



*Fanfiction written by CaraNo*

*Disclaimer: I own nothing Twilighy*

### **This Life**

*The world is a bit different.*

*Do we still have Britney Spears showing her girly bits in the tabloids? Why yes, of course. We have all that in this world. We have Twitter, Facebook, and all that shit, too.*

*It is the year of 2010, and the world is modern...but, there are still those who embrace old traditions. You will find these people in small towns.*

*Towns as...Forks.*

*In the United States, it's illegal for a girl to do much of anything without the consent of her father.*

*There is courting. There are arranged marriages.*

*A girl from... let's say... Forks, she's expected to be respectful toward her father. She cooks. She cleans.*

*She would never curse or raise her voice.*

*The world is however changing, and though it is still the law for a girl to obey her father, many choose to give their children the liberty to do as*

*they please. Britney Spears' father obviously gave her daughter way too much liberty, don't you think?*

*You won't find this type of girl in Forks, though.*

*So, if you're a girl from a town like Forks, you better keep potty mouth, your sass, your snarky remarks...away from Daddy dearest. Oh, and you better treat your future husband with the respect he deserves.*

*The respect he deserves... yes... but what happens if Rose and Bella don't think their future husbands deserve respect?*

## **PROLOGUE – LONDON IN AUGUST 2011**

### **BPOV**

The words had echoed in my goddamn head for the past hours.

*"Marie Swan, you are under arrest..."*

I was pissed.

Rose was livid, too. Obviously.

And now we'd been separated. Sitting in cells with handcuffs chafing our skin.

Edward and Emmett were gonna pay for this. So help me God, they were gonna pay for this.

The door opened to my cell.

"Ms. Swan, a Ryan Denali is here, claiming to be your lawyer. Is he?" a man asked.

Oh, for the love of...

Ryan Denali. That fucker. *I'm gonna rip him a new one.*

"Yes, he is," I replied.

"Then follow me," the man said.

I followed him, because what choice did I have? The man was gripping my arm, you know.

Then there was a room. I knew the type. The room with a mirrored wall inside. And a desk. Two chairs.

I was left there. Alone. So, I sat my ass down in one of the chairs.

The door opened, and then he was there. Dressed to the nines.

*Ryan Denali*, I scoffed internally.

He approached with purpose, being the confident man that he was, and I saw. I saw the miniscule smile playing on his lips.

Amused, cocky bastard.

"Ms... *Swan*," he said smoothly, sitting down across from me. "I'm here to help."

I hated this. Hated that *he* was the one bailing me out...when I wanted to punch him in the nuts.

And because I wanted his smugness wiped from his motherfucking face, I brought my hands up, placed them on the table...making sure that my left ring finger was very much visible.

He noticed. As he opened his briefcase to pull out a shitload of papers, he noticed my movement.

He frowned for a second, watching my finger, and I smirked.

*That's right, you asshole.*

No ring.

## **The beginning – 2010**

### **1 – FORKS IN AUGUST**

#### **BPOV**

“Have you girls heard the latest town gossip?” Alice asked in a hushed voice as she sat down at the lunch table.

Rose and I rolled our eyes at her. Like always. This was just Alice.

She was the chipper girl in fancy clothes and bright colors, and Rose and I were the chicks hanging with her... us in our well-worn, cheap outfits in dull and muted shades.



“I’m sure you will enlighten us,” Rose replied dryly.

And Alice, unaffected by our lack of interest, did enlighten us. “They say that the Cullen Family is moving to Forks, and that the two sons are here to choose their wives.”

I huffed before taking a sip of my soda.

Absurd.

We all knew of the Cullen Family, of course.

Carlisle and Esme Cullen, him being a respected surgeon, and her being a devoted housewife... and of course their two sons, Emmett and Edward.

On the outside, they were one of the finest people you could ever encounter; educated, rich, polite, church goers. Even the boys in their twenty-four and twenty-five year old glory – with Emmett being the oldest – went to mass every Sunday, being the good Catholics they pretended to be.

There were tea parties and benefits. Jackie O suits and large hats, the whole shebang.

But like I said, this was on the outside.

Behind closed doors, they were all linked to the Masen Family in Chicago.

Organized crime hailing from Ireland.

They were just rumors, but being the Chief of Police's daughter, I knew better, and so did Rose and Alice. And though there were never binding evidence, too much linked them with the Masens, and there were too many 'coincidences.'

Starting with the fact that Esme's maiden name is Masen. And then Edward Cullen being named after the leading man of the Masens; Edward Masen.

"Don't understand why they would leave Seattle," Rose said, bringing me out of my musings.

"That's not the point here," Alice hissed. "The point is that they are here to choose wives!"

"Oh, come on, Ali," I chuckled. "They won't come near a high school to do that. They'll probably go to the college in Port A."

"I'm not so sure," she mumbled quietly. "Your dad and Deputy Whitlock were talking about it when I was there this morning."

Ah yes, Alice had a crush on Deputy Whitlock's son, Jasper, who was in college to become a police officer himself, and Alice loved to visit the station to get the latest update on Jasper.

"You're talking about this like it's not just a stray rumor, Ali," Rose pointed out. "Have you really heard anything worth obsessing about?"

Alice did have a tendency to overreact, but I didn't understand why she would overreact in this matter. Men from prominent families often came to small town such as ours to pick out a wife, and sure, the Cullen men would probably want a gullible small town gal, but fuck, we were only seventeen.

They will want a wife in a proper age, someone who is ready to bear their children. Not that seventeen year olds aren't, but still, we're girls. Not women.

Jessica was the last girl to be whisked away when Mike Newton moved into town last year. He, a twenty-seven year old banker, moved here for one single purpose – just like the other men in his situation – and that's to find a wife. But like I said, that was a year ago, and since then, any newcomer in town has headed for any of the community colleges in the area. Not Forks High.

Alice's reply brought me back. "Charlie and Peter talked about Carlisle and how he apparently had landed the chief position at the hospital here."

"And how did you interpret that into wife-searching?" Rose laughed.

"It means they are here for some time. And not just to quickly find someone," Alice said. "But it also means that Emmett and Edward are moving with them."

"I still don't understand." I frowned. "And how do you know they are moving with their parents? Maybe they will stay in Seattle."

Then Alice looked down.

Rose and I knew what this meant. It meant that Alice just had a hunch. Sure, she usually was right, but this was just too far fetched.

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The Cullen Family did move into town, and we had all seen their expensive cars with tinted windows.

Two weeks had passed, but so far we had only seen the cars. Oh and Carlisle Cullen who had started working at the hospital. But no sign of the three remaining Cullens. The only sign of them being there was by the license plates on the cars, which all entailed their last name in some form, and so far it was a black Mercedes, a black Aston Martin, a black Jeep, and a black BMW.

**CARLISLE CULLEN**



Yes, all black.

I assumed the BMW belonged to Esme, because that car was mostly seen on the way to or from the grocery store, and no man goes in there.

I mean, that's just preposterous.

ESME CULLEN



\*O\*O\*O\*

"Dinner's ready, Dad!" I called as I finished setting the table.

I had picked up a few new books on cooking, and hopefully Dad would notice my improvement. God knows he's very aware of my approaching eighteenth birthday, which means I'll be more attractive to possible suitors. And cooking skills is definitely something men will want.

"Smells good, honey." Dad grinned as he entered the kitchen.

I nodded in thanks before filling a plate for him.

I loved cooking for Charlie, and loved taking care of him, especially since he had no obligation to take care of me after Renee left. I couldn't even remember her. Dad could've dropped me off to have me adopted, but he didn't.

"I made you peach cobbler for dessert," I added softly as I took my seat across from him.



He didn't reply seeing as his mouth was full of chicken stew, but he did send me an appreciative smile and a wink.

"This is really delicious," he complimented before chugging his milk. "You haven't made this before, have you?"

*He noticed*, I thought, smiling brightly.

"No, I picked up a few books at the library, and I knew you liked curry, so I figured I'd give it a try."

"You're gonna make a great wife one day." He grinned before going back to eating.

I had actually no doubts about that. I knew what men liked, and I did enjoy taking care of people. My only fear was that Charlie would agree to the wrong suitor.

Rose and I often argued over that.

She didn't want to get married. At all. She was too stubborn and bitchy to even consider it.

Not that it's her choice, of course, and God knows she has a pleading look perfected for her father who has reluctantly turned down a few suitors already.

Me on the other hand... sure I want to get married. The only thing I don't want is to be expected to shut up. I still have a mind of my own, and strong opinions. I can only hope my future husband won't be a tyrant, because I know damn well that they exist.

So far I've only had two suitors, but thankfully, Charlie saw through them both, and that they would never be able to provide for me. Firstly there was Tyler – a boy from school – and he's only a year older than me and

had no plans to go to college, so Dad quickly turned him down. And secondly there was Riley Biers, a twenty year old man who wasn't unattractive, and he was even in law school already, having graduated pre law earlier. But Charlie didn't like the idea of me moving to California, so that was another no.

But I knew there would be more suitors next month when I turned eighteen.

I already dreaded a few of them that I knew from school.

I mean, I know I look good, and Rose, Alice, and I are somewhat popular I suppose, and then of course there's the fact that the three of us are meticulous when it comes to appearance.

That's thanks to Alice's mother, Mary, who has started preparing us for the adult life, and what is expected of us and such. And that entails dressing properly, keeping your hair beautiful, your nails manicured, your body free of hair, how to be pleasurable and polite, how to please, and so on. Like cooking for instance. That was Mary who advised us to advance.

The only one who didn't obey was Rose.

Our problem is keeping up with Alice and her mother seeing as they have the money to buy cute outfits. Rose and I don't.

Me for instance, I own two pair of jeans, two pair of shoes, one jacket, and a few tops and sweatshirts. And trust me, my black chucks are well worn.

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"I have fucked up news," Rose sighed heavily as the three of us sat down for lunch.

She had been off all day but the three of us didn't have any classes together on Mondays, so I knew she waited for this.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I've been approached by one of the Cullen brothers," she admitted quietly.

My heart ached for her when I saw her eyes welling up.

"Oh, Rose," Alice whispered sadly. "What happened?"

"He came by our house," she told us, venom lacing her voice. "I've been seeing that Jeep everyday for a week now, and yesterday it was parked outside my house."



Shit. This can't be good.

But I thought it was strange, because the Jeep was the car I saw most seldom. I usually saw the black BMW or the Aston Martin.

"Did he...?" Alice prompted quietly.

Rose nodded in defeat. "Yes. Emmett Cullen asked my father to meet with me."

Oh, God.

"But surely your father won't say yes to a Cullen," I said.

"He already did," she replied as tears spilled over. "I'm meeting him tonight for the first customary date."

"Fuck," Alice muttered, and it surprised both Rose and I, because she rarely used foul language.

All I could do was comfort Rose. Nothing more.

This sucked. But I was also immensely relieved to have the Chief of Police as a father. No Cullen would ever be interested in me.

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As I walked home from school that day, I couldn't help but think of what this would mean for Rose. If Emmett Cullen were to decide on Rose, would he leave Forks? Would they move back to Seattle? Would he be a good husband to her?

We all knew how the Cullens looked. They were often in magazines and papers for their 'hard work,' and there was no denying that they were attractive people. And shit, Edward Cullen is one gorgeous man, but there is so much more here. I mean, these people are *criminals*.

And one of my best friends may end up as a wife to one of the brothers...

Sighing to myself, I pushed those thoughts away as I reached my street. But I stopped short as I saw the sleek Aston Martin. Parked right outside of my house.

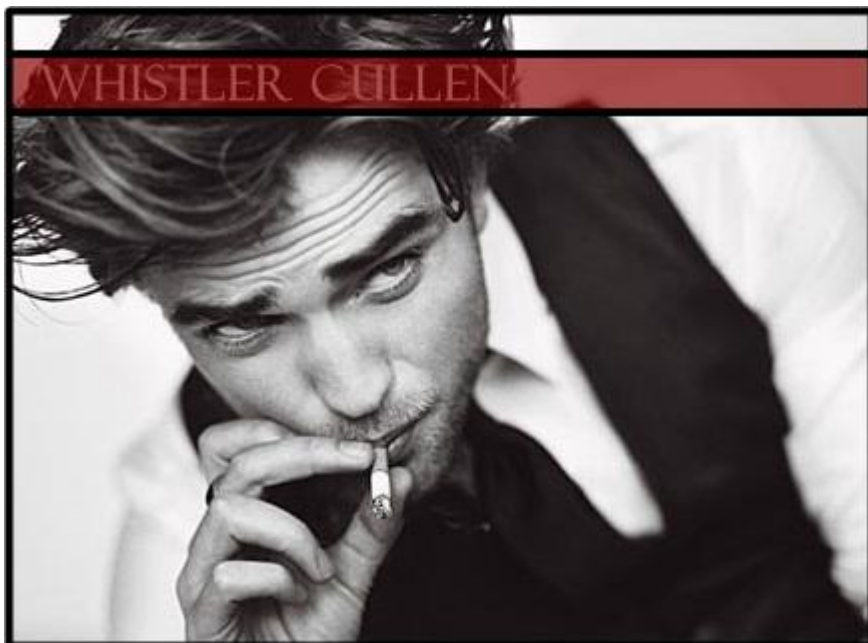
# EDWARD CULLEN



I could feel myself go deathly pale before I realized that there was not a chance in hell my father would ever agree to what ever that man might suggest. Supposedly Edward, seeing as Emmett might be after Rose.

Confidently, I opened the door, and followed the voices that belonged to Dad and...

Edward Cullen.



Hot fuck, the pictures did him no justice.

Wearing fancy shoes, black dress pants, and a black button-down, sleeves rolled up to his elbows, he sat there in our ragged kitchen. Right across from my frowning father.

Oh, God, his face was so... godly. There was no other way to describe Edward Cullen. And tall. So tall and broad shouldered.

"Isabella," Dad greeted me gruffly. "This is Edward Cullen. And, Edward, this is my only daughter, Isabella."

No, he was not in the best mood, especially not since he used my full name.

I knew I could count on my dad, though.

Breathing out in relief, I approached them.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Cullen," I said politely, offering my hand to him.

"Pleasure's all mine, I'm sure," he murmured, standing up to shake my hand. "And please, call me Edward."

I shivered involuntarily at the brief moment we shook hands, and it was... his voice, his smoldering eyes, and definitely his gentle yet firm touch.

And my *God*, he's tall. More than a foot taller, for sure.

Taking a deep breath, I snapped back to reality.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" I asked them as Edward sat down again.

"Actually, you can have a seat, honey," Dad said.

I wasn't prepared for that.

Maybe this wasn't about me at all, because the first visit from a man always took place without the girl.

"Okay," I responded quietly as I took my seat next to Dad.

I felt Edward's eyes on me as I kept my eyes anywhere but on him.

"Edward here has requested to spend some time with you," Charlie said, his eyes cold and fixed on Edward.

I swallowed hard.

"To see if you're the match he's been looking for," Dad added as if the words tasted horrible.

"With all due respect, Chief Swan, that is not what I said," Edward said smoothly.

Another shiver that I couldn't understand ran through me.

Dad huffed and crossed his arms over his chest. "No, you said you already knew my girl was your *match*." And the last word was spat.

I... didn't know what to say.

Surely my dad would say no, right?

But I didn't understand why Charlie was so upset. Couldn't he just say no and be done with it?

"I did," Edward murmured, and once again I felt his eyes on me.

It was quiet for a full minute before I decided to break the palpable tension.

"And what did you say?" I asked Dad quietly.

I held my breath as Charlie's shoulders slumped.

No, it can't be.

Glancing at Edward, I noticed how he radiated confidence and authority, something I always thought Charlie had so much of, but as I watched Edward... it was quite evident that he was above my father. Someway, somehow, Edward Cullen had more power than my father who was the Chief of Police. And even though there was no condescending smirk, or even the hint of smugness, Edward knew how above my father was.

"I said yes," Dad sighed heavily.

Swallowing hard as hell, I nodded, half in defeat and half in acknowledgment.

I wondered why Dad said yes. I wondered how he could do that seeing as he knew so well about that family, and who they were linked to.

"You'll be with Edward on Friday night," Dad informed me in a voice void of emotion. "He'll pick you up at seven PM and will return you to me at ten PM."

Oh, God.

That's... three hours alone with a criminal!

"Okay," I whispered, keeping my eyes on the table.

How did this happen?

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"Bella!"

Looking up from the pavement, I saw Alice and Rose on the school parking lot.



I approached them, wearing the same glum expression as Rose, and when I saw the smoke in her hand, I aimed for it.

Needed it.

Badly.

"Can I have one?" I mumbled as I motioned for the cigarette.

I rarely smoked. Only when the three of us were alone, in fact, but today... today was different.

"I know that face." Rose frowned as she offered one. "Tell us."

After lighting the smoke and taking a deep pull from it, I exhaled deeply, relaxing slightly.

"Edward Cullen," was all I said.

Rose nodded in understanding.

Alice gasped in horror.

"Let's skip first class," Rose sighed as she gestured for the picnic tables across the lot.

We walked in silence.

"Did you meet Emmett yesterday?" I asked quietly once we were seated.

Rose nodded and took a drag from her smoke before responding. "He took me to dinner in Port A."

Picking invisible lint off my black jeans, I merely nodded.

"He was weird," Rose added in a mutter.

"What do you mean?" Alice asked cautiously.

“He seemed too nice, and so goddamn happy that I wondered if he was on drugs.”

“Maybe he was,” I chuckled humorlessly.

I didn’t even want to think about my coming date with Edward Cullen.

## **2 – FORKS IN AUGUST**

### **BPOV**

The rest of the week passed too quickly, and I saw Edward’s Aston parked outside of school several times, just as Rose saw Emmett’s Jeep parked close by. And just as we had feared, Emmett wanted to see Rose again.

A few times, I asked Dad why he’d said yes to Edward, but he offered no response. Merely grunted before leaving the room.

And then it was Friday.

It came way too fast.

Dressed in black jeans, and a dark blue top, I muttered a goodbye to Charlie as I put my jacket on before heading out to the parked Aston.

# FIRST DATE WITH EDWARD CULLEN



Fucker didn't even ring the doorbell.

So, I was quite surprised when he got out of the car to open the door on my side.

"Isabella... you look stunning," he murmured before offering his hand to me.

I didn't like the way I reacted to his voice. Or his words. Or his touch. And I had to fight the urge to snort when he called me stunning. My entire wardrobe probably cost less than a pair of his shoes.

Once again, he brought my hand to his mouth, never taking his smoldering eyes off of me as he brushed his soft lips against my knuckles.

"Thank you," I replied quietly.

I also hated that he was so attractive. So strikingly handsome.

When we were both seated in his sports car, he revved the engine before speeding off, and he said nothing.

For a while.

It wasn't until we were outside the town limits that he pulled out a pack of smokes, lit one for himself, that he asked me if I wanted one, too.

It was a brand I hadn't seen before.

"I don't smoke," I mumbled quietly.

"Sure you do," was his response, and I could hear the smile in his voice.

*Of course*, I thought. He's probably seen me smoke, like the stalker he's been this week.

Annoyed, I decided that I would be myself completely this night, and with that settled, I took the smoke he offered.

He will see and hear all of me. I won't hide my disdain. I won't be polite. I won't refrain from using foul language. I won't try to impress him as is expected.

I will be me. Honest.

Edward pushed a button, and my window was rolled down.

I focused on the nicotine soothing me.

"What kind of music do you like, Isabella?"

Really? Is he serious?

Like he cares.

"Classic and rock," I sighed.

I didn't ask politely what he listened to.

He hummed in response, and I heard him take a deep drag from his cigarette.

Then he turned the stereo on.

I whined internally.

It was Chopin.

"Do you like going to school?" he asked next.

My honest answer would be perfect here since the Cullens are supposedly educated people.

I fought the urge to snicker as I replied. "No."

He was quiet for a few minutes, but I could see that he was thinking hard on something. Not that I watched his face, but his knuckles were white from gripping the wheel so tightly.

"Are you religious?"

"Nope," I sighed, flicking the cigarette out the window.

Silence.

I felt good. Really good.

He would drop me so fast after this night that I wouldn't see him leave.

"My brother is quite taken with your friend."

I swallowed hard, gritting my teeth together.

"There *will* be a proposal," he added.

Oh, God.

Looking out my window, I willed my tears to stay back.

If Rose's father doesn't say no, Rose will be a Cullen.

"And you'll be eighteen soon, yes?"

Shit.

No. No. No. He can't.

"September 13<sup>th</sup>," I whispered, not trusting my voice.

In my periphery, I saw him nod.

And then I became pissed. Really goddamn pissed.

"Why don't you go after girls your own age?" I asked, finally facing him.

"And why come all the way to Forks?"

I sorta had the answer to the last question, though, because with the world changing, I knew that many parents were giving their daughters the liberty to choose for themselves, and these were the modern people. The people living in cities.

The fucker smiled.

"We came to Forks because we enjoy the old traditions. And to answer your first question; because most girls my age have had sex before, Isabella."

I... couldn't *fucking* believe what I was hearing.

So, he and his brother sought out high school girls... because they're virgins?

"We don't believe in premarital sex," he continued. "And I don't want my first time to be with a girl who has already given her virginity to some other man."

My fucking God.

I didn't know what shocked me most; the fact that the all-goddamn-mighty Edward Cullen was a twenty-four year old virgin, or that he didn't believe in premarital sex.

I obviously don't believe in that either, but it has shit to do with religion. My virtue is for my future husband, but fuck me six ways to Sunday if I thought that that applied to the criminal Cullens.

One thing was for sure, though. I did not want to marry a Cullen.

"So, the only reason you're robbing the cradle is because girls are not allowed to fuck before they're eighteen?" I asked in disbelief.

Edward laughed. He fucking laughed at me.

"I like you, Isabella," he chuckled. "Gotta love a potty mouth, eh?"

My jaw dropped.

*Son of a bitch*, I thought as I averted my eyes to the window again.

"And yes. That's reason," he answered after a while. "But neither I nor my brother would settle for a girl simply because she's a virgin."

"Really?" I asked dryly, rolling my eyes. "Sure sounds like it."

"Mm, but you're wrong." He hummed. "I'm sure you've noticed my car more than once... Just like Rosalie has noticed my brother's car."

Didn't like that he said my friend's name.

"It's called investigating," he elaborated. "We wanted to know as much as possible before we approached your fathers."

Bastard.

"And what did you find out?" I asked, still not looking at him.

"Enough to know that we have found our future wives."

His words echoed in my head as I squeezed my eyes shut.

No.

Please, no.

The car stopped then, and through a blurry vision, I noticed that we were parked outside of a restaurant in Port Angeles.

He didn't speak as he opened the door for me. He didn't speak as he led me inside the restaurant. And he didn't speak as we were led to a table by the host. The only evidence of him being there was by the hand on my lower back, and later how he helped me remove my jacket.

Will this man be my husband?

Dad can't possibly agree to that!

But then again, I didn't think he would ever agree on the first customary date either.

"May I take your drink order, sir?" a female voice asked.

I kept my eyes downcast.

"I'll have a Murphy's, and my date will have a vodka cranberry."

What the fuck?



I snapped up just as the waitress left, and I couldn't stop myself from asking how the hell he knew I liked that drink. I mean, I'm only seventeen, which means that that's something I only drink when I'm with Rose and Alice. Behind closed doors.

"I know a lot about you, Isabella," was all he said before picking up his menu.

"You're not gonna elaborate to your future wife?" I asked, making sure the words were laced with venom and sarcasm.

Putting his menu down again, he laced his fingers together on the table, and watched me with an amused expression that pissed me off even further.

"I'm beginning to love your temper." He smirked.

Then he focused on his menu again, as he added flippantly, "As for what I know about you; it's called research. I'm nothing but thorough, and I have access to much."

"Yeah, criminals tend to have that," I huffed as I picked up the damn menu.

He just chuckled, probably not even surprised of my comment.

The man infuriated me. Nothing riled him up.

He was quiet once the food arrived, but I wanted answers.

"Why me?" I asked quietly after I had emptied my drink.

He didn't hesitate to answer. "You're the most beautiful girl I've ever seen, and when I saw you the day after we arrived in Forks, I knew I had to know more about you. You're both sinfully sexy and innocent-looking.

You're a good girl so to speak, but I know now that behind your façade, you're probably as innocent as I am."

How... *dare* he?!

Glaring at him, I seethed. "Don't dare to compare me to your seedy ass. I know about you, Edward Cullen, and I do *not* associate with criminals!"

The man wasn't even affected by what I spat at him!

"You will soon, princess." He winked. "Soon you will be married to one."

I gasped in horror as well as fury.

"You won't even deny being a criminal?"

"I've paid for my crimes," he said cryptically before going back to eating. "There's nothing else to it."

I couldn't eat. I was repulsed by this vile man.

A few minutes later, I had calmed down.

A little.

"My dad won't allow it," I said.

I hope he won't.

"I wouldn't be so sure if I were you," he chuckled.

He was more confident than I was. Much more.

And I began to fear that... my fate had been decided for me.

That thought brought tears to my eyes.

Was I not destined for more? Did I not deserve better?

"You don't even care that this isn't what I want?" I whispered as a tear spilled over.

Tilting his head slightly, I thought I could see concern in his eyes. If only for a second. And then he frowned as he studied me.

I wondered what he saw in me. Surely he saw my devastation. My fear and my sadness.

"I do care," he said quietly, still frowning. "I care greatly, and it pains me to see you upset... But I'm also confident that you will change your mind."

I was too exhausted and distressed to even reply, so I spent the remainder of dinner in silence, just shuffling food around on my plate.

The ride back home was also quiet, and he didn't speak until we were parked outside my house.

Ten minutes before my curfew.

"Isabella, look at me," he said gently.

I obeyed because this was apparently my future. Might as well deal with it.

"Neither of us enjoyed this evening," he said softly, understandingly. "And I know that you don't want this right now-"

"I won't ever want it, Edward," I sighed tiredly.

"You're wrong," he murmured.

I wondered if he always spoke this gently or if it was only with me. Maybe to lure me in. Like that was possible. But I hated that he seemed so genuine and caring when he spoke to me.

"I'll be a good husband," he said. "You won't ever miss a thing."

I fought the urge to snort.

"We will leave Forks, though."

"W-what?" I choked out.

He nodded. "Yes."

Oh, God... he'll take me away from everything I know.

Charlie.

Alice and Rose.

Well, I guess I'll have Rose in my life on way or another.

"Where are you taking me?" I breathed.

"My brother and I have homes on Bainbridge Island, and that will be our home, but we'll travel a lot. Most of the year, really."

Travel? A life on the road? Oh, God.

Sounds horrible for crying out loud.

I could see it all. Motels in towns where they have their so called business meetings.

"Why not leave me behind in Seattle? Or better yet, why not ignore to pick a wife seeing as you won't be home?" I mumbled.

I heard him sigh, but... then I felt his hand on mine, and I loathed the fact that instinct didn't tell me to cringe away.

What did that mean?

“Emmett and I will obviously want our wives to travel with us,” he replied. “We’ll spend a month or two at each location, sometimes in the US, and sometimes in Europe.”

“Europe?” I gasped in surprise.

For some reason, I was picturing Kansas, Montana, Arizona, and Illinois...

“Yes.” He nodded, even smiling a little. “London, Paris, Rome, cities like that... We have houses in most locations, but sometimes we live in hotels if the city we’re in is too far away from the house.”

Oh... God. That’s... not what I had pictured at all... This sounds...

“Isabella?”

“Hmm, yes?” I replied dumbly, still in my Atlas daze.

“You’re gonna have to wipe that gorgeous smile off your face. You won’t change your mind, remember?”

Shit. Shit, shit, shit!

I didn’t realize I’d been smiling. Oh, God, what does that say about me?

“Yes, there’s the disgust I’ve seen all night,” he said with a forced smile.

And for some reason, that made me frown.

There was a pang of something unpleasant going through me as I watched his face, and it was because of the forced smile. It was because he... *Jesus*, it was because he didn’t seem happy.

Fucking hell, something *is* wrong with me.

I realized then that I had been holding Edward's hand, too. It wasn't just his hand covering mine, it was our hands holding... and he realized it at the same time.

*Fuck this. He's clearly some sorcerer,* I thought as I released his hand.

I didn't look him in the eye after that.

"Well, I guess this is it for tonight," he mused quietly.

"Yeah." I nodded. "Thank you... I guess."

I could see him reaching for the door, most likely to be a gentleman, but I needed my escape quickly, and more than that, I needed him not to touch me again. And that's why I opened my door and said goodbye before he had the chance to walk me to the door.

I was in hell... on so many levels.

And I needed Rose.

But as I closed the door behind me and noticed that Dad was still awake, I decided I really wanted some answers, and I found him sitting in the kitchen, nursing a beer.

"I'm home," I announced quietly.

He barely acknowledged me.

That was new.

It hurt.

Sitting down across from him, I decided not to beat around the bush.

"He's going to ask for marriage," I said.

My eyes welled up.

This night had been... so much. Too much. And there was confusion, dread, fear, and... yes, there was something else, too, and I couldn't pinpoint it, but it felt in my stomach... like, fluttering. Nerves. Yes, nerves that made me shiver at times.

Maybe because I now knew that I couldn't foresee my nearest future. Nothing was certain for me anymore.

"I know," he replied gruffly, giving me a one shoulder shrug before he tipped his beer back.

It was on rare occasions I saw Charlie drunk.

"Will you agree to his proposal?" I asked, biting down on my lip as I waited for the answer.

"Yep."

He answered so simply.

A simple three-lettered word. Giving away his daughter. His daughter's life.

It angered me.

It... *infuriated* me that he was so careless about my life, about my future.

"How can you do that?" I asked as I wiped angry tears away.

Dad's eyes flared with anger as he looked at me. "I don't owe you an answer, Bells. Now, go to bed."

*No*, I thought as I fisted my hands in my lap. And *no*, I thought as I gritted my teeth.

"You *do* owe me an answer, Charlie... I need to know why you're throwing my life away! I'll be the wife of a criminal!"

I swallowed hard as Charlie stood up, glaring at me, and I knew this was new for us. Never before had I defied him or talked back, and never had I raised my voice.

Fear prickled my body as he approached, and I stared wide eyed at the rage that had clearly taken over him, and when he was towering over me, he struck me.

Choking on a gasp and a sob at the same time, I clutched my cheek as tears of shock and pain filled my eyes. And over and over, I thought one thing. My father had just hit me.

He had just backhanded me.

And it hurt.

So badly.

My ear rang loudly, my head pounded, *thump, thump, thump*, and I felt that sharp sting linger as blood rushed to my cheek.

"Go. To. Bed," he gritted out before backing away.

Gasping and breathing heavily, I scrambled to my feet and rushed towards my room. Once inside, I cried out. Out of pain, shock, and resolve.

My life had changed.

I was going to get married to a man who showed no chagrin when he openly confessed to being a criminal.

And my father was going to let this happen.



Not only that. He also just laid a hand on for the first time in my life.

I cried myself to sleep.

### **3 – FORKS IN AUGUST**

#### **BPOV**

I grimaced as I looked at my reflection the morning after.

I'd made sure that Charlie had left before I tiptoed to the bathroom, but once I was there, I wished I hadn't woken up at all. Because now... across my right cheek, was the reddened print of a hand, and it was swelling.

Bruising.

*He has really pulled a number on me.*

I carefully dabbed a cold towel on my cheek. And I flinched, cried, and whimpered. Nothing would help. People were going to see this. And though I had seen girls with bruises before, it wasn't all that common, and I never thought I'd be one of those girls.

*I stand corrected.*

Then, as I walked toward school this rainy Saturday to meet Rose, more than one car slowed down.

Perfect. Fucking perfect.

I tried to hide it, obviously, but the hoodie only covered so much. My front was still in view, and people knew who the daughter of the Chief of Police was, and this was news. This was gossip.

As I rounded the last corner and entered the empty parking lot, I breathed out in relief as I saw Rose already waiting for me. Sitting by the

picnic tables, eyes downcast. At least it wasn't a school day. The last thing I wanted was for the entire Forks High to see me now.

"Hey," I mumbled as I reached her, holding two fingers out.

She understood and handed me a cigarette.

I had lit it and taken the first drag before she looked up to see my face.

I was almost impressed.

"Holy shit, Bella!" she gasped. "Who the *fuck* did that to you?"

"Charlie," I huffed, rolling my eyes at the absurdity that had become my life.

*Smoke was good, though*, I thought as I took another drag.

"Why- I don't understand, B. He doesn't hit people, does he?"

"He does now," I mumbled, flicking ash on the table. "I asked- or kinda demanded to know how he could allow Edward Cullen into my life."

Rose lit up another smoke and took a drag before she spoke. "And he just slapped you?"

"Yeah," I sighed. And then I figured I may as well let her know. "Edward Cullen is my future husband."

"Shit," she cursed under her breath. "He told you that last night on the date?"

I nodded.

"And if you didn't know it already, his brother has chosen you," I added.

We both took drags.

"I figured," she muttered.

Our lives had changed in just a week.

"Can't believe Charlie hit you, though," she mumbled quietly. "That's fucked up."

I said nothing.

"So, you never found out why he would agree to let Cullen marry you?"

"Nope," I replied as I exhaled some smoke. "Did your father tell you?"

"Money," she spat out.

I figured it was something like that. A goddamn dowry.

I guessed it was the same with Charlie. Just never thought I could be bought. I was wrong. I mean...he turned Riley down – a respectable guy in law school. But not Edward...

I'm guessing Edward paid more?

Kinda curious to know how much I'm worth to Charlie.

"Hey, guys," chirped a voice behind us.

Alice.

That was so not what we needed right now, and it was quite obvious that Rose thought the same.

"Hey, Ali. What brought you here?" I asked politely as I stubbed my cigarette out.

"Just walked by." She shrugged as she sat down. "You really ought to stop doing that." She pointed at our cigarettes.

Yep, she's a good girl. Through and through.

"Oh my God, Bella, what happened to your face?!" she gasped then.

"Christ, did Edward Cullen do that to you? He did, didn't he?!"

"No!" I practically yelled, and for some reason I felt appalled by her assumption. "My own goddamn father did this."

"Charlie did that?" she asked in disbelief. "You sure you're not covering for someone?"

My fucking lord.

"I'm sure, Alice, okay?" I snapped.

Wordlessly, Rose offered me a new cigarette.

"We're both getting married to those brothers," Rose said bluntly, just to put it out there, and I was thankful for the change of topic.

Didn't exactly feel like talking about my face.

Once again, Alice gasped, horror and disgust clear on her face, and for some unknown reason, it pissed me off. We couldn't exactly help it. We didn't choose the Cullens. They chose us, goddamnit. But now, it sure felt like Alice directed that pity and disgust towards me and Rose.

Rose felt it, too.

"Alice, you don't have to say a word," Rose warned. "Bella and I are both fucked up because of this, but there's not much we can do, alright? We'll just deal with it."

"You can't honestly say that, Rosalie." Alice sneered. "You'll just deal with it? Just like that? Heck, had it been me, I would've run away."

"But it's *not* you," I pointed out through clenched teeth.

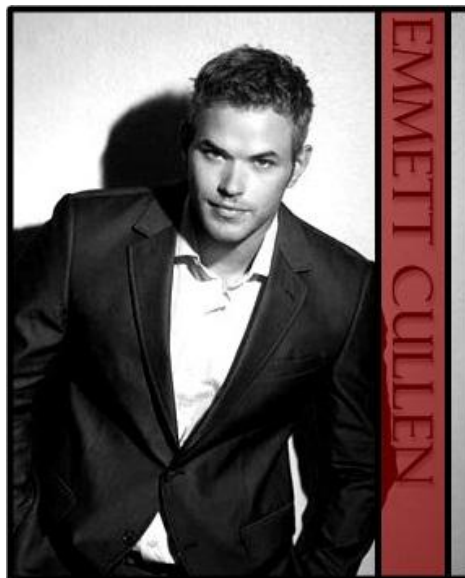
I loved Alice, but she had no idea what Rose and I were going through.

Her parents were one of those few small town folks who wished their daughter to marry out of love and not convenience or the right sum of money. So, there was no way she'd understand this.

The loud rumbling of an engine interrupted us then, and Rose and I who had our backs to the parking lot, turned to see... a Jeep Wrangler.

"Ready to meet my future husband?" Rose said dryly.

Taking a deep drag from my smoke, I watched as the Jeep parked a few spaces over, and then... a man stepped out.



I could see they were brothers.

Though Edward had more disheveled hair, green eyes, and more red in his features, it was fucking obvious that the two were brothers. Both equally tall, though Emmett might be slightly broader. Both dressed in dress pants and a black button shirt... fancy shoes... Gentle yet serious expressions.

They were men. Not boys.

Five o'clock shadows, too.

But Emmett, I noticed as he approached, had blue eyes, and his short cropped hair seemed to be curly.

Also a smoker, I added mentally.

"Rosalie," Emmett greeted. "Pleasure to see you again."

"I'm sure it is," Rose answered sweetly.

I fought the urge to snicker as I took a final drag before stubbing the smoke out with my foot.

A part of me thought this was fun, to speak so freely in front of the Cullens, and I could see Rose did, too. I wondered if it brought her the same thrill.

"It's nice to meet you, Isabella; I'm Emmett Cullen. Edward's brother," Emmett introduced himself, offering a hand.

I wasn't surprised he knew who I was.

I gave him a timid smile as I shook his hand, but in my defense, it was the man's dimples that brought out the smile.

Another sorcerer, I'm sure.

My smile vanished when I noticed he was frowning, his eyes focused on my goddamn cheek.

I briefly wondered if they would ever beat their wives.

"Bella here told me that I'm your future wife. Is that true?" Rose asked curtly.

I lowered my gaze to the ground.

"It is," I heard Emmett reply. "I guess Edward told you, huh?"

Looking up, I was surprised to see a grin on his face, because I sure as hell expected a glare or something.

"Yes," I answered quietly.

"There will be no wedding," I heard Alice scoff from behind us.

Damn, I'd forgotten she was here.

"Ah, the chirpy little Ms. Brandon," Emmett chuckled as he took his phone out.

He didn't greet her politely. Didn't even look at her. Instead he focused on his phone as he spoke to her.

"I've heard so much about you." He snickered at her. "But mostly your mother, of course. Quite the gossip lady of this town, eh?"

Oh, my God, he did not just say that!

I blushed bright crimson as a giggle burst through my pursed lips, and of course they all noticed. Three people. Three reactions. Alice was livid, no surprise there. But Rose actually looked somewhat amused, and I didn't know if it was due to my visible mortification or if she had thought Emmett was funny, too. But in all fairness, what Emmett had said couldn't have been truer. It's just that the Brandon's are highly respected people in this town, and you do not paint them out to be anything, especially not some town gossip.

Emmett, though, his reaction was to give me a genuine smile, and that shit only made me blush harder.

I berated myself over and over for not reacting as I should towards Emmett Cullen. And Edward Cullen for that matter, because God knows I'm a sinner just by thinking any positive thoughts about them.

*Good thing I'm not religious,* I thought as I paid attention to my worn sneakers more than the half-awkward small talk going on. But seriously, we have Emmett Cullen – a twenty-five year old criminal – standing with his future wife, who is seventeen for another week, and has no choice in the matter. Add goodie-two-shoes Alice to that and we have a party that screams mismatch.

"So, Emmett... What did you do before you came to Forks?" Alice sneered. "Spent much time in prison, perhaps?"

Jesus, she's ruthless...

"Alice, for fuck's sake," Rose hissed.

Emmett just smirked cockily at her, and yes, he was definitely Edward's brother.

"What's it to you, squirt?"

He didn't say no, but before I could think about that, my eyes shot to Rose. This time it was her turn to blush, because *she* giggled. Yes, she was mortified, but what caught my attention then was the carefree laugh that Emmett let out. And I knew what he found funny. He was excited over the fact that Rose might be warming up to him.

"We all know what you are, Emmett Cullen," Alice seethed as she stood up. "You and your family should just go back to where you belong, and it sure as hell isn't here in Forks!"

I was with her on that one. So was Rose.



But... something felt off.

"Don't worry, we won't stick around," Emmett chuckled.

And I watched as Rose's face paled.

I already knew this, of course, but Rose didn't. She was most likely scared shitless, just like I was when Edward first told me about leaving. But as Alice began to storm off, I knew I had to follow her. To explain. Or something.

I couldn't leave it like this.

"Emmett, tell Rose about Europe," I told him pointedly. "Tell her what to expect."

He nodded confusingly and I took off to catch up with Alice who was already across the lot.

"Alice! Please wait!"

"Why, Bella?!" she cried, spinning around to face me. "We all know what this means! Both you and Rose are leaving!"

"I-" *have nothing to say...*

What can I say?

I mean, she's right. We're leaving. They're taking us away from everything we know, including our Alice.

She may be an annoying little thing at times, and she's goddamn hyper, but we've known her for years. She's our best friend, always trying to keep our foul language to a minimum, always showing us – with her mother – how we're supposed to act like proper ladies, always hosting the best slumber parties, always caring... always there.

"I'll be here alone," she sniffled.

"Alice," I choked out, throwing my arms around her.

We were both crying and sniffing as she pulled away, and in her eyes... I hated that I saw disgust.

"You're giving up without trying," she accused while wiping her tears away.

I knew she'd see it that way.

"There's nothing we can do," I sighed. "And we can't run away, you know that deep down."

She knew.

Rose and I would never survive on our own. We had no means, no education, and for another month, I was still seventeen. It was illegal for me to travel without Dad's consent, and it didn't matter because we had no money to do so anyways.

Alice glared at something behind me, and I looked over my shoulder to see Edward park his Aston next to Emmett's Jeep. It didn't take more than a second to figure out that Emmett had texted him earlier.

From twenty yards away or so, I watched as Emmett introduced Rose to Edward, and I saw them all turn in our direction. The two brothers dressed the same, in those dress pants, fancy shoes, and black shirts with sleeves drawn up...

"So, that's him, huh?" Alice spat.

I nodded as I turned to face her again.

"They're involved with the mafia, Bella," she muttered, shaking her head in disgust.

We'd never uttered that word. Criminals, sure, but the word 'mafia'... that's more. That's so much more, and maybe we're kidding ourselves when we don't think that word, but... none of it matters. It's our future.

"I can't be friends with you..." she mumbled, looking down at her feet.

She can't be friends with us...?

"Wait, are you saying that this is our fault?" I asked, feeling my temper flare.

"It doesn't matter," she replied indifferently.

I couldn't fucking believe this.

"I can't be associated with that kind of... lowlife," she added.

She was still not looking at me, and I knew she was half-lying here, but that didn't take away the sting. That she could say that to me...

It hurt.

"Then by all means, Alice... leave," I told her coldly.

And she did. With a last look of disgust thrown towards the Cullen brothers, she turned to leave.

I was in disbelief as I headed back to Rose.

Couldn't believe Alice would judge us. It wasn't our choice. But still, she put us in the same category as the men.

God, it hurt. But it also angered me.

Rose and I didn't deserve to be judged by her, and we definitely didn't deserve feeling like she was above us.

I didn't even acknowledge the three sets of eyes on me as I sat down on the bench. Just leaned forward on my knees and stared at the empty lot in front of us, and I didn't know whether to laugh or cry when a frowning Edward squatted down right in front of me, his hands on my knees.

"Who did that?" he murmured as his eyes flickered to my cheek.

There was concern and care in his voice, just like yesterday, and it fucking killed me that he was able to get under my skin that way.

"I fell?" I chuckled humorlessly, leaning back slightly to escape that... feeling.

"Nice try," he replied, giving me a half smile.

Letting go of me, he reached into his pocket and retrieved a pack of cigarettes. An expensive brand... not American. He had them yesterday as well.

Davidoff.

"Thanks," I mumbled as he offered me one.

Turning into a chain smoker here for God's sake...

"Tell him, B," Rose said. "Tell him who hit you."

Glaring at her, I gritted out, "I'm not telling shit."

Fuck, I wished she could read my mind because the only thing I wanted to tell was to shut the fuck up. I mean, couldn't she understand that if Edward found out my father did this, that something bad would happen? Not that I knew what, but it couldn't be good.

"She doesn't have to tell me, Rosalie," Edward sighed, standing up. "I already have a pretty good idea." Turning to me, he said, "Isabella, I want to take you over to my aunt's house, so she can check your bruises." He didn't want me to fight him on this one.

"I didn't know you had family here," Rose said as she pulled me to a stand.

"The Denalis," Emmett replied.

"Tanya Denali's your aunt?" I asked in disbelief.

She was our school nurse for fuck's sake.

"Yes. Our father's older sister." Edward nodded.

"Well, I don't like that woman," I huffed, and Rose agreed with a nod.

"She's always calling us Allannah or some shit like that."

Seriously, we've known the woman all our lives and still she can't learn my goddamn name. She's literally always calling me and Rose that. She's nice and all, but lady, come *on*, my name is Bella!

"That's a term of endearment," Edward chuckled.

I was pissed, confused, and... gawking.

He was beautiful when he smiled.

But back to being confused. "Um, what?" I asked.

Term of endearment?

"It's Irish," he clarified. "It means 'dear child' or something like that."

Huh.

Rose and I were both in a daze, and no doubt did we think the same things. The million things regarding the Cullens. Or maybe two million.

Well, they're Irish. I suppose they would know. And... they're related to Tanya? Shit, I didn't see that coming. I mean, she's always been nice. A bit overbearing and always calling us that... Allannah-thing, but still... nice, I guess.

And then of course there were the questions about Edward. Why did he seem so nice? And caring.

"I'd really like her to look at you, though," I heard Edward murmur.

That same expression of concern was there again.

I needed to protect myself here. I was already marrying him as it is, and before that, I needed my distance. Distance to protect my gullible mind, because I was clearly that; gullible.

"I'm fine," I said firmly. "Thank you, but I'm fine."

He frowned deeply, as did Emmett, but I was glad to see that I seemed to have Rose on my side. Maybe she was scared of thinking positive things about the Cullens, too. It would make sense.

Emmett leaned in to whisper something in Edward's ear then.

And Edward nodded firmly at him.

"Right," he sighed. "I guess you'd rather walk home than let us drive you?"

It was more of a statement than question.

But he was half-wrong. A part of me... no, I'm not going there.

"Thank you for the offer, but we'll walk," Rose said to them both.

"Fine." Edward nodded. "Pleasure to see you again, Isabella, and nice to meet you, Rosalie. I'm sure we'll see each other very soon."

"Take care, ladies," Emmett added politely.

We didn't linger.

Neither did Edward and Emmett.

"I could ask my parents if you can spend the night at my place," Rose offered as we left the school.

"No, I'm fine," I assured, hoping my words were true.

We spent the rest of the walk comparing stories, voicing our fears, and telling each other about our dates, and I was right.

We were both terrified that we would think positive thoughts about the Cullen brothers.

Her dates with Emmett had gone pretty much the same as my date with Edward. Rose hadn't shied away. She had been honest. And... Emmett had loved it.

As for our future, Emmett had told Rose today about what we could expect while I was with Alice, and he confirmed what Edward had said, stating that we could expect being away from 'home' 6-8 months of the year, and it was split between Europe and the US.

Before Rose and I parted ways, I told her about what Alice had said, and though Rose was hurt just like me, there was also anger. And there wasn't really anything we could do about it.

#### **4 – FORKS IN AUGUST**

**BPOV**

A week passed and life was... insane.

True to her word, Alice avoided us like a plague.

Charlie also avoided me at all costs.

It took all but one day for the entire population of Forks to find out about my bruises, and though I was only rumored to be the choice of Edward Cullen, people immediately assumed that he was the one that had hit me. It didn't matter that I argued and told the fuckers that it wasn't Edward. This of course led to the question of me and Edward, and whether the rumor was true. Was I the choice of Edward Cullen? And was Rose the choice of Emmett Cullen?

Rose and I didn't answer shit.

And the Cullen brothers remained a mystery in Forks seeing as no one ever saw them. Only their cars.

The cars were seen very often.

Parked right outside of school. Almost everyday.

Also, Rose and I have found gifts in our lockers at school every morning. And we're not talking flowers and chocolate here. No, we're talking about things they couldn't have known about us.

Without doing 'research.'

Or stalking.





I no longer needed Rose to get my cigarettes. A pack of Davidoff was found in our lockers every other day. And then there was my favorite cherry flavored gum, Rose's favorite soda, lunch boxes from restaurants in Port Angeles, iPods filled with music we loved, and the day after I had dropped my cherry ChapStick in a puddle outside of school, there was new one in my locker.

They gave us things to pass the time, such as the mentioned iPods. Magazines, books, and even a few fake slips to get out of PE or some other class we loathed.

No ordinary courting.

But the thing is that Rose and I had a hard time hiding the fact that we loved it. We both loved opening our locker each morning to find out what the men knew about us. Like the day I found a bottle of my favorite Snapple and a memory card filled with Edward's favorite classical music, along with a slip to get out of Trig.

The man knew me, and I began to *not* hate that he had most likely come across this information by... well, I have no idea, but I doubt they have retrieved it legally.

Rose was the same, and it was close to impossible for her to hide the smile when Emmett had left a small gift basket with shampoo, conditioner, perfume, face cream, and body wash. All of them were favorites of Rose's that she could never afford, and again, don't ask us how, but Emmett apparently knew that her shampoo and conditioner were out at home.

Obviously we freaked out for a second, dreading that the men had installed cameras or something in our goddamn bathrooms, but Emmett had left a note.

*Said, Don't worry, beautiful. There was no invading of your privacy.  
/Emmett.*

And we trusted him, them.

Sorcerers.

I mean, they just knew so much. Knew what we liked, knew what we hated in school, knew what we needed, and knew what we couldn't afford, and they gave it to us. Just like that.

Sure, they did this to get us to warm up to them. There was no doubt about that. They basically bought us. But they could've done it the way most men do; with flowers, chocolate, and fancy jewelry.

But they didn't. They got us things we liked, whether it was a pack of gum or a lunch box from a restaurant... because they knew we didn't like what they served that day in school.

Rose and I discussed at length where they could've gotten this information, and the only answers we could come up with were the cameras in school. But they don't have audio, so it doesn't make sense, that either.

We're assuming the guys can hack into... whatever... I mean, they're outlaws. They do that sorta thing, right?

Rose suggested that they might know from the grocery store as they have cameras there, too. And I suppose that might work, I mean, that's where we buy the Snapples, the ChapSticks, and all that.

Anyway...

Our main concern today is Rose.

It's her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday tomorrow, and we already know that Emmett will show up for their Saturday dinner.

\*o\*o\*o\*

"Anything fun in your locker today?" Rose asked as we took our seats for lunch.

"Pack of smokes, more gum, and a note," I replied.

It was the first time I had gotten a note, and it... did things to me.

"What'd it say?"

I couldn't hide my blush.

"It said, 'You're beautiful.'"

Rose nodded and lowered her gaze, focusing on the chicken salad.

We were both thinking the same things.

We were warming up to them, and we hated it. Loathed it.

"Any idea on what will happen tomorrow?" I asked, effectively changing the subject... a bit at least.

“Just that Emmett will be there for dinner with... a question.”

We knew what that meant.

Emmett would ask her to marry him and Rose’s father would tell her to agree.

“We can meet up tomorrow night, right?” she asked.

“Of course.” I nodded. “Our picnic table at eight?”

“Sounds good.”

I wish I could give her something, but it was like this every year. Our families weren’t made of money, and our petty allowances went to clothes and necessities.

\*O\*O\*O\*

I spoke to Rose this morning, wished her a happy birthday, and after that, I’ve been... pacing. Cleaning the house, and cooked Charlie’s lunches for next week – all to pass time. And I don’t know how many times I’ve checked to clock in the living room.

I’m just... worried about her. Sitting there in their quaint dining room with her parents... and Emmett Cullen. No, there’s no way she’s enjoying her birthday. Adult. God, she’s an adult now.

Last day of August.

And I’m next. Thirteen days.

Thankfully, I was done cleaning the house by the time Charlie came home, so I quickly retreated to the second floor where I continued to clean.

