his facial hair a lot more than he did; he was just lazy when it came to shaving, but he did love the attention it got from her.

A shiver ran through him. "I guess we should head home."

Evidently, Anthony heard that from several feet away. "We should too, and let's not make this awkward, all right?"

Bella snickered.

Edward smirked. "Dude, as long as I don't have to see your lily-white ass, I'm too blissed out to get awkward. I'll just shield Bella's eyes while you get outta here."

"That's not necessary," Bella insisted, giggling. "I see Anthony naked every day—" Edward's brows rose, and Carlisle coughed a laugh. "'Cause his body looks like yours!" Bella cracked up. "However..." Mischief lit up in her eyes. "I wouldn't mind a peek at Carlisle."

"Mine," Anthony deadpanned.

Edward laughed through his nose, amused.

"Maybe another time, princess," Cullen chuckled.

It was Edward's turn for the deadpan approach. "Maybe fucking not. And you better watch it, Cullen. I'mma help Bella with the next prank."

There was a pause before Cullen spoke again, and it was to the sound of him and Anthony getting dressed. "Would you prank your agent and publicist?"

Well, thank fucking God. Cullen had finally made his decision, and it was the right one. Edward was relieved, he had to admit. And Bella showed her happiness with a whoop and fist-pumping the air.

But to answer Cullen's question...?

"Hell yes, I would."

Cullen muttered a curse. "Anthony, you told me he wouldn't. You even said Isabella might stop with the pranks."

Anthony laughed. "That's called lying, sweetheart. And *you're* a liar if you say you don't like the twisted crap you've started with Bella."

Cullen had nothing to say to that, and Bella flashed Edward a beaming smile in triumph. Yeah, she and Cullen would probably be at it until...death did them part.

Chapter 35

Power play: When a team has one more player (or two, three) on the ice than the other team. Like, five against four or five against three, for example. (Happens whenever someone gets a penalty, which is usually two minutes.)

~oOo~

Edward could sense that Bella was putting up a front about the Christmassy cheerfulness. Well, Christmas had already passed, and they were spending New Year's separately. Not Bella and Edward, but Anthony and Cullen were off to London to see Alice. As far as Edward knew, Emmett was having a party tomorrow for New Year's Eve, but that was about it. And Bella was pretending wanting to be social.

Right now they were just lounging around the apartment, watching movies, packing... Edward was signing the last of the papers to get rid of his other place he'd rented here in Sweden, and he was constantly on the phone with his lawyer, as well as Cullen, to get everything ready for his return to Detroit.

At this time in only a few days, they'd be saying goodbye—for now—to Ant and Cullen.

It sucked, but they only had to stick it out for a few months. Actually, Edward and Bella were coming back to Malmo in a few weeks for a game he'd promised to play, and they were all gonna see each other real quick during the World Championship that Anthony had agreed to play in May.

After that, they'd all be back home where they belonged. The city Edward had avoided for so long.

"You know what I've noticed?" Bella's voice broke his train of thought, and he looked away from the movie he wasn't watching. Apparently, Bella

hadn't really been watching it, either. "After the whole Jasper thing? There's something between Anthony and Alice—a parental thing."

Edward had noticed, too. Over Christmas when Alice visited, Anthony had been different. Bella had figured out that—and this'd been the first time Edward had even heard about it—the guy Alice had met here the last time she'd visited was Peter's little brother, who played for another hockey team here in Sweden. He was a cocky little shit, Jasper, eighteen years old, who'd made it his mission to get past Edward during games. Of course he'd failed. But Jasper was still a great player, and he'd been signed to play for the Blackhawks in Chicago next year. And with Alice now going to college there...?

Carlisle was understandably ticked off as the overprotective father, but Anthony had displayed kinda similar behavior. Maybe more on a big-brother level, but not far off. He'd been annoyed as hell when he'd learned just how close Alice was gonna be to this Jasper guy, stating that she was too young to be around boys *without supervision*.

Edward didn't think it was that big of a deal, but maybe that was because he mostly saw the hockey lifestyle from his own point of view. He knew of the puck bunnies and the long road trips, but it had never even crossed his mind to go that way, 'cause...well, Bella.

Even if he'd been single...even when he *was* single...just no. His two attempts years ago while feeling sorry for himself had failed miserably and proven what he already knew. The hookup scene was not for him, but it *had* been a part of Anthony's life. Big time.

Edward shrugged a little and kissed Bella's temple. "If something happens between Alice and Jasper, he won't fuck up."

Bella peered up at him. "How can you know?"

Edward smirked. "Cause the motherfucker would have to face me and Anthony on the ice, Cullen off the ice, and you would probably hunt him down."

"Damn straight." Bella huffed.

Then she sorta got quiet again, facing the TV but not watching, and Edward needed to make it better.

He'd seen the elaborate plan Bella had on her laptop regarding her next prank, and he wondered if that would work to cheer her up. Cullen and Anthony would be back on January first, so it gave Edward a day to get everything together.

He rubbed his jaw. "When does Ant's flight get in?" He only knew his brother and Cullen were coming home early.

"Ten, I think. They'll be home at around eleven. Why?"

"Hmm? Oh, no reason."

~oOo~

The day after, Bella eyed what was left in her closet. One cocktail dress for Emmett's party tonight. Not much else, since they were leaving on the second.

She was so ready to go back home to Detroit, and she was thrilled she and Anthony were on the same page; this was for the best, but breaking up their little family blew.

Usually so carefree and happy, Bella felt like she did when she was on her period. Everything sucked, she needed a constant supply of the sorbet she loved, not to mention cake and wine and carbs—Bloatedville, hello. She was a downer. She didn't have energy for much of anything. Unless it was

sex with Edward. But no work, no non-sex fun, no Emmett's party. Ugh. She had to get a grip.

She'd almost kicked Edward in the balls when he'd carefully said he wouldn't be hurt if she decided to join him in Detroit later.

Puh-lease.

Thankfully, Edward understood that it wasn't a matter of choosing. It wasn't between Edward and Anthony. It was family. Bella had never valued anything more than family, and now when the four—five including Alice, Bella supposed—were together, it didn't feel right to split up even for a short amount of time.

It would be awesome soon enough, though. She kept telling herself that, and she knew the truth of it. Plus, she'd be distracted plenty in Detroit. She'd work more, and she'd be there for Edward.

She sighed and took the dress from the rack.

She honestly didn't feel like going. Adoring Emmett was one thing, but she'd learned that his parties belonged in a frat house.

"Bella?" Edward poked his head in the room.

She found it odd he was only in jeans and a t-shirt. Hot as fuck, but for a party...?

She smirked and held up the black dress. "This might be too fancy for beer bongs, but it's all I have. I know you have a couple nice shirts, though. What's your excuse, goalie?"

He smirked right back and entered the room fully. "I called Emmett and said we can't make it, 'cause we have other plans."

Bella was definitely stuck on "other plans," but first things first. "Now I feel bad. He invited us." Granted, more than twenty people would be there, but...

"It's okay," Edward promised. "Let's just say Emmett owes me."

Bella raised a brow, intrigued. "Let's say more."

"Will you never let me keep a secret, woman?"

"Uh, *no*."

This didn't seem like anything serious, so who was he kidding? He couldn't keep fun secrets for long before he was bouncing around like a five-year-old needing the bathroom.

Edward sighed dramatically. "Well, if you *must* know—"

"I must!" She got a *look* for that.

"It was during my dinner with the Detroit people," he said with a shrug. Totally playing it off—like he was all casual about it. "I might've hinted that I liked playing with Emmett. And he's calmed down since he got the boot for being too violent."

Oh, wow. This was certainly unexpected. But fucking great. "They might sign him?" Bella smiled.

Edward shook his head. "Don't get your hopes up, and definitely not for the next season, but he's on their radar now."

Bella took it as the good news it was. Being on the radar for the Red Wings wasn't something anybody could pull off. She was happy for Emmett.

"So, anyway..." Edward walked over to Bella's closet and yanked a pair of jeans and a top for her. "We have other plans. Fun-house plans."

Bella's head snapped up, and she was instantly alert. The lingering melancholy drew her into the darkness again for a beat, but the buzz of excitement kept building.

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?" She was almost afraid to get her hopes up. She hadn't had any energy to continue planning her prank, but Edward just might be able to rectify that.

"Yes," he said seriously. "We're getting sushi."

Bella giggled and slapped his arm. "Edward!"

He laughed and pulled her in for a hug. "Yeah, we're gonna have fun with Cullen's house. He did give us a key for emergencies, remember?"

Oh, yes. And this was an emergency!

"I fucking love you, Masen." She threw herself at him and kissed him silly.

Edward's smile caused her to wonder if she'd made his day. When in reality, it was the other way around.

~oOo~

Anthony yawned as he waited for Carlisle to open the door. It had been a short visit in London, but to get up at the ass-crack of dawn to catch a flight had never been his favorite.

The plan was to rest a couple hours, then meet up with Edward and Bella, who were leaving Sweden tomorrow. And Anthony and Carlisle weren't gonna miss out on spending their last day together, well, together.

"Here we go." Carlisle let out a yawn, causing Anthony to do the same—again. Felt like they'd both been yawning since they'd left their hotel in London.

Carlisle entered first, and—

"Fucking Christ!"

...a bag of water exploded over his head.

Anthony stiffened in shock, looking up to see a thin rope that had been constructed to tighten its binding around a plastic bag as the door was opened. It screamed of Bella Swan, and he knew the time had come.

Fun house, she'd warned.

Carlisle turned slowly, facing Anthony with a steely look, but both anticipation and nervousness shone in his eyes. "It's her, isn't it?"

Anthony nodded, torn between wanting to laugh at Carlisle's expression and the water trickling down his face, and wanting to run and hide. "It's very possible Ed's helped her." It was probably more than a possibility, too. And while Edward wasn't into the whole prank thing—same with Anthony—like Bella and Carlisle were, Edward could be a sadistic bastard when he wanted to.

"We'll proceed with caution," Anthony said, squaring his shoulders. "And you walk first."

"You really love me," Carlisle deadpanned.

"Shut up." Anthony couldn't help but laugh. "This is your thing—something you share with Bella. Don't involve me." Only, he'd kinda involved himself the day he helped Carlisle... Fuck. "Let's just go in."

But it turned out to be a little more complicated than "just go in."

After they'd dumped their bags on the hallway floor, they encountered some crazy shit that would take forever to clean up. Not to mention the fact that they probably missed some of the stuff. But no one could miss the jackets in the hallway that had been turned inside out. Or the door handles that had been unscrewed from the front door and the half-bath and replaced by new ones—bright neon-colored ones.