We haven't said a word since he slapped me, and I have no intention of saying anything to him. Doesn't matter that the bruise is almost gone. I will always remember the day he not only gave me away to a criminal, but also... God, still can't believe he hit me. Never thought that about him.

By the time I was done with the bathroom, I was a sweaty mess, but I needed shit to do, otherwise I'd go insane. And as I yet again checked the time, I saw that it was six PM.

Had he asked her yet?

Was Rose engaged now? To be a Cullen?

Deep breaths.

I cleaned Charlie's room.

I cleaned my own room.

There was a knock on the door downstairs.

"Get the door, Bells!" I heard Charlie bellow.

He had changed. So much.

With a sigh, I trudged down the stairs, and pulled my messy hair back in a ponytail.

I opened the door... and wished I hadn't.

It was Edward.

Again, dressed in his fancy black. Strikingly handsome, like always.

I on the other hand... was wearing an old pair of jeans with so many holes in them that I... well, there are many holes in them anyway, and then... a

raggedy, baggy, and unflattering t-shirt in grey. A few holes in that one, too. Of course. This is me we're talking about after all.



"Hello, Edward," I said. "What brings you by?"

He didn't speak at first. Just looked me over. From head to toe. Frowning.

I was embarrassed.

"Though you always look gorgeous... I must ask if your father shouldn't encourage you to buy new clothes." He met my eyes as he had said the last word.

It was the same goddamn *murmur*. Nothing condescending... just... God, why the hell does he sound so caring! His words should be taken as an insult!

"Would if I could, Edward," I replied impatiently. "But we're not made of money... Surprised you didn't know that already."

He let out a silent chuckle before responding. "I do know most things, I admit that. But I had no idea your father neglected you this much."

I clenched my teeth. "Surely you didn't stop by to give me fashion advice."

"No, I didn't," he sighed. "And it's not advice. I just want to see you taken care of properly."

Goddamn him and his caring.

"I'm here to invite you to be my date on my brother and Rosalie's engagement dinner for next Saturday."

Engaged. They're engaged.

I paled.

Next Saturday... that's six days before my birthday. Oh, God.

"Um, that's up to Charlie," I mumbled as I motioned for Edward to enter. "Let me get him for you."

I left Edward in the hallway and quickly located Charlie in the living room where he had his eyes glued to the TV.

"Edward Cullen is here," I said quietly. "He wishes to speak to you."

"Hmph," was his response as he got up.

I followed him silently out to the hallway, listening as Edward told Charlie – coldly, flatly – that Emmett and Rosalie had gotten engaged tonight, and that there was a dinner at the Cullen mansion next weekend.

"Sure, whatever." Charlie shrugged.

Lovely.

Charlie left us then. Just like that. Didn't care for shit.

I stared at the floor, thinking, wondering, how or what changed Charlie.

"Isabella."

"Yeah," I muttered, raising my head to face him.

I was met with concern. And a frown.

Didn't surprise me.

"He hasn't done anything else, has he?"

I swallowed hard and averted my eyes to the floor. Hated, hated, hated, that he cared.

"No."

He sighed deeply. One of those sighs where you know he wants to say something, but doesn't.

"Anything else?" I asked him.

"You're meeting with Rosalie at eight, yes?"

Jesus, how the hell did he know *that*?!

"Why ask?" I chuckled humorlessly. "You already knew."

"Emmett told me that Rosalie had plans to meet with you."

Oh. I guess that makes sense.

"Let me drive you there," he said.

Didn't ask. He told me. Still fucking gently, but it wasn't a question.



Why the hell not, I figured.

"Sure," I sighed, getting my jacket in the closet.

Doesn't matter if it's August. Forks is always cold.

"I'll be at school with Rose!" I called to Charlie before ushering us outside.

God, it really was cold outside.

"Don't you get cold?" I blurted out.

But seriously, he had his arms bare, and it really was freezing.

"Not for just a few minutes outside," he replied, smiling slightly as he opened the door for me.

When we were both seated, I decided to just fucking ask him.

"How did you know about all the things Rose and I like?"

He smirked as he pulled out of the driveway, and at first I didn't think he would answer me.

"Emmett and I hacked into the bank, and we got access to your credit card history. We also followed you to and from the grocery store."

I laughed.

I really fucking *laughed*. This dude was insane! Goddamn lunatic for fuck's sake!

Jesus Christ, it was funny. They really hacked their way in!

"Find that funny, eh?" He smirked.

"Yes," I giggled, trying to calm my ass down. "You two are fucking insane for doing that, you know."

And I wasn't surprised. Rose and I had after all figured it was something like that.

"Not arguing with that," he chuckled. "But hey, we were curious," he added with a shrug.

A shrug. Like hacking into our bank was no big deal.

And I'm marrying him.

Christ.

"You could've asked," I retorted, trying to hide my amusement.

"Mm." He nodded. "But would either of you had answered?"

Uhhmm.

I was stumped.

'Cause he was kinda right. Rose and I wouldn't have humored them with honest replies if they asked about our likes and dislikes.

"Doesn't mean you should break the law," I pointed out.

"No, we *shouldn't* have," he concluded.

But they did.

We drove in silence for a while, and I tried not to feel... content. But it was hard. Hard to hate him. Hard to see him as just a criminal.

"Would you answer now?" he asked quietly as he stopped for a red light.

"If I asked anything about you, would you answer?"

I would. But I didn't want to admit that.

Then again, I didn't want him to break laws for me either.

"Depends on the question," I decided.

Didn't take many seconds until he asked, "Do you have any dreams for the future?"

Jesus, he didn't start light.

"What happened to 'what's your favorite color?'" I chuckled.

"I already know that one." He winked.

Winked.

I swallowed hard.

"And which one's that?" I asked as he drove again.

Trick question, because I have two.

"Blue and green."

Damn.

"I figured it was that anyway, judging by the way your room looks."

What. The. Fuck?

"You broke into my room, Edward?!" I shrieked.

He cringed a bit from my shrieking, but the douche was still grinning. That lopsided grin that... *fucked* my shit up.

"Guilty as charged." He nodded. "Don't worry, I didn't read your journal."

Son of a bitch.

Well, I kinda trusted him since I don't write in a goddamn diary, but Jesus, how blunt can an asshole be? Is this his way of getting me to like him, because it aint working.

"Fucking asshole," I huffed as I reached for my smokes.

Wordlessly he rolled down my window.

"Such a potty mouth," he snickered.

I gritted my teeth together as warmth washed over me, and it was all him. To see him amused, or smiling, or grinning, snickering... even that smug smirk of his. It was all him.

"Don't you ever use foul language?" I asked.

"Yes."

And he left it at that. Didn't elaborate. At all.

Douche.

"You frustrate me," I told him before taking a drag.

"How so?" he asked curiously.

"Because I don't understand you."

"All you have to do is ask, Isabella."

So simple. All I have to do is ask.

"And you'll answer?"

He nodded as he made the turn for school. "In one way or another. It might not be the answer you're looking for, but yes, I'll answer."

God, he's cryptic.

Racking my brain for something to ask, I came up with a few questions.  
Sense the sarcasm. I have millions of questions.

"When's your birthday?" I asked first.

"June 20<sup>th</sup>. Recently turned twenty-four."

It was only fifteen to eight, so I wasn't surprised when the lot was empty.

"Favorite color?"

"Green," he replied as he parked the car, closest to our picnic table.

"Favorite music?"

"Irish music. And classical, which you know already."

Makes sense, I suppose. The dude is Irish. And yes, from the memory card he gave me, I knew very well what kind of classic music he likes.

The same as me.

"Do you play any instruments?" I asked.

"I do." He nodded. "Piano, guitar, and the tin whistle."

Wow.

I'm impressed.

Fuck, I'm not admitting that, though.

"What's a tin whistle?"

"An Irish flute," he replied before lighting a cigarette.

So much Irish.

Facing him more fully by turning my body in his direction, I fired off the next thing I could think of. "Does your brother play any instruments?"

"Yes. Guitar, banjo, and mandolin." He smirked, mirroring my position to face me fully. "It's kinda funny to see him play the mandolin."

As I tried to picture Emmett with such a small instrument, I couldn't help but to chuckle either. The men are not small, after all.

"Like you with a flute?" I teased.

"Shut it, princess." He glared playfully. "I rock that instrument."

*Princess.*

"I'm gonna have to see that," I laughed. "I mean, what are you, 6'2"? And your brother's like a giant!"

Yeah, I couldn't wait to see them play such small instruments.

"I'm 6'3", thank you very much, and Emmett's the same. But yeah, he's a bit larger. The dude's in love with working out."

I could definitely tell.

They're both goddamn muscular but Emmett's arms are like... massive. Hmm, but Edward's biceps are pretty fucking spectacular, too...

Change the topic, Bella.

Ah yes, about that...

"Why do you call me Isabella?" I asked curiously.

"It's your name, isn't it?" He grinned.

Damn that grin.

"But you know that everyone calls me Bella," I pointed out.

He nodded thoughtfully as he blew out smoke through his nose.

I found that sexy. As hell.

"I won't call you anything you haven't asked me to call you."

Oh.

*Just like they both call Rose Rosalie.*

They're gentlemen, and they won't take that for granted.

But breaking into my room is acceptable.

Fucking Christ...

There was a tap on my window then, and I glanced out to see Rose standing there.

It was like a cold shower.

I have been sitting here, not only conversing with the Edward Cullen, but I had... enjoyed it... immensely... I've laughed, joked, and teased. And he's done the same.

Shit, we've started to get to know each other. For real.

"I'd say you've just realized what we've been doing," I heard Edward say then. "Am I right?"

Goddamnit.

Perceptive fucker.

"Um, yea," I mumbled as I reached for the door handle.

Before I opened the door, I said without looking at him, "Thanks for the ride."

"No problem, Isabella."

I left the car.

"Hey," Rose said, watching as Edward drove off.

"Hey," I replied lamely.

Silently we made our way to our table, and then I caught a glance at her left ring finger.

"Holy fucking shit!"

## **5 – FORKS IN SEPTEMBER.**

### **BPOV**

*"Holy fucking shit!"*

That... thing... on her finger was... you know, *massive*.

Massive!

"Let me look at it," I gasped, reaching out for her hand.

"I know, you can see it from the fucking moon," she sighed.

I believed her.



# ROSE



It was... hot *damn*, I mean, it was... gorgeous and *mesmerizing*, but motherfucking shit, it's *huge*. Enormous.

I almost asked her if the thing was real, but... well, I've seen their cars, their clothes...

Jesus.

God, it's so *sparkly*...

Can't stop looking at it.

But then I sorta snapped out of it.

Rose is officially engaged to marry Emmett Cullen.

"How did it happen?" I asked quietly as I let her hand go.

Damn, that thing must have cost more than... a dozen houses in Forks.  
Jesus...

"Um, he came over for dinner," she mumbled. "And uh, afterwards, he asked to see me in private, so, my parents left the room..."

Draping an arm around her, I hugged her as she sniffled through the rest of her story.

“He told me that he couldn’t wait to be my husband, and then... he gave me the ring. Said, ‘It will be my honor to marry you, Rosalie... And I will spend the rest of my life making sure that you are happy and well taken care of.’ And then he... put the ring on my finger... and kissed my cheek.”

Rose cried.

I cried with her.

It was suddenly so real. It was happening.

Next week I will be Edward’s date for her engagement dinner. The dinner where we will celebrate their upcoming union. A union where Rose had no choice but to say yes.

And I will go through the same. Soon.

Are we warming up to the Cullen brothers?

Yes. Unfortunately.

They know how to charm. They’re dangerously attractive. But there’s no love. No romantic feelings. No mutual affection. And though we might get whisked away on trips to exotic countries... we’ll still be the wives to criminals. Wives to men that are rumored to have links to the Masen Family in Chicago. Wives to the men who commit crimes instead of making an honest living.

It will be a life of glitz and glamour, but it will all be so goddamn fake. It might even be dangerous, who knows?

We have no idea what it is that the Cullens do, really, but I doubt it’s something petty as a little shoplifting.

Shoplifting won't get you the fancy cars that they drive.

\*o\*o\*o\*

Rose and I spent the next couple of days just... talking, thinking, wondering... crying. Feeling sorry for ourselves.

We weren't surprised when we had gifts in our lockers on Monday. But they didn't have the same effect anymore. Maybe because this had finally hit us. And not only were we getting married, but we were getting married *soon*.

Wednesday came around, and it was just another day. Edward and Emmett's cars were parked outside the school, there were rumors to who the men was choosing, there was more avoidance from Alice, there were boring classes, and there were gifts. Snapple, a fancy lunch, and... a slip to get out of PE. Sure, I was thankful for that one, 'cause God knows I hate PE, but I'm too depressed to... do anything, to think about... anything. Just too depressed.

\*o\*o\*o\*

It was somewhat sunny outside, so Rose and I opted to have our lunch at our picnic table by the parking lot instead.

We walked in silence, but I knew what Rose thought about.

The whole school had been buzzing with rumors for the past three days. All since a girl named Lauren had caught a glance at Rose's ring, and now everyone's asked to see the hand she was hiding in knitted gloves.

"Don't they have a life?" Rose muttered as we took our seats outside.

I followed her line of sight and saw the two black cars, parked across the street.

You couldn't see into the cars of course, but that didn't stop a few students from trying. And they sure did that often. Everyone wanted to get a glance at the mysterious Cullens.

Suddenly I wasn't hungry anymore, and I dumped the fancy lunch container in the trash.

Hopefully Edward noticed.

Hopefully Emmett noticed when Rose did the same.

Yeah, we were bitter today.

Fuckers.

Just wanna... kick their asses. Maybe.

"Perhaps we should go over there and tell them to fuck off," I suggested.

"Like they'd listen," Rose huffed. "Besides, if we did that, the whole school would find out that it's us they've chosen."

True.

But... what if I don't care about that?

"I'm going over there," I said firmly.

"Be my guest. I'll be here, chain smoking my ass off."

With a determined nod, I left Rose by the tables and walked across the lot.

Of course it didn't take long before a few students noticed the direction I was heading but I was too upset to care. And as I crossed the street, and Edward opened the door to his sports car, I didn't care that my eyes welled up. I only had one question, and I could ask that regardless.

Tears be damned.

"Isabella?"

Yeah, he was mighty confused right about now.

"Why are you doing this, Edward?" I asked as I reached him. "Why are you guys so fucking persistent? And why the hell are you stalking us? Don't you have anything better to do?"

Okay, more than one question.

He didn't answer at first.

Just stood there, leaning against his car, and had his arms folded across his chest.

Frowning. Studying me.

Same black clothes.

Don't they have any other clothes?

"Not much to do in a shitty little town like this one, no." He smiled ruefully.

Shitty. That was the closest word to a curse word I've heard him say.

"And you know why we're doing this, Isabella."

"No, I really don't," I gritted out as I wiped a few traitorous tears away.

"We're doing this because we want you two."

And what the fuck happened to mutuality?

I know the society we live in. I know that men come first. But... fuck!

"What about what we want, then?" I croaked, not bothering to wipe my face any longer. "What about what Rose and I want?"

He didn't answer.

"Don't you care that your future wife won't even like you?" I continued.

"Don't you care that-"

He cut me off by grabbing my arm, and then he pulled me close to him. Wrapped his arms around my shoulders, effectively burying my face in his chest. And I was... too shocked to... react.

At first.

"I *do* care," he whispered against my temple. "You have no idea how much I care, beautiful. But I *know* that this will work out."

I... couldn't function.

My senses were invaded by him. Everywhere. All over. His musky scent. His muscular chest. His arms around me. His warmth. His words. His... everything.

"I *will* make you happy, Isabella. I promise," he went on, still whispering.

"I want to give you everything you want, but... fuck, I know that we will be perfect together."

I cried into his chest. Hating him. Liking him. Loathing myself for caving. Despising myself for fisting his shirt. Hating him more for pressing his lips against my temple.

Loving it the same.

Hating myself for reacting the way I do when he talks, when he touches me, when he... just exists. All those shivers. The breath-hitching. The urge to... have *more*.

"I need you to trust me," he whispered.

Trust him? How *could* I? I don't even *know* him! And what I do know isn't good.

"Get to know me, the real me." It was as if he was reading my mind. "Let me take you out this week, and we can talk... get to know each other better... Charlie won't say no."

But... you're a... You're not an honest man.

I sighed heavily, letting all his words register... and I was just... drained. Tired and exhausted. Too young to have to deal with this. I'm not ready to be married. Or... maybe I am, but not to a man I don't know. Not to a man who breaks laws.

Sighed again. Relaxed.

Breathed him in.

Hating myself.

Um...

"You said fuck," I mumbled against his chest.

He did, didn't he?

"That's what you got from all I said?" he chuckled and released me.

He didn't release me completely, though. First he wiped my cheeks with his thumbs, and I fought yet another shiver. And then he trailed down, and held my hands.

Squeezed them gently as he repeated, "Let me take you out."

Goddamn green eyes. Goddamn beautiful fucking face.

Um, what was his question?

Oh, right.

"When?" I asked, biting down on my lip.

"Tomorrow? I'd like to show you a piece of what's really me."

"How many laws are we breaking?" I snorted.

He grinned.

"There's the sass. I missed it."

I lowered my head to hide the blush.

Traitorous hormones.

"Fine," I mumbled. "Tomorrow."

"Perfect. Pick you up at seven?"

I nodded, still watching my shoes.

I mumbled a goodbye then, and the only thing I could think of as I headed back to school was...

That did *not* go as I planned.

\*o\*o\*o\*

When Rose and I arrived at school the day after, everyone was concluding that the Cullens had chosen us. There was no denying it any longer. Not since I pretty much outed myself yesterday with Edward. And Rose was fed up with the questions about why the hell she wore mittens in class, so we just gave up and confirmed the damn thing.



Anyway, we reached our lockers, and what we found was nothing but a note. Both saying pretty much the same thing.

*When you get home, there's a package waiting. See you tonight, beautiful. /Edward.*

*When you get home, there's a package waiting for you, Rose. Pick you up at 6:45 pm. /Emmett.*

Yeah, of course we compared notes.

And yes, Rose told Emmett it was okay for him to call her 'Rose.'

But they're engaged.

Anywho...

We have no idea what this means but it almost sounds as if we're going on a double date, especially since Emmett is picking up Rose just fifteen minutes before Edward is supposed to pick me up.

*No way is he driving the Aston then, I thought. Only two fit in that thing.*

But the thought of double dating is actually quite positive. Might be easier to relax if I have Rose with me.

\*o\*o\*o\*

Uhmmm...

Okay, so um, yeah, there was a package waiting for me when I got home.

Clothes. And a bag. Shoes. Um, and nail polish.

First of all, I sincerely hope Edward didn't pick this out, because that would make him very... you know.

Because we're talking Louis Vuitton, Dior, Marc Jacobs, and True Religion. Themed in blue and white, I have received a pair of jeans, a sweater, a bag, and a pair of ballet flats.

Oh, and the nail polish.



And Rose called, screamed, that she had opened her bag. Same stuff in hers. Themed in black and pink. Pair of black jeans, a pink sweater, a Burberry bag, nail polish... shoes...

The guys didn't pick that out, did they?

God, I hope not.

But anyway, I'm dressed in that now, and I'm trying not to cry out in happiness of the feeling of new clothes, but it's sorta hard, because Rose and I haven't been able to buy new clothes in over six months, and what we bought... well, it sure as fuck wasn't cashmere and stuff like that.

So soft... Incredibly soft. Only problem is that I can't wear a bra in this white sweater, because I only own three bras and they're all black, which means they would've been seen under this shirt.

Doesn't really matter, though. I'm not exactly voluptuous. My perky little things don't need the damn bra.

Anyway, cashmere is goddamn heaven against your skin.

And I hate Edward for making me wear this. So luxurious. Soft. Comfortable.

Hate him.

The fucker is buying me, and I can't stand that. It hurts. But what hurts more is the fact that I can practically hear him say, "Just want you to have the best."

I know he would say some bullshit like that.

The doorbell rang then and since Charlie wasn't home, I ran to get the door...

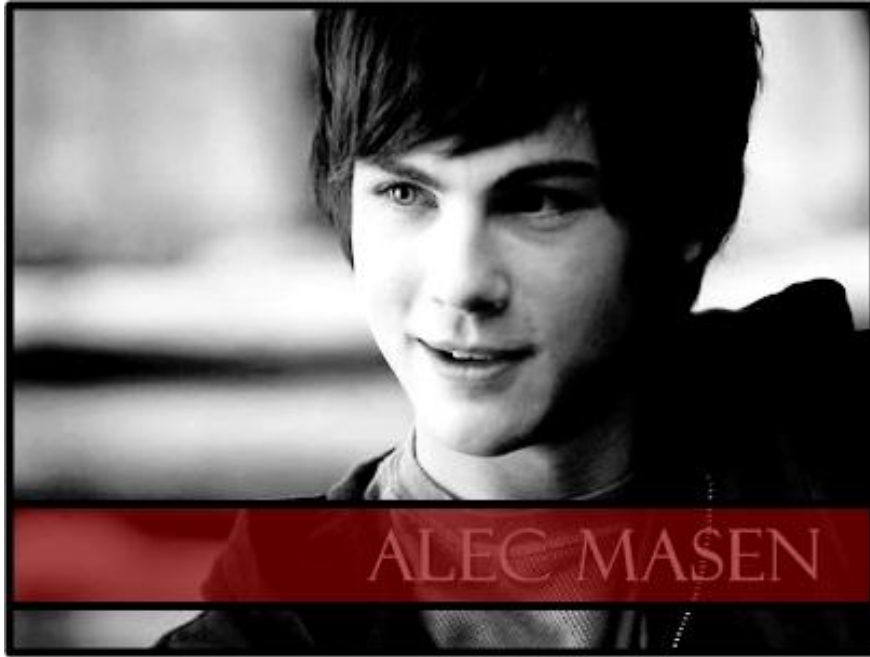
Um, huh?

What I saw... was not what I expected.

"Ye're the lovely Isabella, eh?"

It's a kid.

With an Irish accent.



“Yeah, and you are?” I chuckled, ‘cause the kid was looking sorta cool.

The little dude was wearing cargo shorts – despite the cold – a t-shirt, fancy sneakers, and a fedora. Yeah, you read it; a fedora.

“Me name’s Alec.” He grinned, offering his hand to me. “I’m Eddie and Em’s cousin.”

Em? Eddie?

Oh, God. Damn, he’s adorable. Fucking love his accent, too.

“Nice to meet you, Alec,” I giggled as I shook his hand.

“You too, pretty thing.” He winked.

Oh. My. God!

Pretty thing? Jesus...

“May I escort you to the car?” he asked, holding his arm out.

"Sure," I laughed, looking up to see a very amused Edward stand by the BMW I thought was Esme's.

"You're not shy, are ya?" I grinned after I had locked the door behind me.

"Nah, I'm cool like that."

"Alright, enough outta you, cub," Edward chuckled as we reached him.

"Get in the car, will ya?"

"Aye, boss," Alec replied with a mock salute.

I think I love that little kid.

But then I saw... Edward more... fully... fuck.



The man was wearing a pair of jeans for crying out loud. And not only that, but he was wearing a grey v-neck... and hot damn, he looked all kinds of delicious. Jesus, the man even had sneakers on.

So, this was really more of what Edward really is, then?

"Uhm."

That wasn't me. That was Edward.

He was... huh, um, staring.

Not anywhere *near* my face.

To be blunt, the dude was ogling my boobs.

"Edward," I said.

Snapped my fingers, too. For good measure.

"Uhm, yeah," he mumbled, finally meeting my knowing smirk.

Was kinda fun to see him less... in control.

Shaking his head slightly, to himself, I think, he seemed to snap out of it.

"Isabella," he sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "You look..."

I waited.

For four more seconds.

Then, after he blew air out through his cheeks, he said...

"Fucking gorgeous."

I think I died a little.

"Get in the car, Tush," I heard Alec say then.

Tush? First 'pretty thing' and now Tush?

Sweet Jesus.

"You heard the man." Edward winked, seemingly back to his confident self.

"You're not gonna call me Tush?" I asked, cocking an eyebrow.

"If you'll allow me to nickname you, Tush would not be the one, no," he chuckled.

Not Tush? Then why did he – not so subtly – tilt his head to check out my ass?

*God, this really is a new Edward*, I thought as I got into the car.

I grinned as I saw an amused Rose sit on the other side of Alec.

By the fucking way, I heard Edward curse under his breath before closing the door.

I think he likes my ass.

I think I like that he likes my ass.

"Hiya, Tush." Alec smirked. "You know Sweet Cheeks, yes?" He nodded his head in Rose's direction.

"I do," I chuckled, shaking my head at him. "Hey, Ro."

"Hey, Bella," she snickered. "I'm glad you're finally here. This little kid has been... very suggestive."

"Can ye blame me, ladies?" he asked. "To sit here... between the two of you... Can ye really blame a lad?"

"Oh, my God," I laughed. "How old *are* you, Alec?"

"He's twelve," Emmett answered for him in a chuckle as he started the car. "Just ignore him. And hi, Isabella."

"Hi, Emmett." I smiled.

The damn dimples, I swear.

And Jesus, Alec has them, too.

"Pshhh, they can't ignore the Almighty Alec, Em. They're gonna leave yer arses for me."

First of all, I love this kid.

Second of all, 'arses'?

Christ.

"You know what, Alec? Maybe we will." I grinned.

"Absolutely." Rose nodded.

"Shite, we shouldn't have brought him, Em," Edward chuckled from the passenger seat.

"No kidding," Emmett huffed.

They were different. Both of them. So damn casual all of the sudden.

And then I noticed...

"Hot damn, Emmett, are you wearing a hoodie?!" I exclaimed.

"Sure am," he laughed. "Noticed that, eh?"

"How could I not? And you, Edward, don't think I didn't notice you wearing jeans! Thought I was gonna have a damn heart attack," I joked.

Edward sent me one his delicious winks in the side mirror, and Emmett... he boomed out a carefree laughter.

Shit, things were different.



"So, where are we going?" Rose asked after a few minutes.

"Edward bought a small cabin outside of La Push," Emmett answered.

"We're gonna show you our Irish side."

That had my attention.

"Does that mean I get to see you play the mandolin?" I teased.

"Dude! You fucking told her?!" Emmett guffawed as he punched Edward.

He cursed. Said fucking.

Just... sayin'.

"Of course," Edward laughed... and punched back.

They were being brothers.

Both Rose and I smiled genuinely.

What the fuck is wrong with us?

"Since me cousins don't have the courtesy of answering ye, Tush, I'll step in," Alec replied smoothly. "Yes, luv, there will be playing, but not on the mandolin."

Now I'm love? Or 'luv' in his adorable accent.

"You're cute, you know that, right?" I giggled at him.

"Naw, cheers, Tush. And ye look like a goddess, I swear."

"Jaysus," Edward complained. "Give me a break, will ya, Alec? I'm already having a hard time winning her over."

Oh, how I blushed.

Little does he know that he *is* winning me over.

No matter what that makes me, he is... succeeding.

"Maybe I should teach ye how to work the ladies, then, eh?" Alec suggested. "I mean no disrespect, boss, but I have after all reached first base with a lass, and ye two haven't."

What. The. Fuck?

"SHUT THE FUCK UP, ALEC!" both Emmett and Edward shouted.

Rose and I stared wide eyed at each other. Jaws dropped. The whole shebang.

First base? That's kissing. Right?

But they're... twenty-four and twenty-five years old...

HOW IS THAT *POSSIBLE*?!

"Did I say a wee bit too much, lads?" Alec asked.

"YES!" Emmett bellowed.

"Ya think?" Edward snapped.

Leaning back in my seat, I just... um... sorta went blank... for a while. I mean... they haven't kissed a girl?

Wow.

I haven't kissed a boy yet either, of course, but I'm only seventeen, and I'm not allowed. Well, I suppose I am allowed now, now that I'm officially courting Edward, but... hot damn... I'm just beginning to warm up to the thought of him. Affection will have to wait a fuckload.

Well, until the wedding night.

God, I don't wanna think about that now...

"You've really kissed a girl already, Alec?" Rose chuckled, seemingly desperate to lighten the tension.

To be honest, I hadn't noticed the tension but as I caught a glance of Edward in the side mirror, and Emmett... Christ, they looked like they were in pain, and hadn't it been for the dark, I could've sworn I saw them both blush.

"Aye, Sweet Cheeks," Alec assured. "I've frenched me Maggie back home in Chicago a few times. Gonna marry that lass one day, I swear."

Back home in Chicago?

Oh, God.

With hesitation and apprehension, I met Edward eyes in the side mirror, and noticed him studying me closely.

"Alec's our mother's sister's son," Edward said, his eyes fixed on mine still.

Mother's sister's son.

That'd be a Masen then.

"Alec and his twin sister, Nessa, just flew in yesterday to spend a couple of weeks here," he added.

"Yep, Aunt Esme's tutoring us," Alec piped in. "Mum and Dad are having some problems in Chicago, so that's why we're here."

For some reason I don't think they're having marital problems...

"You're last name is Masen," Rose stated quietly.

"Yes, luv. Surely you've heard of us!" he laughed.

The kid laughed.

Edward continued to study me.

Emmett did the same with Rose.

The rest of the ride was quiet.

## **6 – FORKS IN SEPTEMBER**

*Scarborough Fair – Whistles and Guitar*

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=B83IHBkqu9A&playnext=1&list=PL507A3C9E453531F7](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B83IHBkqu9A&playnext=1&list=PL507A3C9E453531F7)

*Cooley's Reel – Whistles and Guitar*

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9qpDjafWRM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9qpDjafWRM)

## **BPOV**



Once we reached the log cabin in the middle of nowhere, Emmett and Alec started unpacking the car, but Edward stayed back.

"Can I have a word, Isabella?"

I nodded and kept my eyes on the ground.

"I'll be inside," Rose murmured.

Okay.

Then it was just the two of us.

"Here," he murmured, offering me a lit cigarette.

"Thanks," I mumbled.

Deep drag. Exhale. What a clusterfuck this is...

"Ask me," he said.

When I looked up at him, he said again, "Ask that question you've been dying to ask."

I understood.

But was I ready to hear the answer?

Fuck it, here we go.

"Are the rumors true? You're linked with the Masen Family in Chicago?" I asked.

Deep drag. Exhale. Please say no...

"Yes, it's true. We're related."

Fuck.

"So... you're like... in the mafia?"

That was the first time I uttered that word. Mafia.

He smiled ruefully, and took a drag before replying. "That'd be a Sicilian word. There's only one mafia, and that's the Sicilian one."

Is he serious?

"Fucking semantics, Edward," I hissed.

"It's not semantics, Isabella," he insisted firmly. "Because right now your pretty little head is full of speculations, assumptions, and false accusations."

First time he didn't use his soft voice with me.

"Then enlighten me, Edward," I snarked. "How do you pay for the fancy cars, the Gucci, the Burberry, the mansions, and all of it?!"

"I didn't say we were anything close to legit, but I *am* saying that whatever you have cooked up in that head of yours is fucked up wrong," he gritted out, even pointing a finger at me.

Now he was pissed.

Bastard had no right.

"Then what have I cooked up in my pretty little head, huh?"

Deep drag. Exhale. Please take me out of here...

He stepped close, exhaled the smoke from his nose, and changed... it was the gentle eyes again.

"You believe what you've read in the papers; that we kill people, that we deal with drugs and trafficking... that we deal with blood diamonds."

He murmured those horrible words. Softly.

But yes, that's what I've read. And yes, that's what I believe.

I followed the trial last year. I know of the charges that Edward Masen's son stood up against; murder, grand theft auto, armed robbery, fraud... the list went on and on, and he received a life time sentence for that.

Liam Masen.

"That's what you believe, yes?" Edward said as he stubbed his smoke out.

I nodded and looked down. Threw my cigarette away.

"That's wrong, though. Not all of it, but much is."

"You don't kill people?" I asked tiredly, quietly.

"I don't. Emmett doesn't..."

That's not a no...

"But...?" I hedged, looking up at him.

"Our family in Chicago... what they do has nothing to do with me and Emmett."

"That's bullshit," I said. "If the Cullens had nothing to do with the Masens, then why have you been in the papers? And why did Esme testify in Liam Masen's defense?"

"You know your shit," he chuckled humorlessly. "But evidently you don't know enough, because if you did, you'd also know that my mother did not testify in his defense when it came to the charges of kidnapping, murder, and armed robbery."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because he was guilty of those charges," he replied simply. Even shrugged.

"What wasn't he guilty of?" I asked, humoring him, because I sure think he is guilty of all of it.

"Trafficking, diamond trade, drug dealing, a few other things..."

I... couldn't believe I was standing here discussing this.

There's no justifying murder.

"But you're missing the big picture, Isabella," he sighed, stepping even closer. "First of all, there are reasons... And second of all, I'm not like that. My brother's not like that. We don't kill anyone," he implored.

"What do you do then?" I asked, stepping back slightly.

He noticed and took a step back... with a hurt expression that fucking killed me.

Hating myself for this. Hating myself for letting him get to me.

"My brother and I deal with luxury cars... mostly. I can't give you details yet."

Simple answer. He just... said it. Like it was the most simple thing to do.

And I didn't understand a thing.

"You steal, Edward."

He didn't answer.

But they don't kill?

They don't play with human lives? They don't hurt?



"We don't deal with drugs, we don't kill, we don't kidnap... and we don't drag people into this kind of life."

My head shot up faster than the speed of a bullet.

"You don't drag people in, Edward?!" I seethed. "Then what the *fuck* are you doing with me and Rose!"

"You won't be a part of it," he explained quickly. "You and Rosalie will never be a part of what Emmett and I do."

Bullshit! We'll be married to them! We couldn't have been more part of it.

"Yes, we will," I replied confidently. "We'll wear the clothes you buy us, we'll live in the houses, we'll be married to you, and we'll eat the food... and all of this, everything is funded... it all comes from your dealings."

He didn't answer.

Good.

I had him there.

"So, that's all you see, Isabella?" he asked with a tilted head. "All you'll see is that Em and I deal with cars?"

No. Yes. I don't know.

"Does it matter?" I wondered.

"Yes, it matters. Because if you think my work is the only thing that defines me..." He trailed off.

Then what? Will he let me go? Will he break things off?

I swallowed hard.

"Then what?"

Something felt... awful.

He smiled bitterly. "I'm too selfish to let you go. It does matter greatly, but not enough to let you go. I can't see you with anyone else. Plus, you already know some stuff about us. Letting go is not an option anymore."

I closed my eyes as they flooded with tears, and shivers ran through me as I realized I felt... *relief*. I was nothing but relieved. He wouldn't let me go.

I've mentioned it before, and I'll do it again; something is wrong with me.

"I'm sorry I'm not more... humane," he muttered.

Obviously he misinterpreted my tears.

Blindly, I reached out and fisted his shirt.

Pulled the bastard closer, and buried my face in his chest.

"I hate you," I croaked... and tightened my hold on his waist.

He smelled so good... All man. Comfort. Safety. Warmth.

Hated him.

He said nothing, but he relaxed... and held me tightly... his lips pressed against the top of my head.

I loved it and hated it.

"You're gonna hate me for a while, princess," he whispered. "Especially since I'm coming over to your house tomorrow night..."

I tensed.

I understood.

I relaxed.

I nodded.

I didn't hate him. I couldn't.

Tomorrow was Friday. I'd still be seventeen of course, but... by the way he phrased his words, there was no mistaking it.

He just wouldn't wait for my birthday.

Many girls got engaged before they turned eighteen. It was just getting married that you had to wait until you were eighteen for. And I guess Edward doesn't want to wait.

*I don't hate you*, I wanted to say.

But I wasn't ready for that. Instead I settled for hugging him tightly.

Why did I feel so calm by his presence?

Why did he make me feel safe?

Shit, what a mess I was.

"Oi! Em said ye were talking seriousness, but ye're out here smooching!" we heard Alec holler. "Get yer arses in here!"

That kid has the language of... I don't know... but smooching? Who says that?

Edward and I both chuckled, released each other slowly, and I was glad that there was no awkwardness... or uncomfortable tension.

"Let's get ye inside, eh, lass?" Edward joked.

Blushing and giggling like a goddamn school girl, I nodded, and I tried not to think how adorable he was when he spoke that way. I had to say I was curious to why he and Emmett didn't have an accent, although there was *something* there when they spoke. Like how they pronounced a few words. But other than that they spoke American like anyone here.

"Why don't you and Emmett have an accent?" I asked as we headed for the cabin.

"Born and raised in America." He shrugged. "So are the Masens, but they've somehow kept a little of the Irish accent."

"My mother speaks more with an accent," he added.

Because she was a born Masen. "And how Irish are you?" I continued.

"Every fiber in me." He winked as he held the door open for me. "It was my mother's father who moved to Chicago from Ireland... And as for my father's side; they've been in America for a few more generations than that."

"There you are!" Emmett grinned as we entered the living room.

I took in my surroundings.



It really was an ordinary log cabin. Everything in dark wood. A big fireplace. Thick rug on the wooden floor. Dim lighting. Plush couch in the middle of the room with a matching chair.

Nothing extravagant, but it was still beautiful and... rich.

"I got the fire started, boss," Alec announced proudly.

"Good, cub," Edward chuckled.

Edward and I just stood there for a while as we watched Emmett and Alec take stuff out of the two massive bags they had brought, and don't think for a second that I didn't notice Rose and her smile.

It was small, but there still the same as she watched Emmett and Alec, too, from the chair where she sat.

"Blanket for Sweet Cheeks," Alec said, throwing her a fleece blanket in dark blue.

I just smiled.

That kid was awesome.

And...

"How is he related...?" I trailed off quietly to Edward.

"Edward Masen's wife is my mother's sister," he murmured.

Holy... oh... That's... closely linked.

Edward and Emmett's uncle is *the* head of the Masens. And I knew from earlier tonight that Alec was Esme's nephew...

Fuck.

"So, Liam...?" I whispered.

Edward nodded. "Yes, that's Alec and Nessa's big brother."

Shit.

But... wait.

"But... if Esme and Elizabeth were born Masens... How is it Edward Masen's name then?"

"That's a long story... Let's save that for another day, eh?" he suggested quietly... and kissed my temple. "We need some fun."

Felt too good.

"Sure," I whispered, not really trusting my voice.

"Have a seat with Rosalie." He smiled. "We men have some entertaining to set up."

"Okay," I chuckled, walking towards the big chair where Rose sat. It was certainly big enough for the two of us.

"Bloody hell, they're looking gorgeous, lads." Alec smirked as I took my seat next to Rose.

Rose and I... well, we blushed at the damn kid. But come on, the dude was one hell of a smooth talker.

"Yes, they sure do," Edward said to me, sending me yet another of his damn winks. "And you too, of course, Rosalie," he added politely, smiling at her.

"Absolutely. You look beautiful, Isabella," Emmett agreed, giving an appreciative smile. "We're lucky bastards."

God, do they have to be so goddamn charming?

"Oh, for fuck's sake, just call me Bella, will ya?" I groaned. "None of that Isabella-shit anymore."

"Yeah, and it's Rose, Edward," Rose added.

Jesus, the men grinned like they had just won the lottery.

"Nah, nah, ye're still Tush and Sweet Cheeks to me," Alec said dismissively.

This night was certainly... promising.

But then I remembered something...

"Um guys? Did you send us the clothes?" I asked hesitantly.

"Yes. Wasn't that clear?" Emmett asked confusingly.

"Wait, so you picked out the nail polishes for us?" Rose asked with wide eyes.

I'm pretty sure I was equally wide eyed.

"Wait, the sodding what?" Edward choked out.

"In the bags," I clarified. "There was nail polish that matched the outfits."

"Oh, fucking hell," Emmett muttered, shaking his head.

Edward groaned.

I was confused.

"Jesus, I'm gonna kill them," Edward sighed.

Thankfully, Emmett noticed me and Rose, and decided to explain. "We told Mom and Aunt Tanya to put together something simple for a night at the cabin."

Oooh. Get it now.

"And they love to shop," Edward added sheepishly.

"I'll say," Rose huffed. "Aint nothing simple about what we got."

"I second that." I nodded.

"Whaddya mean?" Emmett asked.

I stared at him. Wasn't shit obvious?

"Are you kidding?" Rose laughed incredulously. "Those clothes must have cost more than... heck if I know... all the clothes I've ever owned?"

"Exactly. And then some," I agreed.

"Huh," was Edward's response before he shrugged it off.

"Might as well get used to it." Alec winked. "We Masens and Cullens spoil our ladies."

"Sounds about right." Emmett nodded.

"Yep." Edward chuckled.

Um, okay?

Aaanyway...

The table was full of... stuff. Bottles. Glasses. Snacks. Candy. Sandwiches. And more... stuff.

And our Irish night began.



Alec was definitely in his element as he told dirty jokes, was allowed to curse freely, and take a sip of Edward's beer. And we watched in amusement as he tried to sweet talk his way into more beer.

Thankfully, Edward and Emmett was firm with their no.

We laughed. Rose and I. There was no denying that we laughed our asses off more than once, especially when Edward and Emmett told us stories about their childhood, and how competitive they were, and still are. And Alec loved to pipe in with stories of his own; stories about family reunions and holidays. Oh, and the kid had this pocket knife that he fiddled with. Yeah, I freaked out at first – I mean, a twelve year old kid with a goddamn pocket knife? That's fucked up. But... Alec's not an ordinary kid, and he doesn't come from an ordinary family. It was just something we had to get used to, and when we watched as he played with it, twirled it around, performed tricks with it, it was kinda hard not to be impressed.

The kid was a little gangster brat with his knife, Irish accent, and the fucking fedora.

It was just so casual and... normal. In some weird ass way.

What they told us were stories filled with laughter, love, and jokes. Memories about how some men in the family couldn't hold their liquor, and that, hint, hint, Edward and Emmett were two of these people.

Yes, that was Alec's words, but the brothers didn't deny it, stating that they were Irish to the bone, and that as soon as the beer flowed freely, they would get worked up.

And they did.

Emmett and Edward gave Rose and I Irish beer, first one called 'Guinness' or 'an Arthur' – a beer we had heard of, of course – but then came the beer called 'Murphy's', and that was apparently their favorite, for the

flavor, but also because the beer came from the county of Cork in Ireland where the Cullens and Masens hailed from.

Rose and I spewed the shit out, because holy fuck, that shit was nasty. Who the hell wants black beer? So goddamn bitter.

The boys just laughed at us, and scolded us playfully that it aint beer; it's stout.

Whatever.

The good stuff came then when Edward poured two glasses of 'Magners' for me and Rose, telling us that we would definitely like that.

We didn't believe him.

We were wrong.

It was fucking delicious.

Magners is definitely our favorite, maybe because it's not beer... or stout. It's an apple cider, and it's... yummy.

And that's where we are now.

Drinking cider, listening to Emmett and Alec bicker about soccer, and Edward chuckling and shaking his head at them.

I don't hate him. Not even close.

"Maybe you should just agree to disagree, Alec," Edward said as he brought another bottle to the table. "And Emmett, if Alec likes Manchester United, let him."

That was crazy according to Emmett, though.

But he left it at that and chugged some more of that black shit with thick cream. No, it's not foam, I swear. It's cream.

Well, it looks like cream. Doesn't taste like it. I can vouch for that.

"Time to present some Irish cream to the ladies, eh?" Edward suggested with a goofy grin.

Irish boy is happy.

"If it's like the black beer's cream, then no thanks," Rose giggled.

We're a bit tipsy.

"Stout, luv. Not beer," Alec reprimanded.

"Hold the fucking phone," I said, sitting up more straight as Edward's words registered in my head. "Irish cream? That sounds like... you know... 'cause you're Irish... and..." I trailed off suggestively.

Well, I couldn't say sperm in front of the kid, now could I?

Emmett and Edward stared wide eyed at me.

Rose was on the same page as I was.

Alec happily sipped his Sprite.

"*Bella*... Um, nice to see that you have a dirty side," Edward chuckled awkwardly and squirmed in his seat. "But um, Irish cream is a drink."

"Yeah, to some," Rose snorted.

I nodded.

That was one awkward day we had had with Alice's mother.

She had told us in a very – sex ed. class-way – how to properly please a man, and bananas were involved.

A year later, we had to go through the same shit in school, although Mary Brandon was a bit more... vocal. So, yeah, we knew how things worked, and we knew what men would like, but that didn't mean we loved to talk about it.

But back to this second where Emmett is choking on his beer, and Edward is blushing.

Huh?

"Why are you blushing, Edward?" I asked curiously before I sipped on my yummy cider.

"Uh, yeah, I uh, reckon it's the stout," he replied, still squirming. "Too much of it."

"Yep, that's it." Emmett nodded.

Rose and I looked at each other in confusion, but then we just... sorta shrugged it off.

"Um, okay... Instead of Irish cream, I'm gonna say, it's time to let the girls taste *Baileys*," Edward said in a rather strangled voice.

Two glasses were presented, and Edward filled them with something that looked like chocolate milk.

But looks can be deceiving. I learned that from the beer- sorry, stout.

I recognized the bottle, of course. They have Baileys here, too, but now that I look closely, I can see it says 'Irish cream.'

"What does it taste like?" Rose asked, eyeing the glass with apprehension and doubt.

"You'll like it," Edward promised and handed us the glasses.

"Most women luv that, lass." Alec grinned. "It's as sweet as ye, Sweet Cheeks." He winked.

Damn, that boy...

Snickering at him, we sniffed the content of the glass, and sure enough, it smelled like chocolate cream.

But does it taste like it?

"Trust me, Bella," Edward murmured.

He loves saying my name.

"Oh, my God, B," Rose moaned. "Goddamn delicious. Taste it."

Fine, I will...

I did.

Oh, have mercy on me.

I'm in love.

It was smooth, creamy, chocolaty toffee...

"I'm proclaiming my love for Baileys," I moaned.

"Me too," Rose sighed dreamily.

"Lads, I'd say ye've got more competition," Alec laughed.

Emmett and Edward huffed.

Rose and I giggled.

A few minutes passed of chocolaty deliciousness, but Alec was impatient about something, bouncing around like a little ball, so Rose and I kinda told him to just spill.

He did. "It's time to play!"

Huh?

"You're right, kiddo," Emmett nodded and stood up. "I'll get the guitar."

"Oh, are you gonna play for us?!" I asked excitedly. "Like... songs?!"

Fuck, could I sound dumber?

"That we are, luv." Alec smirked. "We've got Em on the gizmo- or guitar, and Boss and I on the penny whistle."

Penny?

"I thought it was tin whistle," I said, looking at Edward who was opening a smaller bag.

"Same thing, different names," he replied. "I call it tin whistle."

"He's gonna try to impress ye now," Alec told me. "Boss is the master of whistles, and he taught me everything I know."

"Shut it, kid," Edward chuckled as he brought out several different flutes.

"Aye, boss."

I couldn't stop smiling... It was impossible.

"Why does he call you Boss, Edward?" Rose asked curiously.

I wanted to know that, too.

"Because he's the boss," Alec laughed cutely, answering for Edward. "He's me godfather... and Emmett's Nessa's godfather."

Oh.

"Wow, you must have been young when that happened," I murmured as I did the math.

Thirteen. Edward was thirteen, and Emmett was fourteen. Jesus.

Is that even legal?

"Yeah, I was thirteen when Emmett and I were asked, but my parents stood as guardians until we came into age," Edward replied, grinning at Alec.

Oh.

"And I have the same name as Eddie," Alec finished as Edward handed him a tin whistle.

"Or do you want the Clarke?" Edward asked him.

I didn't understand. It was music talk.

"So, you're Alec Edward Masen?" I asked.

"Nah, the Clare is cool, but should I take C or D? You'll take the lead with Clarke D, yea?" he answered Edward.

"Yep. But here, try the Gen in D instead. I think it will sound better."

I have to say it was quite... sexy to see Edward talk music. Alec was just freaking cute.

Alec answered me then. "Nah, I'm Alec Ryan Masen, Tush."

Ryan. Huh.

"You're Edward Ryan Cullen?" I wondered.

"Sure am." Edward grinned. "And Emmett is Emmett Patrick Cullen."

"Ryan means King in Gaelic," Alec said proudly.

"And Patrick means Noble," Emmett announced as he returned with a black acoustic guitar.

Rose and I just soaked it all up, and it was impossible to deny that we were interested, that's for sure.

"You lovely ladies ready to hear some Irish tunes?" Edward asked.

"Indeed we are." I smirked, leaning back to get comfortable.

"Which one do we start with?" Emmett asked as he tuned the guitar.

We watched them. Holding hands under the blanket, Rose and I squeezed whenever there was something we wanted the other one to notice, and Rose sure as hell squeezed my hand when Emmett fiddled with the guitar.

She was as crazy as I was, and you better believe I squeezed the living shit out of Rose's hand when Edward and Alec tested out the flutes... or whistles.

It was... Irish. Warm, fun, and amazing to see. And hear.

"How about Dobbin's Flowery Vale?" Alec suggested.

"We need you on the fiddle for that," Edward pointed out.

Alec plays the fiddle, too? Hot damn.

"Scarborough Fair?" Emmett suggested. "It's easy to start with."



"Sounds good, mate." Alec nodded. "Ye take the lead tune, boss."

"Sure thing." Edward nodded as he sat Indian-style on the couch.

"Emmett, you lead us in."

"Alrighty," Emmett said, sending Rose a wink before he started to play.

He was... good. Awesome. Talented. And he had this calm, serene expression as he strummed on the guitar, and it didn't take many seconds before Edward filed in with the whistle.

Goose bumps. All over. He was nothing short of beautiful.

It was... indescribable.

Alec was next, and the way the three played... mirroring each others expressions...

Rose and I were both squeezing each others hand tightly. As hell. And we were... taken. Enraptured. As we watched the three... Three sets of eyes closed.

They were all musical prodigies in my eyes, and yeah, the song might be calm and easy – perhaps – but it was just so beautiful. And I have to say I was damn impressed with Alec. I mean, the kid was twelve years old...

And Christ, how Edward and Alec played off of each other, their whistles in synch at some times, and overplaying the other at some...

Then the last note was played.

Rose and I just sat there. Stunned.

Definitely in love with Irish instruments. God, the tin whistle was just... *beautiful.*

"I'd say ye impressed them." Alec grinned at Emmett and Edward.

Uh, yeah, I'll say...

"Another one?" Edward smirked.

I nodded quite furiously. Unable to speak.

And the smile he sent me... out of this world.

"I think it's time for Cooley's Reel, lads," Alec said, giving them pointed looks that I didn't understand.

"I think you're right," Emmett agreed.

"Sure, I'm just gonna see if I have the right one..." Edward trailed off as he rummaged through his collection of whistles.

"You need that many?" Rose asked softly, pointing at the bag with whistles.

"No, not really, but it's sort of a hobby, and they do sound different." Edward shrugged. "Besides, it's a cheap instrument to play, so it's easy to get one too many."

"Ye bloody mad, Boss! One too many?" Alec guffawed. "One too many would be twenty-one... You have, what, fifty of 'em?"

Edward merely chuckled.

"Alright, found them," he said, bringing out two flutes in a golden tone.

He handed one to Alec.

"Edward, you take the lead with this one," Emmett said.

He did. Take the lead.

And I squeezed Rose's hand in reflex.

This tune was happier, more playful, but most of all... it was quick.

And I understood Alec's pointed looks as soon as both he and Emmett had joined in on the song.

It was... fast. Which impressed us.

Like seriously fucking fast, and it was like a battle between Edward and Alec as Emmett played both calmly, only to speed up for a while to set the pace for Edward and Alec.

Fingers. I'm watching Edward's fingers. Long fingers. Skilled. Fast. And...

I'm done for.

I could feel it... *there...* and *there...* and *there.*

Body, mind, and soul.

But holy fuck, mostly my body. Goddamn, those fingers...

The guys continued. For a couple of hours, we listened to them play, we drank more cider and Baileys, and we talked, laughed, and goofed around. And Edward smiled widely when I called him Whistler. Alec grinned and nodded with me.

The night was wonderful.

We got to know two men properly, and we like it. We liked what we found out.

There was still so many things wrong in this mess, but we began to see – and acknowledge the redeeming sides, the positive aspects.

It was close to two AM when Edward walked me to the door that night. Alec was fast asleep in the car, and Rose had already been dropped off.

“So... how was your night, Ms. Swan?” he asked softly as we reached the door.

He was smiling.

But behind his smile was uncertainty and nervousness.

“It was wonderful, Edward,” I admitted. “There are still so many things that are-”

He cut me off by placing a finger to my lips.

It set me on fire.

“Not tonight,” he pleaded gently. “I know there are a million things wrong for you... and some for me... But not tonight, eh? Please.”

He was right.

This night had been amazing and I didn’t want to ruin that by stating what’s wrong in this situation.

I smiled, nodding in agreement.

Reaching up on my tip-toes, I placed a gentle kiss on his cheek.

“Goodnight, Whistler,” I whispered, enjoying the surprise that took over his features.

“Um, goodnight, Bella...”

## **7 – FORKS IN SEPTEMBER**

### **BPOV**

Friday came.

Memories of last night were still swimming around in that head of mine as I walked to school, and when I joined Rose later for lunch, it was easy to see that she was occupied with the same thoughts.

"Edward's coming over tonight," I mumbled. "With a question."

*Not a question*, I wanted to say. A statement.

But that's the society we live in.

Rose nodded, unable to really decide what to feel for me.

Sadness? Dread? Hope? Understanding? Fear?

It was all there.

But the bitterness was gone for me, and for that I was grateful.

I had come to terms. Sorta.

There were things I liked. Loved even.

Alec. Definitely.

The Irish songs they played. How casual and relaxed they were. How freely they talked and joked. Even cursed quite a bit. And it felt like we were equals. Yesterday. Just hanging out together. Yes, we were more equals.

I loved the cabin. It felt like it grounded us all.

So, I wonder... will Edward go back to his fancy black today when he proposes? Or will he wear jeans... and maybe sneakers.

I honestly don't know what to hope for. Not now that I've met another side of Edward – the genuine side, the side that's joking around with Alec.

That was another thing I noticed, of course. How much Edward loved his godson. And it was so mutual. Edward was a hero to Alec.

At the end of the school day, Rose gave me a hug and half joked, "I'll see you on the other side."

Funny.

\*o\*o\*o\*

"Is that you, Bells?" Charlie called from the kitchen as I arrived home.

No, you dummy, it's a burglar. Let me introduce myself.

"Yes." *Who else?*

"Got a call from Edward Cullen today," he continued.

And I wondered why he sounded so... casual... almost as his old self when he discussed sports.

Like nothing had happened between the two of us. Like he hadn't slapped me.

"Uh-huh," I responded as I shrugged out of my jacket.

Walking out to the kitchen, I passed him as he read the paper – something he always did as soon as he had gotten home from work.

"He's coming over tonight," he said, not looking up from the paper.

*I know*, I thought as I opened the fridge.

"Okay."

"And I've given him my consent to ask you for marriage."

Knew that, too. Just don't know *why* you've done it.

"Okay."

And then I added, "Fried chicken and rice good for dinner?"

I'm a good girl. Pat my back.

"Sounds good. And Cullen will be here at seven."

Fuck you.

"Okay."

\*o\*o\*o\*

What do you wear on the day you get engaged?

When you have nothing fancy.

A pair of jeans, the ballet flats I had gotten yesterday, and the only tank top I owned. For good measure, I even put on the only bracelet, and the only pair of earrings I had.

My hair ended up in a ponytail. A messy one, to boot.

God, I'm so dolled up.

Sense the sarcasm.

The doorbell rang downstairs then, and something... inside of me fluttered... nerves...

I wasn't allowed to be there for the first part, but I needed to know... something... *anything*. So, I tiptoed my way downstairs, and listened...

They were in the kitchen.

"*You sure don't waste time, do you,*" I heard Charlie chuckle.

Chuckle.

*"No. For two reasons, Charlie. One, I believe I can take care of her better than you. And two, I would never lay a hand on her."*

Edward's voice was cold. Accusing.

*"It was an accident..."*

I fought the urge to snort.

*"I'm not even going to respond to that."*

*"I'm serious, Cullen. She was asking why I did this to her!"*

I held my breath.

*"So? Why didn't you just tell her? No, instead you fucking backhanded her! I swear to God, had it not been for the fact that you're her father, I would've killed you."*

Swallowing hard, I tried to rid the memory of that night. And also... I tried not to feel good about the way Edward spoke with such disgust of what Charlie did. But I was a hypocrite, because while I stood here, in the hallway, feeling good about that, I also knew that Edward wasn't all that great. Because in the end, I know what paid for the ring he's about to give me.

*"You telling me I'm supposed to admit to her that I'm flat broke? And that I traded her away for money? Or should I just tell her that I don't care?"*  
Charlie snarled.

And there it was...

Money.

But wait... that he doesn't care?



*"I don't give a shit, Charlie, and if you don't tell her, then I will, because I refuse to have Bella believe that I bought her."*

But you did... You did buy me.

*"You were the one who brought up money into the whole thing,"* Edward added. *"And what the fuck do you mean 'you don't care'?"*

I was confused.

*"I don't care' as in 'I don't really give a shit about her'."*

*"Christ... So, it wasn't just about the money? How fucked up are you?! I hope you understand that I won't keep this from her."*

I heard Charlie open the fridge then, probably to get a beer.

*"Doesn't matter. You tell her if you want. She's out of my life after the wedding."*

Ouch.

*"She's your daughter for fuck's sake!"*

*"Not after the wedding. I'm done being a father."*

*"You have got to be fucking kidding me."*

*"Nope. I'm done pretending for her. I'm sick of it."*

Silence.

He... He doesn't want me?

Oh.

Um, okay...

"Get Bella for me," I heard Edward command.

Not three seconds had passed until I was caught.

Wide eyed as I stared into an equally wide eyed Charlie in the hallway.

He knew I had heard it all.

And soon, a blank expression took over his face. He even shrugged.

"Edward wants to see you in the kitchen."

I nodded dumbly, still in shock.

Don't know how I reached the kitchen... but... I was there. And um, I couldn't... understand... anything, really.

That that hurts... in my chest... and everywhere.

"Bella?"

But why didn't Charlie just dump me at the goddamn... whatever it's called. Why did he keep me?

"She heard us."

"Shit."

And if he didn't care, then why did he have issues telling me that he was broke? Male pride?

That's... stupid.

"I'm taking her, Charlie."

"Be my guest."

All these years.

It's all been a lie? A charade?

Does that include the disgust he showed when Edward first came into the picture? Was that just to keep a straight face? And why didn't he agree to Riley Biers then?

*Maybe 'cause he couldn't offer money like Edward could...*

"Bella, can you hear me?"

It's cold.

So cold.

Sitting down. I think. Not sure.

Smells good, though. Leather and... man. Him.

Edward.

"Edward," I heard myself mumble.

"I'm here, Bella. Can you hear me?"

Um, yes.

Maybe I nodded. But my eyes... I need to focus... on something. Anything.

"Can you squeeze my hand, sweetheart?"

I did that with Rose. When we... you know, yesterday... at the cabin. We squeezed each others hands.

Smells like car here.

I'm tired.

"Em, it's me... Look, can you head over to Rose? Bella will need her soon..."

"No, no yet... Uh, Bella overheard Charlie telling me that he didn't want her... And now she's sorta... out of it..."

"I know, he's-...No, I never knew. Look, she'll come around, but I think she'll feel better if Rose is there..."

"Yeah, um, I'm taking her to the cabin..."

"Aye... And could you pick up Alec on the way? I think Bella will appreciate having him there..."

"No, she'll meet Nessa tomorrow... But ask Mom to pack an overnight bag to Bella, too..."

"Cheers, bro... Bye."

So tired.

\*o\*o\*o\*

*"Bella, can you hear me?"*

*"Bella?"*

Um.

Smells good here. Wood. Fire. And it's warm and cozy.

*"Guys, I think she's coming around."*

*"Thank fuck... Let me know when she's ready to see me, eh?"*

*"Of course, Edward."*

*"We'll be outside."*

I recognize the voices... And I remember.

Everything.

I'm not wanted by Charlie. Never was.

"Honey, wake up for me."

Rose.

"Rose," I croaked.

Opening my eyes. Focusing. Zeroing in on... everything... Rose... fire...  
everything in wood.

I'm at the cabin. On the couch.

"Hey," she whispered. "You scared us. How are you feeling?"

Excellent.

I rubbed my eyes. Someway, somehow, I got into a sitting position. And  
everything became clear.

It was still beautiful and peaceful here.

"Here," she murmured, handing me a glass of water.

Huh.

"No Baileys around?" I joked weakly.

She smiled. A little sadly, and a little 'cause of the joke. I think.

The water helped. A little.

"Thanks," I mumbled.

"So..." she sighed. "Edward told us what happened."

I nodded once, feeling my eyes well up. And it hurt. So badly, because for some reason, I felt betrayed. For some reason I wished he would've just given me up for adoption or whatever... Instead of pretending. Instead of faking. And all that gratitude I showered him with. Because I knew. I knew he didn't have to keep me. It's the mother's job to take care of the kids. But he still kept me. And he hated it. Me.

"Screw him, Bella," Rose said as she wiped my tears away. "If he said that... If he felt that way... Fuck, he shouldn't have kept you... He never deserved what you did for his sorry ass."

"You did everything for him," she continued. "I remember all the times you took care of him, B. And all the money you've saved him by reading recipes with less ingredients, and all the times you have altered your own *and* his clothes to last longer."

Two hours later, I was all cried out.

I was drained. Exhausted and worn out. Done with... everything. I wanted to move on. Forward. But I was tired. Couldn't even keep my eyes open.

Rose then presented me with a bag of clothes that Esme had apparently packed for me, and it was... all brand new. The woman had actually shopped for us already.



Too tired to ask questions, I jumped into the comfy t-shirt, and the oh, so soft pajama shorts, and then I fell asleep again, but now... I felt better. A little. No more faking. No more searching for coupons to keep the expenses to a minimum. No more feeling guilty for freeloading.

Because that's just it. I've been feeling guilty all these years.

And that was a big load off of my shoulders.

\*o\*o\*o\*

I woke up to the faint sound of guitar strumming.

Just light tinkering.

But it was beautiful.

And I was so comfortable in the plush couch, and... Jesus, these sheets are soft... Mmm, and warm... God, I was just so fucking snuggly.

Opening my eyes, I was immediately met with the sun shining through the window, and that was sure as hell a rare sight in Forks.

"Tush, you're awake!"

That was a voice that made me smile, and as I sat up... on the couch... I saw Edward sitting in the chair on the opposite side of the coffee table, and Alec was on the armrest on Edward's right side.

Both sitting with guitars, and both wearing casual clothes. And though Edward was only smiling carefully, it was still beautiful.

"Good-" No, that didn't work. Clearing my throat, I tried again. "Good morning."

"Morning, luv? No, no, it's past noon!" Alec grinned.

Oh. Shit.

"You needed your sleep," Edward murmured as he put the guitar down.

"You certainly had a rough night."

I did, but... I was feeling lighter today.

Shit sucks and I can only imagine I'm still a bit out of it, but I will just deal with it when I'm ready for it.

"Um, thank you for everything you did yesterday," I whispered, blushing a bit.

Don't know why, but I feel shier today.

"Don't mention it," he replied, like it was no big deal. "Are you hungry?"

Well, judging by the way my stomach growled then, I'd say... yes.

"Wow, Tush, I heard that!" Alec laughed. "I better go fix ye some breakfast before ye end up eating *me!*"

"Where are your manners, cub? Get her some food then," Edward chuckled. "Oh, and get the bag in the fridge named Bella, will ya?"

"Sure thing, boss," Alec called over his shoulder, already halfway into the kitchen.

Turning to face Edward, I, well...

"Um, bathroom?" I asked.

"Oh, right down the hall there, before the kitchen," he said, pointing in the direction Alec went.

Maybe I shouldn't have been surprised when I found a toiletry bag with my name on it in the bathroom, but I was. I was also so emotional about



it that I had to take a few seconds to calm my ass down before I went back to the living room. But seriously, she had bought me everything I could ever need... and more. No one's ever done that for me before. It's big for me. It's big for *us*, me and Rose.

Holidays, like Christmas, birthdays... we never celebrated that much. There wasn't money for it.

Another deep breath later, I went back to Edward, now having brushed my teeth with a sparkly toothbrush in pink, washed my face with something flowery, and... well, I smelled good, goddamnit, and it *felt* good.

"Alec's almost done," Edward said as I reached him. "And here."

He handed me yet another thing with my name on it, and inside the brown paper bag was...

"Snapple, cherry gum, and Davidoff," I giggled into the bag.

"Of course." A smile played on his lips. "Care to join me for a smoke before breakfast?"

"Sure." I grinned, taking my bag with me, 'cause you know... I wanted it all now.

I may have bounced a little in excitement as we went outside on the small porch, but for some reason I felt sorta good. Light and free... and the sun was out.

"Oh, I forgot, um..." And then he disappeared inside again.

Uhhmm...

And then he returned. With a hoodie, and grey... UGG's. Christ, Esme really likes to shop.

"Don't want you to get cold." He winked.

Damn that wink.

"Um, thanks."

*Why the hell am I blushing,* I wondered as I bent over to get the boots on. And damn, they were comfy.

My inner musings were interrupted by Edward groaning.

"Something wrong?" I asked as I straightened up.

Oh.

Irish boy was checking out my ass.

"Nope, um, no," he said as he averted his eyes... and focused intently on lighting our cigarettes instead.

Kinda funny.

"Here ya go," he said, handing me a smoke.

"Thanks," I... kinda chirped. "Or as you would say; Cheers."

Yeah, I had noticed that. Instead of 'thanks' they say 'cheers.'

"Perceptive little one, eh?" He smirked, taking a drag of his smoke.

Eh? Eh? Little one, eh?

I may have giggled as I nodded.

Don't they say a lot of 'eh' in Canada as well?

Ah well... eh.

But it's really more of an 'ay' that they bind together with the last word...  
Sorta... Perceptive little one-ay.

"I've decided that you talk funny," I announced.

"Um... okay?" he chuckled incredulously.

I glanced over at him with a grin, and kinda... let my eyes wander...  
because, um... you know... he's wearing a grey hoodie... black cargo  
shorts... so casual-



Wait.

Oh.

No, there's no mistaking what I see. In his pocket, there's no mistaking it.

It's a ring box.

Apparently Edward noticed. "Don't worry. I won't do it now. Not with the  
day you just had."

Um.

Well... uh, why not? Things can't exactly go back to they way they were. And I sure as hell don't want to, anyway. I don't want more of Charlie's faking.

I want to move on.

And with that thought, I took a deep drag of my cigarette... nice... And exhaled.

"Yes, Edward. Do it now," I said, looking him in the eye. "You have Charlie's consent, and you sure as fuck almost have mine."

Truthfully.

How bad could it be? It's going to be my life anyway. Might as well get the fuckery started.

I have no doubt that Edward will take care of me, and he seems to like me. With him, I'm wanted. And I want that. I want to be wished for. And wanted.

As for Edward... well, we've already established that I'm warming up to him. Maybe I will even like him one day. Romantic, I know. But that's not the society we live in. We learn to live with what we have, and some are lucky to learn to love it.

Will I be one of those? Doubt it. Really doubt it. But I could do worse. I could end up with an abusive husband, and considering the way Charlie had no problem in giving me away to a criminal, he might as well have given me away to an evil man. And by evil I mean abusive.

"Are you sure?" he asked, hesitation written all over him. "Maybe we should give it a few days... or weeks?"

"I'm sure, Edward."

I really am.

He was quiet. Studied me as he smoked. But his hand was on the box. He wanted to.

But he was a gentleman.

And I really wish to get away from Charlie.

As soon as possible.

How quickly will they marry us? Will they wait the full year? Will it be in a few months?

I have no idea, but until then, I'm still with Charlie.

"I don't want a speech, Edward," I whispered. "I just want a life. And I'm sure you will give me one."

He will. I know that.

And I will show him my appreciation.

I know I will be a good wife.

Leaning forward on his knees, he continued to study me... exhaled smoke through his nose... and...

"Marry me."

I wasn't prepared.

For the way my body reacted... I shivered... *something*, fluttered.

"Yes."

Yes. I'm sure.

"Yes," he repeated half questioning... as if he didn't believe me saying it. And he swallowed... hard... Continued to watch me.

"Yes," I confirmed confidently.

He took a final drag before flicking the cigarette onto the ground... and then he brought out the box from his pocket.

And... opened it.

My eyes, they widened. And I gasped. More than once.



It was... out of this world. Universe.

Massive.

The opposite of what I thought of myself. The opposite of what I thought I wanted. But... this... *thing*... it was everything. It was adorable and cute at the same time as it was... gigantic and *extravagant*... and pompous. The fucker deserved an orchestra. But at the same time, it was cute.

It had butterflies. Cute ones. With small diamonds. But... they. The butterflies... they were, you know... *attached*... to this... *huge*, massive... rock.

Emerald cut sapphire.

Christ, it sparkles... so much.

"May I?" I heard him ask.

Right, I wasn't alone here... with this... *out-of-this-world* ring.

Swallowing hard, I met his eyes... nodded, I think... a little. And held my left hand out.

My hand was buzzing as he gently slid the... my God, *heavy*, ring onto my ring finger. Jesus, heavy.

I should speak. Really, because this... is huge. On many levels.

"I uh..." Keep it up. Excellent. "Heh..." Perfect, Bella...

Fuck.

"I have no fucking idea of what to say," I blurted out. "It's... out of this world." And *Jesus*, so goddamn heavy... "You could've put the money to better use than spending it on me," I added, because it felt right, true.

This was too much for... me. I wasn't worth this much.

"Do you like it?" he asked, emphasizing... pretty much every word. And he didn't seem apprehensive. More like, he knew this would be the ring for me.

*Do I like it?*

Well, let's think about that for a while, shall we?

I'm in shock, because I thought... for the past seventeen years... and eleven months that I was more into the... *subtle* things, that I liked... *simplicity and down to earth*.

Boy was I wrong.

This blue thing is... wow.

"I'm proclaiming my love for it," I blurted out.

I blurt out a lot today. Apparently.

"Excellent," he said. Simply. "And not a word about what I spend on you."

Okay...?

"And this ring has nothing on you," he murmured.

And I replied, "You're full of shit."

He laughed. Carefree. And beautiful.

Leaning back, he draped an arm around me, and kissed my temple.

I liked it. Immensely. But I was still gawking... you know, the ring.

"I promise I will make you happy, princess," he whispered against my skin. "I promise you will be happy in our marriage."

Yeah... maybe... perhaps.

Most likely.

In just a month... I have gone from loathing the criminal... to... sorta liking the Irish boy.

"You seem confident," I said softly.



He sighed... let me go, and took out another smoke... lit it, and took a drag... never taking his eyes off of me. And again, he was studying me.

"I think you will love me one day," he stated quietly.

Tall order.

I doubt it today, but who knows? He is a sorcerer after all.

"Will you love me one day?" I asked, half teasing, half wondering.

Edward smiled, chuckled, and shook his head slightly. Sorta in amusement. I think.

"You wouldn't believe if I told you what I already feel about you, Bella."

Maybe I wouldn't.

Maybe I wasn't ready to believe.

## **8 – FORKS IN SEPTEMBER**

### **BPOV**

"Can I come out now, boss? I'm dying here!" we heard Alec practically whine.

"Come on out, cub!" Edward chuckled.

And out came the cub, fiddling with his pocket knife, and then he pocketed it and strode over to me.

"Let me have a look, luv." He grinned, gesturing for my hand. "I heard ye, and I know ye're engaged."

"There's no hiding things from you, is there?" Edward was amused. "And what are you yapping about? You were there picking out the ring with me, cub. You've seen it."

"Aye, but I haven't seen it on Tush's finger, now have I?" Alec argued as he held my hand up for inspection. "But ye're right, boss... Blue is a lovely color on her."

"Boss did good, eh?" he asked me, smirking like the little cocky puppy he was.

"He did really good," I giggled, blushing when Edward winked at me.

"Sapphire's also yer birthstone, luv, did ye know?" Alec continued.

"No. No, I didn't know," I answered, looking curiously at Edward who nodded in confirmation. "How'd you get so smart, Alec?" I chuckled.

"I was born that way, Tush." He winked... and at last, let my hand go.

"Nah, but the lass at Harry Winston told us that when we were there. And she told Emmett that Peridot was Sweet Cheek's birthstone, but Emmett already had his eyes on the emerald. But hey, they're both green, so doesn't matter, eh?"

"But seriously, Boss, ye two picked out rings bigger than the size of Ireland for feck's sake," he chuckled.

Chuckled.

Well, I was still processing... everything he had said.

Harry Winston?

Holy damn.

And they actually put thought into the whole thing?

That's all sorts of adorable.

For feck's sake. Yeah, that's how Alec says it. Fuck. Feck. Weird boy. Even Edward and Emmett said feck a few times the last time we were here.

"Alright, alright, enough with the jewelry talk, eh?" Edward laughed. "You need to pack your stuff, cub, because we're off in a bit."

"Sure thing, boss," Alec said as he started heading inside... But then he stopped... turned around and walked towards me again. "Welcome to the family, luv," he said before kissing my cheek. "It's an honor to have ye and Sweet Cheeks with us."

My fucking God, I love him.

Do not get emotional, Bella. Do not get emotional.

"Jesus, get inside, Alec," Edward groaned.

And he did. Alec went inside, and Edward looked at me very amused.

"Can't fucking believe my twelve year old cousin makes you blush."

I blushed harder.

Decided to throw him a bone. "So do you, Edward."

"Yeah?"

He wasn't amused now. It was a genuine smile. Almost shy.

"Yes," I said.

"Boss, get on with it!" Alec hollered from inside.

"Right." Edward nodded.

Huh?

"Engagement dinner tonight," Edward said... reminding me.

Right. That.

I nodded.

"And though it's a small affair with just the closest family, my mother has a thing for formal, so I hope it's okay she comes by here with a dress for you."

Dress. Formal. Esme. Jesus.

"Um, sure? But... come by here? Won't I be at home?" I asked confusingly.

"Right, um, about that. You're welcome to stay here for as long as you want. You don't have to go back to Charlie, Bella. I've already spoken to him, so it's up to you."

Holy shit, I don't have to go back?

"Just think about it." He shrugged. "You can live here until the wedding, or you can live with us at my parents' house, but I figured you'd be more relaxed here.

"And don't worry about transportation to and from school. We'll take care of that."

Um, that's a lot to process...

But... so, um... what... how... when... uh?

No, too much.

"But Charlie..." I don't know what to say here... I don't have to go back to him? Ever?

"Is a fuckwit."

Well yeah, that too, I suppose...

"Just know that you have the option," he murmured. "I spoke to him earlier and told him that I'd be happy to take over from the start... as of now."

Huh.

"I need to process it," I mumbled. "Um... So, just to... be clear. I don't have to go back? Ever?"

I could stay here at the cabin? And be myself? Care for myself for once?

Um... wow.

"You don't have to go back."

"H-, "oly shit...

I don't have to go back.

My new life is starting.

Until the wedding, I can... be here... stay here.

"Yes, please," I heard myself say.

"Yeah?" he responded, smiling slightly.

"If you'll have me, I'd be happy to stay here." *Extremely happy.*

"If I'll have you, Bella?" He grinned, cocking an eyebrow. "Christ, beautiful, of course I want you to stay here."

Oh, I'm so smiling right now. And he's smiling, too.

Damn, he's a beautiful man.

"I'm packed now, boss!"

Right.

"Alright," Edward sighed.

Our bubble burst... sorta.

"Mom will be here with Nessa and Rose in an hour, and the four of you will get ready together. Is that okay?" he asked, getting back to the main issue.

"Absolutely." I nodded.

"Great. And then my father will pick you all up around six."

I nodded again, taking it all in.

It was a lot that needed to settle... and now there was a dinner, too, and I had no idea what to expect.

I mean, I knew that Rose's parents would be there, and the Cullens, of course... Alec and his sister...

"Who's coming tonight?" I asked curiously.

"Hmm, let's see," he sighed. "Apart from you, me, Em, Rose, my parents, Rose's parents... it'll be Alec, Nessa, Tanya and her husband Garrett, and their two daughters, Kate and Irina."

Huh. Wow.

Tanya, I knew of course, since she's the school nurse, and I've seen her husband a few times... and their daughters... Huh, I haven't seen them in years.

"Where are Kate and Irina now?"

"They both got married a few years back and live in Seattle now."

That makes sense, I guess. They are after all four and five years older than me.

"Won't their husbands come?"

"No."

And he left it at that.

But I didn't.

"Why's that, Edward?"

He didn't say anything.

I was not caving on this one. "Tell me."

He sighed... "They're in prison."

Of course.

Where else would they be?

And then I had to ask, "Have you ever been in prison?"

I remembered on our first date...he said something about having "paid for his crimes". Did that mean prison?

Rubbing the back of his neck, saying nothing... yeah, I got my answer.

"Emmett, too?"

He nodded once.

Excellent. Fucking perfect.

"For what, and for how long?"

"Jesus, you're persistent."

Duh.

"Give me a goddamn answer, Edward."

He was annoyed now. As hell.

I didn't care. He knew this about me. He knew I wasn't one to shy away, and we both knew that he liked that about me.

"Before we arrived in Forks... Emmett and I both spent eight months in prison."

It scared me that I didn't gasp or shudder at his words. Like I was getting used to it.

"For..." I pressed.

"Association with grand theft auto."

Bravo. Well done, dipshits.

"Well, you can't be really good at what you do then," I replied dryly.

The fucker smirked. And winked. Cockily.

"Oh, you have no idea, sweetheart."

My breathing hitched.

And I swallowed hard, because... because... what made its way through me in shivers was... lust.

Lust.



Not hatred, disgust, dread, fear, or even annoyance... but goddamn lust.

Fuck my life.

Thankfully, Alec came out then, carrying a bag, and he was my distraction.

Thank you.

And after a few minutes of small talk, another cigarette, a few jokes from Alec, and a kiss on my cheek from Edward... they left in his Aston.

It didn't take long... that hour, it didn't take long.

And soon I saw Esme's BMW pull in.

Three people stepped out.

A smiling Rose, which relaxed me.

A smiling girl, who I assumed was Nessa.



And... Esme. Beautiful woman with green eyes and reddish caramel hair.

She was beaming.



"Oh, dear Isabella! I'm so glad to finally meet you!"

There were hugs. Squeals. Understanding look from Rose as I was in shock. And more hugs. Tinkling laughter.

"Dear, where are my manners?!" Esme exclaimed before turning to the little girl. "Nessa, this is Isabella, Edward's dream come true." She winked. "And Isabella, this is Nessa, my niece."

"Pleasure to meet you, Nessa." I smiled. "And please, both of you, it's Bella."

"Lovely to meet ya, Bella," Nessa chirped. "I take it ye've already met me brother, yeah? I apologize for that one."

Not shy one, that either.

I suppose you could see that she and Alec were siblings, but I wouldn't guess twins. Especially since Alec looks more like Edward, and Nessa who may have green eyes, also has Emmett's dark brown hair, curly as hell.

But Jesus, she's gorgeous.

My inner musings were interrupted by Esme's squeal.

Sounded sorta like, "EEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!"

Sorta.

And then I noticed that her eyes were fixed on my left hand.

"I didn't know he had proposed already. Oh, this is just wonderful!"

Mm, isn't it?

Rose smiled carefully, asking me with her eyes if I was okay.

I nodded and smiled in reassurance.

It was the truth. I was okay.

Rose saw the ring then. "Holy shit, Bella!"

Yep.

"I know," I chuckled. "It's as bad as yours."

"Mmhmm, my boys sure know how to buy the big ones," Esme giggled as she flashed us her own ring.

# ESME



The ring Carlisle had given her obviously.

"Hot motherfu- Good lord," Rose gasped.

I was impressed with how she withheld the 'fucker.'

"Yeah, seriously, what is it with those guys," I mumbled as I gawked at Esme's ring.

Another sparkly, mega-huge, out-of-this-world-thing. This big, big, big, yellow diamond, and just... Christ, smaller diamonds all around it.

"Oh, they just love us," Esme gushed. "You have seen nothing yet, ladies. Just wait and see."

Yeah, uhm, me and Rose were stuck on 'they just love us.'

No fucking way. Nuh-uh. They do *not* love us. Sure, they seem to like us, and I guess they think we will make good wives, but love has shit to do with it.

"And I promise you, darlings... You will fall for my boys... Just like I fell for my Carlisle," she finished.

Confident.

The lot of them. So confident.

\*o\*o\*o\*

Hours later, we... were so *dolled up*, and it was all so *fancy*. Expensive, luxurious, and extravagant. Nothing like Rose and I had ever experienced before.

Our skin was so soft... smelled so good... And someone have mercy, because I think I'm in love with my own hair. Super, super shiny, I swear. And curled beautifully... into some ponytailish thing, but not really. Almost a bun, but with several curls lingering down, and... I was in love with it.

Rose, too, with her hair. So shiny and pretty. Big curls falling down her shoulders. Almost golden.

We had officially entered a fairytale.

Then there were the dresses.

Tight, body-hugging... also shiny. Black. Mine was frilly on one side, and it had a frilly strap over one shoulder, but the other was left bare.

Rose's was strapless, gorgeous, and so... hot.

# ENGAGEMENT DINNER AT THE CULLENS



There were times when Esme played stylist with us, where Rose and I just... stared at each other, silently conveying that this was... insane. Insane in a good way, but totally off the charts with insanity.

Lastly there were shoes and makeup. Also in black, and my shoes, God, they were high... they had roses on them. Small roses on the straps. Goddamn pretty, is all I'm saying. And then makeup. Simple but black. I had no idea my lashes were that long, seriously. I mean, sure I've worn makeup before, but... well, not like this. I haven't managed to get them so... thick... and long.

Just insane.

Esme's a genius, though.

\*o\*o\*o\*

"Alright, lovelies, how about a smoke before Carlisle arrives?" Esme suggested once we were all done.

"Um, sure," I said, a bit stunned that Esme smoked.

She seemed like the most innocent woman on earth.

"Oh, and we should probably discuss your engagement, Bella," she said before lighting her cigarette.

She had a diamond encrusted lighter.

Just saying.

"Since Kate and Irina are in town, perhaps we should celebrate your engagement to Edward tomorrow before they head back to Seattle on Monday?"

Dear lord, things are happening fast.

"Uh, sure? I mean, that's not really up to me, right?" I asked before lighting my own smoke. "I don't know what Edward's thoughts are."

"His thoughts!" she laughed. "Oh, my dear Bella. In his thoughts you two are already married."

"Same goes for Emmett and Rose," she added in a giggle.

Nessa giggled, too.

Rose and I chuckled nervously as we inhaled deeply from our cigarettes.

"It's settled then." Esme beamed. "We'll have another engagement dinner tomorrow."

Oh, how lovely.

"I can hear a car," Nessa exclaimed then. "It must be time!"

Deep breaths. Deep breaths.

And yes, a car was approaching.

A black Mercedes.

Carlisle Cullen.



He was even more handsome now than when Rose and I saw him outside the hospital all those weeks ago. Now, wearing a tuxedo for crying out loud...

"Evening, ladies," he greeted before kissing Esme on the cheek. "You look lovely, darling."

"Yes, yes, you too. Enough of that now, honey. Come meet my new daughters."

For some reason I didn't feel anything unpleasant when Esme said that.

Another sorcerer...

"This is Emmett's Rose," Esme said with that permanent smile of hers.

"Lovely to meet you, Rose. I'm Carlisle, the boys' father," he said in his charming, velvety voice before kissing Rose's hand.

No one is having mercy on us.



"Nice to meet you, Carlisle," Rose replied quietly, blushing harder than... well, very hard.

"And this beautiful girl became Edward's fiancée today! Can you believe it, Carlisle?!" Esme continued, still high on her excitement.

"Mm, Edward told me," Carlisle said, smiling at me. "Pleasure to finally meet you, Bella."

The charmer kissed my hand.

I blushed like crazy. Jesus, the man was gorgeous.

He's no Edward but... not far off.

"Likewise, Carlisle," I replied politely... and fuck me if I wasn't smiling.

That was not the plan from get-go.

"Oh, Nessa gorgeous, could you get the black paper bag for me in the car?" Carlisle asked.

"Sure thing, Uncle C," Nessa chirped before darting off.

Alec was definitely my favorite, but Nessa was also freaking adorable, although I'm not sure Rose thinks the same. The two of them didn't seem to click instantly, and by the hours of non-stop talking Nessa's done about Emmett, I'm thinking it's a territorial thing.

Nessa loves her Emmett, and Rose is now a threat.

Will be interesting to see.

"What's in the car?" Esme asked curiously.

"The boys have gifts for their girls, of course," Carlisle replied smoothly... and the fucker winked at us.

They all wink!

And it affects us. Fucking hell.

Wait, gifts?

What the fuck! How could there possibly be more?!

"I'm back," Nessa sang as she flew up the steps to the porch.

"Wonderful. Thank you, Ness," Carlisle said, taking the bag from her.

Two jewelry boxes in velvet were presented to us.

Sweet motherfucking Jesus.

"Here you go, ladies."

I opened mine...

I don't know if I should cry... or laugh... Or maybe *scream* because it's so *goddamn* overwhelming. *All* of this.

It was a beautiful pearl necklace, and I... breathed *hard*... as Carlisle gestured for it 'May I?'

I nodded. Blinked back a few tears.

"That's so lovely, Bella," Esme said softly after Carlisle had put it on me.

"Indeed it is," Carlisle agreed.

And then it was Rose's turn.

She, too, has tears in her eyes, and I know that we are yet again on the same page. It's so much. Too much. Almost. We're simple girls and this... this is just... Fuck, I already mentioned insane, yes?

"Oh, it matches the ring," Esme gushed. "Beautiful!"

It was Rose's necklace. Christ, I could see how heavy it was.

Nothing but emeralds and diamonds.

## **9 – FORKS IN SEPTEMBER**

### **BPOV**

Rose and I gasped as the Cullen mansion came into view, and it was just another fucking thing we would have to get used to.

They lived large.

Three stories. Ultra modern. Window walls. Twinkle lights in the trees. Beautiful flowers in equally beautiful vases in the windows.

"Oh, look at that, Carlisle! The dinner hasn't started yet, and the jackets are already off!" Esme complained half heartedly.

We tried to see what she was talking about, but it was kinda hard to see her face since she sat in the passenger seat, and we sat in the back-

Holy shit.

I know what she's talking about now.

Edward, Emmett, Alec, and Garrett.

Standing on the porch steps, smoking... goofing around... Emmett and Garrett had glasses in their hands. Probably whiskey.

But holy fuck me, I'm looking at Edward.

He was wearing a black tuxedo, minus the jacket, leaving him in the white shirt, black vest, and... goddamnit, the sleeves are rolled up.

Isn't it illegal to look so hot? And handsome, and... yea, everything. And God, his smile, his laughter... as he goofed around with Alec. Again, out of this world.

Hadn't Nessa been sitting between Rose and me, I would've squeezed the shit out of Rose's hand.

Just saying.

The men looked up then, noticing the car pulling in, and... I was nervous. Fluttery and... something else.

Emmett approached the car first, somehow knowing that Rose would be the first to exit the car, maybe... And he opened the door as Carlisle and Esme stepped out.

"Rose," I heard Emmett murmur, offering her a hand.

She took it after sending me a nervous smile, and then... I think we all heard Emmett choke on a breath.

In that second, I was blissfully happy. It meant the world to me to be a part of this, for some reason... But just to hear Emmett's reaction to Rose's appearance... words couldn't describe.

Nessa was next. A bit impatient. Also a bit annoyed that it was Carlisle who helped her out instead of Emmett.

Then it was me.

Scooting closer, I saw Edward's hand come into view, and there was no hesitation, no dislike, not a single bad feeling as I grasped it.

Warm. Firm yet gentle.

"Bella-"

I stepped out. Looked up. Smiled.

Edward swallowed hard, gazing at me with wide eyes, and let his eyes roam over my body.

I felt powerful. For once, it felt like I called the shots. And though Edward has never made me feel inferior – almost the opposite – I still know the world we live in, and it's the man who's in charge. In control. But now, Edward's not in control. Not even a little.

"You-" That didn't work. He tried again after he clearing his throat. "You look... sinfully beautiful, Bella."

Oh, the shivers.

"Thank you," I whispered. "And thank you for this..." I trailed off, tracing my necklace with my fingers.

His eyes watched the movement. Swallowed hard again. And I wondered; is he watching the necklace? Or the finger adorned with his engagement ring...

For some unknown reason, I'm hoping for the latter.

"My pleasure." He met my gaze again. "Christ, you're..." He didn't continue.

Words failed him.

Again, he made me feel powerful. And beautiful. Yes, it was *him*. *He* made me feel that way.

"So are you," I offered. It was the truth after all.

There was no denying that Edward Cullen was the most beautiful creature to walk this earth. In my eyes at least.

A smile grew slowly but surely on his face, and I knew this was him returning to himself. I had learned that over the past few weeks. Yeah, I was getting to know Edward.

"Well... Let's get you introduced, eh?" He smiled, offering me his arm.

It wasn't enough.

So, I reached for his hand instead, laced our fingers together.

*That* felt better.

And Edward's shocked expression—quite fun to see.

"Relax, Whistler," I teased. "Don't look so constipated."

Now he choked on a breath, or... cough... whatever.

"Fecking Christ, Bella," he sorta coughed out.

I was enjoying this. Greatly.

"I'm in way over my head, aren't I?" he muttered, scowling playfully.

But his massive grin gave him away. You know, like, totally.

I would've twirled a strand of hair between my fingers, had it been blond.

No offense.

"Let's find out, shall we?" I asked lightly.

He was definitely amused.

"Yes. Let's." He winked.

Damn.

So... with our fingers laced, he led the way up the steps... and into the house.

Hot damn. I have nothing more to say.

Yes, one thing; their house- sorry, *mansion*... is out of this world.

Now I'm done.

Next up were introductions, and lord have mercy, they are all fucking gorgeous in this family.

And I said that to Edward.

He said, "It's about to become even more beautiful."

And I joked, "You mean when Rose becomes a Cullen?"

He answered seriously, "No, when I have the honor of giving you my name."

Problem is... the sound of Bella Cullen... it doesn't sound horrible anymore.

I can practically hear Alice gag somewhere.

Anyway.

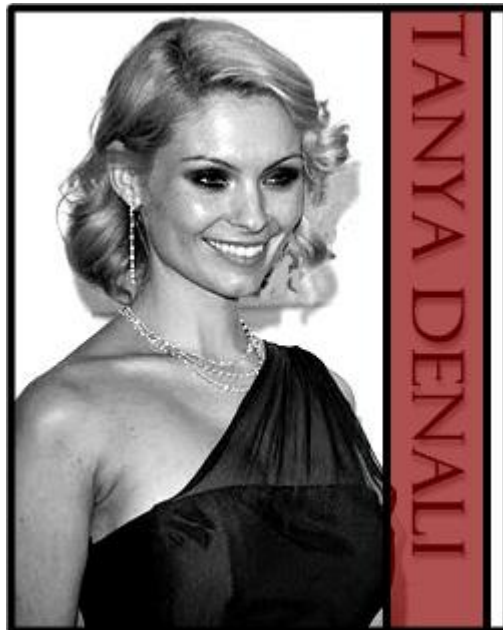
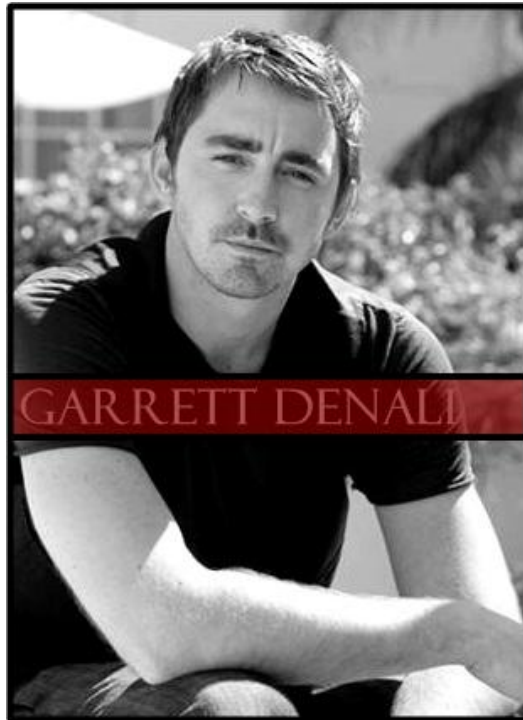
Rose eyed me questioningly of course, when she saw me holding hands with Edward, but once her surprise had worn off, she sorta gave me this soft smile that said 'maybe this will work out after all.'

And I'm beginning to think so, too.

Esme on the other hand... Wow, she actually had tears in her eyes as she witnessed Edward's hand in mine.

But moving on here. I was properly introduced to my school nurse.

Tanya Denali and her husband Garrett Denali.



She was pretty much like Esme – gushing over how perfect I would be for Edward... and the bitch still called me Allannah. Too bad she's so goddamn likable.

Same goes for her daughters, Kate and Irina. Also likable.



However, they seemed to have something against Edward and Emmett, and it was something I had thought about fleetingly since this morning... when I found out about Emmett and Edward spending time in prison. It had me wondering if there was a connection there. If Kate and Irina's husbands had been working with Edward and Emmett when they got caught.

But I'm so not thinking about that now.

Tonight was all about celebrating Rose and Emmett.

Esme, Tanya and her daughters, along with Carlisle – they were the happiest. Without a doubt.

Edward and Emmett were also thrilled, but they were gentlemen, and it seemed like they didn't want to celebrate as much as the rest, simply because it might have come off as rude to me and Rose.

During dinner, I told Edward to relax... but he only studied me, watched me with a frown, and then told me, "I can't until it's mutual."

And we left it at that.

But words like that sure made mutuality come quicker.

The bastard was smart.

The rest of the dinner was... as expected. It didn't feel forced or uncomfortable, but Rose's parents weren't exactly thrilled. Well, Rose's mother Lillian less than Rose's dad. He was after all the one who agree with the whole thing.

But Rose and I both focused on Emmett, Edward, and our little source of laughter; Alec.

\*o\*o\*o\*

"Alright, lovelies," Esme said, clinking her glass. "Dessert will be served in the living room in ten minutes."

It was a pointed look to all the smokers, so Edward, Emmett, Rose, and I wasted no time in hauling our asses outside... along with Carlisle and Garrett, but they stayed on the porch to smoke cigars instead.

"Gimme, gimme," I said to Edward. Yes, I needed nicotine badly. "These formal things are... Jesus, let's just say that I'm a cabin-girl when it comes to gatherings."

"I hear you, sister," Rose agreed as Emmett handed her a smoke.

"Oh, both Eddie and I agree." Emmett nodded. "Luckily these events don't come often."

"There's another one tomorrow, though," I continued, giving Edward a very appreciative smile as he handed me a smoke.

"What do you mean?" Edward asked curiously. "Tomorrow?"

"Oh, yeah, we're celebrating our engagement tomorrow night," I told him.

Nicotine. Yes. Love it.

"Um, what?" He did that choking thing again.

Emmett was also sorta shocked.

"What, did you guys have plans?" I chuckled.

"Uh, well, um, no?" he replied—not so smoothly. But then he got his wits back. "But how... are you taking all this? I mean, you just blurted out that we're having our engagement dinner tomorrow, Bella."

Uh, yeah? So?

I've already come to terms with all of it. I thought that was clear.

"So?" I asked. "I mean, if you want, I'm sure we can postpone. I just thought--"

"No, no," he rushed out. "No goddamn postponing on *my* account. I was thinking about *you*, Bella."

Naw, cutie pie.

Or something.

"Tomorrow it is, then." I smirked.

Emmett started laughing then, "Hell, bro, she'll be the death of you!"

"Don't I know it," Edward chuckled jokingly.

But his eyes, as they rested on me, they were filled with adoration.

"Shite, we have to hit Seattle tomorrow," Emmett exclaimed. "We better have time."

Like it was panic.

Edward nodded and mirrored his expression.

"What's in Seattle?" Rose asked.

"Jewelers," they both answered.

"Why do you need jewelry for tomorrow?" I asked.

They actually gave me a God-you're-dumb-look. I did not appreciate it.

"When someone gets engaged, you usually get them a gift, little one," Emmett told me. Like I was five years old.

"Hold the fucking phone here, boys," I said, pointing a finger at them, and Rose joined me and did the same. "You're not actually talking about giving us more, are ya?"

"Yeah, you better not," Rose warned.

And then we sorta lowered our hands, 'cause they held the smokes... and we needed them.

"*That* is not up to you, princess." Edward smirked, draping an arm around me before pushing me towards the steps again. "Time to head back in."

They weren't even affected by our harsh words!

I'm gonna practice that, so help me God, I will.

"I love giving you things," he murmured as he pressed his lips against my temple.

"Don't buy me, Edward. It's not possible."

"I'm not," he replied, stopping to look at me. "I would never degrade you in that way, nor do I think it's possible. But I do love to give you things, and I *will* spoil you."

"Why?" I blurted out. "I really don't understand it, because I don't need it. I don't need-"

Edward's fingers on my lips. Shutting me the fuck up.

"I know, Bella," he whispered. "Trust me. I *know*. And don't worry. It's not like it's gonna be jewelry every time. You should know that from what we left in your lockers, eh?"

Right. That.

I loved that.

"I also know that extravagant gifts won't speed things along. I'm aware of that."

Good.

"And I know that you're not the kind of girl who is all about gifts and pompous shit."

Also good because I'm really not.

"But," he said, "sometimes I will give you these things, because either I want you to have it, or... hell, sometimes it could even be something I wanna see you in. Okay?"

Okay. I'm calmer.

I nodded.

"Not too often, deal?" I bargained.

"Not too often." He smirked, and I felt... that maybe I should've been more specific.

But Esme called from the living room then.

"Time for Emmett and Rose to open gifts!" he joked excitedly.

Hardy-har-har.

But damn, there were gifts. From the Denalis, from the Cullens, and... from the Masens... in Chicago.

From Edward and Elizabeth Masen, Rose actually... hot damn, they gave her a goddamn car. Not kidding. Their way of saying 'welcome to the family.'

It was black. A black Lexus with tinted windows. No, I'm not kidding! They gave her a car!



Well, they gave her a picture of a car, because the car is being shipped to Seattle next week.

Wanna know something funny?

Rose doesn't have a driver's license. Neither one of us does. Never had the money for that.

So, with that out in the open, Carlisle and Esme said that Rose and I were given that as extra presents.

I was sorta speechless.

But moving on.

From Carlisle and Esme, Rose received something called a Claddagh-ring. A ring that represents Ireland or something like that, and it was *really* pretty. It's for her right pinky finger, and Esme winked to me... making me believe that maybe I will get one of those tomorrow, because I noticed... that they all wore Claddagh-rings.



Edward, Emmett, Carlisle, Esme, the Denali's, Alec, and Nessa... all of them. Yeah, not the Hales of course.

Edward wore his ring on his right thumb, and it was a very masculine version of the Claddagh-ring, especially when I compared it to Emmett and Carlisle's.



Silver, straight lines, and black onyx, that was Edward's. And Emmett's was slightly more traditional with the details – according to Carlisle and Esme – but what they all had in common was the two hands holding a heart, and a crown on top of the heart.

They were beautiful, and it made me happy to see Rose smile as she watched her pinky finger, now adorned with the Irish ring.

“Do you have any idea how gorgeous you are?” I heard Edward whisper.

His words made me shiver – a reaction I was becoming familiar with... and I blushed, of course. Also something I had to get used to.

*Does he have any idea how much he affects me,* I wondered as I lowered my head.

We were sitting next to each other on a loveseat, and it didn't escape my attention that Esme and Tanya often looked over at us, as well as at Emmett and Rose – both of them wearing motherly smiles.

Those, too, affected me. It made me lean into Edward's side. *That* in return made him put his arm around my waist, and... God, I loved it.

He made me feel safe. Protected. And... wanted.

That was what I wished for. To be wanted.

Only, I didn't expect to want Edward in return.

It may seem juvenile, *really* juvenile and... almost *insulting*, but I think Edward will understand the meaning by the words.

Reaching up, slightly, I breathed him in as I whispered in his ear.

"I can't hate you."

He shivered, tightened his hold on me, and swallowed hard.

He understood.

He knew I felt more but that I wasn't ready, ready to admit or acknowledge.

I knew that we focused more on each other for the rest of the evening than... on the festivities... but still, we didn't speak. We were quiet, staying close to the other. Maybe... savoring what we felt at this moment? Because... to *me*... this was very mutual. Right now.



It will probably look different tomorrow, but we're on the right path... so to speak.

Edward drove me to the cabin a bit past midnight, and again, we were quiet, and he still let me take the lead when it came to affection.

He had no problems with kissing my cheek, or temple, or the top of my head. But he never lingered. He always gave me distance. I set the pace. So, when he drove me to my temporary home that night, I took his hand. Because I wanted it. I was ready for that.

And he kissed it.

I loved that, too.

"Here we are," he murmured, squeezing my hand slightly, too.

I looked out.

At the cabin.

In the middle of the nowhere. No houses for miles. Just... trees. Woods.

In the middle of the night.

Heh, it doesn't look so wonderful anymore.

"Great," I forced myself to say before stepping out... of the car... and away from the warmth.

"What happened to letting a guy open the door for ya, eh?" He smirked, but then... I think he noticed something in my expression.

"What's wrong?" he asked, leading the way up the small pathway.

"Um... sorta dark here," I mumbled, hugging my body... looking around... listening.

Forest sounds... rustling...

Shit.

"Did you hear that?" I gasped.

"You mean this?"

I heard it again! The rustling!

"Yes," I panted, stepping closer to Edward.

Am I gonna die here?

"Bella, it's the keys," he said, half amused, half worried.

Then I saw it. It was him wriggling the keys into the lock of the door.

Right.

"Oh. Um, yea... of course."

I was still a skittish mess when we were inside, and it wasn't until Edward had gotten the fire started, and I had changed into my pajamas that I relaxed... but just a little. Because he was leaving me here... to die.

"Are you really going to be okay here by yourself?"

"No," I said immediately, as I got under the covers on the couch. "I'm gonna die here. I swear."

I could hear everything. Branches and twigs scraping against the window, floorboards creaking, the wind blowing... rustling.

I was grateful when Edward didn't make fun of me. Instead he shrugged out of his jacket, rolled up the sleeves on his white shirt, and took off his shoes.

Then he came over to my couch, bent down and kissed my forehead.

"I'll stay until I know you're asleep, and when you wake up in the morning, I'll make sure that Alec or Rose is here. Okay?"

"Promise?"

"Promise." He nodded. "And if you wake up, call me and I'll be here in ten minutes."

I could live with that.

If someone could turn a twenty-five minute drive into a ten minute drive, it was Edward.

"I'd stay, but there's only one couch... But if you want, we could drive back, and you can take one of the guestrooms?" he suggested.

For the first time, I cursed that the cabin wasn't bigger. It really was just the one room, a kitchen, and a bathroom.

"No, I'll survive... I think... as long as you'll come if I call," I said.

"Of course I'll be here. And tomorrow we'll get an extra bed here, so you won't be alone. I can stay some nights, maybe Rose will stay a few nights... and lord knows Alec's up for being your bodyguard," he joked, caressing my cheek.

Felt so good...

"Sounds good." I hummed.

"Good. Get some sleep," he murmured before kissing my forehead again. "Want me to play something for you?"

Oh, God, I would love-... yes!

"Yes, please." I smiled.

"Consider it done."

Then he got comfortable in the chair... tinkered a bit... tuning, strumming... looking sexy and handsome. Perfect. And with the knowledge of him being there, I relaxed... let the exhaustion kick in... Mmm, yawned...