In the coat closet, shoes had been tied together in some random order.

In the small corridor leading to the living room, there was glitter all over the floor, and... "What the fuck?" Anthony mumbled as he walked closer.

"Watch out!"

Carlisle's warning came too late, and Anthony tumbled down to the floor. But that wasn't enough. In what must've been an attempt to steady himself, though he had no recollection of it, he'd grabbed onto Carlisle and dragged him down, too.

Carlisle started laughing.

Anthony hissed and groaned at the pain in his ass.

Lube. There was lube mixed with glitter on the fucking floor.

Now it was stuck to Anthony's jersey, jeans, and—oh, Jesus fucking Christ, it was in his hair.

He understood why Carlisle was laughing now, 'cause...what else could they do?

"I'm not gonna get sucked into this," he persisted as he got off the floor.

"As much as I wanna get back at them, I fucking won't. You hear me, Carlisle?" He helped a chuckling Carlisle up, who didn't seem to take Anthony seriously. "I'm not kidding!"

"Oh, of course not." Carlisle was humoring him. He drew Anthony close for a kiss, then smirked and wiped away some purple glitter from their cheeks. "Let's see what they've done to our kitchen."

But see, the kitchen looked pristine and spotless, which...fuck, that couldn't be a good sign.

Carlisle grabbed a glass from a cabinet, tilted his head at the sink, and filled his glass with water.

In the meantime, Anthony eyed his surroundings warily. Amusement was starting to build up, but he'd never fucking liked the unknown, and Bella could be scary.

"I knew it," Carlisle muttered, and when Anthony looked, Carlisle was dumping his water in the sink. "They've switched the red and blue dots to indicate warm and cold water. Blue is now warm."

For chrissakes. And if Edward and Bella had done it here, they'd probably done it all over the house.

Anthony inspected the fridge for a few seconds before he opened it carefully, but nothing happened. A breath of relief there. *I can do this*. He snatched up two bottles of beer and set them on the counter. Then he went for the cabinet where they had chips and cereal, opening it—

He screamed like a girl as large, life-threatening spiders jumped out of the cabinet to kill him.

"Get them off me!" He squeezed his eyes shut and shuddered and cringed and cursed and felt himself up to get rid of the monsters. "Too far, man! That's taking shit too far!" Good God, he could feel them crawling all over!

"Anthony!" Carlisle stilled Anthony by his shoulders. "*Stop, baby.*" He was laughing, the fucking bastard. "They're not real!"

Oh...

Anthony cracked one eye open and took in the sight of several rubber spiders on the floor.

"Well, this is a bit embarrassing." He rubbed the back of his neck, his heart still doing a hundred miles an hour. "Moving on."

They moved on, and Carlisle didn't laugh at him. Much.

When they'd opened all cabinets, it was clear that they had a lot of shit to do. The Frosted Flakes were in the Coco Pops box, the coffee beans were inside the fucking coffeemaker, the silverware had been smeared in shampoo or some kind of soap, salt was in the pepper grinder, syrup was where the salt was supposed to be, ketchup in the mustard bottle, and every goddamn item had found a new home—cabinet, drawer, whatever.

On the way upstairs, one had to be blind not to notice the hot-pink feather boas along the railing, the party hats fastened to the wall, and the massive banner up above with the cheerful, "Happy Hanukkah!" greeting them.

And the master bedroom...?

Oy.

"Our fuckin' bed, sweetheart," Anthony moaned. Bending down, he brushed a hand over the bedspread, grimacing at the bags of chips Edward and Bella had crushed on top.

"I don't think that's all." Carlisle sighed and joined him by the bed, carefully lifting the spread. "Yep, that's what I thought. I ruined the girl's jeans, and now we have sugar on our sheets."

Anthony scowled. "Why did you have to fuck with her clothes, man? I'm plenty sweet in bed all on my own. I don't fuckin' need Splenda."

"This looks more like powdered sugar."

Yeah, like Anthony gave a shit about semantics.

That's pretty much when the urge to get even took over. He turned to Carlisle, fixed him with a serious look, and said, "I want revenge."

Carlisle smiled evilly. "Welcome to the dark side, my love."

~oOo~

An hour later, they'd accomplished nothing. They'd showered and tucked away their luggage, but the house looked like hell; in fact, they were still discovering shit Edward and Bella had done.

"You know, I don't really feel like taking them to dinner." Anthony plopped down on the couch in the living room. He was tired as fuck, though he couldn't shake the anticipation buzzing through him. It was like a high.

"You'll learn to love it, I assure you." Carlisle sat down too, also dressed casually in sweats and t-shirt, and draped an arm around Anthony's shoulders. "Perhaps next time, we'll break the unwritten rule of not messing with cake."

Anthony chuckled and put his feet up on the table. "After finding all my video games in cases they don't belong in, I won't say no." Then he grimaced at the edible paint Ed and Bella had used on the window. "I'm gonna miss them like crazy, but I have a feeling we're gonna be too busy cleaning to notice their absence." At least for a week or two.

Carlisle hummed and kissed the side of Anthony's head. "We'll join them soon—"

The doorbell rang before Carlisle could finish, and he excused himself to see who it was.

Anthony had a feeling it was Edward and Bella, because sad goodbyes at the airport wasn't their thing. Anthony was gonna swallow this bitter pill about the prank—and accept the fact that he'd been sucked in to the point where he actually wanted more—and spend the day with his brother and best friend.

Edward was smirking and glancing around as he entered the living room, and Bella was smiling outta curiosity.

"I didn't know you'd been redecorating here," she commented.

Anthony snorted and rolled his eyes. "Look who decided to be funny." He drew Bella close, and she plopped down to sit on his lap. Meanwhile, Edward sat down in the closest armchair, and Carlisle disappeared into the kitchen with what smelled like pizza. "You got a little too creative here, don't you think?"

Bella waved that off and slid down to sit on the end of the couch. "There's no such thing." She grinned and put her legs up, resting them on Anthony's lap. "You got some glitter right here." She pointed to her forehead.

Edward chuckled. "Your ear too, bro."

"I got glitter fucking everywhere." Anthony huffed. "Even after a damn shower."

"Isabella, do you by any chance know where the pizza slicer is?" Carlisle hollered from the kitchen. "The pizzas didn't come sliced."

Edward laughed. "I think I put it in the microwave, Cullen."

Bella thought that was funny as shit.

Anthony wasn't ready to admit the same, but he knew it was only a matter of time.

As it turned out, four beers and a whole pizza mellowed him out and made him tell the truth.

~oOo~

"Okay, I have an announcement to make," Anthony said.

Edward grinned lazily, full on pizza and Heineken, and leaned back in his chair. All day, his brother had seemed disgruntled about the whole prank, but Edward knew his twin.

"What's that, boo?" Bella was tipsy on wine, carefree and happy. Which had been Edward's goal the whole time. This sure as hell beat the alternative—having her all sad and depressed about leaving tomorrow.

Ant belched and set down his beer bottle. "It's two against two from here on out. The prank shit—me and Carlisle against you two."

Bella beamed. "Does that mean you *liiike* it?"

"Do I have a fucking choice, love?" he shot back.

Edward didn't buy it. "Sure you do. You can like something and do it, and you can dislike something and *still* do it."

"He's right, Anthony." Cullen agreed. "So, which one is it? You and me versus those two, or should I face them alone?"

"That's not the kind of power play I'm into," Bella sang.

All three men frowned in confusion, and Edward was the first one who barked out a laugh, finally getting it.

"Oh, that was far-fetched, baby girl." He hugged her close and kissed her temple. Bella had explained the whole power play debacle to Edward: how she and Anthony had teamed up on Edward to get him to stop being all moody and avoiding family.

It had definitely worked, but if it wasn't for the fact that Bella had only recently told him about the two-against-one plan she and Anthony'd had, Edward wouldn't have understood the connection she was making right now. Hence the looks of confusion Anthony and Carlisle were wearing at the moment.

"Blame the vino," Bella said with a shrug, then poured herself some more of said vino. "I don't gotta make sense all the time. I'm a woman."

"Well, all right, then." Anthony moved on. "Good times. We'll be a prank family who cracks jokes no one understands."

Bella was smiling brightly, most likely stuck on "family." One of the reasons Edward loved her so much.

He raised his bottle. "We'll paint Detroit red as the craziest family on the planet."

Bella raised her glass but tilted her head. "Hmm. With the *Red Wings* in town, it's already kinda red. But hear, hear!"

"That was sorta the point." Edward snickered at her silliness.

Anthony laughed and shook his head. "To Detroit, then."

"Detroit." Cullen smiled and held up his bottle. Edward's mouth tugged upward at the affection in Cullen's eyes, all of it directed at Ant. "Home?"

Anthony nodded at that. "Home. Definitely."

"Home," Edward and Bella echoed.

Epilogue I

6 months later...

This was what Anthony had wanted since the day his brother had left when they were eighteen. And now...not only was Edward back where he belonged, but Anthony had this hot-as-hell man sitting next to him in the car, and as of two hours ago, they were both wearing gold bands on their left ring fingers.

Last week, they'd left Sweden behind for Detroit. Meetings with the team and sponsors had followed, as had the announcement of Carlisle being Anthony's new agent and publicist. People obviously already knew he worked with Edward as well, and Carlisle was getting several offers that he was shooting down.

They all had the luxury of doing exactly what they wanted, and Carlisle wanted to follow Anthony as much as possible, like Bella wanted with Edward. Which meant flexible hours. Fewer clients.

And today, Anthony had signed a three-year contract to play exclusively for the Red Wings.

After the meeting, they'd gone home, and Carlisle had pulled Anthony close for a hug.

"I got you something," he murmured.

Anthony laughed through his nose, still riding his high from the meeting.

"Is it in your pants?"

He felt Carlisle's grin against his neck. "Technically, I suppose. But it's in my pocket." He inched away kissed Anthony on the lips. "I bought it—or them, actually—when we were in London last Christmas." There was a

pause while Carlisle slid a hand down his pocket. "I had today in mind—the day you renewed your contract."

Anthony's eyes grew large when he saw the two rings, and at first he wondered if he'd entered an alternate universe. 'Cause this shit just didn't happen to Anthony Masen. The star forward playboy falling in love and getting engaged...?

It was laughable. Yet, not.

"Marry me, Anthony?"

Now, in the car on their way to the restaurant, Anthony smiled to himself out the window and brushed his thumb over the smooth surface of Carlisle's ring.