"Goodnight, Whistler," I sighed sleepily as I closed my eyes.

"Goodnight, princess," I heard him whisper.

I fell asleep to the sound of Edward playing acoustic guitar.

I had never felt better.

## **10 – FORKS IN SEPTEMBER**

### **BPOV**

"Time to wake up, luv."

No.

Not yet.

I'd had the best dream... And... my hormones were waking up, surfacing... all thanks to an Irish man.

The attraction was certainly there, and it might get hard to deny that, especially after the dream I had.

Crimes be damned.

Nothing had changed from last night. It was still goddamn mutual.

"I know ye're awake, Tush."

I wanted to whine.

"No, you don't, Alec," I mumbled sleepily.

"Yes, I do, Tush, and ye have a big day ahead of ye," he chuckled. "When Edward left this morning he told me to wake ye up at eleven, and it's eleven now. Sweet Cheeks will be here in two hours."

When Edward left? This morning?

Rubbing the sleep out of my eyes... and some serious stretching... I sat up in the couch, only to see a fedora-wearing Alec handing me a Snapple.

"Thank you," I giggled. It wasn't a pretty sound. "But what do you mean 'when Edward left.' Didn't he leave last night?"

Snapple was good. Will be even better once I have brushed my teeth.

"The lad didn't want to leave ya." He winked. "So, at the arse crack of dawn, he rang Emmett, and he drove me here."

"And then I fell asleep in the chair." He pointed. "Woke up an hour ago."

Oh.

And... Edward wouldn't leave me?

Yep, still like him.

Despite everything.

But...

"That means Edward didn't sleep all night." I frowned.

Alec merely shrugged. "Come on, luv, I'll get ye some fry... and I suppose you wanna have a fag."

"Have a what?" I choked out as I stood from the couch.

"Smoke, Tush! Smoke!" he laughed his way out to the kitchen.

Jesus, am I gonna have to get a damn dictionary here? And don't get me started on all the things I heard yesterday.

Between Edward, Alec, Emmett, and Esme, I heard some weird shit.

Strange words, I mean.

Whatever.

I got up, freshened up in the bathroom, smoked a cigarette, and then when I returned to the room, Alec was there.

With breakfast for me.

"You're cute, you know that, right?" I grinned as I sat down.

That earned me a wink.

"Ye nervous about getting hitched, luv? I'd be shittin' bricks if I were ye."

And I choked a bit on my scrambled eggs.

Nervous? No. Can't say that I am.

There were many things wrong with all this, but nerves... no, I'm not nervous.

"You're only twelve," I pointed out.

"True," he conceded, tinkering on a guitar. "Edward and Emmett are antsy as feck, though."

"Oh? Why's that?"

"Because they're lads, of course," he chuckled. "They're becoming providers. They worry."

This kid is... way too smart for his age.

And I hadn't thought of that. Never did. But it makes sense, I suppose. Edward will be my sole provider and caretaker. That's obviously something big. But for some reason I don't think he'll have a problem in that department.

\*o\*o\*o\*

It felt like déjà vu when Carlisle came to pick us up that evening.

There was only one difference with tonight – Alec was here instead of Nessa, stating that he wanted to escort his 'lovelies.'

Rose and I didn't mind. At all.

But other than having Alec here, the day's been the same.

We've been buffed and pampered by Esme, styled and dressed, and her words when she showed us the dresses were "To get reactions tonight, it's time to show some skin, darlings."

I thought we showed skin yesterday, but comparing to the dresses we have tonight... Hot damn.

Both dresses are strapless, sexy, and... shorter than the ones we wore yesterday. Still black but... yea, different on the sexy-scale, and that doesn't help me when it comes to the... *hormones*... that I'm dealing with today.

# ENGAGEMENT DINNER

AT THE CULLENS



Anyway...

Carlisle came, dressed in a tuxedo again... holding a black paper bag... again. Gave us velvet boxes.

Again.

I opened mine and... I don't know what to say. Still.

Is this really what my life will be like?

"That'll look bloody gorgeous on ya, Tush." Alec grinned as he looked at the contents.

It was a diamond necklace, so extravagant. And sapphire earrings... to match my ring.

Overwhelmed doesn't quite cover it.

"May I?" I heard Carlisle ask Rose.

Glancing over, I noticed it was her turn for the pearls today, and my turn to match the ring.



"Of course," Rose replied quite shakily.

She was as shaken as I was.

Esme on the other hand... she was beaming with happiness. And used to this... lifestyle. Rose and I wasn't. At all.

Carlisle came over to me then, asked if he could do the honors with my necklace.

"Thank you," I replied, blinking back tears.

It had been one helluva rollercoaster ride with emotions, and the hour I'd had alone with Rose before Esme showed up earlier had been all about talking shit out. She was of course overwhelmed by the damn car, and she told me that she didn't really know where she was these days. It was all just so much. And I understood. From the welcoming into their family, to the lavish gifts... it was all insanely much.

\*o\*o\*o\*

Like yesterday, Emmett and Edward stood on the porch, this time with Nessa and Tanya, and they approached the car with huge grins on their faces.

Edward and Emmett, not Tanya and Nessa.

This time, I was first out.

He didn't speak at all this time, Edward. Just helped me out, held my hand fast, and... well, I'd say he eye-fucked me.

He was as handsome as yesterday, wearing a tuxedo, minus the jacket.

"I see my mother is trying to kill me," he forced out eventually.

"How so?" I smiled innocently, already knowing why Edward looked the way he did.

That was another thing I had learned just by watching him.

This was him being turned on. And I loved it. My hormonal side was cheering. I swear.

His eyes dark, his jaw was clenched, he looked like he was restraining himself. It was what I had seen in Emmett, too, as he watched Rose.

They desired us.

Yes, it made me feel wanted, but I know myself well enough to know that I will always be a grounded person. Just like Rose. That's who we are. But that doesn't mean we don't appreciate the looks our fiancés are sending us.

Fiancé.

Jesus, I'm engaged.

Edward didn't reply. Just laced our fingers together, and led us inside.

"I have a necessity to give you," he said as we reached the living room.

"Necessity?" I scoffed. "You think that word fools me, Edward? Just say gift."

"It's actually a necessity," I heard Emmett chuckle behind me.

It was just Edward, Emmett, Rose, and I in the living room.

And Edward and Emmett looked... almost serious.

Then Rose and I were given two black boxes each.

Confused as hell, we sat down on the couch and opened them.

Cell phones.



Was this a joke?

I knew Edward said he was buying me a cell phone, but why the serious faces?

But I put those thoughts away for a second when I unpacked the phone, because it was so sparkly. Yes, I'm a girl. But holy mother of... my phone was hot. Beautiful and sexy. In gold and black... and of course... there were diamonds on it. Didn't even bother to ask, because I was in the Cullen family, they were obviously real. And that's how I also understood that the gold metal... Yep, I saw the stamp. Real gold for fuck's sake.

What happened to buying a regular Nokia... or whatever...

Never even heard of 'Vertu.'

Looking over at Rose, I saw that she was ogling her own phone – similar to mine, but in red and silver... and sapphires...



Sweet baby Jesus.

"Those two are your everyday-phones," Edward said, squatting down in front of me. "We have already programmed them and installed the numbers you'll need."

"Then there are the other two phones," Emmett said, also squatting down, by Rose.

The other two were white, the same kind, very beautiful and *cute*. But why would we need two phones?



“Those two are programmed so that only you can use them. It activates when your thumb presses down on that button there,” Emmett said, pointing at the big button under the display. “Edward and I ordered these weeks ago when we uh... had decided that it... was you two we wanted.”

Oh.

“It activates by the fingerprint of your thumb,” Edward clarified quietly.

“And how did you get our fingerprints before you met us?” Rose asked, cocking an eyebrow.

And this was why they looked serious. No joking around. Because they knew we would get offended.

“From glasses you had used at home,” Emmett answered.

Which means they broke in. Again, or was this the same time as Edward checked my room?

What-the-fuck-ever. We're marrying criminals. Might as well. Get. Used. To. It.

Piece of cake. Or something.

"Whatever," I sighed. "What's so special about these phones? Why do we need two?"

Edward and Emmett glanced at each other before nodding once, maybe to themselves, I don't know. And then Edward spoke as he watched me.

"That phone holds the numbers that we don't want to get out..." A pointed look was given to us, and we understood. "To scroll down, to get those numbers, you have to press that button, and if that person isn't you, the phone will shut off."

And Edward told me that Rose and I would never be a part of their bullshit... yeah, right. Fucker.

"Why would Rose and I ever need those numbers?" I asked, making sure not to meet Edward's eye.

Call it juvenile, but I was annoyed as hell with him.

"Because once we have left Forks, we'll be travelling a lot," Emmett replied. "And if Edward and I are... *working*, you might need to get in touch with either us... or other *family*... and these phones are untraceable. You won't use your everyday phones to call me and Edward when we're in either Italy, Monaco, Belgium, Spain, or France."

Not annoyed. Pissed.

"Emmett and I never travel under our real names, and our everyday-phones could let the authorities know that we are in fact there," Edward continued. "Which is why you will use those phones to reach us whenever we're abroad."

"We also have a second phone," Emmett filed in, showing us a black phone that looked more like a small computer. "So, your white phone holds the numbers to these, as well as the numbers to our contacts in Chicago."



Edward will pay for this. Motherfucking jackass.

Just when I was warming up to the guy...

"Why on earth would we ever need to call *anyone* that's involved in your *fucked up shit*?" Rose seethed.

I love her.

"Just in case of emergency," Emmett told her quietly. "Just in case something goes wrong."

"Like getting caught?" I asked, cocking an eyebrow at them.

Rose gasped. She didn't know.

"Yeah, Rose," I said, glaring at Edward. "Before Edward and Emmett came here, they were in prison."

"Bella," Edward sighed, shaking his head slightly. "There's a lot more to that story."

"Then enlighten us, goddamnit," I hissed.

"Not today," Emmett said calmly.

"Fuck both of you," Rose spat. "Come on, B."

We got up and left the fuckers there.

We didn't get far, though.

Esme stopped us when we reached the final porch step.

"A word, dears?" she asked softly.

Fucking hell!

Sighing, I turned around... and was met with a sad smile.

It infuriated me, because there was no way you could be pissed at Esme... or Alec.

She gestured for us to sit down on the patio where they had heaters.

We did. There was no denying Esme Cullen.

"The phones are for your sake, girls," Esme explained gently, not beating around the bush. "It's if Emmett and Edward gets into trouble that you can call Chicago to have them help you out of the country."

Motherfucking soft voice.



"It's for your safety," she continued. "And my boys just want there to be an escape for you if things get ugly."

I had to ask. "How often do things *get* ugly?"

"Not often," she assured with a smile that she understood my fears. "It has only happened once, and since then, we have a deal with Vertu to make our lines of communication secure and untraceable. All wives carry that white model nowadays, and it's a comfort for me... when Carlisle is out of the country... it gives me a chance to reach him."

I... hadn't even thought of Carlisle. He's in on this, too?

"You don't travel with him?" Rose asked hesitantly.

"Sometimes." She nodded. "I spend a few months of the year outside the country."

"And... will we travel together?" I asked quietly, gesturing for me and Rose.

"Most of the times, yes. Although you won't enter a country all together. But you'll meet up at the destination."

I nodded, taking shit in. It was a harsh wakeup call. And it was conflicting. Two sides pulling at me. The one side, where the Cullens were these lovely people who welcomed us into their family. The side where Edward and Emmett play Irish music for us. Gives us Baileys. Shows us a good time at the cabin. Introducing Alec into our lives.

But then...

There's organized crime.

A side I don't understand. Don't understand why. Why would they do this? Why would they travel the world to steal luxury cars? Why can't they just get a normal job? Why can't they be like normal people?

Normal, regular, boring people.

Whoa. Boring?

Where the hell did *that* come from?

"Do you know how long time it took for me to fall in love with Carlisle?" Esme asked then.

I shook my head no.

It was hard to comprehend, because they seemed so in love, and it was hard to understand that their marriage had been an arranged one.

"About two months." She smiled softly. "But it took me a year to admit it to myself. And another year to admit it to him."

Christ.

"And I come from this lifestyle," she continued. "I was already a Masen, and we come from a long line of no-gooders."

I couldn't help but chuckle at her choice of... word?

"But still I loathed Carlisle for how similar he was to what my family was involved with," she said, shaking her head at some memory. "My sister felt the same when our parents found Ed for her. And our promise to never become a part of our family business flew out the window," she sighed. "I married Carlisle Cullen – car thief extraordinaire. And Elizabeth married Ed – a scheming genius in the business world."

This was sick.

But something even sicker was how Rose and I were disgustingly intrigued.

"So, once my father wanted to retire," Esme sighed again, "Ed took over the Chicago branch, and Carlisle moved me to Seattle, so we could expand. And he took charge over everything that had to do with cars, yachts, planes, anything with transportation, really... And Ed... well, he's more ruthless, I'd say." She frowned. "Though they have strict rules about never involving minors, they still deal with drugs and gambling..."

"Then of course they are more of what people refer as *mafia*... with the *favours*, the bank jobs, the frauds... robbery... murder."

Even Esme shuddered as she uttered the last word, and it was evident that there was in fact a difference between a Cullen and a Masen.

"But this family isn't involved in *that*?" Rose asked, afraid of the answer.

"No," Esme assured. "Carlisle... and Edward and Emmett for that matter, they would never allow that. We don't run things like the Italians do. But that's a story for another day.

"My boys are thrill-seekers... just like Carlisle. There is no excuse for them. No one has forced them into this. They are who they are... And there's no back story.

"Carlisle was in med school when he needed money... for tuition... and he was desperate..."

She didn't need to continue.

That's when he stole his first car.

"He found it exhilarating," Esme muttered. "A Porsche became four Porsches... 10 000 dollars became more... and he couldn't stop... He didn't

want to stop... And by the time he approached my father, he was out of med school, he was a millionaire, and he had a reputation that had reached my parents."

"My father agreed to Carlisle's proposal after the first customary date," she finished.

Esme had cleared my head. I understood more. Didn't respect it, but I was afraid that accept would come... soon... when it came to Edward. I was already finding it impossible to hate him, and I knew that soon... he would've gotten under my skin so much that I accepted him for all he was. Including his life of stealing cars... and then some.

"What's Emmett and Edward's story in this?" Rose wondered.

"The same as Carlisle's," Esme answered, smiling ruefully. "They got into trouble a lot in their teens... Smoking pot, drinking, fighting, and they pulled pranks on others that went too far."

"So, when they started to get interested in girls," she sighed tiredly, "Carlisle and I put our foot down, afraid that they would only hurt the girls... And we knew that Ed and Elizabeth were doing the same with Liam who is a few years older than Em and Edward... So, we pulled the religion-card on them, even though we're not *that* religious. We told the boys that they weren't allowed to date... they weren't allowed to do anything until they got married."

Jesus. I had no idea that it was... *that* way.

"But didn't they see through it?" I asked.

"Yes, they did," she chuckled. "When they were sixteen, seventeen they found out that we only told them that so they could stay proper in at least one way. And Liam found out at the same time."

"But by then, they actually agreed that waiting would be best. Simply because they knew that what they did – with stealing cars, and other things... They wanted something that redeemed them, I suppose."

"They were stealing cars at that age?" I gasped.

Seventeen years old?! Holy shit, that's... young.

"They stole their first car when they were fourteen and fifteen," Esme huffed. "God, I was so furious with them when a police officer brought them home... but then... I just had to come to terms with the fact that they were bastards like their father."

So. Much. To. Process.

"I tried," she went on as she lit a cigarette. Rose and I did the same. "Tried so hard to keep them in school. Tried to get them interested in other things, such as getting an education, or getting a normal job... But they couldn't. They couldn't see past what they had no been introduced to. And that's when Carlisle stepped in, told them that he was the same. And he taught them everything he knows.

"Emmett and Edward were of course aware of our family in Chicago, and knew as much as boys in that age could know, but they didn't know about Carlisle's involvement."

I was relieved to hear that Carlisle had kept his distance... in the beginning... I guess.

"The only good and honest thing my boys do is donate money to charity. That's it," she chuckled humorlessly. "They give away millions every year, all three of them... but I wish everyday that they will wake up and think 'maybe I want to go to college.' But they won't. And... I love my boys regardless. They are who they are."

And that was that.

Esme had given us a glance. And we knew more... of how they functioned. How they worked.

They were in it for the thrill, and not only were they not able to stop their addiction... they didn't want to.

So, they made a business out of it.

Of stealing.

"And they got caught?" Rose half asked, half stated.

"Yes." Esme nodded. "Last year, they were guests at the exclusive Lamborghini show in New York, and Edward and Emmett worked with Irina and Kate's husbands."

There it was.

There was a connection.

"Edward and Emmett overestimated what Felix and Dem could do, and they got caught when four cars disappeared."

I tried to picture it. Edward, Emmett, dressed to the nines, pretending to be guests...

"Felix and Dem were caught red handed, sitting in the cars, on their way out... and Emmett and Edward got arrested when Felix and Demetri couldn't shut their traps."

She shrugged. Esme shrugged.

Deep drag. Exhale.

"My boys got eight months, and Felix and Demetri got four years."

Jesus.

"Safe to say, my boys work better alone, or with Carlisle," she finished, chuckling and rolling her eyes at the same time.

"And now?" I asked. "Now that they're here."

"They're taking a break, I suppose you could say," she told me. "But I recognize the symptoms in all three of them. Can't sit still, fidgeting, pacing, taking their cars out more often... They're bored... and ready to move on."

There was a rush... of *something*... *surging* through me... and I didn't understand, but the deep breath I took... it made my insides flutter... nerves, and... something else... almost... *anticipation*?

"I reckon they're already planning their next move," she told us pointedly. "And I know from experience that Edward and Emmett have a thing for Italy and the south of France."

Oh, God... so, that where we'll go?

Holy... something.

"Um, about this *addiction*...?" Rose trailed off.

"Oh, it's not like that," Esme said. "Yes, they are all addicted to the thrill of doing this *crap*. But they are also great planners, and would never do anything stupid – in this sense – to jeopardize anything. Planning a heist is also a massive part of the thrill, and sometimes they can plan for months before actually doing anything... and that's when you'll be in Seattle.

"The whole thing starts with getting orders, and that's all Chicago-business. Buyers come to Ed with requests, and Ed contacts Carlisle or the

boys, and then they take over, plans the job... execute it, and deliver to Chicago where Ed takes over again, and then money shows up.”

Huh...

As I put my cigarette out, I realized I was breathing heavily... and I couldn't for the life of me figure out why. Was it fear?

No.

That answer came quickly.

This was something else.

But I couldn't pinpoint it.

Nessa came out then, announcing that it was dinner.

“I can see that you are both calmer now, yes?” Esme asked softly, smiling.

It was true.

Things had settled, and I understood more. And better.

But I was still trying to get my breathing controlled.

“Yes,” I replied. Rose did the same.

“Good.” She nodded. “But don't let the boys know yet. Let them squirm for a while. It may be a man's world, but the women sure are the ones standing behind them. Doing much more than just looking pretty.”

We love Esme.

“Be ruthless, let them sweat, and throw in a few curse words for good measure. God knows our men need them sometimes.”



Yep, we really love her. She's on our side in this.

## **11 – FORKS IN SEPTEMBER**

### **BPOV**

To say that Edward and Emmett were stiff as sticks when Rose and I took our seats next to them at the dinner table... well, that'd be the understatement of the year.

Rose and I showed no mercy.

Glares were intact whenever we caught them looking at us, and Esme spent the dinner giggling with Tanya who had been informed.

Edward and Emmett were sweating bullets.

It was fun.

"Can I talk to you after dinner, Bella?" Edward whispered.

"No," I replied curtly as I cut into the lovely steak.

It really was delicious.

I made yummy noises for good measure.

"Mmmm," I yummied. That's a word, right?

"Please?" Whistler tried again.

I snickered internally.

This was what Esme meant. The women do hold some power.

"Go fuck yourself," I whispered, smiling innocently before returning to my meal.

"Wonderful," I heard him mumble before chugging his beer.

Or stout... whatever. This one wasn't black, so maybe it was beer.

Anyway, dinner was... entertaining. Approving smiles came from Esme and Tanya. Sad smiles were sent to the boys from Carlisle and Garrett.

And eyebrows cocked came from Esme and Tanya when Edward and Emmett pleaded with their eyes for help.

Squirm, fucker, squirm... you sexy fucker...

Something is wrong with me, I swear.

"How about some fresh air, ladies?" Tanya suggested after dinner.

"Sounds great," I replied happily, standing up.

"Absolutely." Rose grinned.

"Actually, uh, Rose... Could I have a word?" Emmett asked her.

Looking over her shoulder, she said, "Go fuck a leprechaun. Make it Irish."

Nice. Very nice.

"Excellent," I heard Emmett sigh as we made our way out.

We barely made it down the porch steps before we all burst out in laughter.

"Make it Irish!" I laughed.

"That was a clever one, Allanah," Tanya snickered.

"Just perfect," Esme agreed.

"Why, thank you." Rose smiled sweetly, and even curtsied.

"And ye're so busted, luvs," we heard a voice say behind us.

Spinning around, we saw... Alec. Grinning, rubbing his hands together. The dude had a plan.

"Alec, darling," Esme said, smiling innocently. "What do you mean?"

"Ye're havin' a laugh, eh? At the lads' expense," he accused playfully as he approached us. "And now I'm wondering what I'm to do with that tidbit, ye see."

He's going to blackmail us, the handsome little devil.

"Alright, cut the crap, darling," Esme sighed. "What can we give for your silence?"

He thought about it. Fiddled with his pocket knife. Rubbed his chin and all.

"Well, is' gonna cost ya. I'm supposed to tell Boss," he said pointedly.

I felt that this was my cue.

"But wouldn't you make an exception for me, handsome?" I asked sweetly. "I *am* Edward's future wife after all."

Esme and Tanya gave me big smiles of approval, and I *hoped* that this would work out, because it was fun to tease Edward and Emmett.

So much fun.

"You know what, Tush, you are absolutely right. You are Edward's future wifey." Alec grinned. "And I'm bloody honored to have such a lovely lass as yourself in me family."

I was sensing a 'but' coming...

"But..."

Yep, there it is.

"I'm loyal to me boss, luv."

Hot damn, I love that kid.

Seriously, that was my first thought. To see him loyal, even in this playful situation. It made me soar.

"Later, ladies," he said then, tipping his fedora slightly before heading inside again.

"Well, feck."

Yeah, um, that was actually Esme. Huffing.

But the only thing on my mind was Edward. I wanted to follow, to see if Alec was going to tell on us. And more importantly, I *wanted* to see it happen, because... I don't know.

But for some reason, I was done playing.

So, I left. And followed Alec to the living room where Edward and Emmett sat.

"What's up, cub?" Edward smiled at the boy before noticing that I was there.

When he did, he immediately went for sadness and concern.

It tugged at me.

And... *shit*, I just wanted to see him happy. I wanted to *make* him happy.

God, where did all this come from?

"Actually, Alec, do you mind if I...?" I trailed off, my eyes never leaving Edward.

"Course not, Tush! Come on, Em, let's leave the happy couple, eh? And I'm sure Sweet Cheeks wants to talk to ya," Alec said confidently.

Confused as hell, Emmett agreed, and he smiled politely at me as he and Alec left us alone in the living room.

"Where are the others?" I asked softly once we were alone.

He was studying me again, and most likely wondering when I'll drop the next bomb on him.

"They're setting up in another room," he replied, pointing his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the room where I knew they had a big piano.

I nodded, walked over to where Edward was, and sat down right next to him.

Yes, he was apprehensive... confused.

"I'm not mad at you," I said quietly, placing my hand on his thigh. "Esme told us everything... well, most likely not everything, but a lot... about you... Emmett, Carlisle."

He didn't respond. Just watched the hand I had on his thigh... as he processed what I had said.

So, I continued. "You and your brother are complete bastards for doing what you do," I muttered, shaking my head at the stuff Esme had told us. "But there's more to you than that... What you *work* with... that's not all you are."

He was still quiet, but he was swallowing hard... breathing heavier, and he was watching me intently... maybe looking for signs that I'm lying to him.

But I'm not.

"I know you meant well with the phones," I added. "It's just a lot for me to deal with... but at least Esme made us understand you better."

"I'm not mad," I implored softly when he still hadn't spoken. "I don't respect what you do... and a part of me doesn't understand it... but... there's much more to you than that," I repeated. "We all have flaws, and I suppose... I'm ready to look passed yours."

There. I've said it.

"I'm being honest," I finished, squeezing his thigh slightly for emphasis.

Shuddering a large breath, he seemed to still process what I've told him, but I could see... literally, how he started to relax. And his shoulders didn't slump, but... I could see tension leave them, him... and his posture became less stiff.

"You don't... hate me, then?" he asked very quietly.

Leaning my head against his arm, I replied truthfully. "No... you and your goddamn personality sorta made that impossible."

*Your godly looks and lopsided smile sure helped, too. Seriously, damn smile. Making me all gooey and shit.*

Didn't say that, though. No need to stroke his ego with *that*. Yet, at least.

"Thank you," he whispered, and then I felt him drop a kiss at the top of my head.

It felt good. Really good.

Lastly, I told him, "Though I don't ever want to be a part of what you and Emmett do... I still want to know what it is that you do... because I want to know what you're getting yourselves into, okay?"

I doubted he knew why I wanted that, but I do nonetheless.

Simply because I know I will worry whenever he's out there... working. And I'll be scared shitless that he's gonna get caught.

That revelation scares the living daylights out of me, but I'm admitting to it regardless.

Edward nodded against my temple. "I understand. And I'll make sure I talk with you before... anything happens."

He took my hand, the one that had been on his thigh, and brought it to his mouth... kissed it... reverently. And I felt it. I felt that he felt a lot for me.

It mattered.

Because I was starting to feel... *for*... and about... him, too. A lot more than I ever thought possible.

"I'm sorry," he murmured, his lips still on my knuckles. "Sorry for... dragging you into this."

"Don't be," I replied... truthfully. "I'll look beyond it, Edward."

"Just like Esme does with Carlisle," I added, smiling against his bicep.

I felt his silent chuckle as he lowered our hands to his thigh again.

"We're all flawed, eh?" he murmured quietly. "Starting to wonder if I'm ever gonna see a flaw in you, Bella Swan."

Jesus, this man and his words...

"Time to bring my snark into this." I grinned, looking up at him. "Maybe my flaw is that I'm warming up to your criminal ass."

God, the grin he gave me... I swear it made me hotter than the sun.

It also made me aware of our close proximity, and as I watched him, watching me *so* lovingly, my eyes flickered slightly down... to *there*... yes, I wanted it... *that*... I wanted him to...

Kiss me.

He did the same, his eyes flickering down... and the tension shifted.

Became heavy. His smile was gone. Replaced by... well, for him it was... *want*, apprehension... restraint, but he was also resigned, never thinking that I would actually want it.

But I did. I do.

Yes.

"Edward," I whispered. Swallowing hard before... nodding... once. To give him permission. Because I wanted it badly. I could feel it with every fiber of me.

I was ready for that.

He shivered as he understood what I meant, and tried desperately to read me, a deep crease between his brows, as he... God, licked his lips... and I did the same... out of reflex, watching him do it.

"Yes," I breathed out as he watched my mouth.

Slowly, he leaned down, bringing his mouth closer, and I closed my eyes, feeling my entire being just... set on fire... and then, then ever so gently, I felt his lips on mine. First just slight pressure... no moving, but I still



wanted it, him. I wanted *him*. So, I added pressure, feeling my lips tingle something fiercely, and I think we both felt *it*... and I felt us both breathe heavier as our mouths began moving against each other, carefully, slowly...

It wasn't enough.

Reaching up, I placed my hand on the side of his neck. He shivered, and so did I, and I parted my lips... desperate to wet my lip, and to feel him. And he understood, parting his lips, too, and *God*, there was no describing... *that* feeling, that I felt... when our tongues met. First just the tips, softly and slowly, then more. It was intense. So goddamn *intense*, and it made me shiver... over and over. Even more as he finally grew bold and began kissing me properly, leaving his apprehension behind, understanding that I actually wanted this. And Jesus, when his hand, arm went around my waist... I thought I was going to combust.

He tasted delicious, and it was all *him*. Whiskey, smoke, mint.

"Edward," I whimpered into his mouth, as my hands found his neck... and his hair. His tongue slid along mine, and I loved it all.

"Fuck." He shuddered, breaking our kiss, leaving us both panting with our foreheads touching. "If I don't stop now... Christ, princess..."

I understood what he meant, especially as our eyes found each other.

His eyes were so dark... filled with desire.

As were mine, I was sure of it.

I smiled, overcome with joy, because I desired the man I was going to marry. And I felt confident that this would work out. Someway, somehow, this Irish bastard had gotten to me. Under my skin. And he wasn't leaving.

Edward smiled, too, like he had won the lottery.

"I think you just made me the luckiest man alive," he whispered.

And I knew... that he not only meant what he said, but... that he was talking about me accepting him... and not just because we had kissed.

Didn't mean I didn't want to tease him, though.

"Because you just made it to first base?" I giggled silently.

He grinned goofily before groaning as he closed his eyes, burying his face against my shoulder, so I couldn't see his face.

It felt warm and fuzzy and amazing.

"You had to bring that up, eh?" he chuckled before kissing the skin on my shoulder.

"Of course," I laughed, loving that there was no awkwardness.

Also loving that my first kiss had been... well, to be blunt; fuckawesome.

"Kinda fitting, though, don't you think?" I murmured. "Our first kiss at our engagement party."

He hummed against my shoulder, kissing it once more before he faced me... and yet again brought my hand to his lips.

"You're turning me into one hell of a sap, Bella." He smiled against my hand. "And you better put some ground rules down, because..." he trailed off, sighed as he lowered my hand... "S'gonna be impossible for me to not want more."

That sorta thrilled me to no end.

He still respected me so much, and was still aware of the fact that everything wasn't perfect just because we took things to another level.

I didn't wanna go back, though, retreat or anything... and now that I've kissed him... I'm certain I want more, too, but I was glad he still left it up to me.

"Feel free to kiss me in private." I smiled shyly. "Whenever."

That earned me another smile for him that said I-just-won-the-lottery.

Goddamn, how did he make me feel so wanted?

*Maybe because he does want me,* a small voice answered.

And maybe I'm beginning to want him, too. Fully.

He nodded then, and winked. "Feel free to kiss *me*... whenever. Period."

I blushed. No surprise there.

"Goddamn beautiful," he murmured, caressing my cheek.

"And lord knows I want more... *privacy*." He grinned, even waggling his eyebrows, which made me giggle. "But I have shit to do now... Got something planned for the future wife, you see."

"Oh?" I chuckled.

"Mm." He nodded firmly. "We're playing for you tonight... if you want."

If I want?

I think my excited smile and furious nodding was answering enough, but just in case it wasn't...

"Of course I want that." I beamed, thrilled to see him play.

"Liking the tin whistle, eh?" he teased.

But he was also ecstatic.

It was easier and easier to read Edward Ryan Cullen, and it sure as fuck had me lit up like a Christmas tree whenever I saw how much he adored me.

"I really do." I nodded. "You, Emmett, and Alec sure have made me love Irish music..." *plus, you're damn sexy when you play.*

"Fucking A," he laughed through his nose. "So, Irish music and Baileys so far, eh?"

And an Irish boy, I added silently.

"Yep."

"Well, let's not leave you hanging then." He winked. "Shall we?"

Yes, please.

I took his offered hand, and we got up to join the others in the music-room, but... he stopped me before we left the living room.

"Just because you said I could," he said before cradling my face.

And he kissed me again. Chastely, closemouthed, but without hesitation.

I loved it. The part where there was no hesitation, that is.

"Now we can go," he mumbled against my lips before straightening up.

Or we could stay here...

But then he led me out of the room, so I guess not.

When we reached the music-room, which was pretty much another living room but held a grand piano, and other instruments on the wall, the first thing I noticed was that Emmett and Rose sat close together.

Holding hands.

Yep, they've talked, too.

"Oh, so now you're done smooching, eh?" Alec smirked... which made everyone look up, of course.

He wouldn't know what we had done, but my blush sure gave shit away.

Excellent.

"Come on, beautiful." Edward grinned against my temple.

He led us toward a loveseat, and I tried to ignore the looks, especially from Esme and Tanya.

"Have you decided, son?" Carlisle asked Edward.

"Yep, we're playing," Edward responded as we sat down.

I focused more on ignoring Rose's curious eyes as to what Alec had said. And I knew what she was wondering.

There would be girl talk later, believe you me.

But now I wanna see my Edwar-

Now I wanna see Edward play.

Christ.

"Which comes first, dear?" Esme asked from across the room. "Gifts or playing?"

"Bella has an aversion to gifts." Whistler snickered. "So, I think we should deal with the gifts to get that out of the way."

I punched his arm, but that only made him and every other fucker in the room laugh.

But yeah, we dealt with gifts first... and... holy hell.

I got a car.

From Edward and Elizabeth Masen.



A Porsche Cayenne, black with tinted windows. And all expenses paid to get my driver's license from Carlisle and Esme.

A beautiful Claddagh ring, too. For my pinky finger. Making me feel belonged. And Edward kissed the finger... making me feel... adored.

Alec, that kid, he actually gave me a pocket knife from Tiffany's, and I remember that Rose had gotten one from yesterday, but there were just so many gifts that I didn't think about it.

But now... Jesus, a kid gave me a knife.

The thing is, though... I fucking love it. It's so cool, and it says 'Tush' on the back of it. He winked when my eyes welled up, because I'm a

hormonal freak, and Edward scowled at Alec because Alec is... in. In as in to-ta-lly accepted. And loved.

There were loads of gifts for both me and Edward, but like I noticed yesterday, the gifts were focused on the newcomer in the family, AKA me in this case.

There was a theme, and had I paid attention to what Rose received yesterday, I might have known already what I was going to get, because like with Rose, Kate and Irina gave me a Burberry bag, filled with everyday-stuff; a matching wallet, a pocket mirror, make up from Dior, a zippo lighter from Tiffany's... No, these people can't buy the ordinary. It has to cost an arm. At least. And when we took a break, to you know, get that fresh air everyone's raving about, Edward tried and failed to be subtle as he stuffed my wallet.



"I'm not asking you to use the card or the cash. I'm telling you," he had said. And then added, "I don't want you to go without anything."

Emmett had done the same thing yesterday with Rose, but I had missed it... because I was preoccupied with ogling my fiancé, but she came over

with cigarette dangling from her red lips, stating that Emmett had given her the same black card last night.

But what I noticed... and what Rose had noticed yesterday... was that it said Isabella Marie Cullen on the card... just like it said Rosalie Lillian Cullen on hers. And the boys explained sheepishly that they thought, you know... that it wouldn't be long.

Until that was our name.

And I felt nothing negative. I could see Rose didn't feel anything bad either.

Things were looking up.

It was time for me to embrace this and focus on the people that actually care about me.

"Time to get yer arses inside," Alec announced then.

## **12 – FORKS IN SEPTEMBER**

**Two songs for this chapter. "Dobbin's Flowery Vale," (track 10) and "Pine Tree", (track 06). Click on the link to listen. By the way, the song I have in mind when you read about Edward's song for Bella is "Pine Tree."**

<http://www.deezer.com/en/music/songsolnamoo#music/songsolnamoo>

### **BPOV**

Rose and I were sitting in one of the loveseats, watching Alec and Edward, Emmett and even Carlisle.

Everyone is scattered around the big room, and everyone is watching them.



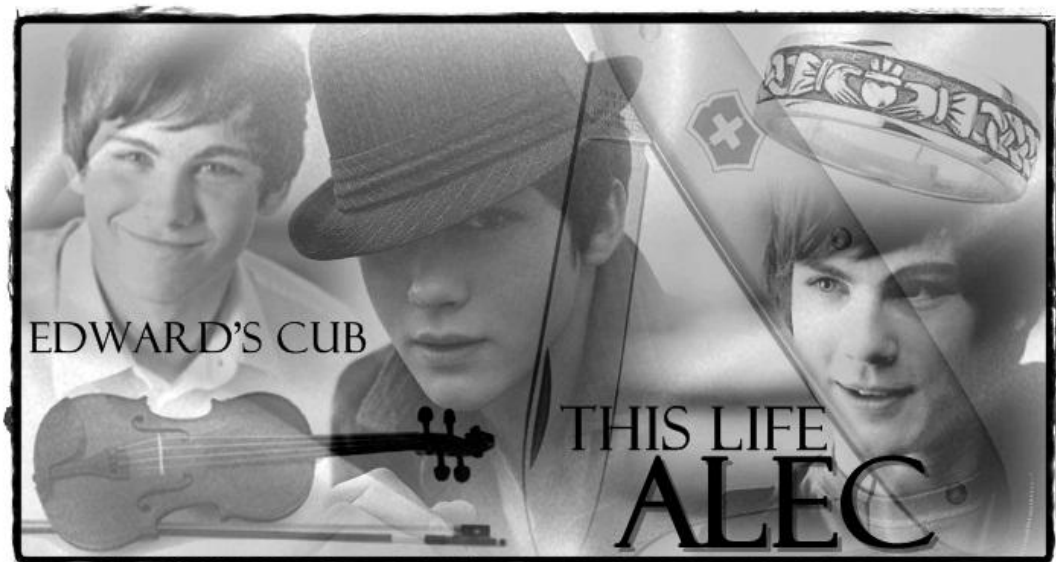
"Alright," Alec said, clapping his hands to get our attention... as if they didn't have it already. "Tonight we're celebrating Boss and Tush, and it's me honor to introduce this bloody brilliant group of musicians."

We giggled, of course. I mean, this was Alec we're talking about.

He's a charmer.

"We have Boss on the whistle," he continued, and Edward grinned at him... and winked at me. "We have yers truly on the whistle, too, but I'll also bring out me fiddle. And then we have Em on the mandolin... and lastly, folks, we have Uncle C on the acoustic guitar."

We cheered, because this was turning out to be quite the show... on many levels. Firstly, because they were all so handsome. Sleeves rolled up, buttons unbuttoned on either vests or shirts, instruments tuning, muscles straining as they tinkered, Alec's fedora tilted, and his suspenders down...



He was adorable.

Carlisle and Emmett were very handsome.

Edward was... cue dreamy sigh... beautiful, and... so goddamn sexy.

And secondly, because I've really come to love Irish music.

"Alright, folks, we're starting with Dobbin's Flowery Vale," Alec announced then as he positioned the fiddle against his shoulder. "Uncle C, you count us in."

They all grinned as they got comfortable next to the piano. Carlisle on the piano bench, holding his guitar, Emmett on a chair next to him with his mandolin, Alec standing next to Emmett, and lastly, Edward sitting on an ottoman on the other side of Carlisle.

"You ready, boys?" Carlisle chuckled.

And the boys nodded, sent winks to the girls.

Girls aww'd. Me and Rose very much included.

"On three..." And then he counted down by tapping on the wood of his guitar.

They all began at the same time.

It was... no, there were no words.

It was Alec and Edward setting the pace, and they started out slowly. So beautifully, and Carlisle and Emmett tinkering in the same pace... All of them wearing the same serene expressions that we'd seen at the cabin.

The song became faster then, and Edward and Alec both grinned as the two challenged each other, increasing the pace... faster and faster... yet never rushed. It was supposed to be like that, and... God, I hated it whenever I had to blink. I just didn't wanna miss a thing.

They were just so damn synched. All of them.

The song ended, like they all had begun, together. Everyone on the last note.

We applauded, because honestly, I'd pay good money to see this.

And since I have the tendency to be... blunt, and... crude...

Fuck, it was porn, alright?

Alec announced that the next song was from Emmett and Edward to me and Rose, and we blushed scarlet as they began a song with only the mandolin and the whistle...

It wasn't until the middle of the song that Alec filed in with his fiddle, and it was emotional. Seriously an emotional song. Calm, serene, beautiful.

More songs were played, some happy and cheery that had us grinning like fools, and Garrett, Tanya and Esme clapping and cheering. And then there were calmer tunes...

But what it all led down to was... Christ, Rose and I were taken.

Swept off our feet.

"Alright, everyone," Alec said. "Time for the last tune of the night."

Dramatic pause that made us giggle.

But when I caught a glance at Edward, and saw that he seemed nervous, I stopped.

"And since Boss can't talk for shite, he asked me to announce it," Alec laughed, making Edward shake his head in amusement. "I told him to name the tune 'Tush', but he wouldn't 'ave it... So, he named it '*Gile álainn*' and it's you, Tush."

I didn't understand, but Esme and Tanya gasped and became emotional, and I...I wanted to know what it meant!

Had he... *written* it for me?!

"Aunt Essy, Tan, Rina, Katie, you better get the clapping started when it's time. Alright, luvs?" Alec said pointedly. "I'll give ye the cue."

Emmett began, quietly on the guitar, and then Edward filed in... and it was *indescribable*.

Alec was next, also on the tin whistle now.

In the corner of my eye, I saw Esme move toward me, and she squatted down next to me.

"It means Beautiful Lightness, dear," she whispered.

I exhaled shakily.

"I heard the song yesterday," she continued quietly, and I listened, but we both kept our eyes on the three playing. "It's for you, Bella."

For me.

My eyes were fixed on Edward who had his eyes closed, and as I listened... and watched. I couldn't understand what it was surging through me. But it was heavy.

Alec winked to the ladies, and Emmett's playing changed... and it all happened at once; the song went from serene, *loving*, and beautiful... to light, playful, and *fun*.

Beautiful lightness.

"He did this for me?" I breathed out, unsurprised that my vision became blurry with unshed tears.

"Yes," she whispered, squeezing my hand.

I was nothing but overwhelmed.

The song was happy and cheery now, and everyone – except me, Rose, and Esme – were as cheery as the music. I just couldn't because... my *mind*... was all over the place.

A jumbled mess was what it was, and I was conflicted.

"I know, B," Rose whispered next to me, squeezing my other hand.

And I understood.

She was on the same page.

"Don't fight it, darlings." Esme winked. "Remember, I went through the same thing with Carlisle."

Don't fight it. Huh.

Easier said than done, though.

My body had made up its mind, that's for sure. It wanted him. badly. All of him. Forever.

My heart was undecided. It was jumbled, messy, fighting, warring, pulling from side to side.

My mind told me to run... sorta. Perhaps.

And then there were events. Like the kiss... where all three parts of me screamed how *right* it was. But when they gave us the white phones... I wanted to hide. Get away from him, them. All of it.

Lastly there was when Esme told me about the Lamborghini Car Show, and I felt... *something*... *rushing* inside me.

Just so much to deal with.

But as the song ended, and Edward looked straight at me... I knew... with every fiber of my being, that right now... my body was stronger than my mind.

I wanted Edward Cullen.

\*O\*O\*O\*

"Do you want Rose to stay with you tonight?" Edward asked.

We were standing on the porch, having just said goodbye to Tanya, Garrett, and their daughters, and Edward's question made me look in the direction of where Rose and Emmett just disappeared.

Inside. And I know my Rose. I know what she had planned. She was also giving in, and well, Emmett's about get lucky.

Maybe not *that* lucky, but he's gonna get the kiss.

*And no, I don't want Rose to stay with me tonight,* I thought as I took a drag from my smoke.

"Emmett and I had a bed delivered to the cabin," he continued.

How great.

"No, I don't want Rose to stay with me," I said.

He grinned, exhaling smoke through his nose.

"You saying you can stay there alone, then?"

Funny. Funny, funny boy.

"No," I replied.

His grin turned into a look of confusion as he took another drag.

"I'm saying I want *you* to stay there, Edward."

All traces of humor. Gone.

Not so funny now, eh? Eh, eh?

"If you're up for it, that is... *Whistler*." I smirked before heading inside.

Threw my smoke on the way, and went to say goodbye to the Carlisle, Esme, Alec, and Nessa.

My mind was... elsewhere... because my body was in charge, and... *it* had one thought... yes, my body can think. Apparently. And right now, it's thinking about the giggle-fest Rose and I had with Kate and Irina when they presented extra *gifts* for us... upstairs, in one of the guestrooms.

Kate and Irina love to shop, too. And they gave us a bag each.

With sleepwear. Lingerie. Innocent ones... and not so innocent ones.

\*o\*o\*o\*

God, I love the cabin. And my plan.

"I'm just gonna go change." I smiled innocently.

"Sure... I'll start a fire."

Yes. You man. You start fire.

I fought the urge to giggle as I headed for the bathroom.

On the ride over, Edward was... quiet, I suppose you could say. And now that I've learned to read him better, I could practically read his mind. He knew me well. Very well. But I was starting to know him, too, and when

he gripped the steering wheel... hard... instead of holding my hand, which he never shies away from... I knew he was thinking about us spending the night together.

Being the gentleman he is, I know he's assuming to sleep on the couch... but when I saw the big-boy they had bought... well, that bed is mighty big for just little ole' me.

In the corner of the cabin, behind the sitting area, now stood a bed. A king sized bed with a frame in black leather.

It was sexy. And I want a heated make up session with Edward there. Tonight.

My fiancé's gonna make it to second base, too.

"I'm such a hussy," I whispered to myself as I got rid of the dress.

Now it was time for the chemise in grey silk, and a pair of black panties in lace. Not so innocent, but far, far, *far*, from slutty. A good start, I'd say.





I mean, I'm only seventeen, still, and I'm on unknown territory here. This would never happen had it not been for those awkward hours with Mary Brandon. But I'm sending her silent thanks now, because the woman who is very proper, is also one to please her man. That's after all why she was put on this earth.

Or some bullshit like that.

Yes, the men come first, but fuck me if the women don't deserve some fun, too.

But yeah, those hours may have been uncomfortable as hell, but it's paying off now, and will continue to do so.

After I pulled my hair back into a ponytail, I took a deep breath, slipped into the black slippers in satin... and opened the door.

Edward stood crouched by the fire, wearing a pair of light blue pajama bottoms, and... hot damn, a black wife beater, but...

Damn, is that a tattoo?

Silently, I made my way over, trying to see it better... and yes... on his shoulder blade, I could make out a 'C', and 'U', which means he's probably got CULLEN written across his shoulder blades in a very old font... sorta Celtic-looking.

*That's... the sexiest thing I've ever seen,* I thought as I swallowed hard.

"I know you're there, you know," I heard him murmur.

Without turning around.

He's good.

I said nothing.

And eventually, he stood up, and turned to face me.

He tensed. Eyes widening for a second.

Irish boy eye-fucked me.

Goddamn, he's built. Like really fucking muscular.

"You have *got* to be kidding me, princess," he gritted out quietly. "How much restraint do you think I have?"

Bingo.

"I kid you not, Edward," I replied.

*And I hope you don't have much restraint at all.*

"Shall we?" I asked lightly, motioning for the bed.

Dragging his hands through his messy hair, his eyes flickered between me and the bed... and boy did he have a big decision to make.

"No, I'm thinking I'm gonna sleep on the couch," he answered firmly, even nodding to himself.

Such a gentleman.

"And I'm thinking you should sleep in the bed," I countered.

He didn't move.

Goddamnit.

*Come hither, come hither, Whistler,* I thought as I sauntered my way over to him.

“What the hell are you doing to me, Bella?” he groaned as I fisted his beater, and when I walked us towards the bed, wearing a coy smile for him, he continued incredulously, “And seriously, what’s happened to you?”

I have no idea.

“You hated me yesterday,” he reminded me as we reached the bed.

Irish boy wasn’t really struggling at all.

“But I don’t hate you anymore,” I pointed out softly.

With that said, I positioned myself in the middle of the bed, enjoying watching him... you know, cover his crotch.

“There are parts of you that want me, Edward,” I told him, quietly but knowingly.

Irish boy chuckled, a bit humorlessly. “Every goddamn part of me wants you.”

His words... motherfucking magic, I swear.

“Then stop fighting this,” I whispered, propping myself up to reach him. And I did.

Pulled him down. To me. So close. And it was hot. On every level.

“I want it, too, Edward.”

Two words left him in an exhale.

“*Fuck, baby.*”

And his mouth was on mine.

Firmly and passionately, we picked up where we had left it at the Cullen mansion, and it was fire and sin as he pushed me down on my back, never breaking the kiss. We were tangled together, so hot, so close, with my naked leg hitched over his hip... and damn, his hand... up, up, up my thigh... more... higher. Lips, tongues, moving sensually, setting me on fire, making me crave, making me want more and more and more.

"Christ, sweetheart, you better fucking stop me," he breathed, breaking the kiss... to kiss my jaw... my neck... so hotly.

He consumed me. His large hand caressing my upper thigh, his body covering half of mine, and my God, his mouth, his tongue... on my skin. So close. So hot. So wet.

I felt him. All of him. His muscular body, his heart pounding, his desire for me.

His hard cock.

And let me tell you... My wedding night? Will be painful. As in; Full. Of. Pain.

Fucker aint little.

Are all cocks that big?

"Can't stop you," I moaned as my nails dug into his shoulder blades.

"Not... Oh... not yet..."

More. Just a little bit more. Please.

Hitching my leg up... higher... I pressed myself closer to him, making him hiss against my neck, and... his hand... up, up, higher... yes, cupping my ass... kneading.

"You're sin, Bella," he moaned. "Sweet motherfucking sin."

Maybe, yes. But it's your fault.

"Don't stop," I whimpered, and my mouth latched onto his collarbone.

"Can't... either," he groaned as his hand wandered more... yes, even higher... resting on my hipbone... and, and... his thumb brushing the sliver of skin under the chemise, and yes... I wanted him to.

He found my mouth then, again, and our tongues met immediately in a heated kiss that would've brought me to my knees.

I encouraged him, moaning in want as his hand ghosted over my stomach... please, more.

"Goddamn flawless," he breathed in my mouth. "Perfection."

I was wet. So wet, and... wantonly willing... eager, *desperate* for him to know. To know how he affected me.

Up my ribcage, but his hand stilled... hesitating... too much of a gentleman.

"Yes, Edward," I pleaded, breaking the kiss, gasping for air.

He shuddered, shivered and... *throbbed*, against me. Against my thigh. Yes, I felt him, and I wanted him to feel me, too. And with that decided, I ground myself against him, and he... moaned, loudly as he sucked on my pulse point... and then... fucking finally... his thumb brushed lightly over my nipple.

Testing the waters maybe, but when he noticed that I *wanted* it, he grew bolder... palmed my breast, making us both moan... and shiver, God, so many shivers.

Drawing a ragged, shaky breath, I tugged on his hair, making him face me, and, fuck... our lustful eyes met, only making me *wetter*, only making

me want *more*, so much more... Chests heaving rapidly, his hands, shit, his *hands*, working me... exploring... *pleasuring*.

He kissed me hard then, harder than before, and again I arched towards him, and this time I was positive he felt it, against his thigh, he felt it, *me*. My desire for *him*. That I was wet for him.

And he tensed... before he stilled... and broke the kiss.

His eyes clenched shut. Tightly.

His hand descended to my side.

He was putting a stop to it.

"If I don't stop, baby..." he panted breathlessly. Swallowed hard. Shook his head slightly... to clear it, maybe. "I have to stop, sweetheart."

Yes. Because I'm his sweetheart.

And he wouldn't disrespect me. He wouldn't take things too far.

Fuck.

*But I want more*, I wanted to whine.

I settled for a reluctant nod in the crook of his neck instead.

Our moment was over, and Edward told me – very reluctantly – that he would sleep on the couch.

I asked him why, and he chuckled, just a little, and said that I was too much of a temptation.

So, even when he was the one to stop it all, he still managed to make me feel wanted, desired, and... treasured.

"Goodnight, Whistler," I whispered.

He dipped down, gave me a soft kiss, and tucked a piece of hair behind my ear, as he whispered back. "Sweet dreams, beautiful."

\*o\*o\*o\*

Edward had set the alarm on my extravagant cell phone, and that was the bullshit I woke up to.

Edward wasn't there.