"You know I fucking will." Anthony had kissed him so hard.

The driver said they were only five minutes away, but Anthony knew that already, 'cause this was his hometown.

Carlisle gave Anthony's hand a squeeze, both of them probably thinking about everything that had happened today, and almost just as importantly, what was still to come. Because going out to dinner with Edward and Bella at some swanky place where they would be seen wasn't only about coming out in public. It was about officially having the family together again.

Alice was busy packing in London, but she'd join them in the States soon, and then Carlisle and Anthony were gonna find her a place in Chicago. A place with a front desk and a bribable doorman to keep track of Alice's male guests.

Carlisle squeezed Anthony's hand again as they stopped at an intersection. "Nervous?"

No. Not at all. He'd *been* nervous, but it was all over now. His contract was non-negotiable as long as he performed well on the ice, and...well, he was Anthony fuckin' Masen. Of course he did good with his skates on.

"No way." He smirked a little and glanced sideways at Carlisle. "What about you?"

After all, Carlisle was coming out too, and he wasn't used to the spotlight. In the past, there'd been rumors about Anthony's sexuality, though most people had shot them down. Especially when he'd been dragged to some faceless puck bunny's house. But there'd been no question about Carlisle. Mostly because he didn't have a job that put him in the public eye, but also because he'd been married to a woman and had a child. Carlisle's closest knew the truth; that was it.

Once tonight was over, though...it would be all over the tabloids because of who Carlisle was dating. Or engaged to, as it was.

"A little bit," Carlisle admitted, although his smile was easy and casual. "Mainly I'm just glad the wait is over."

Anthony could relate. While it hadn't been a struggle to remain hidden in Sweden, they'd still kept their relationship on the down low. In fact, earlier when they left their condo and got into the cab, they'd held hands in public for the first time.

It was the little things, and Anthony wanted all of it.

He'd make sure to get it too, and there was nothing anyone could do about it. When this coming-out spectacle hit the news, Anthony and the others already knew that the team would take the "of course we support Anthony" approach. They might seethe in silence for a bit, because being gay in the male-dominated sports world always turned into a fucking

hoopla with Jesus-is-Lord lovers wailing and flailing about sinners, but the Red Wings big shots would soon see the ka'ching aspect of the ordeal.

Supporting LGBT issues could raise them millions in campaigns and sponsorships, and they would forever look like the good guys in Corporate America.

Anthony didn't give a fuck.

~oOo~

Arriving at the restaurant, Anthony linked his fingers with Carlisle's, and they both dodged photographers on their way inside.

"Are you dating your agent, Anthony?" one paparazzo hollered.

"We've already seen Edward and Isabella going inside; did you date her as a cover?"

Anthony rolled his eyes and pushed past another motherfucker.

"Are you really gay, Masen?"

"Carlisle, what does your ex-wife say about all this?!"

At that, Anthony stopped to use his fists instead of words, but Carlisle was quick to steer him back in the direction of the restaurant.

"They've already done their digging." Anthony growled, fucking furious. He knew they'd be relentless and dig up everything they could find, but this was a new record. Anthony and Carlisle had only been out in public briefly in the time it took to walk between the team's headquarters and the goddamn garage, and sure, there were sometimes paps lingering, but Christ.

"None of that matters, baby." Carlisle cupped Anthony's neck and kissed his temple. "It'll pass."

Anthony blew out a breath as they got inside, and the maître d' was quick to send security to the door.

"We value your privacy here, Mr. Masen," he said, shaking Anthony's hand. Anthony was still trying to calm down. "It's so nice to meet you both. Your party is waiting for you in the smaller dining room. Please, this way."

"It'll be fine," Carlisle murmured, only for Anthony to hear.

He nodded tightly and rolled his shoulders, letting his man guide him through the restaurant, the maître d' walking first. Anthony did his best to ignore the curious glances the fifty or so guests sent them not-so-subtly, but it didn't get easy until they reached the more intimate dining room that only seated some ten people.

Edward and Bella were at a table in the corner, and it was a relief to see them.

"A waiter will be right with you, sirs." The maître d' left again.

Edward stood up and shook hands with Carlisle, then stepped up to Anthony while Carlisle and Bella hugged.

"You okay?" Ed asked quietly, squeezing Anthony's shoulder. "Bella and I were hounded, so I'm guessing it was worse for you and Cullen."

Fucking twin thing. Regardless of how well Anthony could act, Edward would always be able to read him.

"I hope he won't think it's too much," Anthony chuckled, though there was no humor to it. If anything, there was a queasy feeling in the pit of his stomach, and not even the engagement ring could ease his fear.

"Who, Cullen?" Edward lowered his voice further, his brows raising. "Dude, he loves you like nothing else. You have absolutely nothing to worry about. Just look at him." He jerked his chin over his shoulder. Randomly, he also squirmed in a weird way and scratched his balls, but Anthony ignored that.

He followed Ed's gaze instead and saw Carlisle. Saw Carlisle as Bella gushed over his hand. Saw the amusement in Carlisle's eyes as he humored his "prank princess." Saw the affection he held for Anthony's family—a family that was now Carlisle's, as well.

"There's no diamond to inspect, you know," he told Bella, smirking faintly.