But a note was there, and just as I started dreading that he regretted last night, that shit was squished down when I unfolded the note.

*Good morning, beautiful.*

*Have some arrangements to take care of with my parents, but Em and Rose will be here at 8 to pick you up for school.*

*I'll see you very soon.*

*Love ~ Edward.*

Love...

## **13 – FORKS IN SEPTEMBER**

### **BPOV**

"They sure as hell seem to like my car, eh?" Emmett joked.

Rose and I laughed, shaking our heads at just how weird all this was.

Emmett had parked on the school parking lot this morning and not on the street outside the premises, and hot damn, the students wanted to see inside the car.

The secret was out of course. Everybody knew that Bella Swan and Rose Hale were the 'victims.' But we didn't care anymore.

"They just wanna see you, Em. You know, see the dude who's stealing me," Rose teased.

They had become close, too.

Not quite as close as me and Edward, but this morning when Rose and Emmett came, she wasted no time in ordering Emmett to stay outside while I got dressed in whatever Rose had brought me.

Yes, more clothes. This time from Tanya and Kate.

Don't ask me where they get it from but I'm thinking they love to type their card numbers online.

Anyway, Rose spilled the guts while I got dressed, stating that she's – and I quote – 'just gonna embrace this fuckery, because the things, the words he showers me with...' and then she sighed dreamily before continuing, 'Everything is fucking perfect, B. And damn, the man can kiss.'

Rose has turned into some material slut, and hadn't it been for the way she spoke dreamily about Emmett, I would've been worried.

Because today... Jesus, she's wearing these really tight jeans in shiny black, a black leather jacket – equally snug – and then a deep red top, deep red lipstick, and deep red heels. And everything is... expensive shit.

Okay, not shit, because let's face it, I'm wearing the same kind of clothing. But I'm a bit more subtle, thank you very much.

I may also wear black jeans, and a black leather jacket, but there aint nothing slutty or provocative about me.

I think.



What-the-fuck-ever. No deep red for me. *And* I'm wearing chucks.



"Not stealing, Rosie," Emmett chuckled, bringing me back to reality. "I'm sweeping you off your feet, remember?"

Ah, yes. He calls her *Rosie* now.

Cute stuff.

"Oh, yes, of course," Rose replied, smiling teasingly.

Jesus, we've changed.

"Are you done with the foreplay?" I asked dryly, trying to hide my amusement.

"Oh, you shouldn't talk, shortie," Emmett snickered. "My dear brother sent me a message in the middle of the fucking night, complaining about you."

"What?!" I shrieked.

School was no longer important.

"Show me!" I demanded.

And he did. The fucker showed me the text.

**Bella will be the death of me, bro. Seriously, the girl's not so innocent, and I'm in way over my head. – ERC.**

Hot damn.

"ERC?" Rose questioned.

"Edward Ryan Cullen," I mumbled automatically, still watching the display.

But... what does this mean? Is it positive? Does he like it? Does he want me to continue?

"Huh," was my clever reply. And then I faced a grinning Emmett. "Should I continue?"

"Continue what?" he asked as he pocketed the phone.

"Be... *not* so innocent... or doesn't he like it," I clarified.

Because right now I'm going through my collection of underwear in my mind.

I would not mind a repeat of yesterday. Tonight.

"God, I'm so jealous that you live by yourself," Rose muttered.

*That* had Emmett's attention, and I could practically see him start planning the wedding.

"Emmett," I said. "Are you with me? Can you answer my question?"

"Oh, um, right... Heh, are you actually asking me if you think Edward wants you to continue?" he laughed incredulously.

Um, yes. I am.

Then he brought out his cell phone again. "This was also sent to me, but I didn't know of you would be offended."

"Offended, offschmended, just show me," I said dismissively.

He did. While laughing.

Rose and I gasped, here, you know... in the backseat... from what we read...

**Proclaiming my love for black lace. And Bella's body. And Bella's everything. Gonna hit the shower now. – ERC.**

Oh my.

Talk about locker room... talk.

Irish boy can gossip.

"Have you sent texts about me, Em? To your brother?" Rose asked curiously.

Emmett pocketed his phone, stopped laughing. "Um, no. Wouldn't do that."

Sure, Irish boy number 2. Sure.

"I'll talk to Edward about that," I assured Rose.

Emmett actually looked nervous.

Funny.

"Goodie," Rose chirped. "Let's get to class now. See ya later, Em."

"Have a good day, ladies," he responded politely, grinning like a goof, though, because Rose kissed him.

\*o\*o\*o\*

Lunch couldn't have arrived fast enough.

Everyone had their eye on us. Ev-er-y-one.

They are *all*... disgusted with us. And we're ready to flip.

We hated school before, because it's just a load of *bullshit*, but now I'm ready to go apeshit.

"Let's head outside instead," Rose said as we entered the cafeteria.

We stood there. And they all looked at us. All of them. Whispering, snickering, laughing, pointing.

Today we'd been called whores, sluts, outcasts, criminals, and... hmm what else... oh, Alice called us worthless girls without a backbone when she passed us in the hallway earlier.

Lovely.

"Yep, outside sounds good." I nodded.

My phone buzzed then, in my pocket, and I brought it out as we walked outside.

**Em confessed to have shown you texts. How pissed are you? – A nervous Edward.**

My eyes welled up.

Don't fucking ask me why.

Just... sick and tired of... everything.

I want the cabin.

I want my Edward.

Yes, damnit, *my* Edward.

**Alec would say piss and vinegar. But I'm not pissed at you, Whistler. – Bella.**

"What did he want?" Rose asked as we took our seats at our picnic table. "I'm assuming it was Edward."

"Yeah," I mumbled. "Just asked if I was mad about the texts."

Rose chuckled tiredly as she lit a smoke. She, too, was sick of this. And we sure as hell didn't deserve the shit people threw at us. To be honest, we didn't think Emmett and Edward deserved it either. To everyone, they're known as ruthless criminals that kills people for a living.

Not far from what Rose and I thought before, but we know them now. And they're... god-fucking-damn, they're good guys. Somewhat.

Wonderful and amazing in the way they treat us. Sure, they're bastards, too, but they don't kill.

"So, Em fessed up, huh?"

I nodded as my phone buzzed again.

**What's wrong, princess? Anything I can do? – Edward.**

See?

He's wonderful.

And now I'm tearing up again.

Goddamn.

**Just school. And all the bullshit that comes with it. Miss you – Bella.**

Yes, I said it. Wrote it. And it's true. I miss the fucker.

**Miss you, too, sweetheart. You have no idea. But tell me if you need me, okay? – Edward.**

"Fucking shit," I sniffled as the tears spilled over.

Since when do I cry?

"Hey, Bella, are you okay?" Rose asked worryingly.

No, she's never seen me cry, 'cause I don't do that. Not really.

Well, she saw me cry after Charlie... you know... said he didn't want me. But that was different. That was huge.

This... hell, I don't even know why I'm crying.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I croaked, wiping the damn tears away. "Don't know what the fuck I'm crying for."

We were interrupted then.

"Bella. Rose."

That would be Alice.

Tired, annoyed, frustrated, and fed up, I looked up.

And it wasn't just Alice.

It was Jasper, too. And another man.

"What do you want, Alice?" Rose sighed, handing me a smoke, knowing I would need it.

She was right.

"I'm here because I'm a good person," she replied in a clipped tone. "And though you both seemed to have succumbed to the Cullen brothers' wicked games, I'm here to help you."

Is she for real?

As I exhaled smoke, I had to ask, and I was done being polite, "What the fuck are you talking about, Alice?"

Yes, I snapped.

She ignored me and turned to Jasper – a man we haven't seen in months, knowing that he's been in college.

"You know Jasper," Alice said. "And this is his friend, Jacob Black. They're both graduating from the Police Academy early... And they want to help you."

"Well, fuck all of you," Rose said. "We don't need or *want* your help."

"Yeah, what she said," I agreed, nodding at Rose.

Alice shook her head at us, looked us up and down. The disgust. Oh, how familiar we were with that now.

"Take it easy, Ali," Jasper murmured before turning to me and Rose. "I'm sure you're both under a lot of stress. Am I correct?"

Couldn't fucking believe him.

Prissy shit in his academy wear.

"Yeah, you could say we're under a lot of stress," I chuckled humorlessly. "But not because of Edward and Emmett, that's for sure."

Rose nodded and continued as I took a comforting drag. "Yeah, you see, Emmett and Edward haven't called us whores or sluts for being engaged to them. The students here, though... they sure know some colorful words."

The dude named Jack or whatever it was, eyed my engagement ring, and did the same with Rose. I didn't like it.

Didn't like the way he looked at us. Or Jasper for that matter. They gave us pity looks for fuck's sake.

"And I'm sorry for that," Jasper replied smoothly. "You don't deserve that."

"Absolutely not," Jacko agreed. "But we can help you out of this mess. You see, Jasper and I are working on the Cullen-case for the Seattle PD as part of our graduation work, and--"

"*And* we're not interested!" I seethed, cutting the fucker off.

"See? They've been brainwashed, I swear!" Alice exclaimed.

Bitch.

I heard the distinct purr of Edward's Aston then, and I wanted to cry out of pure happiness as Rose and I watched both Edward and Emmett pull in to the parking lot.

In my periphery, I noticed Tanya, and I understood immediately that she had called them for us.

Rose and I both breathed out in relief as our men climbed out of their cars – both of them in their fancy shoes and black dress pants, and Emmett in a grey button shirt with his sleeves rolled up... and my Edward in a grey pullover, looking sexy as ever.





With serious expressions, they headed toward us.

It was the lunch hour, so, yeah... students all over paid attention to the two men they've never seen before. The two men they've talked shit about since their arrival.

Hard to believe Rose and I used to be two of those people.

"You okay, Bella?" Edward asked, reaching us first.

Rose and I could see they were both livid, but they sure hid it well, and soon Emmett reached us, too.

"I am now," I replied quietly, giving him a half smile.

He didn't stop until he was standing right in front of me, and I reached for his hand as he turned to Alice, Jasper, and Jacko, or whatever his name now was.

Emmett did the same, standing protectively in front of Rose.

I still wanted to see, though, so I snuck under Edward's arm, and stayed close to him, feeling his rigid body as he tried to stay calm.

"Curly-boy Whitlock." Edward smirked cockily. "And Sidekick Black, of course."

Jesus, they know everything, don't they... and how the hell can they ooze such confidence?

"You know who we are," Jasper stated, a blank expression on his face.

"Yeah, we tend to keep track on nosey fuckers," Edward replied.

"You boys aint exactly stealthy," Emmett added, the same cocky smirk on his face.

Yep, they're brothers.

"It's only a matter of time before you slip again, Cullen," Sidekick Black said, also smirking.

Edward's smirk is way cooler, dude.

"I'm confused," Edward chuckled. "I thought you were here harassing our fiancées, and now you want to discuss a case that's going nowhere?"

I could see that Alice wanted to say something, but Jasper mirrored Edward and Emmett's position, standing protectively in front of her. Like she needs protection...

"We're not harassing anyone," Sidekick scoffed. "That's not what we do."

"Coulda' fooled me," I muttered.

I thought I was quiet, but I was wrong. Oops.

"Mm." Edward nodded. "I'm gonna have to agree with my Bella."

"She won't be your Bella for long," Alice seethed from where she stood with Jasper.

"I'm pretty sure that's up to Bella and Edward, don't you think, Alice?"  
Rose snapped.

Not really up to me, but if it was...

I'd stay.

That's clear now. I wouldn't leave even if I had the choice.

"Up to Bella?" Sidekick huffed. "She doesn't have a choice, we know the damn law, but we can help her. This is different, there's a crime involved here. We can help both of you," he added, speaking to Rose.

"Hold the fucking phone here, Sidekick," I snapped, struggling free from Edward. "First of all, you do *not* have the right to even utter my name, comprende? And secondly, if I *did* have a choice, it would still be Edward."

Deep motherfucking breath.

As I walked back the few steps to Edward again, I knew he wondered if I was being truthful, and I sure as shit was. And I'll tell him later.

My body has chosen, that's for sure. And after this day, I'm pretty sure my heart has chosen, too.

"Bella, you can't mean that," Jasper pleaded.

He was concerned. That was obvious.

He wondered why the girl he grew up with could say what I just said.

Jasper had always sorta been a big brother to us, but... shit has changed.

"I do mean it, Jasper," I replied confidently, stepping under Edward's arm again.

"I can't believe this," Alice muttered.

"Believe it," Rose snapped.

"Was there anything else?" Emmett asked Sidekick and Jasper.

"I suppose not," Jasper answered reluctantly. "I can see the girls have chosen their side."

"Not chosen," Sidekick insisted.

"Yes, chosen!" Rose and I both shouted.

"For fuck's sake, Black," Emmett laughed. "Just move along, will ya?"

God, I'm just... so *done*. So goddamn *tired* of this.

It's clear to me now that I can't be a part of both worlds. And to be honest, what do I have here?

Alice? My *father*? My school and so called *friends*?

Bumfucked Forks where *nothing* happens?

No. Just... *no*.

Everyone here has made it clear what Rose and I are to them.

Nothing.

I'm *done*.

"Baby, are you okay?" I heard Edward whisper against my temple.

I noticed then that I was trembling.

Was I okay?

No. Not even a little. Not here.

"Take me home?" I asked quietly.

He frowned in confusion as I looked up at him, and it hit me that he didn't understand what home *was* to me. He didn't know just *how* much I had 'warmed up' to him... and his world, his family.

"To the cabin," I clarified. "With you."

He nodded once, still watching me intently with his brow furrowed, not *really* understanding yet. Or maybe doubting.

Reaching up on my tip-toes, I pulled him down at the same time... and kissed him right *there*, making unwelcomed people gasp... but I needed to make Edward *understand* that *this was mutual*. Now. I wanted him. I really did.

He was an amazing man with a fucked up 'job,' but I didn't care about the negative anymore. Edward Ryan Cullen was the future I wanted.

"Please," I whispered as I broke the kiss, making sure my eyes showed everything I wanted, so he would just. Get. It.

He got it. Maybe.

"Anything," he replied, taking my hand before facing what used to be my world.

"Harass Bella or Rose again, and you *will* pay for it," he told them, coldly, flatly. Because Edward could do that.

He did the same with Charlie once.

"Is that a threat, Cullen?" Sidekick sneered.

"No." Edward smirked. "It's a fucking promise."

Then he took my bag for me, and tugged on my hand, and we left.

With Emmett and Rose.

And all I could think was... *finally*.

"How about we meet up at the cabin in an hour or two?" Emmett suggested as he held the door open to his Jeep for Rose. "We could bring some food, and we could talk shit out."

"Sounds good." Edward nodded, holding the door open for me.

"Make it in two hours," I added before I got in.

One hour's not enough, goddamnit.

"You heard the lady," Edward chuckled and closed my door.

I could still hear Emmett's booming laughter, though.

Once Edward had gotten into the car, he didn't waste time in starting the car, but I was a bit miffed, 'cause he was just chuckling with Emmett, and now... he was so serious. Gripping the wheel tightly, teeth clenched, and that deep frown was there.

I didn't like it. Made him look unhappy.

"Talk to me," I said as he sped towards La Push.

He didn't waste time.

"I need to know," he replied, very quietly. "Or rather... maybe ask you not to say that again." A small smile was there, but it was very forced. "I mean... you couldn't have been serious," he continued, shaking his head slightly, and now I was sure that he wasn't talking to me. He was talking to himself. "It was just harder than I thought... to wait. And fuck, I don't know... maybe I was wrong," he mumbled, and I listened hard, ignoring how fast he drove. "Maybe you won't get to where I am. Maybe Em's

right. Maybe we should be happy for settling with... what we have now... maybe."

He didn't believe that he would be my choice.

And it hurt him to hear me – what he thought was a – lie.

"Sometimes, though," he chuckled, quietly, and without humor. "Fuck, you're so goddamn convincing sometimes... and I hope..."

He stopped there.

We were also at the cabin.

And I knew what I wanted to do. What I *needed* to do.

## **14 – FORKS IN SEPTEMBER-NOVEMBER**

### **BPOV**

He got out of the car, sending me a frown when I didn't wait for him to open my door, but I just took his hand and walked toward the cabin... waited for him to unlock... and once inside, I think he spoke on autopilot.

"I'll get the fire started."

I nodded and headed to the bathroom. To change.

Already knowing what I would change into, I wasted no time in undressing, and I quickly located the pink t-shirt, and the grey cotton thong.

It was sorta innocent with its colors and material, but I wanted to go for comfortable for what I was about to do. I wanted him to understand that I wanted him, that I felt safe with him, and that I was comfortable being with him. And that I in fact loved it when it was just the two of us.

I let my hair stay down this time. Kept it casual. Comfy.

Then I returned to the living room, not surprised when I found him dressed as before, in his dress pants and grey pullover. Even had his shoes on.

"Wanna rest with me for a while?" I asked softly, alerting him of my presence.

Edward looked up from where he sat on the couch, but this time was different... He did watch me, my very bare legs in particular, kind of like yesterday.

But he looked more like he was in pain today.

"Go rest, Bella," he murmured. "I can wake you up when Em and Rose gets here if you want."

Not what I want.

I walked over to him, motioning for him to stand up... which he did.

And he was struggling internally when I reached for his belt, unbuckled it... unbuttoned his pants... looked him in the eye, showing nothing but assurance, and as I slid his pants down, I spoke quietly, but with confidence.

"I do want you, Edward."

Wordlessly, he stepped out of the pants and shoes, and then it was time for the shirt.

"I was being truthful to that jackass," I continued. "My choice would be you regardless."

When I couldn't reach, he took over, and pulled the shirts over his head.



"My choice *is* you, Whistler," I finished.

He didn't speak. Didn't surprise me. I still had some convincing to do.

I took his hand once more, and walked ahead of him toward the bed... smiled when I heard his sharp intake of air.

Irish boy had just seen that I was wearing a thong.

"Get in the middle of the bed," I instructed quietly. "Propped up against the headboard."

Wearing nothing but a pair of black boxers, he complied, and I was right... he had his last name tattooed across his shoulder blades, and it was beautiful, sexy on his broad shoulders... or shoulder blades.

I climbed in once he was positioned, not stopping until I was straddling him.

He went rigid. His breaths came in quick pants.

"Look at me, Edward," I whispered.

He did. Same crease was there, deep frown. Apprehension all over.

I wanted it gone.

"I want you," I whispered, so close that our foreheads were touching.

"There are so many things, sweetie..." I closed my eyes, trying to make him understand, though it was so hard... but, I had to try. "It's in the way you look at me," I started, keeping my eyes closed and our foreheads touching, and I smiled, because I could see it, the way he looked at me... always... "It's in the way you play the whistle." Another reason for smiling... the way he looked so serene when he played. "The way you make me feel cherished and taken care of... The way you are with Alec." I smiled even wider, just remembering how they goofed around with each

other, and... they may be 'boss' and 'cub,' but... they were equals in the way they craved each other.

I sighed then, realizing that Esme was right.

I was falling for him. Hard. And way too fast.

I haven't seen Edward outside of Forks yet, and before I've done that, before I've witnessed Edward in what is going to be our life, I need to keep myself at bay... but there's no doubt anymore...

"It's so mutual, Edward," I finished quietly, now opening my eyes... to see him watching me intently, breathing heavily.

"Trust me," I added, but I barely got the words out before his mouth was on mine. Hard, passionately, and unyielding.

I let him dominate the kiss, because there was just no way I could deny him any longer. It was Edward for me. Regardless of what he does for a living.

The kiss became frenzied quickly, our tongues moving together urgently. His hands... down... cupping my ass... roughly, kneading. I whimpered. It triggered him, I think, and soon he had me positioned on my back, and he was on top of me... hands wandering... never breaking the kiss, and... fuck, I want more...

Then, against my lips, he mumbled, "I love you, Bella."

Oh, *God*.

He broke the kiss, leaving us both panting with our foreheads touching.

"Don't worry... I know you're not there," he said, quietly but strongly. "I know it will take... a long time... if ever... but know that I love you."

He closed his eyes, and he smiled beautifully – a smile that had me tearing up.

“Just knowing that you want this... us... Christ, baby... you have no idea how much that means to me.”

“I do want you... so much,” I whimpered, not because I needed to convince him anymore, but because I wanted to say it.

And... he loves me.

There’s no describing that feeling, and I... wasn’t prepared to feel this... elated, wired, excited... and *blissful*.

He loves me.

I knew that the smile I wore, the smile that could very well split my face, was enough for him right now. He showed that with his own smile.

“Say it again?” I asked, quietly and timidly. Shyly.

“I love you, princess,” he whispered, dipping down, our noses touching. “I love you.” More, closer, and he kissed me.

It was different. Reverently, sensually, and heavily, emotionally, he kissed me, slid his tongue in my mouth, caressing my own with his, and... I... and... so overwhelming...

My arms went around his shoulders, and I pushed him down, closer, harder, needing to feel him... all of him... and we both moaned as our bodies came together.

The tension was heavy, so thick.

I loved it.

His hand... caressing my side... pausing on my ribcage until I nodded for him... still so gentlemanly. But I wanted more today. I wanted to feel him, too. I wanted to please him today. Not just get him worked up.

"Lay on your back," I said, breathless from the kiss.

"Did I do something wrong?" he asked confusingly, his hand still on my breast.

Something wrong?

Fuck no, he just made me want more.

"Hardly," I giggled. "But it's my turn today."

"Your turn?" He frowned as he ended up on his back.

"Mmhmm." I nodded, following him. I kissed his neck as my hand ghosted over his chest. "My turn to let my hands wander."

I figured he would chuckle or something, but he didn't. He tensed... breathed heavier, and when I hitched my leg over his thigh, so far up that I touched his erection, he hissed and tightened his hold on my waist.

"Christ, Bella," he gasped.

I paid him no mind.

Instead I moved down... kneeled between his legs, and kissed his collarbone as I hovered over him, and I loved it. He did, too, but he was also frustrated, not knowing how far I would take this, thinking that *maybe* he should stop me, but still... he loved what I was doing. That was obvious. And I continued, kissing further down... openmouthed on his nipple, and he hissed through clenched teeth.

I felt him throb against my thigh. Proof that he loved what I was doing. And my hands wandered, along his muscular chest, his defined abs, feeling him shiver as I continued... down... until I reached the hem of his boxers.

Looking up at him, in question, I traced my fingers along the hem, making things clear... that I wanted to touch him. There.

Swallowing hard, he shuddered out a breath, his abs tensing fiercely... and he nodded. Slightly. Only once. But it was still there. The want. The desire.

I was a bit nervous, for obvious reasons, but there was no apprehension, no doubt, and it was comforting that Edward was actually as inexperienced as I was. And then, of course, I had Mary Brandon to thank for knowing... at least a little, about what a man wants.

So, as I continued kissing him, his chest, sensually and wetly, my right hand reached his erection, his... how-is-that-ever-going-to-fit-in-me erection, but my nerves about that were squished down when Edward groaned, loudly in pleasure. And he bucked against me, out of instinct I think, and I felt myself get hotter and hotter as I stroked his cock, gently and slowly, outside of his boxers.

It was lust. Sheer lust that rushed through me, down... there... dampening my thong, and... fuck... I breathed heavier... We both did.

"Fuck, sweetheart," he moaned, as I tightened my grip... only slightly.

Starting at the tip, where I could feel slight wetness through the fabric, I made my way down, firmly, and down, down, hoping Mary was right... and cupped his balls-

"Oh, fuck!" he growled.

His words, his tone... it was almost my undoing, but there was no time to react, because Edward flipped us over, so fast, and he held me, pinned me to the mattress, and God, his eyes, smoldering... so intense... black with lust.

"My turn," gritted out through clenched teeth, his voice quiet yet so unyielding. "After all..." His eyes followed his hands movements, down my side, over my stomach. "... I don't want my little Bella to have me finish like a seventeen year old."

I whimpered, arched my back to just... have *more*... I needed it... His touch always set me on fire, and he was teasing me now.

Playing me like an instrument.

I moaned. Loudly.

And he exhaled sharply, we both did, as I felt him... there... the tip of him, pressing against my drenched pussy.

With our eyes locked, and one of his hands restraining mine above my head while his other hand... yes... dipped under... and he palmed my ass to... ungh... press me against him, and then-

"Oh, Edward!" I moaned, feeling so many unknown emotions... *rush* through me, as he rocked against my clit.

He did it again, harder, and again, I moaned.

"Fuck, baby... I'm not... gonna be able to stop," he moaned, too, and added more pressure.

"Don't," I cried out, struggling free from his grip to let my hands feel him. "I... want this, Edward... need more..."

"Goddamnit," he grunted, another sound that sent a wave of desire through me, and I could feel how it all went straight to my pussy, leaving me desperate for more. Always more with him.

His body covered mine, and we rocked together, his cock pressing against my clit every time, and I knew that... this... this would make me come. For the first time without my hand, and for the first time with my Edward, I was going to orgasm.

He kissed me so hard, no hesitation or apprehension found anywhere, and it became so much... his firm grip on me, the way he moved over me, our labored breathing, his wet lips kissing me hard.

I gasped, breaking the kiss, and all that was left was an instinctual need to... hold onto him... and I did... My nails dug into his shoulder blades, making him growl, before moving faster, and... oh... yes... hotter... rushing... so much...

"I'm gonna-... ungh... Edward!" I moaned out.

"Fuck yes, Bella, let me see you," he breathed. "Let me see you come, sweetheart."

And I did.

I exploded. Harder than I had ever experienced, the orgasm took over, washed through me, over me, consumed me. Never had I felt something so powerful before.

Edward tensed.

"Motherfuck," he cursed. "I'm coming, Bella."

My eyes flew open, even more desire surging through me, and I watched him, breathing heavily, I watched him as he came, and I take it back. *This*

was the most powerful thing I had ever felt and seen. His face contorted, every muscle tensing, his eyes squeezed shut, and then I felt him... pulsing, throbbing against my wet pussy.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck," he panted, and I was on the same page; panting like crazy as the orgasm subsided.

I couldn't move. Could barely breathe.

Completely spent, he collapsed next to me, dragging my limp body with him. And then we just lied there for a while, regaining our breaths, savoring each other, kissing softly... grinning like fools.

With a grimace, Edward announced that he *really* needed to clean off after a while, and I giggled like the school girl I am as he headed for the bathroom with the same grimace of discomfort.

Once we were both cleaned off, and I had gotten rid of my soaked thong, I dressed in a pair of pajama bottoms, and then we headed out, both dressed in comfy clothing, for a smoke.

*My first after lovin' smoke*, I giggled silently to myself.

"What's so funny?" He grinned, sitting down on the bench.

I sat down next to him, beaming when he draped an arm around me, and contemplated telling him, but... nah.

I'm changing the subject instead.

"So, you're proclaiming your love for my lingerie, huh?" I teased, knowing that he would understand that I was referring to the text messages.

It made him cough as he took a drag.

Quite fun to see.



"Is Emmett as gossipy as you?" I asked, grinning from ear to ear when he actually blushed. Only a little but I could see the tip of his ear heat up.

Irish boy is embarrassed.

"Can't believe he showed you that," he muttered, pressing his lips against my temple, effectively taking himself out of my view.

"S'alright," I giggled, taking a drag before continuing. "Who else are you going to tell which base you've reached?"

"Oh, you're just full of fun, eh?" he sighed.

But I felt his smile against my skin.

Again we were quiet for a while, and I loved it. I loved how we didn't need to fill the silence. It was so comfortable as it was, and it was just the two of us together, him holding me, me leaning against him.

It was perfect.

I wondered what he was thinking, though. Every once in a while, he would just tighten his hold on me, kiss me, and sigh in content.

And I decided to bring up the stuff I had on my mind.

"When are we getting married?"

He tensed slightly but relaxed when he saw that I wasn't uncomfortable.

Because I wasn't.

Was I ready to get married?

Not really, but if I was, it would be with Edward.

And if there was something I was very ready for, very eager *to* do, it was to start our life.

Outside of Forks.

"I don't know," he replied pensively, lighting another cigarette before facing me. This time he studied me, sorta the same way he did when he 'proposed,' leaning forward on his knees, watching me, with that furrowed brow.

"Do you want the customary year before we get married?" he asked carefully.

I fought the urge to snort, knowing that no, I didn't *want* to wait a year, but also knowing that Edward wouldn't be *able* to wait a whole year before returning to his 'work.'

"No," I replied, chuckling a little. And then I decided to just be blunt, get the shit out there to show just how ready I was to move on. "How soon can we put together a wedding?"

He didn't laugh. Didn't even smile.

But he was eager. Very eager. And the look he gave me was one of want. He, too, was ready.

"As soon as you want, Bella."

I nodded. Firmly. Once.

Then I said, "I want to marry you within two months."

And I was shocked. Because the words were true.

The *want* to marry him was there. Very there.

*Maybe I am ready after all.*

\*o\*o\*o\*

After Edward had put up a bitch fit, claiming that I wasn't ready to get married so soon – a 'fight' I won – we enjoyed the evening with Rose and Emmett.

Edward and I sat together, very closely, and after an hour or so, I felt him sigh, exhale deeply, and as Emmett and Rose talked about... something... Edward leaned in.

And whispered.

"I want nothing more than to marry you within two months."

\*o\*o\*o\*

The past two months.

Crazy.

In a good but overwhelming way.

Since Edward was my caretaker already, he told me that I didn't have to go back to school if I didn't want to, but Rose still did since she was under the care fo her parents until she got married.

So, I stuck it out. For her.

We kept to ourselves, though.

And even more once Rose and I received our driver's licenses, and we drove our expensive mafia-paid cars to school everyday.

But it didn't matter.

Because we're leaving soon.

In one week... I will become Mrs. Cullen.

And it's all insane.

The first month was wonderful, and it was nothing but great with Edward.

We spent our nights together, exploring each other, getting to know each other more and better. Oh, and there's been much more music. Especially after Alec returned to Chicago.

Yeah, that wasn't funny at all, but apparently the 'the trouble' in his family had been solved, so he and Nessa returned a few weeks after my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Anyway, the first month was great, and though Edward – ever the gentleman – insisted that we didn't remove our underwear in bed – until we were married – there's still been some... heavy stuff going on. To say the least. And my lord, he's got some skilled fingers. Yeah, the underwear stayed on, but... well, hands wandered.

Just saying.

And I have to say I was mighty proud when Edward came after... like, a few minutes, the first time I gave him a handjob. He blushed so adorably afterwards.

I'm only eighteen. I'm allowed to feel pride in such things, so don't judge me.

Okay... so, our days passed quickly, and Edward and I lived with our little routine of school by day, hanging out with Em and Rose at night, and then... well, I already told you what Edward and I did then.

But then... when our wedding was only a month away, shit hit the fucking fan.

So far, Esme and Tanya – along with two wedding planners – had taken care of our planning, and the invitations were sent out a week after Edward and I announced the date. And as soon as the Masen’s had RSVP’d that they were coming, the authorities drove into town.

Yes, for the past three weeks, Rose and I have both been followed by black SUV’s, and it’s driving Edward and Emmett insane.

And tomorrow, twenty of the closest are arriving to spend the week with the family, and... getting to know me and Rose. And then, the day before the wedding, we’ll head to Seattle where I’ll become Edward’s wife.

St. James Cathedral.

One hundred and eighty guests.

Most of them associates to the Masen organization.

My wedding.

Lovely.

Oh, and one more thing... just a *small* thing.

Sense the sarcasm.

I’ve realized I’m in love with Edward.

Damn Irish boy.

\*o\*o\*o\*

“Wanna do something tonight?” Edward murmured, the sound quite muffled since... mmm... he was kissing my neck.

Love our bed by the way.

Love spooning, too.

"Mmhmm, but not with you." I hummed, *really* enjoying what he was doing... but then he sorta stopped.

"Getting tired of me already, eh?" he chuckled.

I smiled and stretched, making Edward groan as I sorta moved my ass against his morning wood... but it was school soon...

"No," I replied sleepily. "But Rose and I are having dinner with your mom and Tanya."

"That's ridiculous," he huffed, tightening his hold on me. "You've been spending more time with my folks than with me."

True. There's been a lot of wedding stuff to deal with over the past few days, and Esme and Tanya sure know to use the speed dial to reach me and Rose.

But to be fair, there are two weddings to be planned. Not just mine and Edward's but Rose and Emmett's, too.

Yeah, they're getting married in a month. Just in time for when Edward and I return from our honeymoon. And no, he aint telling where we're going.

"Well, if you didn't have such a big ass family, and so many *acquaintances...*" I trailed off, chuckling when he groaned, this time in frustration.

"I fucking told them I didn't want the Chicago people there, but my parents told me it would be disrespectful," Edward muttered.

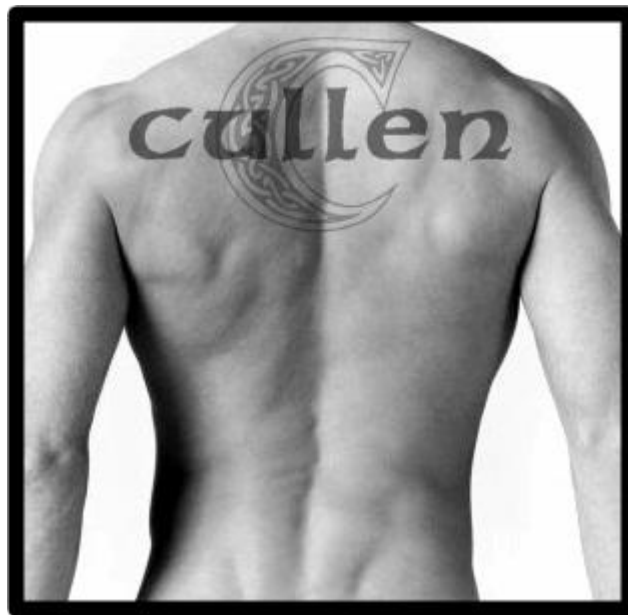
I was glad to have him on my side there, and I wasn't the only one uncomfortable with having the Masens and oh, so many other 'acquaintances' there.

But it was my life. Had to get used to it.

"Stop whining about it, sweetie," I chuckled, sitting up to start my day.

I was careful not to look behind me... cause I would see Edward then, sprawled out on the bed in his half naked glory, and that's just goddamn distracting.

Don't get me started on his tattoo. It was too fucking sexy.



"I love it when you call me that, you know," he told me quietly.

I blushed, glad he couldn't see my face.

And I knew what he meant. He may love hearing me call him 'sweetie', but not as much as I loved saying it. Because I really loved it.

Like I loved him.

But I'm keeping quiet about that one.

For now.

\*o\*o\*o\*

"What's Edward doing today?" Rose asked.

Lunch. Picnic table. You know, our drill.

"Final fitting." I grinned, knowing that he would hate it. "Emmett's going, too. As is Carlisle, and the day after tomorrow, they'll take Alec to do the same."

Since Charlie wasn't coming to the wedding, Carlisle was walking me down the isle, and Emmett and Alec were Edward's best man and groomsman.

"Well, their afternoon sounds like a walk in the park when you compare it to ours," Rose huffed, and when I shot her a look of confusion, she elaborated. "I spoke to Esme on the phone this morning, before school... and do you know what they will bring up with us later?"

"No," I replied, furrowing my brow.

"Sex."

## **15 – FORKS IN NOVEMBER**

### **BPOV**

"Sex."

"W-what?!" I choked out.

Rose nodded, knowing that I had obviously heard what she said.

"But-... why?" I asked, starting to panic.



"Esme want to know if we're ready, because if we aren't, she'll talk to Em and Edward."

Oh.

Huh.

Um, yeah, I blushed.

I rather liked the idea of 'not having a choice,' because then I could've masked the fact that I *wanted* to have sex with Edward on our wedding night... with that, the fact that we're supposed to.

"I can totally read your mind, B," Rose laughed.

I looked up, expecting to see judgment or anything, but it wasn't there.

"Don't worry," she snickered, blushing slightly. "I want it, too."

Oh.

I chuckled and breathed out in relief.

"Can I ask you something personal?" she asked then.

I cocked an eyebrow, 'cause Rose never asked if she could ask.

She understood, but became shy?

"Um, how far... I mean, what have... you know, you and Edward..." She trailed off.

I smirked. "Are you asking me how far we've gone, Ro?"

She huffed, clearly annoyed with me, but nodded.

"He has skilled fingers, and he claims I have the same," I giggled. "Or a skilled *hand*," I corrected.

She merely nodded. Looked down, and fidgeted with her shirt.

“What about you and Emmett?” I asked quietly.

Sighing and rolling her eyes, she mumbled, “Only kissing... I mean, I don’t have my own cabin... We’re never alone, and I sorta... you know, wish... we could be alone.”

We were quiet for a while. Just thinking about the fact that we were both falling for our Irish bastards... well, I had already fallen, but I was too chicken to ask Rose where she stood.

It would give me away.

“Do you think Esme will bring up children?” Rose asked a few minutes later.

I had no idea, but I was glad I had already had that talk with Edward.

It was one night, we were lying on the couch together, and he was kissing my stomach so *lovingly* that I didn’t really know how to react. Because it felt amazing to be so cherished, but it still felt... like it meant something, like his thoughts were connected with what he was doing.

So, I asked him. About children.

And he said, *“I can’t wait for you to bear our children, beautiful... but if you don’t mind... I’d like a couple years alone with my wife first.”*

I relaxed after that, because sure, I want children one day, but I’m not near ready for that, and I’m happy Edward isn’t there either. I’m happy that we’ll wait a little.

“We’ll just have to see,” I sighed.

\*O\*O\*O\*

That night, after my dinner with Rose, Tanya, and Esme, I headed toward the cabin, smiling because I couldn't wait to see Alec tomorrow.

The dinner had been relatively innocent, and it was what Rose had said; Esme just wanted to make sure where we stood, because if we weren't ready, she would tell the guys.

She was however thrilled – to say the least – when Rose and I admitted that we were in fact ready for that stage of our relationships.

So, now I'm looking forward for tomorrow.

Emmett and Edward were picking Alec and his family up at the airport in Port Angeles, and hadn't it been for my final fitting with my dress, I would've gone with them.

I narrowed my eyes then, slowed the car down, because... ahead of me... fuck.

Quickly, I located my white cell phone. First time I'd be using it.

And scrolled down until I reached Edward's special number.

He was of course on high alert when he picked up.

*"Princess, what's wrong?"*

I took a deep breath, forcing myself to stay calm. "I'm on my way home... About a hundred yards ahead, there's a roadblock, and it wasn't here earlier."

*"Roadblock?"*

In the background, I could hear him unlock his car, most likely not able to stay where he is.

Squinting my eyes, I counted four cars. "There are four cars blocking the road, Edward... What do I do? Is it the FBI?"

Okay, I was getting panicky.

*"They don't block the road for nothing. Is it police cars?"* he asked, and I heard him rev his engine.

"No," I replied. The taillights were too high for them being cruisers. "More like Esme or Emmett's cars--"

*"Turn around, baby, right now. Do you hear me?"*

Okay, I'm really freaking out, because... because... Edward's not calm anymore!

"Where do I go?" I asked shakily, pulling my car to a stop before- Oh, shit! "Edward, they're starting their cars!"

Oh my God, oh my God, this is why I don't want this!

*"Just drive, Bella! Drive toward the police station!"*

FUCK!

Revving my engine, the tires screeched as I stepped on the gas, and I breathed heavily, my heart pounded, and something... so fierce rushed through me, and I recognized it.

Adrenaline.

*"Are you with me, baby?"* I heard Edward's not so calm voice ask.

"Yes," I replied, checking my rearview mirror as I pushed my car to the limit. It was fast as hell, and... yes, I was a live wire. "They're closing in, Edward."

*"Fuck! Alright, just... drive... drive as fast as you can. I'm on my way, and I have your car on the F12... Don't worry, okay?"*

Don't worry? RIGHT!

But I was glad he could see me on that thing he had in his car. A weird gadget where he knew of my whereabouts thanks to a transmitter on my car.

I gasped then, wide eyed as I saw the flashing of lights ahead of me.

"Edward, they're ahead of me, too!"

*"I'm five minutes away, Bella. I have to call Emmett, Dad, and Garrett, okay? Just... fuck... Just stay calm... I love you."*

The line went dead.

"I love you, too," I whispered as I pulled over my car.

It was bulletproof. The car, it's bulletproof. All the Cullen cars are bulletproof.

Why? I have no idea.

A black car pulled over next to me, and it wasn't one of the Cullen cars.

And I was calm.

Too much in shock.

I had questions, but none of them surfaced as I just sat there, breathing in and out... calmly.

Then there was a tap on my window, and one would think I'd jump ten feet in the air.

I didn't.

I just turned to see who... what... it was.

A man stood there. Wearing a sinister smile. Motioned for me to roll down my window.

He was blond. Shoulder length hair. Eyes... evil.

And I was still calm.

Why? I have no idea, but I'm guessing I'm in shock.

"You must believe I'm awfully stupid if you think I'm rolling down my window," I told him, calmly, knowing that he would hear, because I pressed down a button that opened a small valve.

"Ah, Ms. Isabella Swan," the man said in a thick Italian accent. "Stupid you are not." He smiled. A smile that made me wanna shudder, but I didn't. "But you *are* alone," he pointed out.

*Not for long*, I thought, knowing that my Edward would get me out of this.

I should hate him. Edward. I should hate him for this.

But I don't.

"Who are you and what do you want?" I asked.

His smile widened, showing off his too white teeth.

"My apologies, beautiful *Isabella*. My name is Caius, and I am here to ask you if you have yet met Edward Masen."

I didn't answer, but I was surprised to still feel this calm. And surprised to feel so in tune with myself.

I was not only calm, but also collected. My thoughts were in order now, and I though I was nervous and anxious, I couldn't feel fear... or dread. I had already understood that this had to do with Edward's family in Chicago, because this sure never happened when it was only the Cullens in Forks.

But the news was out, and had even been in the Seattle Times that the Cullen brothers were both engaged to be married this month and the next.

"Will you not answer me, beautiful Isabella?" he crooned.

I cocked an eyebrow. "I didn't hear a question."

He, Caius, snickered, tapping a cane lightly on the window.

Freak.

"Such wit, such beauty," he goaded. "And you are of course right. I did not ask you. So, here is my question; Have you met Edward Masen yet?"

Shouldn't Whistler be here by now?

"I don't see how that's any of your business," I told him.

"On the contrary, *mia bella ragazza*... You see, Edward Masen is family!" he laughed. "He is my boss's brother even!"

I blanched.

This man, who was clearly Italian, was claiming that Ed Masen was... Italian?

I didn't understand.

Not one bit.

Or was this man's 'boss' Irish?

I heard the roar of an engine then, and I knew something was happening, and Caius did, too.

"Hmm, I suppose our little encounter has come to an end, ragazza," Caius said. And then nodded to me. "Until we meet again, Isabella."

Then he left.

And I sat there. Just... sat there. Wondering, thinking, asking myself... Why am I not freaking out anymore? Why am I this calm? How can I think properly and calmly?

And how the *fuck* can I still want Edward?

There was a tap on the window then, and I turned to see Garrett stand outside. Forehead deeply creased in concern for me.

Over the past two months, I had learned that he, too, was – as Esme referred to – a no-gooder, and though he didn't do anything illegal per se, he was still in charge of the security when it came to the Cullens, and he was the tech-freak who taught Edward and Emmett to work computers.

"It's safe now, Bella," Garrett said from the outside, and I wondered; where the hell is Edward?

I opened the door and stepped out, just as eight cars drove off.

That was one hell of an entourage that Caius had.

"Are you alright, honey?" Garrett asked. "What happened?"

Yes, I'm fine. What-the-fuck-ever.

"Where's Edward?" I asked.

Garrett frowned, pursing his lips as if he wasn't sure how to tell me.

"Well... Emmett has him restrained."



My eyebrows shot up.

Garrett walked us to the other side of my car then, and once I had a clear view of the road, I saw that it was only Carlisle.

No Emmett. No Edward.

Just Garrett and Carlisle... and Carlisle's Mercedes.

How the hell did the two of them manage to make Caius and his... brood... just leave?

"Come here, gorgeous," Carlisle murmured, holding his hand out for me. "Garrett will drive your car, and you're coming with me, okay, honey?"

I just nodded.

I wasn't in a daze, but I guess they thought I was.

I still remembered everything. I still had my questions and thoughts in order, and I still remember panicking in the beginning, but... that was all gone now. I was calm.

Why wasn't I in shock?

Why didn't I freak out like I did when Charlie told me he didn't want me?

"Can you tell me what happened, Bella?" Carlisle murmured gently once we were both seated in his car.

"There were four cars blocking the road," I said, calmly. "I called Edward and he told me to turn the car and drive as fast as I could in the opposite direction, and I did, but once I had driven for a minute or two, there were four more cars ahead of me. I was surrounded."

Still not freaking out. My breathing is even. My hands are steady. Thoughts still collected.

"Did that... man speak to you?" Carlisle asked then, facing me fully, studying me. Trying to figure me out, perhaps.

Join the club, Carlisle.

"Caius, yes." I nodded. "He asked me if I had met Ed yet, and then he told me that his boss was Ed's brother."

Silence. Carlisle stayed still. Didn't drive. Just sat there. Watching me.

I watched him, too.

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"How are you feeling, Bella?"

"Calm, collected, relaxed. Wanna know why?"

He nodded as he frowned deeper.

"Yeah, me, too," I huffed.

Carlisle started the car and drove towards the Cullen mansion.

So many questions...

I have to ask.

"What's Ed's last name... really?" I asked.

I counted to fourteen before Carlisle answered.

"Avellino."

That sounds Italian.

"And why did he take Elizabeth's name?"

Carlisle sighed, and I'd give a million dollars to get inside his head right now, because he was glancing at me every now and then... with a doctor-expression. You know the one, trying to figure me out. Trying to diagnose me.

"How much have Edward told you about our family?" he asked quietly, pulling over the car in the middle of nowhere.

He brought out a pack of cigarettes once he had killed the engine, and I smiled in thanks as he gave me one.

"Not much," I replied once my smoke was lit. "Just how you're all related. Oh, and how you and Edward and Emmett began stealing cars."

Carlisle smirked at me and I could practically read his mind, and it would be something in the line of Christ-Edward-picked-a-blunt-one.

I smirked back.

This may be the first time I'm alone with Carlisle, but if there was one thing I knew about the Cullen men, it was that they'd rather die than harm the women in their lives.

"Alright, Ms. Swan," he said, nodding once as he smiled. "I suppose you're ready to hear our story, eh?"

"I wouldn't know until you've told me." I shrugged.

That earned me an incredulous chuckle.

"Touché." He winked. "But you and Rose are... *different*... so, I'd say you're ready."

I wondered what he meant by that. Different how?

Carlisle began. "Ed's mother's family has for generations been... fighting, I suppose you could say... with an Italian family living in London. It started because they were competing in the same business. But it quickly escalated when Ed's mother ran away with a man named Angelo. And this Angelo was the only son of the head of that Italian family."

Holy... something.

And what the fuck *is* this? Some Romeo and Juliet bullshit?

Carlisle continued. "What Ed's mother didn't know was that Angelo was already married and had a child... a son."

I... have nothing to say, because... this is just getting more and more fucked up than it already is.

"Anyway..." Carlisle sighed. "Once the secret was out, Ed's mother was devastated, and she left Angelo... and gave birth to Ed back in Ireland to get away from everything in London..."

"However, Ed's mother got sick. When he was five or six years old, and she died, leaving Ed alone with his grandparents.

"And somehow the word got out, and Angelo came back into the picture... and kidnapped Ed, brought him to Italy..."

Still... nothing, nada, to say.

It's insane. Just insane.

"Ed grew up with Angelo and his family... and particularly Ed's half brother... Aro... and he is today the head of the Avellinos."

Right.

Got it.

Makes sense now.

"Aro hates Ed and vice versa?" I guessed.

Carlisle nodded. "Yes, and Ed left Italy as soon as he turned eighteen."

Awesome.

"Bella, I need you to listen to me now," he said softly. "We got the word yesterday that the Avellinos might be in town, but I don't want you and Rose to worry, because we're taking care of it, and they... They're only here for Ed."

Right. Only here for Ed.

Sure. Whatever.

Wonderful.

"Is there anywhere I can take you? To Rose? We have security outside Rose's house, so it's safe there."

I stared at him incredulously. "How about taking me to Edward!"

Carlisle looked shocked as he started the car. "Of course. I just didn't think you'd want that right now."

"Why wouldn't I want that?" I asked, but then it dawned on me just as the words had left my mouth.

Edward was the rational one here, thinking that I would blame him for this – which I really fucking should – but he's not marrying a rational girl, and I'm not blaming him.

Still want the bastard.

Still in love with Irish boy.

Before Carlisle could answer, I fired off another question. "What did Garrett mean by saying that Emmett was restraining Edward?"

Carlisle merely shrugged. "Edward would've become a murderer if he had been here when Caius was still here."

He shrugged when he said this. Shrugged!

"Luckily, Garrett and I were on our way to the cabin to see Edward, and Emmett was taking Rose out, so I had him pull Edward over before he got too close."

I took a deep breath, expecting to freak out...

I didn't.

I just... God, my fingers were *itching* to feel the *surface*... of something that made me feel *safe*. Seriously, I had to ball my hands into fists, and it was *so* strong... *so powerful*, and...I knew right away what I needed. I needed to feel Edward, to actually *feel* him; that he was there, that all of this was okay, over, unreal, or real, or whatever. It left me confused and *so frustrated* but I knew with all I was... that as long as I had Edward, I was safe.

Yes, the irony is very clear to me.

We finally arrived at their mansion, and I was out of the car so fast that Carlisle probably didn't see me, but I just needed. Him. Now. Edward.

"Where is he?" I asked as soon as I reach the living room.

Esme, Tanya, Garrett, and Emmett sat there, but Edward wasn't there, and I could feel my breathing pick up, my need getting stronger.

"Up in his old room," Emmett murmured. "I'll take you to him."

I was glad they didn't question me, or even eyed me weirdly.

Who knows, maybe Esme even understood. Maybe she knew I wouldn't push Edward away for this.

"You okay?" Emmett asked quietly, leading me up the stairs.

"Yes," I lied.

Maybe half lied, but I was too confused to even begin to sort through my thoughts. The only thing I knew for sure was that I needed Edward so much that my hands were trembling, my knees shaking, my breathing labored, and my heart pounding.

"Are *you*?" I asked, eyeing the swelling under his eye, already knowing that Edward most likely put it there when he was being... restrained.

I think Emmett responded, but I couldn't... not for the life of me... focus, on that, because we were standing outside Edward's door then, and I felt my eyes, you know, they prickled something fiercely, and it hurt. Everywhere. My chest, my heart. And my breathing became labored as Emmett opened Edward's door... to reveal a very disheveled looking Whistler, sitting in a chair, leaning forward on his knees, and with his hands in his hair, eyes downcast.

"Edward," I choked out, placing a hand over my heart as if that would help with the insane pounding.

Edward's head snapped up and I was met with wide eyes, and I knew, I knew he didn't expect me to even come here. Not tonight. And maybe not willingly, ever. It made me choke up more.

Edward swallowed hard, quickly glancing over at Emmett, I think, I'm not sure, but he looked confused and wary and apprehensive and sad and frustrated and agonized... all the same. And he didn't know what to do. He didn't know if I was here to punch him, or if I was here to plead with him to get me out of our engagement.

He didn't know whether to approach or to stay back.

It killed me because I needed him so badly, but everything hurt, and I couldn't speak, could barely breathe, and tears burned, finally spilling over, and that's when it hit me. It all came crashing down now. Everything I had been through tonight. The roadblocks, the part of being alone, hearing Edward panic over the phone... the tapping on the window... Caius. Facing that sinister smile, listening to that pretentious voice, that mocking laugh. It all came crashing down now, because I couldn't allow myself to lose it before seeing Edward.

Emmett grabbed me by the waist, and I realized that I was swaying, but thankfully, Edward shot up without hesitation and rushed over to me. My eyes widened as I felt the relief get closer and closer and then he was finally there, taking over for Emmett. I was instantly hit by Edward's scent, making me choke on a sob as I clung to him.

I think he relaxed in a way, when he realized I wasn't here to blame him, and he held me tightly, lifting me up to carry me over to the bed, and I was aware of it all happening but I focused solely on Edward's scent, on his arms around me, on my arms around his neck, on my face buried in his neck, and I just... God, I just cried. Like I'd never cried before. And I was just so unbelievably relieved as we lied there in his old bed, all tangled up, holding each other tightly, because that was just what I needed. Need more than air, it felt like.



"I'm so sorry, baby... so fucking sorry," he whispered in my hair, and I shook my head, unable to tell him, but desperate for him to know that I didn't want his apologies.

I just wanted *him*.

## **16 – FORKS IN NOVEMBER**

### **BPOV**

"Tell me what to do, sweetheart," he pleaded quietly as I cried harder and harder. I had no idea what to tell him because I really didn't know anything about anything... Only that it was unacceptable for him to leave me.

"Want me to get Rose-"

I didn't let him finish that sentence before I vehemently shook my head in the crook of his neck, and just the thought of him leaving had me sobbing even more, and I'm pretty sure I was choking him.

"Just... you," I managed to gasp out through my tears.

I felt him shudder, maybe finally understanding that I at least wanted him.

I don't know how long I cried, but it was more than tonight's events that left me gasping for air as I soaked Edward's t-shirt. It was so much more. Significant and insignificant things. Everything from Charlie not wanting me, and me never getting closure or even an explanation from him; it all just died, and then Jasper and that other fucker showing up, and Jasper's concerned expression... Alice's disgust and judgment... All the new things, the jewelry, the clothes, the knowledge of all the future travels, the luxury... And then the good things, the really good things... like, falling for Edward, seeing what a wonderful man he truly is, how sweet he is, and

how much he takes care of me... the way he looks at me, with so much adoration and devotion... the way he lights up when I move myself closer to him or asks him to play me something... All our time spent at the cabin, just the two of us...

And God, there's Alec. Never did I think I would fall so hard for that kid, but I have. He's a friend, an amazing musician, a sure source for laughter, and just a goddamn bright spot.

Even Emmett is hilarious, and geez, I've fallen for all of them; Esme, Tanya, even Carlisle and Garrett... they're all family to me, much more than Charlie ever was, and for the first time in my life, I feel like I belong. And though that thought scares me, there's no denying it any longer, because it's true; I belong with Edward and the Cullens.

It's just so fucking overwhelming, and tonight... to see the other side, to come face to face with the... *trouble*, and to face it all alone...

Fuck, I'm just all over the place.

The sobbing finally stopped, but as desperately as before, I held onto my Irish boy, and I thanked... whatever... that he held me as tightly, seemingly needing me, too.

*I love you*, I wanted to say, but *really*, I needed to save it for a better time. Didn't want this night to hang over that memory of me telling him I love him for the first time. I did, though. I really love him, and I won't wait long until I tell him, because my life may change even more, and maybe even for the worse when we leave Forks, but... it's true nonetheless, and denying it is only pointless. Besides, I want him to know. I need him to understand that regardless of how my life will change, the fact that he is in it, is enough for me.

"Tired, princess?" Edward whispered.

I shivered as his breath washed over my neck, and though I wasn't sleepy, I was definitely exhausted, so I nodded, my face still buried in the crook of his neck where I could smell him most. It was a scent I no longer just loved, but needed.

"Let's get under the covers," he suggested quietly, and again, I nodded, but made it perfectly clear to Irish boy that he was under no circumstances leaving me.

As smoothly as possible, he peeled off my clothes as I still held onto him, and he kissed me softly and gently, on my cheeks, my temple, my forehead, my eyelids, whispering sweet stuff as he got rid of our clothes, and then, in pure relief and nothing but my panties, I snuggled into Edward's arms, pressing my body to him, loving the feeling of skin-on-skin.

There was nothing sexual about it, for either of us, as we stayed close under the covers, in nothing but underwear. It was comfort. Relief and comfort.

"I'm so sorry for not being there, baby," he sighed heavily, and I could picture him staring at the ceiling, but I was not leaving his neck just to check if I was right. He smelled too comforting for that.

"Don't apologize," I whispered, knowing that my voice would be raspy as hell if I spoke louder. "Just don't leave me."

"Never. Not even an option for me... But..." He sighed again, tightening his hold on me as he pressed his lips against the top of my head. "Your safety means everything to me, Bella, and..." He shook his head, I could feel that. I could also feel dread for what he was about to say. "If you don't want this..." He swallowed hard, I could hear it, and my eyes welled up.

"I *will* let you go, sweetheart, because I can't fucking *stand* seeing you this way."

No.

No.

Not a chance in hell.

I shook my head, tried to speak as strongly and firmly as I could. "Don't ever... *ever* say that again, Whistler... Not ever."

"I want this," I added, feeling my tears spill over. "I want *us*."

"I'm not broken," I continued quietly, pressing my lips against his neck, making him shiver. "I was scared as hell tonight. There's no denying that. But... No, I'm not broken or anything... and I'm not going anywhere... because I don't want to... And I *need* you."

Positioning himself lower, he turned onto his side, facing me, our foreheads touching, and with that deep crease that just screamed *doubt*, he studied me. Caressed my cheek and studied me, and though I was still silently crying, I knew he wouldn't find hesitation in my eyes.

He didn't say anything, but I knew the exact moment it dawned on him that our relationship was as mutual as it could be, because I saw him, swallow so hard, and his eyes, they... widened, only slightly, but enough for me to notice, and he shivered as he closed them, maybe in relief.

"Okay," he whispered after a while.

\*o\*o\*o\*

Rose and I were both pulled out of school the day after – meaning, this morning – and I was glad that Rose's parents agreed to let Emmett take care of her from now on. They realized, of course, that Emmett and

Edward could take care of her better than they could, especially now when *trouble* had rolled into town.

It's no surprise that this morning, Edward and I talked shit out. Aired everything. And I was glad that he didn't seem to hold things back. He truly answered when I asked, and he spoke the truth. I know that. He told me how they had suspected that – thanks to the media's interest in the wedding – the Avellinos would show up, hoping to get to Ed Masen, and that now they were here, Carlisle and Garrett were already doing everything to get the security up and running... well, more security than we already had, that is.

It didn't take long for me to notice the changes, and Edward was a bit apprehensive about my reaction, but to be honest, I didn't care. Not anymore. This was my life now, and I would just have to get used to having people watch me. Because that's what they did. The new part of Carlisle and Garrett's safety-plan was to get more guys in. More guys as in guards, and they all flew in from Chicago this morning.

Apparently, Carlisle had planned this from yesterday already, and now, at noon, there's one guy at the cabin, one guy outside Rose's parents' house – just in case – and three guys outside the Cullen mansion.

I also learned that Edward and Emmett had assigned two personal guards for me and Rose, and Carlisle had done the same for Esme. It was insane, but I listened and embraced Esme's advice this time, "It's easier if you act like they are not there."

So, that's what I do. Right now, as I'm getting ready to go to the airport in Port Angeles with Edward. I'm ignoring the man named Conn, who is my personal guard, and is right now standing outside the cabin with Kellan – our cabin-dude. Yep, ignoring him. Both of them. As I put makeup on. So ignoring them.

Okay, it's hard to ignore. But I try.

Edward seems to ignore them, but maybe that's because he grew up in this... situation... or whatever the hell I'm supposed to call it. Right now, he's in the kitchen, making himself a sandwich, because Irish boy can eat. A lot.

Anyway, today's plan is for me and Edward to pick up the Masens at the airport, and this will be the first time I meet them. Not Alec, of course, and I can't wait to see him again, but the others; Ed and Elizabeth. I'm nervous about meeting them, and after yesterday's fuckery, Edward and I seem to hover close to each other and that means I'm going with him to Port Angeles.

"*You ready to go, baby?*" Edward called from the kitchen, his voice muffled either by the bathroom door... or his goddamn sandwich.

"Almost," I replied. "Five more minutes."

It was two weeks ago that Esme and Tan had invited me and Rose over at the Cullen mansion for 'some shopping,' and Rose and I were obviously confused, but when we had arrived, our jaws hit the floor as we noticed what Esme and Tan meant.

Esme and Carlisle's living room was packed with clothes. On hangers, in boxes, in garment bags, on chairs, and... all over. Clothes. Accessories. Shoes. Make up. Jewelry. Lingerie.

And two very flamingly gay assistants standing close by, eager to help.

Esme had said, "Don't just stand there, sweets. Come here and start choosing."

Yes, Rose and I were there to put together a wardrobe, or as Tan said 'It's a start at least.' And now we have clothes, and more, and... God, the cabin is full, I swear.

Edward's reaction to all the boxes of clothes?

*"I see Mom and Aunt Tanya got to you."*

End of.

Glancing in the mirror, I gave myself an appreciative look, because truth be told, I didn't look half bad. It may be cold as fuck outside, but when I saw the grey dress pants with pockets on the sides, I knew I wanted to wear them today, despite them ending at my calves. Then of course the black satin top – that won't exactly keep me warm, but I like it, so end of discussion. Lastly, my dusty pink ankle boots. They are hot.



I sure have changed over the past couple of months, and though I still get overwhelmed at times, especially when I see price tags – for instance on the Alexander McQueen bag I'm using today – I freak out for a while before Edward shushes me. Literally, he shushes me.

But COME ON! Fifteen *hundred* bucks for a small clutch?!

I swear I can feed a village in Africa with that money. For a month.

"*Princess, I'm on the phone with Mom,*" Edward said through the door then. "*She wants to know if you have an outfit for tonight.*"

Ah, yes, tonight. Edward and I are having dinner with Ed, Elizabeth, Carlisle, and Esme at the Cullen estate.

Esme wants to know if I have an outfit for that? I huffed. Rolled my eyes, too, as I put on the earrings for today's outfit.

"Tell her I have a few too many!" I called back.

I smiled as I heard Edward laugh.

Once I was done, I left the bathroom and joined Edward who was sitting on the couch, devouring yet another sandwich.

"Didn't you already eat one?" I chuckled as I walked over to him.

He was wearing his signature black, and I thought fleetingly about you know, devouring *him*, but there was no time for that. Unfortunately. I blame him, though. Whenever he's wearing his black dress pants and black button shirt with the sleeves rolled up, I get hungry.

Not for sandwiches.

"Goddamn, beautiful," he coughed, watching me with wide eyes as he appraised my outfit.

I made Irish boy choke on his sandwich.

I felt proud. Yeah, I'm a bit twisted, but what else is new?



"You like?" I asked innocently, twirling around for him once, but come on, I knew the attachment Edward had for my ass.

And boobs for that matter. He really likes those.

"I fucking love," he replied, and yes, his voice was huskier.

"Good." I grinned. "And it's time to go," I added pointedly when he didn't stop eye-fucking me.

A girl only has so much restraint, and the way he looked at me was a sure way for me to lock the door and stay here with Whistler.

"Fine," he muttered, standing up to get our coats.

\*o\*o\*o\*

An hour later, Edward and I... and Conn... were waiting for the Masens private jet to taxi in, and I was nervous as hell, but also damn excited to see Alec again.

"You really like Alec, eh?" Edward murmured, smiling softly in my periphery, and I tightened my hold on his hand.

"I love him," I replied, keeping my eyes on the gate, 'cause I knew that within the next few minutes, they would be here.

"Yeah, he's easy to love," he sighed quietly, and I wanted... God, I wanted to tell him, but I couldn't. Not yet. I had already planned to tell Edward next week when we got married, knowing it would be the perfect moment for us. But it was clear as day that Edward sighed, thinking that he wanted me to love him, and not just Alec.

It hurt, knowing that Edward felt that, especially since I did love him but kept it to myself, and I needed to say *something*.

Just then, I caught a glance of a messy mop of brown hair, and I knew Ed Masen had similar hair to Edward's – except Edward's was more red – so I took the opportunity of saying what I wanted him to know, right before the doors opened.

"You both are," I murmured, and I was right. Edward's head whipped around so fast that I thought it'd fall off, but I refrained from meeting his – most likely – shocked and questioning eyes. Instead I smiled as the doors opened and...

"TUSH!"

Glancing back, I sent a very gaping Edward a wink before turned to my second favorite man.

"Alec!" I almost squealed, and grinned so widely my face could probably split, but I didn't care as he rushed over to give me a hug. "I can't believe you're still wearing shorts, kiddo! It's November for crying out loud."

"Ah, you know me, luv. I love me shorts. Now let me have a look at ya, eh?" He grinned like a fool as he released me, only to take my hand and twirl me around.

Such a Casanova.

I felt an arm encircle my waist then, and I smiled as I leaned back against Edward's chest, always loving the feel of him as well as his masculine scent.

"Alright, enough out of you, cub," Edward chuckled before kissing my temple. "Good to have you back."

"Good to *be* back, boss," Alec replied, saluting him in his always playful manner. But still, I saw the way he viewed Edward as his hero. Alec never needed it seeing as he was a confident little guy, but whenever Edward

complimented him or included him in something – like helping Edward to find my engagement ring – Alec lit up, beaming with pride and happiness.

Tilting my face upwards, Edward understood and smiled beautifully before dipping down to kiss me.

“Alright, you two, enough smooching!” Alec grinned, and then – as Edward and I reluctantly broke the kiss – I heard another voice.

“Edward, me boy!”

Ed Masen.

With a sigh, I turned back in the direction of where Alec had now been accompanied by his parents and sister.

Greeting Nessa wasn't hard, though, and she was still a polite yet cheekily cute little chick, and I liked her immensely. So did Edward, and parts of me, parts of my anatomy... reacted when he kissed her hand and winked at her, making the little girl blush.

Seeing Edward this way, the way he is with Nessa but mostly Alec... yes, it certainly does things to a woman.

“Uncle Ed, good to see you. You too, Aunt Liz,” Edward replied, still standing close behind me with an arm around my waist. What I thought about most was Edward's voice. It was different, and I remembered it from when Edward and I first met. Before feelings were involved, before he showed me his true self. This was business. Unyielding, though very polite, not caring. *Perhaps a bit more caring with Elizabeth, though*, I thought as they kissed each others cheeks.

“Good to see you, too, lad.” Ed grinned, as his eyes flickered to me. “And this must be your lovely bride-to-be.”

I noticed that his accent wasn't as pronounced as Alec's and Nessa's, and I figured it had something to do with the fact that he grew up in Italy.

"Yes," Edward answered. "Ed, Liz, this is Isabella Swan, my beautiful fiancée. Bella, this is my aunt and uncle, Elizabeth and Edward Masen."

"Nice to meet you both," I said politely, lying through my teeth.

"Oh, the pleasure is all ours, dear," Elizabeth replied, even winking at me.

*She's an Esme*, was my first thought.

"Pleased to meet you, Isabella," Ed said, bringing my hand to his lips, and sure, it was very chivalrous and whatnot, but don't do it again!

"Did you have a pleasant flight?" Edward asked, and his voice was tight as he brought my kissed hand to his. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry when I felt his thumb rub over the spot his uncle had kissed. But one thing was very clear to me; Edward was only related to Elizabeth. Not to Ed. Not to him at all. In any way.

"Absolutely." Ed grinned. "Oh, and Liam sends his best. Hopefully, we'll get him out soon."

How on *earth* would that be possible?

"Can we go now, Mum, I want to see Emmie," Nessa said, putting a stop to a conversation. She was undeniably cute, and Rose would be her hell. No doubt about that.

"Of course," Elizabeth replied, and then she turned to both Ed and Edward. "I suppose Alec is going with you, Edward? And Ed, Ness, and I can go with Conn. We need to make a few arrangements before tonight, too."

"Sounds good." Ed nodded before snapping his fingers to get Conn's attention. "What's the status?"

Ah, yes, he's of course updated on the Avellinos being in Forks, and Conn may be my personal guard, but he's Ed's employee, just like the rest of them.

"Nothing new, sir," Conn answered from behind me and Edward. "The perimeters are checked and double checked, and Mrs. Cullen has got your rooms ready."

"Splendid!" Ed grinned.

*Yeah, lovely...*

\*o\*o\*o\*

"Good to be back," Alec sighed contentedly, stepping inside the cabin.

"Good to have you back, kid. We missed you," Edward replied. He gestured at the single bed we had ordered and was now standing in the corner behind the front door. The cabin was officially full. "That's your bed right there."

"Sweet. Too bad we won't be here much, eh?" Alec chuckled as he lunged for his bed.

"Fuck yeah," Edward laughed softly, motioning for us to have a seat by the fire. "Come over here, we have some stuff to discuss."

Edward and I sat down on the couch, or well, he was on the couch... I was on his lap. Just normal procedure; I sit down, and he pulls me closer.

I am not complaining.

"What's to discuss?" Alec asked, sitting down in the chair.

"Just some things about this week," Edward said. He *totally* had this gorgeous smile on his face, 'cause of the mentioning of our wedding. "Tomorrow, Em and I are taking you to your fitting, did your mom or dad tell you about that?"

"Yes, Mum mentioned it, and that I wasn't allowed to have 'em cut off into tux-shorts."

I've mentioned I love this kid, yes?

"Oh, she did, eh?" Edward chuckled. "Well, that's up to her then, I guess. Did she mention tomorrow night for you?"

Alec's frown turned into a wide grin. "Yea, we're playing at the dinner?"

Tomorrow night. Twenty-something guests – the guests that are staying here for the week until the wedding. We're talking cousins, uncles and aunts, grandparents, and the closest family.

They're all here for me and Edward.

Can't wait.

Sensing the sarcasm?

I heard my cell phone ring then, and I headed for the nightstand where I had put my bag.

Caller ID. Rose.

"Hey, Rose," I answered.

*"Hey, are you guys at the cabin yet?"*

"Yeah," I replied, confused at her wary voice. "Are you with Emmett?" I asked, knowing that she was moving into the Cullen mansion today.

*"Um, yes, and the Masens just arrived."*

"Okay...?"

*"We're all watching the news. You should do the same. Channel 4."*

## **17 – FORKS IN NOVEMBER**

### **BPOV**

Sitting down next to Edward again, he draped an arm around me as he flicked on Channel 4.

I gasped and Edward tightened his hold on me as we watched none other than Deputy Whitlock come on the screen, and the headline on the screen read; 'The Masens have arrived in Forks.'

*"The residents in Forks are obviously shaken by this. Do you have any comment on that?"* the reporter asked Whitlock.

*"The matter is not in our hands any longer, but I assure you and everyone that the FBI are handling things well. There is nothing to fear."*

*"And what about the rumors stating that Aro Avellino is in town? Are they here for Mr. Cullen and Ms. Swan's wedding?"* the reporter continued, and the screen flashed with a new headline for those who didn't know who Aro Avellino was.

*"This is just a stray rumor, and I'm sure the FBI would've informed us if this was a fact."*

Yeah. Right.

*"Last question, Deputy Whitlock. What are Chief Swan's thoughts about his only daughter marrying Edward Cullen?"*

"That he couldn't have cared less," I chuckled humorlessly as I weaved my hands through Edward's hair. It made him relax.

*"That's not a question I can answer, ma'am,"* Whitlock replied, and then the interview was over, but the reporter continued, now watching into the camera.

*"There we have it. The Masens have arrived, and so far the link between the two families has been rumored, though never proven. But I think we have our confirmation now, and the once highly respected Cullen family is now of course immediately associated with the infamous Masens from Chicago. This is Emily Young, reporting live from Forks. Back to the studio in Port Angeles."*

"You okay, sweetheart?" Edward sighed quietly.

"I'm fine," I replied truthfully, because I really wasn't affected by any of it.

*"Thank you, Emily, for that rapport, and with us here in the studio, we have Special Agent Black. Thank you for coming,"* some woman said, and I quickly understood that this, too, would be about us.

"That's Jacob Black's father," Edward informed me, frowning deeply, but I was just confused, 'cause I had no idea who Jacob Black was. "I believe we called him Sidekick a couple of months ago, baby," Edward clarified with a chuckle, and yes, *that* dipshit I remembered. "Fuck, this isn't good." He brought out his Vertu phone.

Crap, what now!

"Somethin' wrong, boss?" Alec asked.

"Yeah," Edward muttered, scrolling down on his phone. "It seems that Billy Black is taking over for Siobhan."



Alec nodded in understanding before focusing on the TV again, and once again, it struck me how smart he was for his age, but also... "I don't understand," I said quietly.

Edward pinched the bridge of his nose as he pocketed his phone again. "Special Agent Siobhan McKenna is on our side, so to speak, and she's the one making sure that mine and Emmett's records don't get out. Or at least, that used to be the case. If Black's now in charge of our case, he will most likely make our records public."

"That you were in prison," I finished.

"Exactly, and it would've been nice to have our shit classified. Makes things easier in society."

I rolled my eyes.

"Well, shit happens when you get caught, Edward. One would think you'd know better."

Right? I mean, if they're stupid enough to get caught...

"Really, princess?" he asked, very amused all of the sudden. He leaned back on couch and let his arm rest behind my back. "Now here I was, thinking that my beautiful girl was going to lecture me on stealing, and how wrong it is."

I... don't understand.

"What?" My brows furrowed.

Both Alec and Edward chuckled as he continued. "Baby, do you realize that you just made one of your sassy remarks about how stupid it is to get *caught*... and not that it's stupid to do the crime?"

Oh, fuck my life.

What the hell is *wrong* with me!

"Just... shut up," I mumbled, hitting Edward in the chest, but that only made him laugh.

Fucker.

\*o\*o\*o\*

"Wow, Tush, ye're matching!" Alec laughed as I emerged from the bathroom.

I was dressed and ready for the dinner with Esme, Carlisle, Ed, and Elizabeth. "What do you mean, kiddo?" I asked, confused. Then Edward appeared from the kitchen, and we both sorta froze as we eyed each others outfits. He was wearing grey dress pants, black shoes, and a black fitted pullover, and yes, he looked good enough to eat. Then there was me, and I was matching him with a grey hitched pencil skirt, black peep-toe pumps, and lastly a black ruffled sleeve top.



"Great minds think alike, huh?" Edward asked, amused...still eye-fucking me, though, so I sorta snapped my fingers in front of him. He just shrugged before giving me a soft kiss on his way over to sit down next to Alec.

"Alec, will you be okay here by yourself?" I asked as I brought out a box from my bag.

"I'm not alone, Tush." He grinned. "I have Kellan outside, remember?"

Of course. He probably knows the muscles standing outside.



"But still..." I trailed off, walking over to Edward for some help.

"I'll be fine, luv. Kellan and I will catch a game on the telly."

"All right," I sighed, turning to Edward. "Could you help me with this, sweetie?" I held up the first item I used his credit card with, and then I turned my back to him as he stood up.

It was sort of a surprise, but I knew he would love it.

"Of course," he replied, taking the necklace from me.

He hadn't seen the charm yet.

The charm with an 'E' on it.

"Um, baby?"

Now he had, however.

"Mmhmm," I replied, smiling hugely as I looked over my shoulder, and you know, upward, 'cause he's tall.

Irish boy's eyes were very happy.

"Who gave this to you?" he asked quietly, holding up the necklace.

Right, because according to him, I couldn't possibly have bought it myself.

"I did."

"Oh," he mouthed as he helped me put it on, and I felt him, his breaths ghosting over my neck. They were shallow.

Once the necklace was in place, he dipped down and kissed my neck.

"Thank you."

"You have nothing to thank me for," I huffed quietly, turning around in his arms. "Now, kiss me, Whistler."

There was that smile again.

"Yes, ma'am."

Too soon, we were interrupted by Alec, making kissing noises.

\*O\*O\*O\*

"Christ, you are so bored, Edward," I chuckled as we made our way to the Cullen mansion.

"What do you mean?"

I glanced over to see how fast he was driving as I spoke. "Esme told me and Rose about the so called symptoms. Like if you and Emmett, and Carlisle for that matter, haven't 'worked' in a while, you become restless... and more reckless in your driving. That you need the thrill. And now... how fast are you going, Whistler?"

Edward didn't seem surprised of my knowledge, so I gathered that Esme had told him what she had told us, but he did smile sheepishly and said, "Sorry, it's just that nothing ever happens in Forks."

To his response, I started thinking about our future, and the fact that we were actually leaving Forks in just a few days, and I had no idea where we were going or what the plan was. The only thing I knew was right after the wedding, we were heading for our honeymoon, and then back to Seattle where Edward had his own house... or mansion.

But then what?

I found myself very curious, and... excited.

"Are you and Emmett planning anything?" I asked him, quietly but pointedly so he'd understand.

"Yes," he replied, almost as quietly, keeping his eyes on the road.

My body buzzed with something.

"Can you tell me anything about it?" I asked, realizing that I was watching my hand... that was placed on Edward's thigh. Rather high up on his thigh, and I knew he was very aware it, too.

He cleared his throat before answering, still quietly. "We'll be in Rome in January... for uh, Maserati's next release."

I swallowed hard.

My hand traveled higher.

Rome. We're going to Italy.

Edward sped up, and I could barely see the trees we passed. It was a blur.

The tension shifted. Became thick.

"And then what?" I asked, feeling myself lean towards him. I was suddenly very aware of my dampened panties. "Once we're there... what's the plan?"

My hand reached his very prominent erection, and I shivered at the realization; this was the thrill. Not only for him, but for me. I found this very thrilling, too.

"Fuck, baby, what are you doing?" he rasped, gripping the wheel tightly as I stroked him through his pants.

And I wanted more.

So much more today.

I kept my eyes fixed on his cock as I unbuttoned his pants. "Answer my question."

I was out of control, and I had no idea what it was that had taken over, but I found myself loving it; the tension, the speed, the... talk of Italy and Maserati.

"Shit," he hissed under his breath, glancing down as his erection bobbed free. I gave him a look, silently telling him to answer. And he did. As I stroked him. "Um... we have orders... *ungh*... on two cars..."

Two cars. That they will steal.

I shivered violently.

My body was in charge, and well, I leaned down... towards his cock.

"Bella," he choked out, but I was already under his arm, and then I planted an openmouthed kiss on the leaking tip. I found myself loving that, too, and I was unable to stop.

We had never done this before, but like I said, I couldn't stop it, and it appeared that Edward couldn't either. Because I knew he would if he was focused. That's who he is, and he would never agree to this – for my sake. But he did, and he moaned loudly as I sucked him into my mouth.

I felt his hand, or his fingers, threading through my hair... as he stepped on the gas... again.

He drove faster.

"Oh *God*, princess," he groaned.

My pussy was literally throbbing with want, and this... Christ, I had never felt like this before. And I already craved it, loved it, loved feeling his cock in my mouth, loved the saltiness, his size, his pleasure.

I gagged on him once, but as I was fucking new at this.

"Fuck!" he grunted, bucking his hips upward, which made me gag once more. "Shit, I'm sorr-"

I didn't let him continue because I moaned around him, worked him harder, sucked him deeper, used my teeth... I was absolutely out of control. The feeling was so fucking powerful, and the thought of not sleeping with him until our wedding night all of the sudden felt horrible. I needed him. Physically, I actually needed him, and I sought friction by rubbing my thighs together, but it wasn't enough.

"I'm close, baby," he moaned, but I didn't stop.

The need was too great, and I thought I was going to combust. I was pretty sure of it, in fact.

Edward tensed, and with a loud groan, he came in hot spurts down my throat, making me almost choke as I swallowed. Though I couldn't say I enjoyed the taste, I definitely enjoyed pleasing my man, and fuck, it made me hornier. It made me feel claimed in some way.

"Fuck... fucking hell," he panted as I released him. "Just... fuck."

It was with reluctance I helped him zip his pants, because my pussy was still throbbing, leaving me breathless and panting with that goddamn need.

"Jesus, Bella," he breathed, staring at me with wide eyes. "What the hell was that?"

I had no answer for that. Well, it was a blowjob, I'm sure, but I have no idea where it came from. Or why. But I knew I wanted more.

"I need you," was my whimpered reply, and I was fucking desperate now.



I think Edward noticed the desperation because he quickly pulled the car over at the side of the road before pushing his seat back. "Come here, beautiful."

I practically threw myself at him, and though it was a small ass car, I managed to get myself situated so I was straddling him. It was frantic the way I launched myself at him, kissing him hard, plunging my tongue into his mouth, but as he caught onto my desperation, he was as eager.

"Tell me what you need, baby," he panted in between kisses as his hands went under my skirt. "Fuck, I wish..."

"You wish what?" I moaned, throwing my head back as he sucked on my neck.

"Goddamn, I wish I could taste you." he snarled against my neck. "I've wanted to taste that sweet pussy of yours for months now."

"Oh, fuck!" I moaned. His hands...under my skirt...closer, higher... "Please, Edward... please..."

Fucking finally, I felt him slide my thong aside, and then his long fingers teased my wets slit. I needed more, so I bucked against him, making him understand... ungh! Yes...

"So fucking hot, baby," he whispered... and then his voice changed, into a command. "Ride my fingers, sweetheart. Let me feel your pussy."

I moaned again, buried my face in the crook of his neck, and then he pushed two fingers inside me. Hard. It was everything but not enough, because I knew... Goddamnit, I wanted his cock.

"Ungh... can't wait for our wedding night," I whimpered, riding his fingers harder and harder, moaning louder and louder as his fingers worked me. Still not enough because he didn't go deep enough.

"Oh yeah? And why's that, baby girl?" He kissed my throat.

I felt his thumb on my clit, and I tensed around him, breathing erratically, finally feeling the orgasm approach. Fuck, a third finger, stretching me... we both moaned. Harder. Faster. I want more. Need more. Faster. Please.

"Oh... 'cause... *ungh*... want all of you," I practically sobbed out.

"*Fuck*," he groaned loudly. "Is that it, baby? You want all of me? You want my cock?"

Yes! I clenched around him. Throbbing. He noticed and knew what I wanted.

"God, you're dirty, aren't you, Bella?" he growled, nipping at my shoulder as he redoubled his efforts. "I knew it... Remember? I told you. I fucking told you."

I knew what he meant. Back on our first date. He said I was probably as innocent as him. Fucker's probably right.

"Fuck, you're so tight, baby."

And so close.

Yes.

Oh!

"Yes, I can feel you, Isabella... Come for me."

I came hard and fast, squeezing my eyes shut as waves and waves of pleasure rushed through me, and I was barely aware of anything other than myself, and Edward's heavy breathing.

"Shit," I panted... and shuddered... and trembled... and shivered.

It took a while, but once my breathing had returned to normal, we just sat there. We didn't speak about my insanity. He just held me, and we kissed. Slowly and softly. But I think it's quite obvious that Edward isn't the only one in need of a thrill; I am, too, and I believe he knows it better than I do, even for myself. Whether it's about driving fast or... you know, what he does... or will do... in Rome... I don't know, but it's something. Something that... *shit*, turns me on.

I *am* fucked up.

I'm not feeling upset about it, though. For some reason, I'm... thrilled. Excited. Happy. Shit.

Once I was back in my seat, I knew I was blushing like a freak, and Edward didn't exactly make things better when he revved the engine while licking his goddamn fingers before taking off. The smug bastard was indeed that; smug. Just *anyone* wouldn't be able to see it, but I sure did. I saw the very satisfied smile playing on his lips. He even tried to fight it, but I saw the twitching. I saw it and hated it. No, I didn't. That's the thing. I didn't hate it. At all.

As he threaded our fingers together, he glanced over at me one time, and then he smirked. Smirked cockily, not trying to hide it any longer.

And he said, "Tonight I'm tasting from the source, baby."

Then he stepped on the gas, making the engine purr... and I bit down on my lip to fight the moan.

There's no denying it anymore. I'm more like Edward than I thought, and that's that.

\*O\*O\*O\*

Dinner was... weird. Really fucking weird.

The table, set for the six of us, felt very formal. More so than the previous formal events we've had here, and this was supposed to be casual. But it wasn't. Far from it. Carlisle sat on one end of the table and Esme sat on the other, which left me and Edward on one side, and Ed and Liz on the opposite.

Another way to look at it was; Esme, Liz, and I sat on one half, and the three men on the other half, and though I felt Edward the entire time, it was very divided. Two groups with only one link, and that was Edward and me, and how he refused to let go of my hand, or if he did, he rested his arm on the back of my chair. Make no mistake, I loved the way he stayed close, almost in a protective way. I needed it, loved it. Craved his closeness. He did, too.

But that was it. Edward and I didn't talk and neither did Esme and Carlisle... or Ed and Liz. The women kept to themselves and the men did the same.

Again, Edward was different. He was business. Same went for Carlisle, and Esme gave me an assuring smile that told me things were fine, and this was only when Ed was around. That didn't surprise me, because I still remember the way Edward acted today when we met them at the airport. He was colder, void of emotion. Business.

It thrilled me though, that no matter how 'business' he had to be, he still showed me his true self, in this case with affection – the way he touched me. It mattered immensely.

And the talk?

Well, us women talked wedding-stuff, which had me more excited than I thought possible, and the way Edward squeezed my hand from time to time told me that he paid attention to what we said, and I was the same.

Without squeezing his hand, of course, but I still listened in a bit. I was curious, but can you blame me?

Didn't think so.

And the men talked business, which explained the added security around the mansion. Guards and detectors. All to make sure no one listened in – someone that shouldn't, that is.

It wasn't much that I didn't already know. They talked a bit about the Maserati show we were attending in January, and that Ed had his people getting the paperwork in order... whatever that meant. But I assumed it had something to do with identification and such seeing as Edward and Emmett never travelled under real names, and I figured it would be no different for me and Rose.

What I knew, from what Edward had told me, and now from what I'd heard over dinner, was that Edward and I – along with Emmett and Rose – would attend the car show together, and then that night, the night after the show, Emmett and Edward would return. Alone. To work.

It scared the shit out of me to hear them talk so openly about it. It also made things more real, especially when the three men brought out their Vertu phones to talk numbers, plans, and dates.

It was so real.

Esme and Liz did a good job to distract me with wedding stuff, but talk about centerpieces, flowers, and outfits only did so much.

After dinner, Edward gave me a soft kiss along with an apologetic smile, and told me that he and the other two men had some things to go over in Carlisle's office before joining us in the living room. I just smiled and nodded in return. It scared me a bit that I was so understanding, that I genuinely didn't have anything against it, but there wasn't much use in

denying it either. I knew I was finding myself still, and I was young, still growing up, still learning about being an adult, so to speak. But was this who I was going to be? The wife with no objection?

It sure looks like it, but what's worse... is that I like it. I trust Edward, I see him as the wonderful man he is... I love him. Nothing can change that... evidently.

It's not just the acceptance of what Edward does, though, that is on my mind. It's also what I experienced on the ride over.

And what a ride it was.

But on a serious note; I may be young, a bit immature at times even, but I know that the woman I am- or the woman I'm becoming... is more like Edward than I ever thought. I'm not just the wife, I'm also a bit... the same as him.

I felt the thrill.

I can't wait for Italy. I can't wait to see Edward in that setting, and a part of me... Oh, have mercy on me, but it's my God's honest truth; a part of me wants to be a part of it.

## **18 – SEATTLE IN NOVEMBER**

### **BPOV**

No more Forks.

I'm in a hotel suite.

I'm getting married tomorrow.

In sixteen hours to be exact.

It's midnight and I'm lying here in bed, staring up at the ceiling, unable to sleep. It's funny, because it's thanks to Edward I can't sleep. Yeah, I love Irish boy so much that I can't even sleep without him anymore, and this whole you-can't-see-each-other-for-24-hours-before-the-wedding is goddamn taxing.

Truth be told, I'm fucking exhausted. This week...

This is where I shake my head at the insanity that has been my life this week.

Dinners, fittings, rehearsals, toasting, meeting new people... It's just been so much. Thankfully I've had Edward by my side throughout it all, and we've both been very reluctant to let each other go, but Esme and Tan put their feet down when Edward asked to come with us to get the flowers. It was quite cute to see him pout. I did the same, but I'm eighteen and a girl. I can pout and blame my age.

Then the dinners. Most of them at the Cullen estate, but a few – smaller ones – in a restaurant in Port Angeles, and those were... interesting. One was when Carlisle and Tanya's parents had arrived that we went out to eat, and let me tell ya; hadn't it been for Esme's firm 'no,' I would've stomped their prissy asses.

Wanna know why?

Well, because Sandra and Geoffrey Cullen are two rude human beings. Though they know all about their son's shenanigans, they blame Esme for Carlisle's 'work.' They think Esme – just because she's a Masen – turned Carlisle into a criminal. Edward had to hold me back when Geoffrey said *'It's not too late, son. You can still remarry.'*

They said that right in front of Esme.

So, right in front of the two less likable Cullens, I asked Edward '*why are they invited?*' That earned me a watery smile from Esme, and a proud look from Edward who told me that family was family, no matter how much he disliked them. Family is invited regardless. That didn't stop him from whispering '*don't worry, baby, we don't see them often,*' though.

I huffed and thought *thank God*.

That was one long ass dinner, and it was very clear that none of us enjoyed it, especially when we saw the way Carlisle and Tan breathed out in relief when it was over. But family is family. What-the-fuck-ever.

There have been other dinners as well. The kind of dinners where the women are arm candy while the men talk business, and I saw the way Edward relaxed when I just saw the whole thing as very amusing.

Esme, Rose, and Tanya did, too. The four of us would stifle laugh after laugh as the men got into their heated debates about politics, sport, and finances.

I was glad it was business-Edward I attended those events with, because I don't want my Irish boy anywhere near that shit. No, I much preferred to see the suited-up Edward, the too polite and too mature Edward there.

Irish boy was better saved for me, and real family. And for fun times of course. Such times as our bachelor and bachelorette parties. That was a fun night, and I was glad we spent that night together.

During the day, Edward and his closest ones – Carlisle, Emmett, Garrett, Alec, and Ed – had been playing golf or something like that, and I had been kidnapped for a spa day with my closest ones – Rose, Esme, Tan, Nessa, and Liz. This was just two days ago, so let's just say I'm pampered, manicured, massaged, waxed, pedicured, and simply set for my wedding night.



Anyway, that was our day. Then that night, we all had dinner together, and there was Irish music along with Irish men drinking Irish stout. A lot of Irish stout.

It was truly a fun night, and more fun went down after Conn took me and Irish boy home.

Shit, I'm digressing.

The week has been so fucking long, and I'm exhausted, but that doesn't matter because I can't sleep without Edward.

Which is why I brought out my phone.

**I can't sleep, Whistler. Picture me with puppy eyes when I tell you I miss you. I miss you. – Bella.**

I laughed into the darkness and pressed 'send,' not awfully surprised when my phone dinged a few seconds later with a reply.

**Same here, baby. Wish I could be there but Emmett is barricading the fucking door. Love you. – Edward.**

I smiled. Chuckled a bit, too, 'cause it didn't surprise me. I could definitely see Emmett as a guard.

**So you already tried to get to me? ;) – Bella.**

**Of course. Stupid question. – Edward.**

Goddamn, he's one of a kind. Always making me feel so adored.

**I guess I'll see you tomorrow then. I'll be the one on white ;) – Bella.**

"And I can't wait," I murmured to myself, smiling.

It was the truth. I can't wait to marry him. I'm ready. It's mutual, and I've fallen hard for Edward Ryan Cullen.

**Emmett will be the one with a hand on my shoulder in case I feel the need to attack. – Edward.**

"God, I really love you." I snickered. "Damn Irish boy."

*And I'll tell you tomorrow. That I love you.*

\*O\*O\*O\*

"No, Allannah!" Tan gasped.

I froze. With my fork mid-air.

I wanted to whine because I was starving. This morning had been busy as hell, and there was no breakfast. There was however a big brunch and right now Tanya was in the way.

"No carbs," she said, walking over to snatch the fork out of my hand. "No carbs today, Allannah. You need better food than that if you want to make it through the day."

*Yes, ma'am*, I sulked, saying buh-bye to my delicious fries.

Instead I was given a bowl of strawberries, a plate of scrambled eggs, another plate with vegetables and a goddamn steak, and lastly a smoothie and a glass of orange juice.

"I'll barf if I eat all of this," I said frankly, digging in on the strawberries.

Rose and Esme just laughed at me from where they sat by the window.

The four of us were in my suite, and it was eleven-ish AM... or something like that, and Liz and Nessa would be here soon. I was also texting Alec

who was having brunch with Edward, Emmett, Carlisle, Garrett, and Ed. Irish boy was nervous but smiling a lot according to Alec.

My link with Alec was what kept me calm this morning.

And I needed that. To stay calm, that is. Because shit, there's a lot to remember. It's not just to say 'I do.' Far from it. There's a program for our wedding. A long one. Catholic. Irish catholic... or Roman catholic. Whatever. Anyway, there's so much to remember. It isn't just that the wedding is catholic. No, there are also Cullen and Masen traditions, Irish traditions, and they all had to be fit into the 'program.' This was what Esme and Tanya took care of with the two wedding planners, and I have to say Edward and I have both been somewhat lucky in this mess, because there hasn't been much work for us. As long as we knew where to be and what to say, we were good.

That's not to say that we don't know what's going on with the planning, though, because we do. In a way, Edward knows more about it than I do because he's the one handling the paperwork, and the... priest. Yes, handling the priest, that's exactly accurate because that is what Edward's been doing. Handling him.

I know money is involved. I know bribery when I see it.

I'm not catholic and Edward hasn't attended mass regularly in a year. And before that, it was somewhat of a show the Cullens put on – to attend mass. This is of course a reason for the priest to raise questions, and this is where Edward stuffed money down the priest's throat. Not literally but you get my point.

There have been no questioning whatsoever for me or Edward, and I know that's not... normal. Or whatever.

\*O\*O\*O\*

**Just 2 hours left, Tush! How ya feelin? – Kiddo.**

**Buffed, puffed, and crushed. Makeup and hairspray all over. How's Whistler? – Tush.**

**Chain smoking and bugging me ;) Nah, he's fine. Nervous but dandy. Em gave him black stuff. – Kiddo.**

**Make sure he doesn't drink too much. Rose is the same, giving me glass after glass with champagne. – Tush.**

**Haha, just told Boss, and he tried to snag the phone to call ya. – Kiddo.**

**What, did Emmett take away Edward's phone? :D – Tush.**

**Yeah, and now Boss knows I'm talking to ya. He's jealous and glaring at me. And telling me to tell ya that you shouldn't drink. – Kiddo.**

**Tell him the same! Anyway, where are you guys? – Tush.**

**Told him. He gave me the finger. I gave him the finger. And we're on our way to the church ;) – Kiddo.**

**Already?! – Tush.**

**Of course, Tush! Boss and Em are greeting guests and talking to the priest. – Kiddo.**

**We're at the church now, Tush. Media circus. – Kiddo.**

**Yeah, Conn informed us. Anything new with Edward? – Tush.**

**Boss is fine. A bit annoyed with the reporters, but fine. Ready to marry you, lass ;) – Kiddo.**

**I'm ready to marry him, too. Tell him that. Is the tent up? – Tush.**

**I told him. He's a happy bloke now haha. And yes, the tent is up. Don't worry, no one will be able to take your picture. – Kiddo.**

**Ok. I'm getting dressed now. Shit, only an hour left. See ya soon, kiddo! – Tush.**

\*O\*O\*O\*

I'm nervous.

I'm at the church.

Right this second, it's only me and Rose in our little room here at St. James Cathedral. Esme and Tanya just left with tears in their eyes as they were going to greet guests and stuff like that. Out there. Yes, outside the door... there are... guests. 180 of them. They all RSVP'd that they were coming. No one declines to attend this wedding.

It's big. It's been on the news for days. People have been interviewed and goddamn debates have been held. All because of the groom. All because of the groom's family in Chicago. Well, that's not completely accurate, because ever since Agent Black released Edward and Emmett's records, the Cullens have their own reputation. That happened a few days ago, and Emmett and Edward were both livid but there wasn't much they could do about it. Their pictures are out there now, and so is their history.

Before, the Cullens have all been in magazines, but for their charity work. They were always rumored to be involved with the Masens thanks to Esme's maiden name, but it was never proven that they were criminals, and back then, it was tabloids and less reliable sources that wrote about the connection between the two families. Not now, though. No, now, it's on the news. In newspapers. Proven and printed in black and white.

Thankfully it hasn't captured the media's interest so much that it's on the national news. It's more local. Washington and Illinois are covering this, and when I had asked Edward what this meant for him – when it came to future 'work,' he'd just shrugged and said, *'It's far from optimal, but no one will even know when we leave the country. They won't suspect that we're in Europe because no one knows of our relations there.'*

That had calmed a little because the last thing I wanted was for Edward to be arrested the second we set foot on any airport. Not that that would really happen. I mean, they have served their time, and that's that. You don't exactly get black listed at a goddamn airport for being associated with something petty as theft.

The fact that no one knew about Ed's bond with Aro Avellino was also good. People just thought the two families held a grudge, but they didn't know about the two being brothers, and that was yet another thing working in our favor – according to Carlisle, Edward, and Emmett – because no one in their right mind would think that the two Cullen brothers would even consider doing a 'job' on European soil, or in this case; the Avellino territory.

Right. No one in their right mind. What does that make Emmett and Edward?

Either incredibly stupid... or incredibly smart.

We'll see which one of the two they will end up as.

The Cullens compared to the Avellinos are nothing. Carlisle and his sons wouldn't even show up on the radar if one of Aro's men was in the same room, and I suppose that's a good thing, right? Edward and Emmett say it's a good thing at least.

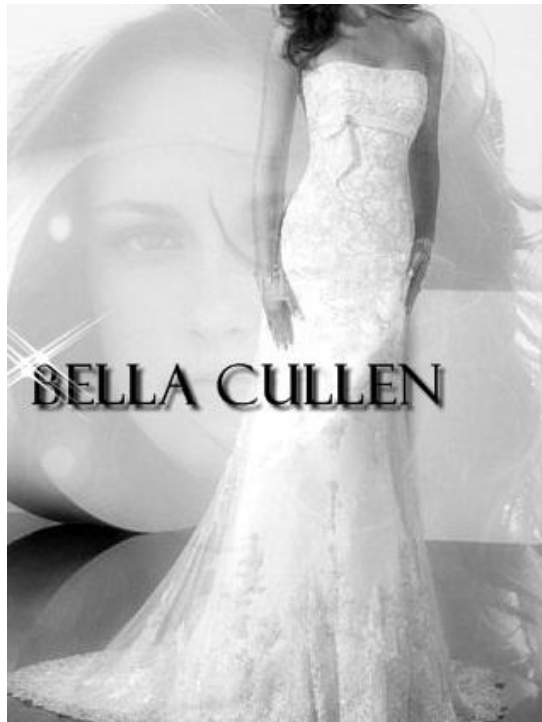
Speaking of the Avellinos... There hasn't been another encounter with them, but that's probably not weird when you consider the fact that Ed has twenty-six men working as guards this weekend. Yes, twenty-six of them. All wearing black suits and earpieces. They are armed, too. But that's the Masen life for you. I'm glad I'm not a Masen, because shit, to live that life... Christ.

I think I'm done with my inner rambling now.

I think I'm ready for that last look in the mirror.

Rose smiled at me. I smiled back. Best friend. Sister. Maid of honor.

Then as I glanced over at the mirror, I smiled again. I'm far from conceited or vain but I do believe I'm gorgeous today. My dress is also strapless. White. Layered. Short train. Lace. A thin ribbon under my chest – a cute bow. It's old fashioned yet very modern. I love it. And my hair is down, just like I know Edward loves it. It's curlier, though. Bouncy. Shiny as hell. I love that, too.



"You ready, Bella?" she asked softly.

"Yeah, I am." I smiled.

I really was. Ready, that is. Still nervous as hell but there was a weird calm to it that I couldn't explain, and I suppose it doesn't make sense when I say I'm nervous and calm all together but to me... it makes sense.

"You have the penny?" she chuckled.

I chuckled, too.

That was an Irish thing, and Esme had given me an Irish penny to put in my shoe. For good luck.

Something old. A family heirloom from the Masens. From Esme's grandmother to be exact, and it's a tiny brooch. Gorgeous and intricate with diamonds and a pearl in the center. Despite my protests she wanted me to have it, and it made me feel... like family. Cherished and belonged. I adore it.

Something new. A gift from Edward. It was on my pillow this morning – a blue box – and inside was a beautiful bracelet with a diamond encrusted infinity symbol.

Something borrowed. A hair pin that Carlisle had given Tanya on her 13<sup>th</sup> birthday and it's beautiful in silver with blue stones.

Something blue. Yeah, this was a gift from Rose. A garter. Light blue lace. I have to say I love it very much, and truth be told; I can't wait for Edward to see it. And remove it...

Lastly. An Irish penny in my shoe.

"Yep, I have it." I grinned.



She nodded once. "Alright, I'll go find Carlisle and Esme then."

This was it.

"Okay," I breathed out. A bit shakily.

Rose left and I was alone with my thoughts.

Fleetingly, I thought about Charlie and Alice, but... no. It feels like another lifetime, and frankly, they don't deserve to be in my thoughts. Not on this day.

Luckily, Rose came back just a couple of minutes later with Carlisle and Esme in tow. He was dangerously handsome in his tux, and I felt nothing but pure happiness about having him as my father-in-law. Always nice and caring. Always there. What's not to love.

Then, Esme. Emotional little woman. Okay, maybe not *little*, because we share the same height, but whatever. Emotional, though. So loving. Accepting. Wonderful.

"Ready, sweet?" she asked, sniffing a bit.

I nodded with a smile, and she walked over to another mirror where my veil hung. This was another Irish tradition. She told me to call her when it was time to put the veil on because it was bad luck to put it on yourself. Best was it if a happily married woman helped you, and Esme certainly fell under that category.

"You look lovely, Bella," Carlisle said. "It's an honor to walk you down the aisle. I hope you know that."

Yeah, I blushed. Smooth talkers, the bunch of them.

Esme helped me with the veil then and as I saw the next set of tears fill her eyes, I knew that her mind was on my vows. They had probably been on her mind since I asked her for help two days ago.

“He’s going to be so happy,” she whispered thickly, confirming the fact that she was thinking about my vows, and I believe she’s right. “Do you remember?” she asked, softly but pointedly. It wasn’t for Carlisle’s ears. Only Esme knew. Not even Rose. But I understood her. Esme, that is. I understood her question.

“Yes.” I nodded, feeling my throat close up.

Shit, I’m getting married.

To Irish boy.

Nessa came in then, dressed in a beige baby doll dress, and she was freaking cute as my flower girl. Her green eyes twinkled, I swear, and her very curly hair bounced when she skipped over to us.

“I think it’s time, Uncle C,” she chirped, winking at me. “Everyone is seated.”

Time. It’s time.

Oh, God.

I’m gonna marry my Whistler now.

## **19 – SEATTLE IN NOVEMBER**

### **BPOV**

“Are you okay, honey?” Carlisle whispered to me.

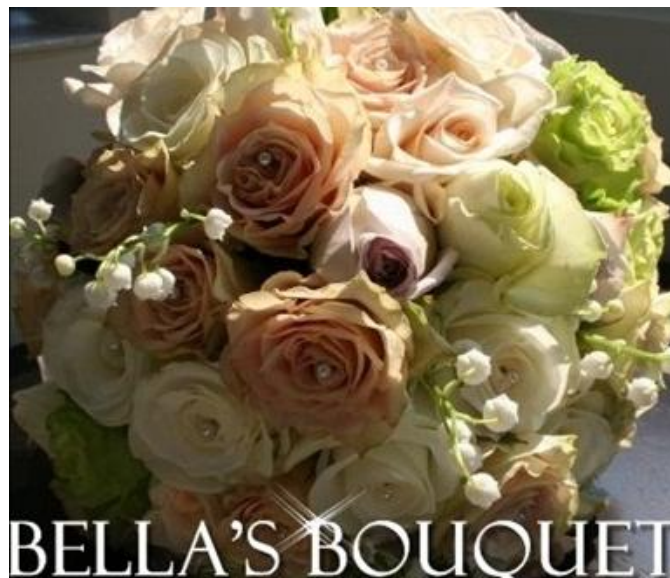
Am I okay? Yes, I’m just so fucking nervous.