"Such long fingers." Okay, Bella was lost in her porn world. "If Edward's hadn't been longer..." Her joke trailed off, and she started giggling.

Wine. There was already wine on the table, explaining her giggly mood. There was beer too, so they must've ordered for Anthony and Carlisle.

"That's why you're with me, baby girl?" Edward nodded, stifling a grin.

"Because of my fingers?"

"Solely," Bella deadpanned.

Edward sat down next to Bella, the two shifting close as if they were drawn together by magnets, and Anthony finally saw it. The love that Edward and Bella always had for each other was there in Carlisle's eyes, too.

All right, so he already knew that, but to feel it and really let it settle and relax him was another matter. Anthony's brother was right. He had

nothing to worry about, and he joined Carlisle with a less rigid spine and less stiff shoulders.

"Congratulations are in order." Edward smiled and raised his glass of beer just as a waiter appeared with menus. "A spanking new contract and an engagement—to Anthony and Carlisle."

"I'm so happy for you guys," Bella said, her eyes welling up a bit. Much like Edward did before, she did some odd squirmy move, adjusting in her seat. "And I'm so fucking thrilled we're all together again. This is how it's supposed to be."

Anthony swallowed and nodded with a dip of his chin. He felt Carlisle's hand on his thigh, and he covered it with his own hand as he took a swig from his beer.

"I'm sure it's your turn soon, yes?" Carlisle eyed Edward with a teasing smirk.

"I'm working on it." Edward smirked right back, relaxed in his seat, and draped an arm along the back of Bella's chair. His expression softened when he tilted his head to Bella and kissed the side of her head. "Right now we're focusing on the boyfriend/girlfriend stuff we missed out on last time."

Anthony thought that was a good idea. That said, he knew it wasn't gonna be long before Ed popped the question, 'cause he and Bella were two fucking peas in a pod. They had the same dreams, beliefs, and goals. But for now, they prioritized traveling together for when Edward wasn't busy and going on dates. And after tonight, they could do that in public.

Opening his menu, Anthony only paid a little attention to the selection, more interested in doing what Bella was doing: reveling. 'Cause she was right. This was it—how it was supposed to be.

There would be bumps in the road, but there would be no more chasing. They'd all deal with any issue that arose together—like the family they were.

"Bella, did you buy a new detergent?" Edward shifted in his seat.

Anthony lifted a brow. "Mention your snuggly crotch and I'll chuck my beer at you and make a dramatic exit."

"No, did *you*?" Bella seemed to know what Edward was referring to. "I was gonna ask before, but, you know, fancy restaurant."

Carlisle smiled as he studied his menu. "Oh, no. I hope no one snuck in to your house this morning and poured itching powder in your underwear drawer."

Edward and Bella dropped their jaws and stared at Carlisle, equally horrified.

Anthony barked out a laugh, more sure than ever that he had nothing to worry about.

Epilogue II

3 years later...

"Jack, I said that's enough." Bella knew she wasn't sounding nearly as stern as she needed to, but it was difficult around this little three-year-old. "No banging on the window." She wiped a napkin over the glass as the third period started down below on the ice.

"Banana fingers," Jack giggled at his messy hands.

"Yeah, let's turn that into squeaky clean fingers. Come here, pup." Bella helped him off the bar that was along the window in the VIP box and sat him down on the floor. "If you wanna watch the game from up here, you gotta sit still, okay?"

Jack nodded, eyes wide, looking too fucking cute in his little Red Wings jersey. "Daddy gonna score 'gain?"

God, she loved him. Every time Jack referred to Anthony and Carlisle as Daddy or Dad—which was a fairly recent development—Bella's heart soared. It had only been a year ago Anthony and Carlisle had adopted Jack, but both men were born to be fathers, and family came first to all Masens and Cullens.

"Maybe." She grinned and returned Jack to the bartop, holding on to his middle. "Can you see him down on the ice?"

Jack nodded again, eagerly this time, even though he couldn't actually find Anthony—hell, neither could Bella right now—and held up seven fingers. "Number tenny-free!"

"That's right." Bella chuckled and ruffled his dark, curly hair. "Daddy's number is twenty-three. And what about Uncle Ed?"

He got ten fingers. "Fowty!"

Behind them, Carlisle entered the area with Alice and Jasper.

The day Detroit defeated Jasper's team—the Philadelphia Flyers, which was his new team—in the fight for the Stanley Cup had been...interesting. While Carlisle and Anthony were on good terms with Jasper now—especially because Alice and Jasper were doing a long-distance relationship until she started grad school next semester—Carlisle and Anthony had been smug as hell and gloating their asses off like a couple kindergarten kids. Only, Carlisle had been slightly more graceful about it.

Anthony had just skated up to Jasper and laughed. *"In your fucking face, Blondie. See ya at dinner."*

Like a boss.

"Daddy, lookie!" Jack pointed to the window. "They're playing some more."

Carlisle joined Bella and picked Jack up, nibbling playfully at his chubby little fingers. "I know, sweetheart. It's the third period."

"Yeah. Did you get my juice box?" Jack flipped Carlisle's tie, then squealed when Alice crossed her eyes at him and puffed out her cheeks. "Tha's funny—do it again!"

Alice took that as a cue to snatch up her little brother from Carlisle, and Carlisle turned to Bella with an easy smile.

Though, it morphed into a frown. "I'm sorry I took so long. The kid wanted a burger."

Bella sputtered. "What?"

"Jasper," Carlisle drawled.

"Right." Bella snorted, then took a sip of her Sprite. "Still giving him a hard time, huh?" Carlisle offered a shrug and a smirk. "Gotcha," she chuckled. "So, what's with the frown, Daddy C?"

He rolled his eyes, failing at hiding his amusement. It had been Bella's suggestion he and Anthony went for Daddy A and Daddy C with Jack, but apparently that wasn't appreciated. They were gonna go the Daddy/Dad route, and later they'd just have to see what Jack preferred.

"Ignoring that," Carlisle said mildly, and the frown returned. "I don't know how many times Edward has told you—and include Anthony and me, please—that you need to rest." He pulled out one of the barstools and gave Bella a pointed look. "I'm not kidding around, Isabella. Sit."

It was Bella's turn to roll her eyes, and she did it while obeying like a damn dog. "I'm pregnant, you dingus. Not dying."

Except, the way her husband, not to mention Anthony and Carlisle, coddled her, she might wonder if *they* thought she was dying.

"We're careful," Carlisle defended, then grinned and patted her protruding stomach lightly. "We have a future hockey star in there."

Bella smiled. "Or a chef." Because Edward and Anthony's baby brother had wanted to be a chef, and when Edward and Bella learned they were expecting a boy, Brady was the perfect name. The only name.

"Or a chef." Carlisle inclined his head, smiling softly.

"Dad," Alice called. "Jack wants to know when he's going to the locker room."

Carlisle reached over and tapped Jack's nose. "After the game—as always."

Well, it wasn't really *always*, but it had morphed into a religion in this round of the playoffs. Detroit was playing their fourth of seven games against Boston Bruins in the semifinals, and before and after each game, both Anthony and Emmett—who had joined the team last year—had to do high fives with Jack.

It was another superstition, this one having begun when Detroit had beaten the Flyers.

Not only that, but it was Bella who had to carry Jack down to the locker room, because she'd been the one to do it the first time. The second time, Carlisle and Alice had gone down there, and the team had lost.

Alice was a little put out, but Carlisle could be just as superstitious as the rest of the guys, and he'd told Bella to get her ass down there next time.

Bella wasn't complaining.

"Cuz I'm ready," Jack said seriously, holding up his high-five hand.

Bella smiled widely at the cutie as Carlisle landed smooches in his hair, then tried to pay attention to the game again. Which wasn't easy when Jack could steal the show with a simple grin and the baby boy in Bella's belly loved to press against her bladder.

She sucked in a breath when the Bruins stole the puck and charged against Edward, two players against one goalie.

"Bloody—oh, come on!" Alice groaned.

The Bruins scored, and Bella winced as she watched Edward shouting angrily at his defense. Obviously no one could hear what was said, but Bella had a pretty good guess.

"Score!" Jack clapped happily.

Jasper grinned and stroked his cheek. "Wrong team, buddy."

"Oh." Jack didn't really know what to do, so he went back to sipping his juice.

~oOo~

Edward ripped off his gloves and threw them into his locker, still pissed about the game. They'd won, thank fuck, but he'd let in three goals, and it had messed with his stats.

"Let it go, bro," Anthony told him.

Edward would. Soon.

They had the next game to worry about. Two days from now, they'd do it all over again, but in Boston instead of Detroit. They needed four wins to get to the finals, and they had three. Boston had won the second game.

Speaking of that fucking loss: "Where's my wife and little nephew?" He sat down and started untying the laces on his skates.

Seeing Bella would calm his ass down.

"Finally!" Emmett grinned and walked over to the door as Bella entered with Jack. "How's our mascot doin'?"

"I'm ready!" Jack smiled goofily and held up his hand, and Emmett high-fived it. "Daddy, wha's a mascot?" He turned to Anthony, who was joining them.

Ant picked him up, all sweaty and still geared up, and whispered something in Jack's ear. In return, Jack giggled, nodded, and gave Anthony a high five.

Edward smiled at the sight, and his smile widened when his eyes met Bella's.

Fucking gorgeous.

The guys gave her wide berth, and Bella made her way to Edward with her basketball belly.

"You did good, baby." She plopped down on his lap and kissed him hard. "Don't be a grouch, okay?"

He sighed heavily, pushed his helmet all the way off, and dropped his forehead to her neck. He held her tightly and finally felt the tension slowly draining away.

Marrying Bella had made him the luckiest motherfucker alive, but the day they'd learned she was pregnant had magnified that feeling. And when it came to his stats, the reminder of what he had was the only thing that worked to relax him.

"I dropped a point," he muttered glumly, referring to his save percentage. "I went from 93.5 to point four."

Bella flicked the side of his head. "You won't care about that when you're holding the Cup." While she said those words, there was no time for Edward to stiffen up, 'cause she was already leaning over to the beam between his and Anthony's stalls to knock on wood. "I'll never forget this, you know."

Lifting his head, Edward saw that Bella was looking at his helmet next to him. The words "She said Yes" had been there since he'd proposed a couple years ago, and he had no plans to change it, even though they were married now. Because it meant more than the original question he'd had there.

Will you marry me, Bella?

He'd won that game in more than one way, and with her yes, it had been crazy easy to ignore the media storm that had blown up in their faces for a while afterward.