We're standing outside the heavy doors. They are about to open, and once they do... shit. I'll see 180 guests. They'll see me. They will all see me.

In front of me I have Rose, and in front of her is the priest, and in front of the priest is some other guy. Don't really know who he is but it was something with... something. And behind me we have Nessa. Behind Nessa are two guards but they'll stay where they are, thank you very much. Conn and Kellan, by the way.

This is all in the back of my mind, though. All of that. The guests, the everything. Except Edward. He's very much in the front of my mind. So to speak.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I whispered back, tightening my hold on Carlisle's arm... cause I don't wanna trip in front of 180 people. I also made sure my grip on the flowers was deadly. As in strong, cause I didn't wanna drop them. They were too beautiful for that.



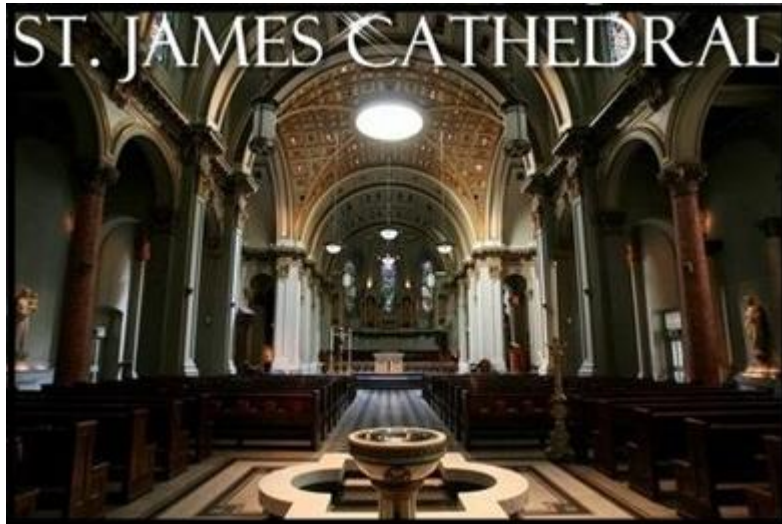
The church bells started ringing.

Very ding-dong-y. Powerful and loud.

Then they stopped. After a while.

It was *really* time now.

The doors opened and through my veil, I watched the entire assembly stand up. Facing us. Me. Facing *me*.



Music began. It was different and beautiful. Violins instead of the organ.

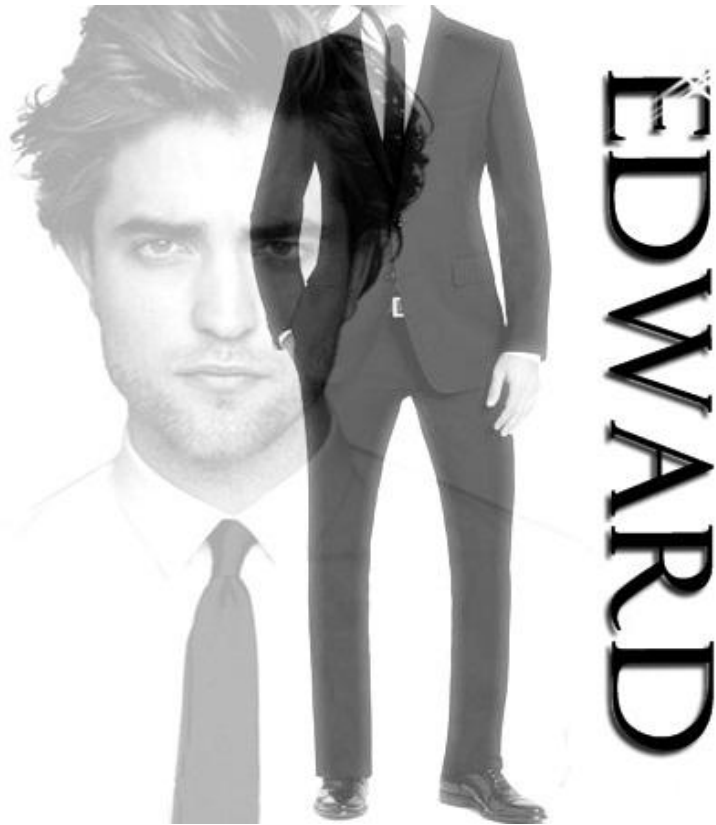
I couldn't see Edward. Too many fuckwits in the way. God, the aisle is long.

We started walking then, slowly, after Rose... who walked after the priest... who walked after that other dude.

There were very low murmurs all over, but I kept my eyes on Rose's back. The last thing I needed was people to distract me.

The aisle was really fucking long.

I heard Carlisle chuckle a bit, and I think it was because I walked too fast. I'm not sure. I just want to see...



Oh God, so handsome. Sexy. Beautiful. Smiling. Nervous. Waiting for me.

Carlisle chuckled again.

Oops.

My eyes were locked on him. Edward. My Edward. Christ, I love him. So much.

His eyes on me were as intense as mine were on him, and things happened around us. Words were exchanged, and Edward said something. I didn't hear a word of it, but I knew that Carlisle had just given me away, so to speak, because then I saw clearly. As Edward lifted the veil.

Oh, my hand is in Edward's hand now. Warm. A bit clammy, but I think mine is, too. This is a big day after all. Very big. Huge. And I can't believe it's here.

We were facing each other as the priest talked and talked and talked. Readings, blessings, prayers... what-the-fuck-ever. Just let me say 'I do.'

Edward was the same. I could see it. We didn't focus on the words said. They didn't matter. Much. Okay, they mattered, and we heard some of it. But not all of it.

Far from it.

But I heard some, and I smiled as the priest read an Irish blessing that Edward and I had chosen together. Irish boy smiled, too, and squeezed my hand. It was emotional.

*May God be with you and bless you.*

*May you see your children's children.*

*May you be poor in misfortunes*

*and rich in blessings.*

*May you know nothing but happiness*

*from this day forward.*

It was time for our vows then, and I swallowed hard as Edward cleared his throat, preparing to go first.

He did. Go first.

Spoke firmly yet so velvety. Like only he could. I'm sure.

"Your beauty came first, on that day I saw you. Then your voice, your sass." He winked, and I fought tears. "Then came your incredible personality, your strength and honesty... And along the way came your heart. You let me in, and for that I am forever thankful, Bella.

"My promise to love you forever is easy to make, and loving you is effortless. I know I will love you forever, be faithful to you, and I promise to show you for the rest of our lives that I'm yours."

Oh, Christ, Irish boy has a way with words.

Tears, you know, they're falling. Thanking God for waterproof mascara.

*It's my turn now, Irish boy, and you're about to see just how much I've let you in.*

I cleared my throat because that was necessary.

"I tried to write my own vows," I murmured, knowing that most of the guests were unable to hear me, but that's life. Get over it. "But I couldn't," I chuckled. Only a little. "I found something else, though. Esme helped me, and it's Irish."

Edward grinned widely.

I nodded. To myself, once, and then I spoke again... or quoted is more like it.

The Irish Vow of Unity.

*"We swear by peace and love to stand,*

*Heart to heart and hand in hand.*

*Mark, O Spirit, and hear us now,*

*Confirming this, our Sacred Vow."*

Edward's eyes were a little misty, and it was time for me to finish.

So, I did. "Those words apply to me very much, Whistler," I told him quietly, thickly. "Heart to heart. You love me and your heart is mine, you say. I hope you know that you have my heart, too, and I hope you know that I love you very much... because I do. And I promise to cherish you, to love you, be faithful, and be yours forever."

With one last breath, I told him, "Gráim thú."

'I love you' in Gaelic. Yeah, it took time, and thankfully Esme was patient. But I got it right. Fucking nailed it.

More words were exchanged.

To have and to hold.

All of that.

But Edward and I kept our focus on each other, and I told him over and over with my eyes that I loved him, willing him to understand it. Willing him to believe it.

After a while he did.

I was... *crazy* emotional, but that didn't surprise me. As soon as I saw Edward eyes well up, I knew I was going to need a goddamn Kleenex factory.

Yes, I love you.

Rose had my flowers then because it was time for the rings, and...

"I do."

"I do."

No one could stop me from smiling.

The feeling of sliding that ring onto his finger... no words could describe it. It was simple, titanium, and very shiny, but still simple. However, it became the most beautiful thing in the world, the second in was on Edward Ryan Cullen's finger. I swear. And it felt like he thought the same, when he slid my wedding band onto my finger. Also a very simple, very thin wedding band, because I wanted focus on my engagement ring,



which was why I didn't allow him to buy me anything other than simple. But the look he gave me, and the way he kissed the finger, now that it had two rings, made me believe he thought the same – nothing had looked lovelier.



Our love, our relationship... it was all mutual.

He loves me. Adores me. And shows it.

I love him. Adore him. And I will make sure he feels it for the rest of our lives.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife..."

Husband and wife.

We're married.

As if I was made of glass, Edward cradled my face, dipped down, and pressed his lips against mine, and seriously, when the hell was that ever enough?

"Kiss me properly, Whistler," I whispered against his lips, all while throwing my arms around his neck... to which he fucking growled in my mouth, and ladies, that's not appropriate in a church. And then kissed me properly. Firmly. Hotly. So passionately that my knees almost buckled. Oh, God!

I whimpered.

Edward groaned quietly.

Alec laughed, reminding me of our surroundings.

The priest cleared his throat with a very subtle, "Ahem."

Yeah, yeah, Amen to you, too.

"Better, princess?" Edward breathed, breaking our kiss slowly.

"Humhmm," was my clever response, but it was his fault. He dazzled me.

Mad skills that Irish boy has. Mad I tell ya!

I was eager to leave and so was Edward, but we stood, somewhat patiently, as the priest read another blessing, but then... after what felt like an eternity, the ceremony was coming to an end, and Rose returned my bouquet to me as Edward and I turned to face the assembly... now as husband and wife.

Mr. and Mrs. Cullen.

Hot damn, that sounds good. Feels even better.

I didn't see any of them. The guests. Even as I looked away from Edward, and stood facing the crowd, all I saw was him. My husband.

I squeezed his hand, cause I just had to. He squeezed back.

Then as the violins started playing again, it was time to go, which we did, faster than we were supposed to, and that earned us a few chuckles from the guests but I couldn't have cared less. I needed Edward badly, behind closed doors preferably.

One step closer.

Two steps closer.

I tightened my hold on Whistler's hand. He did the same.

We were so close. You know, to the heavy doors. Even though we had Rose and Nessa, Emmett and Alec on our tail, I didn't care, and hopefully Edward didn't either.

So close.

Just a few more steps.

Edward sped up. I followed eagerly.

More chuckles.

Then finally, we reached the end.

And before I could react, Edward dragged me towards the nearest wall where he pressed his body against me. Kissed me hard. Really fucking hard. Thrusting his tongue into my mouth as my arms went around his neck. His hands travelled south, palmed my ass, making me moan.

We ignored the giggles and the chuckles coming from... yeah, you know their names.

"Say it, baby. Please fucking say it," he mumbled in between kisses. "I need to hear it again."

I knew. Understood right away what he wanted, needed, to hear.

"I love you," I whimpered. "I love you."

"Fuck," he panted, resting his forehead against mine. "I love you, too, Bella. So goddamn much. Christ..."

Our eyes met. Happy eyes. Happy mouths curving into wide smiles, and lovingly, he brushed his knuckles over my cheek.

"My wife," he whispered, watching me reverently.

I shivered.

"My husband," I said softly.

Even wider smiles.

"Ahem."

"Ahem."

"Ahem."

"Yeah, ahem, Boss."

Emmett, Rose, Nessa, Alec.

Right. We're not alone.

By the force of Emmett and Alec, we were ushered into the small room where Rose and I got ready earlier, and I sat patiently, probably squeezing the living shit out of Edward's hand, as we heard the commotion outside; the guests leaving the cathedral to receive us outside – where a big ass tent has been set up to keep unwelcomed eyes out.

Reporters, Italians, Feds...

"So beautiful, baby," he whispered, leaning his forehead against mine.

My husband.

"We're married," was what I said. They were the only words I could form. But I needed to try them out.

They felt good. So good.

He nodded once against my forehead, smiling beautifully, finally relaxed, now knowing how much I want this, too.

After a few minutes, Emmett announced that it was time, and Edward and I waited for a few minutes while the four of them headed out, and then it was our turn.

"Ready, Mrs. Cullen?" he asked, threading our fingers together.

"I really, really am," I said, shivering at the affect of his words, and how deeply they cut through me. Not in a bad way – no, the opposite. It was like they cut their way in only to stay etched in my soul forever.

Mrs. Cullen.

That's me.

The name gave me a lot. A lot I never considered, but now, now that it's my name... I feel pride. I'm proud to carry that name.

"I love you," I had to say it.

Edward swallowed hard, I saw it, and he said nothing. Just shook his head slightly. Closed eyes. I think it was big for him to hear it.

The doors opened then, and our heavy moment was lightened when we chuckled and laughed at the hundreds of flashes that hit us. Guests hadn't been allowed to take pictures inside the church, because they'll get those

pictures sent to them later – as a thank you for coming. It was Esme and Tan who hired the photographer, and I can't wait to see them later.

A few started shouting out for Edward to kiss me. There where we stood on the steps, outside St. James Cathedral, and Edward was no one to waste time.

Dipping down as I tilted my face up, we met in a soft, lingering kiss, and I placed my ring-adorned hand on his chest.

Mine.

His hand held mine in place, effectively showing the world our symbols, and then we just focused on each other. Gazing, kissing, smiling. Happy goddamn eyes. So happy.

\*O\*O\*O\*

It was a pity really, that Edward and I weren't alone in the limo-ride over to the Fairmont where our reception was held, because I needed me some Edward, and by the way he touched me, I'd say he needed him some Bella, alas... we weren't alone. We had Rose, Em, Alec, and Nessa in the limo, too. Laughing and giggling at us.

Then as we arrived at the Fairmont, the six of us had to wait in a hotel suite as the ballroom filled up with guests, and once again Edward and I wished we were alone. Damn, we even caught each other eyeing the bed, which made his eyes darken, and I... well, I bit down on my lip. To stop the whimper.

When a security guard came in and announced that everyone had arrived and were seated, Emmett, Rose, Nessa, and Alec left, and Edward and I followed shortly, stopping right outside the doors to the ballroom.

Hands holding. Tightly.

"I love you," he whispered, dropping a kiss at the top of my head.

I smiled up at him. "I love you, too."

Lovey-dovey eyes met.

We were so sappy.

From inside the ballroom, we heard Carlisle then. Saying welcome and all that, and then our cue...

*"...Now as husband and wife, Edward and Isabella Cullen!"*

"*Fuck*, that sounds good," I hissed.

That earned me a hearty laugh from my husband.

The doors opened, and Edward and I were met with a goddamn standing ovation as we entered, walking over to take our seats.

The ballroom was massive. It kinda had to be, though, right? I mean, 180 guests.

There were round tables everywhere – except for the middle where the dance floor was – and then at the far end, there was a long table for me and Edward, and our closest family.

Everyone stood up, which I found humbling, as Edward held my chair out for me, and it wasn't until the two of us were seated that everyone else sat their asses down.

As preordered, there was a cold beer placed in front of Edward, and a glass of champagne for me, and there was no hesitation; we both drank greedily, cause let's face it, people... getting married takes it out of you. But everyone followed, it looked like. Perhaps it was the Irish, because

glanced around, I noticed that waiters were already refilling and refilling and refilling.

Edward and Emmett were two of these, and I laughed as they chugged an entire Murphy in mere seconds.

I was seated between the two, cause that was apparently tradition – for me to sit next to Edward’s best man, and for Edward to sit next to my maid of honor. And then next to Emmett sat Nessa, Alec, Liz, and Ed. Next to Rose sat Esme, Carlisle, Tan, and Garrett, and this was family. Yeah, even Ed and Liz, I suppose. But in Liz’s defense; she’s just like Esme. Adorable, blunt, cool, graceful, beautiful – all wrapped up in an amazing woman. Ed on the other hand... well, he’s nice and all – he really is – but still... nah, I’m glad we won’t see him much.

The rustle and bustle quieted down then, as Carlisle stood up, and I knew this was another Irish thing coming. Apparently it was good luck to have a man that isn’t your husband welcoming you into your new family and this was what Carlisle was about to do.

Edward draped his arm around me, resting it on the back of my chair, and gave me that panty-dropping smile. You know the one. Yeah, you do. And it was good to see him relaxed, finally. Because right now... Jeesh, Irish boy is grinning goofily at me.

“Beautiful Isabella,” Carlisle said, grinning at me. “I can say that I speak for everyone when I say that it is our honor to have you in our family, and I know that you will carry the Cullen name well.

“When Edward told me about you, I heard the words ‘amazing,’ ‘beautiful,’ ‘gorgeous’... and then since it’s my son we’re talking about, I was of course privy to some of his more colorful words.”



We all chuckled, watching Carlisle intently in anticipation of his next words because if there was one thing I knew about the Cullens it would be that they are brutally honest.

"I believe 'fucking spectacular' were two of those words, isn't that right, son?" Carlisle laughed.

Edward laughed, too, unashamed, and nodded with a shrug.

I giggled and blushed but that's nothing new.

"Anyway, Isabella," Carlisle continued. "Now that I've come to know you, I know that my son is right. He truly hit the jackpot, and it's my honor to welcome you into our family." He raised his glass. We all did. Everyone. "To Isabella – Sláinte!"

A choir of 'Sláinte' rang out, and I flushed scarlet at the attention, but nodded in thanks. I was nothing but humbled by the response and I was glad I had Edward next to me because I never handled this much attention well. It wasn't uncomfortable but I wasn't used to it, and praise was new to me.

"*Ta tu go halainn,*" Edward whispered then, and I smiled curiously.

I have heard Edward speak Irish many times but it's usually on the phone, and it's always business. But this, this was in Irish boy's tone. Not the firm business-voice.

"You're beautiful," he clarified, giving me a wink as he brushed his knuckles over my cheek. I knew he loved my traitorous blush.

Obviously, I blushed harder now.

And was it wrong for me to be turned on by the foreign language?

I hope not.

The dinner was served then, and I watched with wide eyes as at least... twenty-five or... thirty? waiters came through the doors, all with plates upon plates with food. It occurred to me then how fucking starving I was and I was glad when Edward and I were served first.

By the look of it, I wasn't the only one starving, because Edward and I both dug in with mighty eager, yes we sure did. And of course, Emmett followed as soon as he'd been served, too, and soon we were all eating, conversing, laughing and drinking... everything was perfect. Goddamn delicious, too. I love lamb, by the way.

"Want more to drink, princess?" Edward asked, and I looked up from my food, noticing that he had a waiter standing by.

"A Coke and a vodka cranberry, please," I said, smiling.

The waiter nodded in understanding before scurrying away, and Edward gave me a wink just because that's Irish boy. He always winks.

"I'm fucking stuffed," I heard Emmett belt then. "Christ, this was good."

"Yeah, it was really good," Nessa chirped, always echoing Emmett's words.

Edward and I grinned as we both turned our heads in Rose's direction and we couldn't help but to laugh as we watched Rose roll her eyes.

"I'm so glad we don't have that issue with Alec," I chuckled quietly, only for Edward to hear, and he laughed in agreement.

"Alec's almost the opposite," he huffed playfully. "I'm starting to wonder if he doesn't like you more."

"That's ridiculous," I laughed, nodding in thanks as my drinks came.

"You're his hero and you know it."

Edward was about to reply, but we were interrupted by Emmett, and... oh, God, it's time for his speech. You know, the best man-toast. And as I glanced at Edward, I knew he dreaded this.

I grinned. Widely. In anticipation.

That earned me a playful scowl from my husband, but he couldn't hold it for long.

Emmett cleared his throat very subtly. "Ahem, ahem, AHEM! I'm clinking my motherfucking glass!"

Dear lord...

## **20 – SEATTLE IN NOVEMBER**

Translation

A ghra mo chroi – Love of my heart.

Mo anam cara – My soulmate.

### **BPOV**

"Have mercy on me," Edward muttered quietly, hugging me close to him.

"As the best man, I have the honor to piss off my brother," Emmett began, grinning down at both me and Edward. "The past months we've spent in the small town of Forks have been... well, Eddie, whaddya think? They've been *interesting*, wouldn't you say?"

Edward seemed to understand and gave his brother a glare, but I didn't understand one bit and I wanted more! I wanted to understand!

"Let's just say that my brother and I have had two beautiful women who have managed to keep us on our goddamn toes, that's for sure, but... well, you all know me and Edward. If there's anything we need; it's

something do... constantly. And since we couldn't exactly spend every minute with the girls, we had to turn to something else."

I was on the edge of my seat, hating that dramatic pause, and as Edward actually blushed, I just couldn't fucking wait to hear what Emmett was going to say.

"And I thought I'd give you a nice little image of one thing that Edward loved to spend his time doing... when he didn't have his lovely Bella with him."

"I hope you'll love me after you've heard this," Edward whispered pleadingly in my ear.

I whimpered in nothing but sheer desperation, really wanting to hear this!

"Eddie, it's my honor to tell our close ones... and of course your lovely wife... that you spent that time checking out barely-there lingerie that you wished to see Bella in."

Huh.

Uh...

Is...um... Is it weird that I don't laugh? Is it weird that I just get turned on?

Every man and most women in the ballroom laughed, especially Emmett, but... I just couldn't.

'Cause I was just horny by the idea of Edward buying me lingerie.

We've already established that I'm not normal, yes?

Good.

"Please say something," Edward whispered.

Emmett was still talking, now moving on to what a great honor it was to have me in the family and that Edward couldn't have found a better girl, but I've heard it before. It's still a lot for me to handle, so I turned to Edward, focused on him for a few seconds.

"Did you buy anything?" I whispered back, smiling curiously.

Irish boy didn't know how to react.

He was quiet for at least a minute before he...

"God, I *really* fucking love you, princess."

\*O\*O\*O\*

The reception lasted forever. Speeches, cake-cutting, eating, drinking, more speeches, dances, oh the dancing. I swear I danced with them all.

Thankfully my husband appeared to be quite possessive and cut in very often.

My bouquet was tossed and I had to laugh when Nessa was the one catching it.

As for my garter... well, Edward did an amazing job removing it with his teeth, and I have to say his hands lingered for a long time. I didn't mind.

It wasn't thrown, though. Whistler just stood up, winked to the drunken men... and pocketed it.

At midnight, Whistler and I looked at each other and I know we both thought 'enough is enough.'

We were horrible. Truly horrible, because we slipped out.

We didn't tell anyone that we were leaving because that would leave us with an hour long goodbye, and we just didn't have it in us to go through that. We wanted to be selfish, so we left.

And that's where we are now. In our grand suite, here at the Fairmont.

"I'm just going to put something less comfortable on," I said, winking at Whistler as he gulped with wide eyes.

I barely recognized myself as I stared into the mirror in the bathroom.

The woman looking back at me was happy. Happy beyond words. She looked more at home, a bit more mature, confident, at ease, in love, and at peace.

The irony was not lost on me.

It is a bit amusing when you think about it. But here I am, standing in the bathroom of our hotel suite, far from the little town I grew up in... as Swan. And I'm not Swan anymore. I'm Cullen. Yet, now I feel like I'm home. Not before, not in the same sense anyway.

I'm home as long as I have Edward, as long as he's my husband, as long as we share his name.

I've changed so much.

I've grown, matured. Still a long way to go of course... but I do believe I will be pleased with the outcome.

Smiling to myself, I unzipped my wedding dress.

And ten minutes later, when I stood in the lingerie I had picked out, I knew that this was the real me. This was who I wanted to be. This was my life now and I was going to savor it. Because Whistler was fucking right. I'm not all that innocent after all.

Months of struggling against Edward and his heart led me to this anyway. I still fell for the bastard, and have mercy on me, I'm loving every second of it.

I'm ready for anything as long as I have him.

With that thought, I left the bathroom and headed straight for our bedroom where I found Edward sitting on the edge of the bed, fidgeting with the cuffs on his tux.

"Need some help with those?" I asked softly.

His head turned in my direction.

Irish boy gasped quietly.

Eyes were wide. Wide and hungry. Roaming over me. They took it all in. The bra and panty-set in cream colored lace. See-through lace. And of course, the very, very, high heels. Also in creamy brown.

Why not red? Or white? Or black?

Because it's common.

I'm not common.



Whistler silently motioned for me to twirl, so I did, and I smiled as Irish boy moaned.

*Yes, baby, it's a thong. You've seen me in one before.*

Not a see-through one, though.

Slowly, I walked towards him, and he stood up, eyeing me hungrily, making me feel beautiful and sexy.

"You're wearing too much," I whispered as I started unbuttoning his shirt. He stood frozen, just watching me. "Way too much."

His vest and shirt came off.

His pants were unzipped and pushed down.

Boxers. Gone.

His cock... well, I had its attention, so to speak.

My husband's magnificent.



As I stood up again, I felt my nerves kick in, but that didn't take away the fact that I was ready, that I wanted this, because I did. I do.

"I love you," I murmured, cradling his cheek.

His eyes softened and he placed his hand on top of mine before kissing my palm.

"I love you, too."

His arms went around me slowly, caressing my sides until he reached my ass, and he dipped down and kissed me softly, lovingly, before lifting me up. I eagerly wrapped my arms around him and deepened the kiss, only wanting to show him how much I wanted this, how much I desired him, and how much he was actually needed in my life, because he was. And as we kissed passionately, we conveyed all that.

Our feelings were mutual.

Our marriage was something we both now wanted.

As Edward lowered me onto the bed, he continued to kiss me, caress me... tease me. My mouth. My chest. My stomach. My legs...

"As much as I love these shoes," he whispered, gently holding up my left foot. "they need to go."

And so my heels were gone. Tossed aside. Not existing anymore.

"Same goes for this," he said quietly, dipping his fingers under the hem of my thong.

My breathing picked up. So did his.

Underwear gone. Bra and thong. Gone. I'm naked.

Both of us were naked, and shit, my nerves... yeah, very present.

"Baby, we don't have to do... that," he told me softly as he lowered himself, covering his body with mine. "The only thing I need is to show you how much I love you."

"I'm just nervous," I breathed out, wrapping my arms around him. "I want this- I want you."

It was my God's honest truth, and I think Edward was finally beginning to trust me because he didn't pause to study me, he didn't stop, and he didn't decide for us. He just nodded minutely, nuzzled my nose with his, and then he kissed me. Softly at first, chastely, just feathery light ones, and I realized that this was him relaxing me.

It worked because I felt my body warming up, wanting more, wanting to feel more. Of him.

"You're so fucking gorgeous, princess," he breathed out as he kissed my jaw. "My wife."

I smiled. Smiled so widely because it felt right. It felt perfect, and I pressed my lips against his neck, kissed him, breathed him in. My husband. "My husband." Yes, so right. We're Cullens.

"Say it again," he mumbled as he kissed his way further down.

"My husband," I gasped, feeling his lips wrap around my nipple. "Ungh, yes," I whimpered, threading my fingers through his hair, and I was unable to stop myself from arching into him. There was no denying that my body desired him fully. My entire being desired him but my body did the talking, or... showing.

"Whistler," I moaned quietly.

My eyes were closed. I just felt him. Focused on everything he did. His openmouthed kisses on my body, his large hands caressing and rubbing...

yes... kneading my breast, kissing my breast... oh... want more... so hot... so hot here.

"Fuck, I love your body," he groaned. "Goddamn addictive..."

My body buzzed. Nerves and pleasure. Blood pumping. Heart pounding. Warmth rushing, surging. Waves of heat downwards... towards there... down. Soaking.

He reached my pussy.

Mouth. His mouth reached my pussy.

Edward groaned, I gasped, as he planted a kiss on my clit. An openmouthed one. Sucking slightly, flicking with his tongue. I moaned louder.

"You like this, baby?" he asked huskily as he worked his magic on me, and he knew very well how I reacted to his... talk. "I know you do. So wet for me, Bella."

I shivered.

His tongue parted me, his hand kneaded my breast, rolling my nipple between his fingers, and it was that damn multi-tasking he could do. It was so fucking much. Pleasuring. Making me tremble and moan.

"Please, baby," I moaned as I threaded my fingers through his hair.

He was teasing me and he knew it.

"Please what, Bella? What do you want?"

"More," I whined.

Irish boy obeyed, and I gasped loudly as he pushed two fingers inside me, all while sucking on my clit.

I was soaked.

Desperate.

He brought me to the edge several times over, and I pleaded with him to let me come.

"Can't fucking wait 'til it's my cock, princess," he moaned.

"Oh, God!" I gasped breathlessly.

My legs started shaking, my body tensed, and he felt it. Worked me harder and faster. Oh, yes... please... my eyes shut tightly, I stopped breathing...

"Christ, sweetheart," he groaned. "Come in my mouth. Fucking come, baby."

His words were my undoing, and I felt the pleasure rip through my body in waves. Gasping and panting. Unable to be still, and I'm sure I pulled his hair too hard but all he did was groan and moan against my pussy.

"Holy shit," I panted with a hand over my chest.

Damn black spots.

I shivered violently; Edward kissed his way up my body. Openmouthed, hot, wet, sensual kisses, and when his hot breath reached my neck, I felt him. The tip of his hard cock.

"You ready, sweetheart?" he whispered against my neck.

I felt everything.

His muscular body covering mine, his hair on the side of my face, making me shiver as his scent hit me... his erection right there, in position... his mouth on the spot below my ear... my arms around his shoulders, my

hands feeling his shoulder blades... my legs wrapped around his waist... my mouth on his shoulder.

I felt it all, registered it all, and yes, I wanted it. I was ready.

"Yes," I breathed out. "Yes."

He looked at me, down at me, rested his forehead against mine.

"I love you."

I smiled.

"I love you, too, Edward. So much."

He kissed me. Hard. Passionately... as he pushed himself inside me.

Not all the way.

It stung.

My eyes closed.

*Shit, he's big... fucking huge... how will this ever work?*

"Fuck," he shuddered out. "Princess... *Christ*, I need you to relax...I'm never gonna fit if you don't relax..."

Relax. Right. Yeah.

Easier said than done!

I gulped or gasped to get air in my lungs. Shallow breaths. Relax, relax, sure.

He kissed me then, softly and lovingly, and his hand reached down between our bodies... his thumb reached my clit, and it was slow... to make me relax... to allow him inside... Deep breaths.

"*Mo anam cara*, so beautiful," he breathed against my lips.

Deep breaths.

I breathed in deeply through my nose, feeling myself relax against him, and it became easier and easier to focus on the pleasure each time I exhaled. Our bodies came together.

"*A ghra mo chroi*," he whispered as his lips ghosted over my jaw. "You're my life, sweetheart."

"Edward," I sighed quietly, overwhelmed with the love he showered me with.

Opening my eyes, I found him watching me with his smoldering eyes. Lust, desire, love, adoration.

I nodded to him. Once.

He understood, and I closed my eyes again and focused on his mouth on my skin... and prepared myself for-

*SHIT!*

I gasped.

Huge motherfucking Irish boy was apparently a firm believer of the ripping-off-the-band-aid theory.

"I'm sorry, baby," he said in a really strained voice.

Sorry? Yeah, me, too.

Okay, not really, because maybe... no, *probably*... it was for the best. Yeah. But shit!

Again I was tensing every muscle in my body, and a part of me knew that the tensing wasn't making things easier on him, but fuck, who cares? Right now, this shit hurts like a motherfucker.

I think I cursed loudly.

After a while, though, I felt other stuff.

I felt the kisses again. The soft, hot, kisses.

His thumb stroking and rubbing my clit.

The sweet words.

His warm body against mine.

Deep breaths.

Then, I felt him *pulse* inside of me.

It made me tense for a whole other reason, and the pain subsided slowly, was replaced by a dull ache... and slowly but surely, he started moving inside of me. More throbbing. Christ, everytime I felt him throb inside my pussy, something rushed through my body.

Something that felt good.

"That's it, sweetheart," he breathed against my forehead. "I can feel you relax... *ungh*... just... just feel me, Bella."

His words made me relax further.

My eyes stayed shut, but I wrapped my arms around him again. Slowly. Slowly my hands traced his muscular forearms, up, up... his biceps... shoulders... up, more... and I reached his neck, his hair. Soft, damp. And he moved in me. Sensually. Then he kissed me. Mouth on mouth. Pushed

his tongue into my mouth. Labored breaths exchanged. Noses touching, foreheads, too.

Warmth.

Pleasure.

I shivered, my skin broke out in goose flesh.

"So good," I breathed out against his lips. "So, so, so good..."

"Fucking amazing," he mumbled back before deepening our kiss.

Our bodies, slick with a light sheen of sweat, moved together, and I realized that my body was spurring him on. I was meeting his every thrust, and everytime our hips met, he grunted quietly – a sound that made me wetter and wetter by the second.

My hands wandered down, and with my eyes closed I could picture it. My hands. The way they traced over his spine, the way his muscles tensed as I made my way down... to his ass.

"Bella," he growled quietly.

His next thrust was harder, and I moaned out in nothing but pleasure.

Edward cursed and sped up his movements, and I felt everything. Every inch of his cock stretching me, moving inside of me.

More.

Deeper.

"I'm too fucking close," he grunted.

"Come," I whimpered. "Please, Whistler..."



I heard him shout out an impressive line of profanities as he delivered a few final thrusts. Then he came deep inside of me.

I clenched my muscles around him, wanting to prolong his orgasm.

He spat out a quiet curse in a strained voice.

Then it was over. He collapsed on top of me, breathing heavily, and I was on the same page.

"Are you okay, Bella?" he panted.

I couldn't answer verbally, still too out of breath. So, I held up a finger, silently telling him to fucking wait a second.

"Are you in pain?" he asked then, and now there was worry in his voice.

I managed to shake my head in the negative because no, I'm not in pain. There's an ache but it's a goddamn good one.

*So good*, I grinned internally. I'd grin for real if I could command my body to you know, move. But no can do. Not yet.

"You killed me, Whistler," I whined after a while.

That earned me a breathless chuckle from Irish boy before he told me that I had killed him, too.

Nice.

Then he sorta resurrected me by trailing his fingers along my collarbone and chest, and it made me shiver and hum.

I was in love. In love with all of this. Edward. Our marriage. This night. Our moment right now.

This life.

"I love you," I hummed sleepily, unable to open my eyes.

'Cause I was so sleepy.

This day... so loooong.

"I love you more, my Bella," he murmured as he dragged my dead body to his dead body. Well, he couldn't be dead cause me dragged me and all, but whatever.

"We can shower in the morning, right?" I mumbled half-asleep.

I didn't hear his answer. Just felt him hold me closely.

## 21 – COSTA RICA IN NOVEMBER

### BPOV



"Take both, baby," Edward chuckled.

I was undecided. I didn't need both. Only one, but a part of me wasn't a Cullen. Not in that sense anyway. 'Take both' was the answer to everything if there were two things to choose from.

In this case, I was choosing between a black bikini and a turquoise, and sure, I can see Whistler's point. 'Cause he loves to see me in skimpy stuff. I don't mind showing him, mind you, I really don't. Hence buying a new bikini, because he's already seen me in the seven I'd packed so far.

Edward took me to Costa Rica for our honeymoon, and that's where we are. Specifically, we're in a store. To buy a bikini.

Three weeks of nothing but me and Whistler. Well, we've already been here for two weeks, but we still have another to go before returning home. Neither of us is eager.

"Or what about this one," I heard him ask, and I spun around to see him waggling his eyebrows.

My husband is fucking hot.



We're actually matching a little. Him in beige cargo shorts, a light blue shirt, beige sneakers, and a beige baseball cap. And me in a beige, draped dress, a light blue bag, and light blue sandals. Oh, and I'm wearing a fucking fedora! Yeah. It's beige and cool.

COSTA RICA



But back to the bikini he was holding up.

It was barely there in dark blue.

Irish boy thought he was being funny, but he should know by know how damn wanton he's made me.

"Okay," I said, snatching the barely-there piece from him before walking towards the register.

I heard him mumble under his breath, "minx."

I blame him.

Since our wedding night, it has been on.

After insisting that I rested for two days, stating that I was too sore, which I admit I was, he finally caved. Maybe because I straddled him naked after dinner one night. But seriously, I'd fucking had it with his fucking-chivalry. I wanted my husband because he's woken some damn hussy in me, and now she won't shut up. Not that Irish boy is complaining because damn, the libido he has... He's insatiable. Works very well for me.

He's still very careful with me but I'm working on it, and I know he wants more, but it's the damn gentleman in him putting a stop to it. Like I said, I'm working on it. That's not to say he doesn't satisfy me because my God, he does. Everytime. All the time.

I just want him to lose it. To go insane.

As I reached the register, I felt Whistler snake his arm around my waist, also placing his credit card on the disk before I could reach for mine.

"Why give me a credit card if I'll never use it?" I hummed, leaning back against his chest as he kissed the top of my head.

"You'll use it if I'm not around," he murmured.

The saleslady wrapped up my purchase, sent Edward a not so subtle smile, and then we left the store.

I flipped her off as we went.

Mine, bitch.

"Now, how's that fair, Mrs. Cullen?" Whistler asked me, draping an arm around my shoulders as he flashed me a very amused grin. "Some byrd throws me a smile, you flip her off. Some motherfucker flirts with you, I send him a glare, and you get pissed off."

Ah, he had to bring that up.

Our first night here, the dude in the reception tried to flirt with me as he checked us into our bungalow.

"I didn't get pissed off for the glare you sent him," I huffed, playfully smacking him in the chest. "I got annoyed 'cause you got the poor dude fired."

He did.

Once we'd reached our bungalow, he'd called front desk, demanding to speak to the man in charge, and after telling him about the man trying to flirt with Edward's wife, the flirty dude got fired on the spot.

"He stared at my wife," he muttered. "Fucker had no right. You're mine."

Yeah, during the past two weeks, I've noticed that Whistler's quite possessive.

Thing is, I've noticed I'm quite possessive myself.

Whistler's mine.

"I love you," I said, smiling up at him.

He smiled, too, dipped down and kissed me. "I love you, too, princess."

He calls me princess *all* the time now.

I love it.

Makes me feel even more cherished than I already did.

"So, dinner?" he asked, dropping a kiss on my temple before straightening, 'cause he's so damn tall. "Or more shopping?"

"Dinner," I replied with a firm nod. "I'm fucking starving."

"Perfect." he grinned. "I know just the place."

I couldn't help but laugh. "And you know just the place because...?"

Smiling sheepishly, he just shrugged.

Truth is, Alec's been texting Edward about tourist spots in Costa Rica, and I had caught Edward as he'd texted Alec from the bathroom. Yeah, he said

he was gonna brush his teeth but when he brought his phone with him, I grew suspicious. At first I thought he was covering because it was work, but when he showed me the text, I burst out in laughter. So, Alec's been our guide without him being here.

Let's just say that Alec is a sly fuck on Google.

"Hey, he found us some cool stuff here," Whistler chuckled.

True.

There's been scuba diving, rock climbing, jet skiing, hiking, romantic dates, and so much good food. Not all thanks to our little dude because my husband is perfection when it comes to the romantic gestures, but Alec's been the one scouting out many locations. I swear he's got too much free time on his hands.

"It's been an amazing honeymoon," I agreed, leaning into him. "With an amazing husband."

He stopped, effectively halting me, too, since I'd been so close.

"My amazing wife," he replied quietly, giving me that look. The look that turned me into mush, and he cupped my face tenderly, kissed me lovingly... Shit, the looks he gave me could very well knock me up, I swear.

"Thank you," he mumbled against my mouth.

I refrained from rolling my eyes at him, and instead I pushed my tongue into his mouth, shutting him the fuck up.

He'd thanked me for a lifetime ever since we got married, all because I wanted him.

Like he didn't know how easy it was to want him.

Actually, he didn't.

I *have* told him.

We've talked a lot here, and I've told him about all the conflicting emotions running through me since the first time I'd met him. I've confided in him, told him everything, but he still can't believe I love him. I mean, he does believe it, me, and he knows I'm *in* love with him. He told me he can feel it, but he also said he's waiting for me to wake him up and tell him it's all a dream.

I fell even more in love with him after that.

And I told him as much.

He'd responded by kissing me into oblivion, and then... well, it's our honeymoon. What do you think we did after that?

"Or room service?" he groaned quietly in my mouth, pulling me closer to him, showing me just how much we needed to leave the sidewalk.

"Room service," I agreed breathlessly.

Then we hurried back to our hotel.

\*O\*O\*O\*

"What do you wanna do now?" He hummed.

I wanna keep doing what we're doing.

After sharing an amazing dinner on our little patio, we both crashed in bed, 'cause the food was just that good.

But then I thought about it and maybe we should work off the calories. Right?



"I'm gonna take a shower," I told him, getting out of bed. "Wanna join me?"

"Fuck, yes," was his reply and then we raced to the bathroom.

I totally won.

"Let's get you out of this," he murmured huskily, pulling at the strings of my bikini. "Two weeks of you walking around in a bikini isn't the easiest to ignore, princess."

He walked me backward, into the shower, and I grinned as I pressed my lips against his chest.

"*Have* you ignored it?" I asked teasingly, letting my hands slide up his muscular arms. "Because in that case... who have I been with for the past two weeks?"

He growled against my neck and let my bikini top fall to the floor.

I whimpered, feeling his body press harder against mine.

"Mine," he whispered softly, and I shivered at his words. "Only mine, Bella... only me."

My eyes closed.

"Only yours," I moaned quietly.

I felt him.

His hard body. Muscular and defined.

His hard cock against my stomach.

Then there was the magic of his fingers.

Pushing my bikini bottom down... before, yes... his middle finger, teasing... stroking, spreading my juices around... yesss... parting me. And his breath. Hot and ragged against my neck, his body heat, his... everything. He cupped me. My pussy, and kept teasing my slit with his middle finger. Not enough.

My fingers dug into his shoulder blades.

He groaned. "Bella..."

Slowly his finger entered me. I was so slick.

"More," I whimpered, bucking into his hand.

And I felt him. Felt his mouth curve into a smile, now against my collarbone.

Before I could do, well, anything, he sunk to his knees before me.

"Give me your legs, baby," he moaned as he nuzzled my pussy.

Threading my fingers through his hair, I obeyed and hitched a leg over his shoulder, but Irish boy *meant* plural.

"The other one, too."

My breathing hitched, and my mouth popped open.

Was he serious?

"The other one, too," he repeated, looking up at me. "I want you riding my face. I won't drop you."

I gulped as I felt his large hands cover my ass, and before I knew it, my other leg was hitched over his shoulder. I was literally straddling his face as my back was supported by the wall.

"Delicious motherfucking pussy," he groaned against... mentioned pussy.

Coherency – gone.

His tongue parted my slick folds, licking me in one stroke.

His eyes were closed as if he was savoring me.

I moaned, feeling him suck my clit into his mouth, and it was... fuck... hot, wet... his tongue flicking. His sexy five o'clock shadow tickling, scratching my folds, and God, his hands... kneading my ass... Firmly. I loved his hands. His fingers. And shit, his mouth, tongue... oh, *God*... Harder now, he sucked on my clit harder, moaning against my soaked flesh.

"Fuck," he whispered. "Play with your clit for me, princess."

Then...

"Christ!" I gasped, bucking against him as his tongue slid down, *entering* me.

"You like that, baby girl?" he moaned. "You like it when I fuck you with my tongue?"

"Yeeesss," I moaned out, feeling my eyes roll back, and my head followed. Against the wall, my head rested, and I just felt. I felt everything. His tongue entering my pussy, licking my inner walls. Slowly and so sensually he fucking drank from me, moaning and groaning against me, and I gave him more. It was out of my control anyway. My pussy coated his tongue, his lips, chin... Christ... magic mouth...

He moaned loudly and sucked on my flesh.

With a shaky hand, I brought two fingers to my clit.

"Damn," he mumbled. "That's it, Bella... play with your pussy for me...  
*fuck...*"

My breathing became labored and I felt my inner walls constricting around his tongue. He noticed, too, of course, and fucked me eagerly. Sucking, lapping, kissing, nibbling, and licking. Harder and more. Earnestly.

I panted.

My legs shook.

"I can feel you, princess," he whispered. "Come in my mouth. Come in my mouth and then I'll fuck you. I'll fuck you so good, baby."

Fuck!

Everything inside me tensed. I stopped breathing and the orgasm ripped through me forcefully.

I heard him snarl.

I pulsed.

The pleasure surged through me, washing over me, pulling me under... I wasn't aware of much. Spots filled my vision and I was completely out of it.

Gasping.

Still coming.

"Fuck, I need to be inside you," I heard him groan.

I was still gone but I felt him move me, lowering my legs. I couldn't stand so I was glad that he held me up.

He put my arms around his shoulder and my head fell forward, resting on his shoulder as he wrapped my legs around his waist... then his cock. God, his cock. Right *there*.

Our scents, they mingled. I could smell him. I could smell myself.

I needed more but wasn't sure I could handle it.

"I need to fuck you, princess," he moaned in my ear. "Please let me fuck you."

I shivered.

Finally.

Fire.

"Edward..." I gasped out. I was goddamn *delirious*. "Yes... *please*."

That was all he needed, and he pushed himself inside me with force and speed, burying himself to the hilt.

He stretched me fiercely.

It was a sting that made me feel more alive.

"*Goddamnit!*" he hissed.

He had to hold me up completely. I was still spent from my orgasm, my legs were damn jelly, and my mind was jumbled and all over the place. The only thing I could really focus on was the present. His cock pounding into me like never before. His face buried in the crook of my neck. Mouth latched onto my neck, sucking, kissing, nibbling. Moans and grunts. Hands and arms holding me up...

Thrust, grunt.

Thrust, grunt.

Thrust, grunt.

Harder.

I was starting to wake up, starting to feel that urge again. The urge to cling onto him and feel more. The urge to... to... clamp down.

“Christ, you’re so fucking *tight*,” he groaned.

My heels dug into his ass, and I realized I had my strength back. More, I needed more. Harder and deeper. Nothing was enough.

I was insane because my pussy was hurting. Not much but it stung to be so fucking stretched, so... fucked. And I wanted more. Needed it. Desperately. Yes, insane.

“Don’t hold back, baby,” I pleaded breathlessly. “Please...”

I knew he was. I knew he was still holding back.

I didn’t want him to.

My pussy will regret it later but I don’t care right now.

“Don’t fucking beg me, Bella,” he warned, stilling his movements. “I only have so much restraint.”

His expression was dangerous. Eyes dark, filled with lust, consumed by it. Need. Fire. His jaw was tensed, teeth gritting together.

So... I uh... Yeah, I begged some more.

“Please,” I whispered, leaning in to kiss his jaw as I clamped down on his cock that was still buried in me. “Please... fuck... your... wife.”

He went rigid.

Everything around us stilled.

But his cock... his cock pulsed inside me.

He wanted this, too.

And then he leaned in.

Mouth close to my ear.

Hot breath.

Lips touching... as he whispered.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you, princess.”

My breathing hitched at his husky whisper, and slowly he pulled out of me, to which I steeled myself.

Eyes locked. Mine were wide, his were fierce.

He smirked. Cockily.

Then... he slammed into me.

I choked.

I felt him everywhere.

“This is what you wanted, baby?” he gritted out.

He didn’t wait for an answer.

Instead he started fucking me in earnest. Hard and deep. Fast. Harder. Deeper. Faster.

More.

It hurt...

It hurt so good.

I clung to him, hanging on for dear life, and he fucked me.

I felt everything.

Crashing his mouth against mine, he kissed me hard, pushing his tongue into my mouth, and it was more than I had ever felt before. More than passion, more than pleasurable. Yes, this was more. It was thrilling. The feelings inside me spiked and it didn't matter if it stung, I met his thrusts anyways, needing to feel it all.

"Fuck, Bella," he moaned in my mouth. "You feel it, don't you? Fuck, I know you do."

"Yes!" I cried out and my head fell back. "Everything..."

"Everything," he mumbled.

I felt it all. I wanted it all. The thrill, the love, the passion, the fire... the danger... and Whistler gave it to me. Fucking finally, he gave me everything. He gave it all.

I felt the build-up. The intensity.

His cock pounding into me.

My pussy constricting around him, soaking him, sucking him in.

"Come on," he groaned. "Give it to me."

I gasped.



Everything tensed.

He grunted.

I exploded.

It was more. So powerful. So consuming. Every fiber of my being came alive as I came. Came hard. Constricting and convulsing, pulsing around his thick cock, and he followed, tensing and thrusting jerkily. Heat. So much heat.

I couldn't breathe.

Shit.

Shakily, Edward lowered us to the floor, and I knew he was on the same page. Completely fucking spent.

"Fucking hell," he panted.

I shivered and managed a small nod against his chest.

I could still feel him twitch inside me.

Our chests heaved, our bodies slick with a light sheen of sweat.

I was spent.

Sated.

So *incredibly* satisfied.

Now I could breathe.

I smiled.

I was... mush.

"You okay?" he whispered, kissing my neck softly.

I hummed. I was more than okay.

Fucking perfect.

"Thank you for letting go," I murmured, shivering violently as he caressed my sides.

He chuckled quietly. "Never thought I'd be lucky enough to meet my match."

But you did, Irish boy. You did.

.

.

.

"Is it still shower sex if the shower wasn't on?" I giggled sleepily.

"Fuck yeah," he laughed through his nose. "And please don't giggle, princess, 'cause I'm still inside you and I can fucking feel it."

I giggled more but stopped abruptly when I felt him throb inside me.

I've created a monster.

Can I fist pump the air?

\*O\*O\*O\*

Fucking shit.

I knew I would feel sore but... fucking shit, I can't walk.

Yesterday's fuck-scapades in the shower had left its mark, if you know what I mean, and no fabric was now allowed near my poor cooch. Which is why I'm wearing a short jean skirt with my bikini top. Need the fresh air, damnit.

Sipping my drink, I sat down in the lounge and pushed my sunglasses down my nose a little to see Whistler clearer.

We have a private pool. Just saying. It comes with the private bungalow. A private pool. Oh, and we're on the beach. Spectacular resort if I may say so. And I may.

"Something wrong?" he asked, coming out of the pool.

Pussy-destroyer.

And boy was he aware. It was a mixture of cocky smugness and concern in the looks he gave me.

Let me paint you a picture by the way.

My husband is right now walking towards me. Water running down his muscular body. He's only wearing black swim trunks. They hang low on his hips, showing the perfect 'v' on his abdomen, and don't even get me started on his abs. Defined. Six... no, wait... eight of them. Then his chest. G'damn. Arms, muscular, yes, very. And he's tanned. Fucking tanned.

I'm quite tanned, too, thank you very much, but he's fucking glorious.

Oh, and let's not forget his muscular back where there's a fuckhot tattoo across his shoulder blades. You know the one. The one with 'Cullen' in a Celtic font. Yeah, that one. *Ungh* is all I'm saying.

"Hummm?" I uttered as he blocked the sun.

Very fine by me cause that way, I can ogle him without squinting through my lashes.

"You look a little hungry, princess," he chuckled, leaning down to kiss me.

Ah, yes. Hungry for Irish.

He's created a monster, too.

I shivered as drops of water drizzled over my heated body, and even more when his lips met mine.

"Love you," he hummed, pecking me a few times.

"Love you, too," I sighed contentedly.

I was *this* close to deepening the kiss, but... a sobering ringtone interrupted.

Edward's work-phone.

"Fuck," he mumbled under his breath, giving me an apologetic look before heading inside.

With another sigh, I leaned back in my chair again, dead set on soaking up as much sun as possible before we head home.

We still have six more days but then it's Seattle and cold waiting for us.

*Until Italy in a month*, I thought a bit smugly.

Couldn't fucking wait.

My thoughts were interrupted by Edward's not so nice tone.

Glancing over my shoulder, I watched him through the window, pacing in our bedroom, arms gesturing, a smoke between his fingers. His face was

serious. Really fucking serious. But I couldn't understand a word cause he was yelling in Irish, which made me believe he was talking to Chicago-people.