"I'll make an addition soon enough," he murmured, tracing her belly with his palm. "I can't wait."

Bella laughed softly and kissed his bearded cheek. "Don't do it during a season. The guys will go postal."

That was one of the few superstitions Edward didn't have, but he knew it meant a lot to the others. He'd done it once—when he'd added Bella's name—and that was enough. Besides, Brady would be born before next season, so they were all good. His son's name would grace the sliver of white that was left underneath Bella's name, and he'd add stars for each family member.

He'd do the same to his ribcage, but that was for Bella's birthday.

"Aunt Bella!" Jack hollered across the locker room. "Time'a go!"

"I'll be right there, pup," Bella replied, then turned to Edward again. "I'll see you at home, yeah?"

He nodded and kissed her. "We still going through with our plan?"

"Hell, yeah." Bella stood up, serious as a heart attack. "I'm not missing the next game just 'cause I'm too knocked up to fly."

Edward wasn't going to argue with her, because he fucking adored her for her loyalty and devotion. But that didn't mean driving from Detroit to Boston wasn't nuts.

"The coach is gonna be pissed," he laughed.

"At what?" Anthony asked, appearing with his son. He narrowed his eyes at Edward, then at Bella. "What're you planning?"

Bella smirked. "Edward and I are road tripping to Boston. We leave tomorrow morning."

Ant chuckled and shook his head. "That's dedication." He raised a brow at Edward. "You're right. Coach is gonna freak. Count me in—Carlisle and Jack, too."

The more, the merrier. "All right." Edward grinned and bumped fists with his brother. "We might as well rent bigger wheels."

Bella's eyes lit up. "And a driver so we can rest and have fun."

"What do you say, baby?" Anthony tickled Jack's tummy, who laughed. "You wanna go on a road trip with your dads and Uncle Ed and crazy Aunt Bella?"

"What the puck, bro?" Edward was insulted.

"Fine, fine. Crazy uncle Ed," Anthony amended, chuckling. He gave Edward a look. "We both know you're not as crazy as this one." He jerked his thumb at Bella. "No offense, love."

"None taken." She shrugged. "And since we're on the subject: I'll show you just as crazy next time we prank your butts."

Edward smirked and nodded, looking forward to it.

Anthony scowled. "Last time, we went easy on you—"

"Are you outta your mind?" Edward laughed incredulously, and he welcomed Bella to his lap again, 'cause she needed to rest. "You guys painted our house pink."

"Yes!" Jack clapped his hands. "I painted also."

"And you're lucky you're cute." Edward winked. "When you hit eighteen, you'll be treated differently."

"Amen," Bella agreed.

"Hitting's not good," Jack said frankly.

"That's right." Anthony kissed his forehead. "Only on the ice."

"Anthony," Bella chastised.

Of course, that was the moment Emmett, the damn enforcer who loved violence on the ice, joined the conversation. "One of these days, I'll teach you everything I know, little man."

That amused Anthony. "Over my dead body, McCarty. In fact—Bella, could you take Jack back to Carlisle before Emmett does something he'll regret?"

"I wouldn't regret it," Emmett laughed.

Bella giggled and accepted Jack in her arms, all while Anthony and Emmett started roughhousing like kids. It made Jack laugh like crazy, and Edward figured if he showered quickly, he could go home with Bella and maybe rock her world a bit before they hit the sack.

And then, tomorrow, he'd start worrying about the next game. Because the Cup fucking belonged to Edward this year.

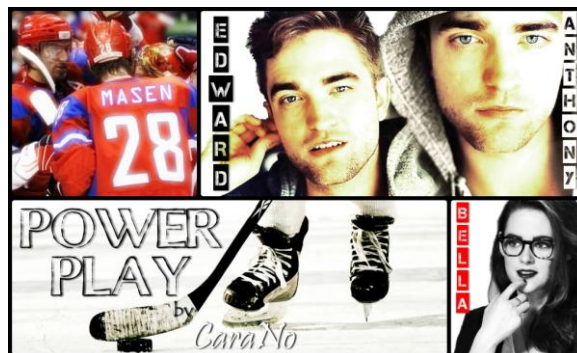
He was gonna raise that big trophy in the air and thank his lucky stars for the life his family had given him.

The End

Playlist

| | |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| + Planet Hell | Nightwish |
| + Conquest Of Paradise | Vangelis |
| + Timber | Pitbull, Ke\$ha |
| + Can't Hold Us - feat. Ray Dalton | Macklemore & Ryan Lewis |
| + Good Feeling | Flo Rida |
| + I Gotta Feeling | The Black Eyed Peas |
| + Sirius | The Alan Parsons Project |
| + No One Sleeps When I'm Awake | The Sounds |
| + Birthday Cake | <small>EXPLICIT</small> Rihanna |
| + Gangnam Style (강남스타일) | PSY |
| + Born To Be Wild | Krokus |
| + Chelsea Dagger | The Fratellis |
| + Legenden - feat. Phantomen | Niello |
| + Arlanda | Niello, Truls |
| + En För Alla För En | Tre Kronor, The Poodles |
| + Luck | American Authors |
| + Untouched | The Veronicas |
| + Friday Is Forever | We The Kings |
| + All Night | Icona Pop |
| + Good Time | Owl City, Carly Rae Jepsen |

Fan Art





Lolypop82



Lolypop82



Manips by Fallingsnow Winter