Then he stopped pacing. Everything stopped.

Something made him look at me.

I stared back, worried now.

He looked... fucking devastated.

I heard him mentioning Alec and Nessa.

My stomach dropped and Edward disconnected the call.

He came out.

There was fury and worry in his features.

"Ed's been kidnapped."

## **22 – SEATTLE IN DECEMBER**

### **BPOV**



Hours after Edward had hung up the phone, we were on our way home.

Dressed in jeans, chucks, and a hoodie, I almost felt like my old self. The only difference was the price tags. Even Edward looked... well, actually, he looked like another person. Still hot as hell but there was an edge to him now. Wearing baggy cargo pants in army green, a black hoodie, and Dr. Martens boots he looked... dangerous. Dangerously sexy, too.

Shit had hit the fucking fan in Chicago, and as Edward and I boarded the private jet, he was on the phone again, this time with Carlisle. Carlisle in turn was heading to Chicago with Esme, and we were told that Alec and Nessa were on their way to Seattle. Everything was a damn mess and the only thing that was clear was that Emmett and Edward were now in charge of the Cullen branch while Carlisle was taking over in Chicago. Only until we knew more and could make better decisions, but yes, Carlisle was the next man in line.

It scared me.

I know he won't make decisions like Ed makes them. Carlisle's not like that, and the *business* will be put on hold... so to speak. But he will still be there to oversee... until we know more.

"Make sure Emmett takes Alec and Nessa to safety," I heard Edward say to Carlisle.

It was weird because they changed. One minute they spoke Irish and one minute they spoke English. The weird thing was that Edward didn't keep anything from me. As soon as the phone call ended, he would fill me in, so the Irish didn't really make sense but maybe it came natural... I don't know.

He'd filled me in, though, after every call so far and there had been many between the hotel and the airport. And I know my husband. He isn't lying to me. He's being upfront about everything.

"I'm gonna call Jenks as soon as I end this," Edward said as he sat down in his seat. "Yes... I think he has. I filled Bella's in before the wedding."

I didn't ask, knowing he'd tell me soon.

Before taking my seat, I walked over to the bar cabinet and grabbed a bottle of beer to Whistler and a Bacardi Breezer to me.

"Thank you," he mouthed as I handed him the beer.

I winked and sat down on the couch on the other side of the aisle.

Then when he pulled up his mini laptop from his carry-on, I figured I might as well call Rose. Maybe she could fill me in.

Apart from being worried as hell over Alec and Nessa, I was calm, and as I scrolled down to Rose's number on my white phone, I realized that there was much to get used to with this lifestyle, but so far I was embracing it all. Even found a certain thrill in it. Perhaps that's considered terrible of me. Most likely. But it's true nonetheless.

"*Rosalie*," she answered.

"Hey, it's me," I replied before taking a sip of my Bacardi.

*"Oh, thank God you called," she breathed out. "Shit is fucking insane here, B."*

"Where are you?" I asked, sitting up straighter. "Are you in Forks?"

*"We're about to leave. I spent the day with Tanya and Garrett. Emmett's picking me up in half an hour and then we're off to Seattle to pick up Nessa and Alec."*

"Where's Em?" I frowned, looking over at Edward but was busy on the phone. "I mean, who are you with now?"

*"Getting some papers fixed or something like that," she said. "And I'm at the Cullens with Greg."*

I breathed out in relief. But knowing that her security guy was with her certainly made it easier to breathe.

"Okay, good." I nodded even though she couldn't see me. "So... can you fill me in? The only thing I or... we know is that Ed was taken from the airport in Chicago."

Edward most likely knew more now from Carlisle but I was a bit impatient.

*"Yeah," she sighed. "The Masens were on their way to us... for the pre-wedding dinners, and Ed was going out for a smoke or something like that, and he didn't return. His bodyguard was found shot outside the airport. They're pretty sure it's the Italians."*

Holy shit.

"But... but... fuck, there's gotta be footage, right? I mean, airports are nothing but security for Christ's sake."



*"Yes, everything was caught on camera, but they still got away with Ed. The men taking him wore masks, though, so there hasn't been anyone to identify."*

I... don't really know what to say.

"Is it all over the news yet?" I asked, fiddling with the label on my bottle. "Jesus, Alec and Nessa must be freaking out."

*"That's the thing. It's not on the news. Well, it is, but the official story is that the footage from airport security got lost. So there's no proof. There's just a rumor going around stating that Ed Masen has been kidnapped."*

"What?" I asked, confused. But then it dawned on me. Christ, they work fast. "Who has the footage then?"

*"What the fuck am I supposed to call it?" she chuckled humorlessly. "I suppose I can say our side has it. Emmett told me that the Masens have a protocol to follow in case of kidnappings."*

Again I nodded even though she couldn't see me.

Edward had told me about that protocol on the way to the airport, and the first step was to clean up. Nothing was allowed to leak out to the public, and Ed had men on his payroll for just that – cleaning up. So, I suppose they got started immediately, most likely bribing... or worse... to get their hands on the security tapes.

After cleaning up comes securing, and I know that's what Carlisle's doing right now – trying to find out where 'enemies' can be, and how they've entered the country. Also, of course, where they are headed. It's all about monitoring and planning at this stage.

"Edward told me about it," I muttered. "Alright, what else? What's gonna happen now?"

*"After we've picked Nessa and Alec up in Seattle, we're going to Emmett's estate on Bainbridge Island, and then when you arrive, we'll meet up at your place, and Alec will stay with you. Emmett's called in people from Chicago, and they will be here later."*

People – security.

Okay. Shit. So much.

I haven't even seen 'our' place. Edward's estate is on the same street as Emmett's but we haven't been there yet, Rose and I.

"And the wedding?" I asked, knowing that they're supposed to get married in less than two weeks. "Is that postponed now?"

*"No. Emmett said that it would look suspicious if we postponed it, but there is however a chance that we'll get married sooner. Tanya's working on it with the planners."*

It was a lot to take in. A lot to process.

"Why would you get married sooner, though?"

"I can answer that, princess," I heard Edward say then, and I looked up to see him turn his chair in my direction. He wasn't on the phone anymore.

I nodded to him. "Rose, Edward's off the phone now. We'll see you soon, yea?"

*"Absolutely. Love you."*

"Love you, too."

After disconnecting the call, I pocketed my phone and headed across the narrow aisle, cause I needed closeness, damnit.

"Rose okay?" he murmured as I sat down in his lap.

"Yeah, I think so," I sighed, snuggling closer to him. "She says it's crazy, though."

"It is," he replied, nodding. "And I have some things to discuss with you."

He wasn't Irish boy anymore.

It was business.

"Okay," I said warily, sitting up to face him.

He didn't waste time. "The reason for Em and Rose getting married sooner is because only husbands and fathers can sign the papers for full consent."

I frowned.

I knew about full consent of course. It was the paper that gave girls freedom. Many fathers signed those nowadays but usually people from bigger cities. People that wanted to move forward in the world or whatever. And this was why so many men sought out girls in smaller towns because that's where traditions lingered. They... we, were the ones not really following trends. It was still the law in America for fathers or husbands to be in charge, but the world was changing, and many wanted equality. Most countries in Europe had changed their laws for instance but America was still strict about it.

Full consent.

Does that mean Edward and Emmett have signed those papers for me and Rose?

Is that why Edward's all business right now?

That paper. That paper would give me my rights. My driver's license would get a stamp, stating that I'm my own person. No one controls me. I would be able to travel wherever, do whatever, without needing permission.

It would also give me the right to divorce Edward.

So, again I wonder; is this why he's all business now? Because he knows that that piece of paper might end our marriage if I say so?

I stared at him, noticing the blank expression. The hard exterior. Eyes void of emotion.

It was clear as day.

"You're giving us full consent?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"We are, yes." He nodded firmly. "We need you and Rose to be able to travel without us just in case something happens, and we don't have time for all the paperwork when it comes to temporary consent since we'll travel so often. It would be too much work to get you pre-approved for each time we leave the state. Full consent is the only thing that makes sense."

I nodded thoughtfully, choosing my words.

"This means I can divorce you," I stated, raising an eyebrow.

He swallowed hard. "Yes."

I nodded. Again.

"Well... it's a good thing there's something topping that piece of paper then," I said.

He frowned, but was otherwise completely rigid. "What would that be? Nothing tops that paper, Bella. It will give you your full rights."

I shrugged. "To *me* there's something topping it."

"What?"

"My wedding vows, stupid!" I cried out. "I take my vows seriously because I believe in them."

Irish boy exhaled sharply and relaxed.

Irish boy closed his eyes.

"Fucking shit, you scared me, princess," he said quietly, shaking his head a little.

"It shouldn't have," I told him, hooking a finger under his chin to make him face me. "I've told you I love you. I've told you I'm yours. I wouldn't give myself to you so wholeheartedly just because I had to marry you."

"You are the reason I'm yours," I continued. "If I hadn't fallen for you, sure, I would still be yours, but not all of me. You'd own me but you wouldn't have all of me. You know that."

With a heavy breath, he relaxed further and brought me closer to him.

"I know," he sighed, resting his forehead against mine. "And you're right. I should've trusted your words. You haven't given me reason to believe otherwise."

I nudged him upwards, silently telling him to fucking kiss me already.

He did. With a smile.

"I love you." He hummed, capturing my bottom lip between his. "With all my heart."

"I love you, too, Whistler," I mumbled as my arms went around his neck. "We belong together."

He grinned.

Irish boy was back.

"I gotta say, princess," he sighed, pecking me. "I love being your Whistler."

"Oh, and Irish boy," he chuckled. "That's what you call me in your sleep."

Ah, *shit*.

"Maybe it's Emmett," I teased, hiding my blush by kissing his neck.

"Sure, baby," he laughed quietly.

\*O\*O\*O\*

"I thought we were going to Seattle," I said, looking out the window as we descended.

I recognized the tiny airport immediately as we got close.

Port Angeles.

"We're driving from here," Whistler responded, brushing his lips over my knuckles. "Em ordered a car for us."

"Why?"

"Safer," he said quietly. "We don't have Sea-Tac monitored, so we don't know how safe it is there."

Ah.

Later when we had deplaned, I noticed how Edward tucked me into his side, towering over me in a more protective manner, and I wondered just how dangerous this was. Were we in danger? Was Edward in danger?

Carlisle and Esme? Alec and Nessa? Or was it just Ed they were after, and this was just Edward taking precautions?

"Mr. Cullen," I heard a familiar voice say closely.

Conn.

"Any news?" Edward asked, skipping the greeting as the three of us headed for the exit.

"Your father has people monitoring every major airport on the East Coast – in case they land or middle land there," Conn replied. "He also ordered in flight-service, and we should know if a private jet lands anywhere near Washington."

"Is the state secured?" Edward continued, not missing a beat. "I don't want the Avellinos near Seattle."

"Within the hour it will be. Mr. Denali and your brother are working on it."

"Make sure the ferry from Vancouver is a part of that," Edward pointed out, and then we reached a car... to which Edward made a sound of disgust.

"Something wrong?" I asked.

"Yeah, you could say that," he muttered, opening the door for me. "Conn, is this what my brother ordered?"

"Code Yellow," was Conn's reply before he nodded in goodbye and took off in a red truck.

It was weird.

Where was his SUV?

"Fuck code Yellow," Edward grumbled, closing my door.

Don't worry, I don't understand either.

Once Edward had loaded our carry-ons into the trunk, he took his seat behind the wheel, slammed the door shut and put the car in reverse. He was still muttering and cursing under his breath as we sped off.

"Mind explaining the pms-ing?" I asked, turning in my seat to face him better.

Edward huffed and kept his eyes on the road. "Fucking piece of shit Volvo. Seriously, who drives this crap?"

Oh, good God. Yeah, I rolled my eyes.

"Anyway," I sighed, "can you explain this code-thing?"

"Sure," he muttered, still looking annoyed as shit over a simple thing as a fucking car. "There are five codes – Green, Blue, Yellow, Red, and Black. Green's the everyday level when things are good. Blue's when we've picked up something that needs monitoring. It's basically Green but entails researching, monitoring, and preparing."

After lighting up a smoke, he rolled down the window a little, took a deep drag that seemed to relax him, and continued.

I watched and listened, fascinated with both what he said and how he looked. He was in one of his many elements.

Sexy.

"Then there's Yellow," he said, giving me a sideways glance before facing the road again. "And that's where we are now. Yellow's more about preparing for Red, which is the next code. It's about precautions, securing and shutting off. We need to be inconspicuous, hence the fucking sad excuses for cars. They suck but they blend in."



I nodded in understanding, feeling a smile creep up at the sight of him. But he was undeniably cute when he bitched about his cars, and evidently Volvo wasn't for him.

After another drag, he went on. "Yellow's also about getting loved ones to safety."

My eyebrows shot up, and a second later I lit my own damn smoke 'cause the tone of his voice was suddenly not so matter-of-factly. It was a mixture of concern, apprehension, and resignation. He knew what was going to happen and I was about to hear about it.

"If everything goes accordingly, Emmett and Rose should be married within the next couple of days, and... then..." He took another pull from his cigarette. "Then we need to get you out of the country."

His words echoed.

*We need to get you out of the country. You out of the country. You, you, you...*

Didn't that include him?

"Why?" I asked in a small voice.

"Because the Avellinos are probably already here," he said flatly. "Like Conn said, our people are on their way to the borders, but there isn't much we can do if they're already here, and considering the fact that Caius was here before the wedding lead us to believe they've planned this for a while."

Christ.

My hands shook as I took a drag, and everything dawned on me.

This wasn't about stealing cars.

This was much more and now we've been dragged into the middle of a fucking vendetta between two brothers. Question is, how much will this affect Edward and Emmett?

"Then when we have something to go on, when we have someone to pursue," Edward said quietly, "we enter code Red, and that's charging."

"No," I said immediately, shaking my head. "No fucking way, Whistler. You are not putting yourself in danger. Not a chance in hell."

"Don't worry, princess, it's not like that," he assured, gripping the wheel tighter and took my hand with his free one. "Emmett and I aren't like that. We will only be security for our wives as well as Alec, Nessa, and any others that are being ordered to leave the country. My guess is that Kate and Irina will be two of those. Most likely Aunt Tanya as well."

I studied him, read him, hoping this meant he was going with us.

"So, you and Em are coming with us?" I asked. I wished I could state it, demand it, but I knew I couldn't. It wasn't up to me, and it wasn't up to Edward either.

"We'll get you out," he replied, squeezing my hand in reassurance. "And we'll stay with you as long as we're not needed by Dad. But remember that the Cullens are different, Bella. Code Yellow is for precautions only, and you have nothing to worry about. I promise I'll keep you safe."

He didn't fucking get it.

"It's not my safety I worry about," I told him. "It's yours, Edward."

"Nothing's going to change," he countered gently. "That's not just because Emmett and I say so, it's also Masen rules. Business has to continue as usual in order to keep suspicion at a minimum. We're still going to Rome,

and we still have our orders, fuck, we have plenty of them. We just need to make sure everyone is safe before we continue.”

Oh. Okay. Good. Shit. Deep breaths.

“But... there is something you should know.”

Uh-oh... It was that voice again. The please-don't-be-mad-at-me-because-there's-nothing-I-can-do. That one.

“What?” I asked, letting his hand go.

He sighed and dragged his fingers through his hair, gave me another sideway glance, and then... “Check the glove compartment.”

Fuck, what now?

I didn't want to, in fear of what I would find out, but... I did it anyway, and...

What the fuck?

“Precaution, princess.”

“Precaution my ass,” I snapped. “It's a fucking gun!”

“Yes,” he replied simply. “We're all armed when it goes beyond code Blue.”

So many things rushed through me, and though there was a small voice in my head screaming 'wow,' there was a louder voice yelling for me to run, run to hide Edward away from this world. I didn't want to leave this life, this world, but I didn't want Whistler hurt, goddamnit. He's my husband, my everything, and now he's going armed? Fuck that. It's wrong.

Dangerous.

I swallowed.

Shaky breaths.

With wide eyes, I watched him reach over and pull the gun out, and then with even wider eyes I saw how he tucked the gun in the waistband of his pants. He did it so easily. Like he knew that gun. Like he knew guns. Like he'd been around them before. Like he was trained. Familiar. Very familiar with them.

I flushed and breathed heavier.

This was... so much. It was bordering too much. Almost.

"You promise you won't put yourself in danger?" I breathed.

I brought the smoke to my lips but realized it had already reached the filter.

I threw it out.

"I promise," he told me. "You have nothing to worry about."

Deep breaths.

Okay.

Shit.

"I trust you," I mumbled.

It was hard to get the words out but they were true nonetheless. I do trust him, and I know... I just know. Yeah, I trust him. But fuck, this is... insane. A lot to take in, and I don't know what I feel about it. So much is running around in my head, and I can't pinpoint every emotion. Rushing, pulling, surging... so much. But I trust him. He's my Whistler. My Irish boy. He knows what he's doing.

“Good,” he replied with a nod. “And don’t worry, we have plenty of security waiting for us at home. It’s not just me and Em. We’re just leading it, we’re not putting ourselves in danger.”

Well, that was a bit contradictive but... okay?

“What do you mean?” I asked.

He kissed my knuckles before he explained, and I found myself relaxing if only a little.

“Since we’ve entered code Yellow, you won’t see them, but our house will be surrounded by guards. Emmett and I, along with Garrett, are in charge of them all, but that’s it. It’s not like we’re going out there, waving the Glocks around to get attention.”

I cocked an eyebrow, silently telling him that he was not funny. Not at all.

“Sorry,” he chuckled. “But seriously, Bella, we have it all under control. This very rarely happens, and though I’ve only experienced code Yellow and Red twice before, we’re trained to do this. We know what we’re doing, okay?”

I sighed, leaned back in my seat and just... let it go. I would just have to trust him. And don’t think for a second I didn’t pick up on the ‘I’ve only been in this situation twice before,’ because I did, but... no, I’ll ask another time. Too much is going on already.

.

.

.

“What’s code Black then?” I asked, remembering he left that one out.

He shrugged. "Code Black is basically running for your life."

Oh. Great. Lovely.

"Super," I muttered.

That earned me a chuckle from my husband and I don't think he wants to know how close I was to punching his fucking balls.

"Relax, baby." He snickered. "Black, yes, it's for hiding when everything else has failed, but we've never seen it. It has never happened in our family, alright?"

Whatever.

\*O\*O\*O\*

A couple of hours later, we drove onto our street.

Mansions. All over.

Edward pointed out Emmett's estate as well as he pointed out the many cars that belonged to the 'security team.' Apparently we were safe.

Yeah.

"Just wanna remind you, princess, now that our family is known for our business that you make sure you don't talk about anything you shouldn't," he murmured. Softly and gently. "We'll obviously have the feds close by from now on."

*Obviously*, I snarked internally.

"I won't talk." I shrugged. "Have no reason to."

"I know you won't," he chuckled quietly. "Just wanted to mention it since they'll try to listen in. They will go far to get evidence."

I nodded in understanding because I understood.

"Alright," he sighed, looking out his window. "This is it, princess. Welcome home."

I looked out, too, and... "Holy shit, Whistler, this is your house?!"

It's... massive.

"*Our* home," he reminded me.

Our home.

Yeah, I'm grinning. Widely.

## **23 – SEATTLE IN DECEMBER**

### **BPOV**

"You haven't said anything in five minutes," Edward chuckled nervously.

I haven't said anything?

That's because I'm a tad overwhelmed. Okay, not a tad. A fuckload.

The mansion is... yeah, I mentioned massive.





And just like all things Cullen, it's out of this world, huge, gorgeous, spectacular, and *homina, homina, homina*, I cannot find my words. Yeah, that's Cullen for ya.

So, I turned to him, gave him a cheeky smile and... two thumbs up.

Irish boy started laughing like crazy, but whatever.

Want me to put it in a nice perspective? Well, Whistler's laughter echoes. That's how big the fucking foyer is.

"It's homina-worthy," I decided with a firm nod.

That earned me that look. The look in question, 'are you insane?'

That one.

So, I explained. "Homina, homina, homina. You know, when you can't find your words for how perfect it is? You're speechless. That's homina."

He kept laughing, put his arm around me and showed me into the kitchen. It took a while to get there. "I love you, princess," he snickered, still so damn amused. "To me, *you're* homina."

Naw. Shucks.

"Ditto, Whistler," I chuckled, pressing my face against his bicep. "You're very homina."

And then the homina Whistler showed me around the homina mansion that was now *our* home.

Starting with the kitchen 'cause Irish boy was starving.

You know, two birds, one stone.

\*O\*O\*O\*

After Edward had given me a tour of the this-is-where-I'll-get-lost-and-die house, we showered and ate. Well, Whistler ate more than he already had, that is, and I heated up a pizza in the microwave. I also made a mental note to get familiar with the kitchen 'cause I can't wait to cook here. Shit, the kitchen's huge, not to mention fully equipped. No, can't wait.

Anyway, once all that was done, I noticed that Edward seemed a bit off.

But when Emmett buzzed in from the gate, I understood.

Edward was off in a flash, and by the time I arrived in the foyer, Edward was hugging a crying Alec to him.

Yeah, I broke.

My eyes welled up from just watching them.

"We'll find him, cub," Edward whispered over and over. "We'll find him."

Nessa wasn't in a better shape, and she was clinging to Emmett who in turn was comforting her every now and then.

Christ, it's their *father*. Ed Masen.

"Hi," I murmured, approaching Rose with a cautious smile. "I missed you."

"Missed you, too," she whispered, and then we hugged.

In a second, our mood had gone from okay to funeral-worthy.

But then again, maybe it was just my ignorant ass. I forgot about Alec and Nessa but Edward sure never did. That much was clear from the way he rushed to let the guys in. So, after kicking myself internally for being so stupid, I got my shit together. I mean, fuck, I'm Whistler's *wife*. I may be young but it's time for me to step up to the plate. Honeymoon's over.

Releasing Rose, I went over to greet Em.

"Hey, Em," I said, smiling softly at both him and Nessa. "Lovely day, huh?" I added, rolling my eyes a little.

"Yeah, isn't it?" he chuckled quietly before hugging me to him. "Good to have you guys back, Bella."

Felt fucking good. Like a big brother.

I nodded and squeezed him once before releasing him, and then I turned to Nessa who hugged me immediately. "Hey, girl," I whispered thickly, not really knowing what to say. But as I noticed that Edward and I were in comfortable clothes and the others, namely Nessa and Alec, were dressed in the fancy stuff, I got an idea. "Hey, sweetie? How about we get you guys into something comfortable, and then we'll raid the fridge for sugary deliciousness."

Nessa chuckled through her tears, nodded timidly, and moved to Emmett again.

Looking over at Edward and Alec, I noticed just how completely broken Alec was, and then there was something in Edward's eyes that I could suddenly identify... because I felt the same. So, when Whistler sent me a grateful smile, I didn't return it because I was too busy getting to know this... new side. Of me. Of this life. And Jesus, all the feelings. But it was so clear. Looking at Edward now, despite his small but grateful smile, there was nothing comforting about his eyes, and then, maybe because I needed more proof than I already had, I chanced a glance at Emmett-Fuck. Same look.

It terrified me because I could practically feel myself being on the page.

Determination. Fury.

I don't know why I can read them so well but I can, and I know Edward and Emmett are comforting themselves by promising justice. As in, *payback*. They're after revenge. But how can I identify myself with that look, or those feelings? I hardly know Ed, and I don't know shit about this world. So, how can I feel this... ugh! Too confusing!

But... I knew Alec and Nessa. That was enough.

With a sigh, I turned back to Emmett because it was too painful to look at Alec. I hated the way he and Nessa were hurting and it only caused up a shitstorm inside me.

"How has Alec been holding up so far?" I asked quietly, only for Emmett to hear.

"Stoic until we arrived here," Em muttered. "We knew this. Alec doesn't let his guard down, or allows himself to be upset if Edward's not there." Then he lowered his voice further. "Ness is the same with me. They were both closed off when Aunt Liz saw them off in Chicago."

Holy shit. So, they're not even fully comfortable around their own *mother*?! That's... that's fucked up.

I was pissed. Like really fucking livid.

Shaking my head to just... *argh*, I don't know, but this was just too messed up, and I wanted to hurt somebody. I mean, seriously, who does that? Isn't top priority keeping your children safe and happy? Why keep them around Chicago if they don't like it? Okay, maybe they like it, but it appears as if they like it here more. Or wherever Emmett and Whistler are.

"Alright." I gathered my thoughts. Well, if the Masens won't prioritize their children, I sure will. "Come on, sweetie," I said to Nessa, holding my hand out for her. "Let's find some comfy pajamas for you, eh?"

Eh? Now I'm embracing the 'eh,' too?

*Jeesh.*

"Thanks," she sniffled, taking my hand.

But that wasn't enough, damnit, so I pulled her closer and draped an arm around her, and then I led us up the stairs toward mine and Edward's bedroom.

Once I opened the door to the walk-in closet, I showed Nessa the dresser full of comfy stuff that Esme, Tanya, Kate, and Irina had bought me before sexy lingerie was on my mind, and she located a tank top and a pair of shorts that weren't too big for her.

"Ready to back downstairs?" I asked softly as she tied her shorts.

"Yea," she whispered, nodding slightly.

My heart broke for her.

Out of instinct, I pulled her close to me again, and then we went back downstairs and followed the voices to the kitchen where I found them all gathered around the kitchen island, and Alec was now also in more comfortable clothes.

Nessa took off for Emmett and Rose, and I only saw Alec who looked up at me with a sad smile. *Fuck.* I just wanna kill those bastards doing this to Alec and Nessa. Because... shit, they're only twelve years old! Give them a fucking break.

"Hey, kiddo," I murmured, wrapping my arms around Alec.

"Hey, Tush," he mumbled. "Did you have a good honeymoon?"

*Shut up, kiddo. Think about yourself for once.*

"Yes," I whispered, feeling my eyes well up again. "Thank you for all the help."

I felt Edward's hand on my back, rubbing soothing circles, and I found myself needing it, so I ordered everyone into the living room where we had this big ass couch. Much comfier than kitchen stools, you know.

A choir of 'yes, ma'am' rang out, and then Rose and I raided the stocked fridge and a few cabinets before we followed the others. We're talking frosting, fruits, sodas, beers, chips, peanuts, cookie dough, and candy bars. Only Irish boy would stock the house with this much crap.

"Nice," Whistler chuckled tiredly, rubbing his hands together as Rose and I entered the living room with our sugary findings. "How did you know I had cravings, princess?" He winked.

I huffed playfully and placed the grease and sugar on the table. "Because you have more cravings than a pregnant woman," I told him, handing him a beer and his beloved Doritos. "You *always* have cravings."

He just shrugged and grinned, patting his lap, silently telling me to get the fuck on it, and I'm not complaining, so I sat my booty down. This was what I needed after all. Closeness and cuddling.

Then we sat there. It was somber but the snacks and comfort worked.

Alec, Emmett, and Edward ate and ate and ate and ate, and Rose and I talked a little about the honeymoon. Obviously Edward piped in with a few comments, mostly with his mouth full, and Emmett wouldn't be Emmett if he didn't add to the conversation with crude remarks. But then Edward pretty much put him in his place by telling Emmett that he was only jealous because he wasn't married yet. That sure shut Emmett up, which made Rose, Nessa, and I giggle.

I sat in Whistler's lap, twisting his hair between my fingers, occasionally making him shiver and hum, and despite the day's events, I felt content. Not surprising. I finally have a family, and I will tend to them. Care for them. Love them.

"So..." Emmett sighed, and just like that the tension shifted.

It wasn't stiff or uncomfortable but it was quite clear that it was time to talk business.

Edward held me in place when I tried to move off him, but when Alec and Nessa declared that they were going to bed, I helped them with whatever they needed. I wasn't all that surprised when Nessa opted to sleep with Alec in his room instead of a guestroom. And this was where Alec became the protective brother. He was nothing short of amazing and I made a mental note to talk to Whistler about him, because this is a time where he needs to be twelve – not an adult.

After saying goodnight to them, I went back to the living room downstairs and sat down next to Edward instead of *on* him, which earned me a scowl, but if I knew my husband... and I do, I know he's gonna light up soon. Though I'm a smoker myself, I don't exactly approve of him smoking indoors, but I know when to pick my battles and this moment isn't perfect for that.

"Shall we?" Edward asked.

I smiled, thankful for such a small thing but it mattered. It mattered that they waited for me to return before the 'talk' started.

"Go ahead," I said. "You two talk, and Rose and I will listen."

"That'll be the day," Edward teased.

"What?"

"When you only listen and don't share your opinions," he laughed.

I punched him in the chest.

He laughed harder and kissed me sloppily all over the face.

Wonderful.

"I'm kidding, baby. You know I love that you're opinionated. Fuck, it's one of the reasons I fell for you. You wouldn't be you without your sass."

Damn Irish boy with his butter-melting smile.

"Yeah, yeah," I muttered, trying to hide my smile. "Get your Dorito-stinking mouth away from me and talk business with your brother."

That earned me the pout.

"Nice try," I said dryly, opening a Mountain Dew. "But seriously, talk to your brother!"

"Are we gonna be like them when we're married?" I heard Em ask Rose. "Cause I don't know if I should run away or get married sooner."

I grinned when Rose buried her face against Em's bicep. "Rose, not that you don't already own Emmett, but I swear to God, once you start doing the nasty-" And then there was a hand clamped over my mouth.

"Bella, if you value your life, you won't ever talk about how pussy-whipped I may or may not be," Edward growled playfully in my ear. "Am I making myself clear, Mrs. Cullen?"

"Abundantly," I laughed behind his hand.

Irish boy's reply to that? He licked my fucking face. "Here's some Dorito-love for ya. Now, be quiet 'cause Emmett and I gotta talk."



After eew-ing and wiping my face on his t-shirt, we sat back with goofy grins and faced Rose and Em.

"You two are so sweet it's nauseating," Rose deadpanned.

Whistler and I just shrugged.

"So, if you're done marking your territory, can we get started?" Em chuckled at Edward.

"Shoot," Edward replied, tipping his beer bottle back.

I did not watch him swallow his beer. I did not watch how his Adam's apple bobbed.

*Ungh.*

Snap out of it, Bella.

Right.

Shaking my head to clear it, I turned back to Emmett and Rose.

Emmett didn't beat around the bush, and the humor was gone.

"There is one thing we could do that would piss Aro off royally," he said with a pointed look directed at Edward. "And I'm pretty fucking sure Dad would agree. Hell, he'd probably be jealous for not being able to help."

I watched Whistler as he leaned forward, letting his elbows rest on his knees, and he understood his brother. That much was clear as a smirk slowly crept forward. It was obviously an idea that he approved of.

"You're talking about Aro's fleet of cars magically disappearing," he chuckled, lighting up a smoke. "Are you serious?"

Rose and I exchanged looks. *Are they serious?*

They're talking about stealing Aro Avellino's cars?

"Fuck yeah." Emmett nodded, lighting up his own smoke. "I mean, not all of them, but definitely his most prized ones. The collectives, the concept cars..." He trailed off.

I watched Edward as he thought about it. Scratching his chin, then leaning back in his seat to run a hand through his hair, thinking, thinking, thinking, and I had a feeling he was thinking about possibilities, ways to go, not just yes or no. This was a yes, and now he moved onto the hows and ifs.

"Where are his garages?" he asked, exhaling through his nose. "Because we want the ones he'd never sell or trade. We want the ones he shows at the Geneva Motor Show."

Emmett nodded with a wicked grin. "Exactly. We want the cars he brags about. He stores them in Milan and London. Except for the concept cars. They're in an underground garage in Copenhagen."

Edward took a drag, brow furrowed from all the thinking, and Rose and I exchanged glances. We read each other. And yes, we're on the same page. It made me curious about how much Emmett had shared with her and when she realized that she's the same as me.

"I bet he stores the Bugatti in Milan." Edward smirked cockily. "And that fucker's mine. Actually, both of his Bugattis are mine. The '37 coupé and the goddamn Veyron. I'll torch them right in front of his fucking face."

Humhuh?

"Wait, what?" I asked incredulously. "You're going to steal cars and then destroy them?"

And...

Uh, no. "No, Edward," I said, shaking my head. "You're not going to let Aro know that you're stealing his fucking cars! That's just sooo stupid! He'll come after you!"

"That's not what he meant, Bella," Em chuckled. I shot him a glare. "Wait, I'm just saying that by torching, he's not actually going to be there. Aro will see his cars go up in flames because he fucking deserves it, but it's not like Edward and I are going to be there to light the match so to speak."

Oh.

*Oh.*

Okay.

"Proceed," I said calmly.

Leaning in very close, Edward whispered in my ear. "Just sit back and listen?"

I punched him in the chest again.

"Ow, fucking shit," he coughed through his laughter. "Damn, you've got strength."

I swelled with pride, 'cause yeah I do.

Don't mess with me.

"Aaanyway," Em chuckled. "To answer your other question, Bella; we can't keep Aro's cars or even sell them, because they're that rare and exclusive. It's impossible to get away with. For instance... Ever heard of a concept car?"

"Um, no." I shook my head.

Emmett leaned forward slightly and explained. "A concept car is like a fucking tease, basically. It's a car that... let's say Alfa Romeo designs and creates for a car show. They don't usually go to production. Which means they're cars that there is only one of. One of a kind. Not for sale."

"And 'not for sale' equals in very desirable," I finished.

"Exactly. And Aro has gotten his hands on a few of them. Not that he can drive them unless he wants to risk getting caught. But he still wants them. He collects them."

Huh. Alright.

"That's not to say we won't get a test-drive," Edward told us. "Because I refuse to destroy a beauty like that Bugatti and not get a chance to drive it first. Fuck, his '37 goes to auction for... what, six mil?"

Holy...

Six million dollars for a fucking car?

SIX MILLION DOLLARS?

Have mercy.

"Something like that, yeah. The last I saw went for five point eight. And of course we'll drive the fuckers," Emmett replied, like it was obvious. "When I get my hands on his Ferrari Enzo, I'm gonna drive it and fuck in it before I send it off a cliff."

Rose spewed out her Coke.

I'd do the same but I'm used to Edward being like that.

Hell, I love that. Maybe because I'm equally fucked up.

Let's just say that there's a water jet-ski in Costa Rica that's seen way too much. But since Rose hasn't seen all of it yet, I can't blame her for being shocked, so I decided to put Emmett in his place.

"Maybe you should lose your V-card first before you start thinking about cars you'll fuck Rose in," I said dryly.

"Nailed it, princess!" Edward guffawed, throwing his arm around me.

"Hear that, bro? Damn, from now on I'll just sic Bella on you when you're annoying."

"Oh, piss off," Emmett grumbled.

I smirked.

And when Rose had recovered, even she seemed amused.

Then the night continued. They talked cars and ways to get to them without getting caught. They also called Carlisle and Garrett to inform them of their plans, and then Edward and Emmett started doing just that; plan. In detail they discussed time-tables, ins and outs, surveillance, routes, and money. This time Rose and I just listened. We had nothing to add because this was oh so new to us. But there was no denying that we enjoyed it. All of it.

Laptops, Vertu phones, and other equipment filled the table, and Rose and I ordered pizza for us because the Irish boys can eat, but what they can't do it fix food for themselves. They live on take out, and that's something I'm going to put a stop to as soon as I get familiar with my new home. Granted, I can't cook when we're travelling but when we're home I sure can.

That night- Correction, that *morning*, when we went to bed, the first part of their plan was set in motion, and they showed Rose and I pictures of the eleven cars belonging to Aro that will 'magically disappear.'

So, after Rome, we're evidently heading to Milan.



## 24 – SEATTLE IN DECEMBER.

### Aro's POV

*July 5<sup>th</sup> 2010*

I sneered at the photo of Masen on yet another benefit dinner. This time he was there with his wife, but what I focused on more and more after each image was one Carlisle Cullen. Obviously I knew he was involved with my bastard brother's family, but... I did not quite know to what extent. But judging by the photos of him and Masen at that dinner, I'd say they are pretty close.

Watching Masen was not enough for me anymore, though.

I wanted more.

Not even his death was enough.

No, I wanted his entire family destroyed, and I wanted to shatter his organization. After all, his existence almost shattered my own family once, and it is all his fault that my dear mother killed herself when I was a child. Well, his and his mother's fault. Hadn't Masen's whore of a mother started that affair with my father, all things would be well in the world. But they are not, and I'm fed up.

With a frustrated sigh, I pressed down the button to reach my secretary.

"Bring me Caius," I barked.

Ten minutes later, my secretary told me he had arrived, and I told her to let him in.

Caius said nothing as he entered, as he shouldn't. He's an obedient little puppy.

"Surveillance is no longer enough," I announced, lacing my fingers together on my desk. "It is quite clear that Edward Masen is always guarded. So... we need a new approach."

"Tell me what you need, sir," he said dutifully, keeping his eyes downcast.

I sighed.

"I want to know more, Caius, and your work is not cutting it. I need inside information," I told him pointedly.

A deep crease formed on his forehead and I knew he was thinking about possibilities already, as he should. And he knew that this would take much more work, because now... now I wanted him to infiltrate the Masens. But... I am a smart man, and I know very well that such a thing is not possible. It's nothing I will admit out loud but Masen runs a tight ship, and he is very much in control of his business.

"I want you to go through another family that works with the Masens," I said. "We have the Denalis, the McKennas, and... the Cullens."

He looked up then, noticing that I used a different tone with the last mentioned family.

I continued. "Garrett Denali is... in charge of the Denalis, yes?" I asked, already knowing the answer, and he nodded for confirmation. "Well, we know this because his wife – Tanya Denali – was born Tanya Cullen. She is Carlisle Cullen's sister, am I correct?" Of course I simply asked to make sure he was following, which he was, thankfully. "Exactly. And the McKennas are more silent. If I am not mistaken, Siobhan McKenna works for the FBI and is on Masens side."

"That is correct," Caius confirmed with a nod.

"Then this should mean that the Cullens are the way to go, no?"

I leaned back in my chair, both pleased and frustrated. Frustrated because I knew more than Caius, and he was the one getting paid to know. And pleased because... well, I'm me. I'm the head of the Avellinos for a reason and it not just because I was born into this family.

"Have you a suggestion, sir?" Caius asked quietly.

I shot him a look of disapproval but said nothing. He should know this, he should be smart. So, I made a mental note to make sure he gets better.

"I do," I said curtly, leaning back in my leather chair. "I heard Carlisle Cullen's sons were just released from prison."

"Yes?"

"Yes. And now I want all the information you can get."

**July 13<sup>th</sup> 2010**



After dismissing the messenger, I opened the envelope and read Caius' report.

Sir,

In the envelope you will find everything I could dig up on Carlisle Cullen, Emmett Cullen, and Edward Cullen.

My conclusion is that they take orders from Edward Masen when it comes to luxury cars, yachts, motorcycles, and even jets. In other words, they are common thieves. What I've also come to understand is that they are not living under the same protection as the Masens. The Cullens are to the public, as we know, only rumored to work with the Masens, though we know this to be true. And after spending this time in Seattle I must say they are more than linked. They are very closely linked, and they work together.

As for Emmett and Edward Cullen, I say that they are eager to return to work, and they have spent a lot of time updating their security on Bainbridge Island.

Unfortunately I have not been able to enter their homes due to their heavy security, but that's where it stops. At technology.

They do not use guards.

So, it was without difficulty my men were able to follow them one day when they visited a shooting range, and while listening we found out that they are ready to find wives. I am still trying to tap into their phone lines but something tells me they are not using land lines. Until I succeed, I will continue to follow them.

Last but not least, I found out that they are spending next weekend in Vancouver with Garrett Denali as well as Tanya Denali and their two daughters, Kate and Irina.

We will follow them there, and I will report to you shortly.

/Caius Lettoni.

I reread the report as well as the files several times, and I hoped the Cullens would be our way to reach the Masens. Yes, I sincerely hoped that.

"I will crush you, little *brother*," I spat.

**July 19<sup>th</sup> 2010**

"You're excused," I told Luca, taking a seat behind my desk.

As soon as the door was closed, I opened the envelope.

Sir,

I'm writing this on my way from Vancouver.

The Cullens, the Denalis, and also a man named Conn O'Neil met at a resort outside Vancouver this weekend. I believe O'Neil works directly underneath Masen and is the head of Masen security. He is also a guard himself but is rarely seen with or close to Edward Masen.

They were careful and held no meetings where we could listen in, with or without technology. However, we found out about the Cullens next move, and it's a literal one. It was after a family dinner, which seemed much more casual, that they discussed the Cullens move to a small town in the Olympic Peninsula. The town is called Forks and is also the permanent home of the Denalis. We did not hear much, but we did hear something that leads us to believe that the reason for moving is for the two sons to find wives there. It was Garrett Denali's wife that told the two Cullen sons that she knew a few girls that could be a possible match.

I will obviously bring my crew up there because this could be our way in. If we somehow can influence the girls they pick, we might get more information. I doubt it will be hard seeing as these young women do not have a choice in marriage. It is up to their fathers, and I find it hard to believe that whoever they choose will want them in return if they know of the Cullens' true life.

I will report shortly.

/Caius Lettoni

**July 27<sup>th</sup> 2010**

Sir,

Carlisle and Esme Cullen have bought an estate in Forks. Carlisle is also now the new surgeon at Forks Hospital. From what we have found out, he will start in late August, and that is also when the Cullens move into town.

Like planting a seed, we have dropped off photographs at the local Police station of Edward Masen and Carlisle Cullen from last month's benefit. Anything to make sure that people start believing in the bond between the two families.

We tried to find out about the girls Tanya Denali had in mind for Emmett and Edward Cullen, but we found nothing when we managed to break into the Denali Estate. However, we found something when we broke into the school Tanya Denali works at as the school nurse. Unfamiliar to us, the American girls start their school year in August already, and classes will focus around tending a household. This will last for a month and then the males will start in September. My point in this is that I thought Tanya Denali might have hid something in her office at Forks High seeing as she must be somewhat close to the girls she is suggesting, and also since she is the nurse, I assumed she was starting the year early as well, and I was

right. I found a list. Now, I am not positive that this is the list of suggestions, but it appears to be.

Obviously we have researched the young women, and a part from one girl, I'd say they are all average and good. For us, that is. However, if either of the brothers choose a girl named Isabella Marie Swan, we need to go deeper, because she is the Chief of Police's only daughter, and I sincerely doubt he would ever agree to the marriage, especially not since we planted the photographs at the station.

We will stay undercover until you say otherwise and we will continue.

I will report shortly.

/Caius Lettoni.

I growled.

My patience was growing thin.

All I wanted was for Edward Masen to go down. Him and his damned family!

**August 6<sup>th</sup> 2010**

Sir,

Garrett Denali is undeniably in charge of the Cullens security, and he is very up to date with technology.

He has spent the past few days on Bainbridge Island with the Cullen brothers, and what we know is that they are doing their own surveillance now. Mostly on the girls on Tanya Denali's list, but also over town, which can be considered amusing since the Denalis have no idea about our break-in. But, they are now tightening their security, so I doubt we can enter their home again, though my men will try.

Moving onto the mentioned list. It is without a doubt a list of Tanya Denali's suggestions of wives. We found out when we tracked her and Esme Cullen on a day trip to Seattle. And we also found out that the men have crossed many girls off already. Not many remain, and I'm afraid to tell you only one remains for Edward Cullen. It is unfortunately Isabella Marie Swan, but do not worry, sir.

Edward Cullen has not even met this girl yet, and we can still hope he changes his mind once he arrives in Forks. But if he does not, we have a backup plan. I've already sent for Jane and she will start digging up everything on Isabella's father – Charles Swan (also the Chief of Police.)

I will report shortly.

/Caius Lettoni.

"Cazzo!" I growled.

Why would that stupid boy go after the Chief of Police's daughter!

Surely he cannot succeed?

Surely her father will say no!

**August 13<sup>th</sup> 2010**

Sir,

Both Cullen brothers have now settled into town with their parents. We also know that the younger brother, Edward, has purchased a hunting cabin between Forks and La Push. (In the envelope you will find the coordinates) We do not know why he purchased it, and it is clean. We have entered it.

As for the girls, they have made their decisions about them, too.

Edward Cullen's choice is still Isabella Marie Swan.

Emmett Cullen's choice is Rosalie Lillian Hale.

We found out about this when the sons visited their father at work yesterday.

Our safest pick is to go with Rosalie because after researching her parents, we believe they will agree to a proposal if money is involved, and it's no secret that the Cullens are wealthy.

The girls are still unaware and their fathers have not been approached yet.

Like I said, I believe Rosalie is the safest girl to convince to join our side. One of the reasons is that she appears to be against marriage, period. This we know after paying a girl off at the school. And the girl, named Lauren Mallory, happily told us about the two girls. Rosalie is without a doubt reluctant to find a husband, but Isabella is not. However, Isabella has high standards and her father is still the Chief of Police.

So, as soon as Emmett Cullen approaches Rosalie's father, I will let you know and wait for your orders.

As for Isabella Swan, or more correctly, Charles Swan, we have found out quite a lot about their life.

Isabella's mother left when Isabella was little, and instead of sending Isabella off, Charles kept her. They lead a modest life, if not worse. And Isabella is the caretaker of the household. She takes care of the cleaning, cooking, washing, and shopping.

Charles brings home a meager pay check but Isabella makes it work. She is quite creative.

In other words; she will make a great wife, and I can see why Edward Cullen has chosen her. But back to Charles.

This is our way in if we need more than Rosalie.

Charles will most likely be reluctant to even let Edward Cullen inside his house. However, he has a secret. After going through the Swan residence, we found something rather interesting in Charles bedroom.

He is still hung up on his wife.

We found photos, returned letters, and papers that appear to be a part of his private little investigation. He wants to find her, sir.

And Jane did.

In Arizona we located a Renee Dwyer. She ran away and is officially still listed as a runaway, which is why she goes by another name. We can use her, tell Charles that we can take him to Renee, all to make sure Charles agrees to the marriage, because after looking into his hidden boxes, I'd say he's obsessed with finding his runaway wife. Of course, we can also threaten Charles. Perhaps take Renee to Italy for a while?

Then when Isabella is betrayed by her own father, not to mention that she will not fall for a criminal, we can use her.

It is up to you, sir. Do we use both Rosalie and Isabella, or just one of them?

I will wait for Luca and your answer.

/Caius Lettoni.

I didn't hesitate to call Luca back in.

"Yes, sir?" he said, closing the door behind himself.

He looked tired after flying back and forth so much.

Not that I cared.

"I have a message for Caius," I told him. "I want a Renee Swan taken in. I want her here in my house. And I want it done immediately. I will not wait for Charles to either agree to the marriage or refuse. Just make it happen."

"However," I said. "Make sure that when Caius approaches Charles Swan, Caius will not tell him where she is. And by that I mean, do not mention Italia. I want Charles to find out about Renee being kidnapped later. Later when I want Charles to completely shut his daughter out."

"So, Caius is only to tell Charles that he knows where Renee is?"

"Exactly."

A part of me doubted that Charles would agree to the marriage if we simply told him we could take him to Renee. After all, should not a daughter be more important than a wife? Surely.

So, to threaten that old Police Chief must be better.

But to play it safe... or *safer*...

"And Luca?" I said, smirking. "Add a nice blackmail to Charles. A financial one that will make Charles demand money from Edward Cullen."

"The amount, sir?"

I sighed. Hmm, how much?

"Two million dollars," I said flippantly.

"Yes, sir. Two million dollars and the life of Renee Swan."



Perfect.

.

.

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Unfortunately, things did not turn out perfect. Not at all, and I was livid when I weeks later found out that the little whore was falling for Edward Cullen.

The only thing I had accomplished was breaking the bond between Charles and her daughter.

But... I still had Renee.

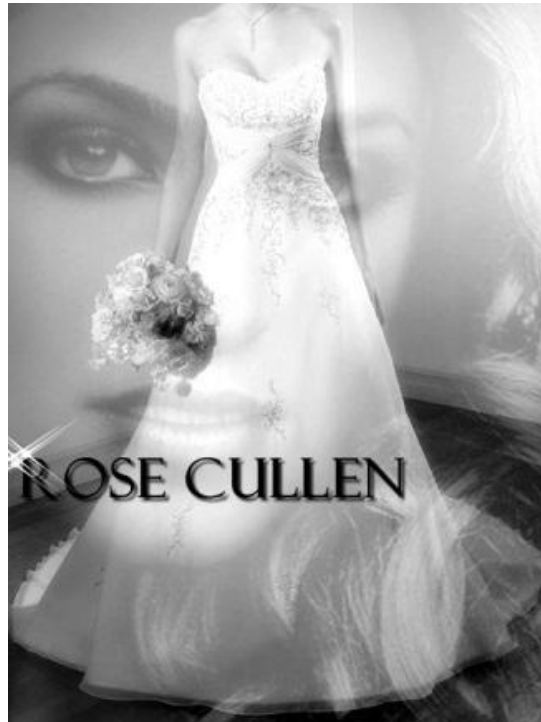
Right here in my villa.

## **BPOV**

### **Present day...**

"Nervous?" I asked Rose as I brushed a stray tear away from her cheek, feeling emotional myself.

She was smiling as she watched herself in the mirror, and she looked beyond gorgeous in her dress. White, layered, lacy... Simply gorgeous. Tight bodice and wide skirt. Yeah, beautiful, and I told her that over and over, to which she blushed and beamed. There's no denying I'm happy for her. Both of them, her and Em. They deserve this so much.



I wasn't really an emotional person but seeing my best friend in a wedding dress, soon to be sister, yeah, it's a bit emotional.

"Yeah," she sniffled, "but I'm ready. I really am." She spun around in front of the mirror and hugged me fiercely. "I can't help it. I love him so much, Bella. And... Christ... it's all of it."

I understood.

"I know what you mean," I whispered thickly.

Just a few weeks have passed since I stood in front of that exact mirror, getting ready to marry Whistler. And now we were back. St. James Cathedral. Fancy dresses. Smiles. To be honest, it was all very perfect, and I shouldn't have been surprised when Tanya and the four wedding planners got it all together so quickly. Even the guests. Yeah, they're all here. Almost two hundred of them. It's still the same – no one says no to a Cullen wedding. Or Masen wedding for that matter.

The past week has been insane, but it's also been fun to be back with family. *Family*, because I have that now.

It had been all about wedding planning for us girls, and while we rarely left the estate, we'd gotten a lot done. The men had gotten a lot done, too, but that was all about work, and our home had now turned into the headquarters for the Cullen Family. I wasn't surprised when I welcomed all of it. It had taken time but I was embracing my life now, and when Whistler and Emmett tightened the security on our street, not to mention the ridiculous army of men stationed around the church today, I found it oddly easy to ignore. It's for safety, why fight it?

In all honesty I was just happy there was no immediate rush to get us out of the country. We needed to enjoy this day, and if that meant having Conn and the others shadowing us then so be it. As long as we can have this day.

When there was a knock on the door, I hugged Rose one last time before I went to open-

...And I was crushed in a hug.

"Oh, Bella! So good to have you home, sweet," Esme gasped. Then she released me, leaving me stunned, and crushed Rose in an even harder hug. "Oh, sweet Rose, you're getting married. You have no idea how happy you're making my Emmett!"

I grinned through my tears.

Esme and Carlisle only arrived in Seattle today, and to say that Esme was a bit pissed about missing the final wedding details would be an understatement. It was good to have them back.

"Ladies," I heard the unmistakable voice of Carlisle say.

"Hi, Carlisle," I chuckled, wiping my tears before I hugged him. "Good to be home?"

"Indeed," he sighed, kissing my cheek. "Chicago's fucking insane," he added with a chuckle. "I almost miss the hospital in Forks."

I grinned, knowing though he loved practicing medicine, he couldn't stay away from his nature for too long, and after a while, the real Carlisle would shine through. The real Carlisle is undoubtedly this one. He doesn't use foul language often but when he does, he's so *incredibly* similar to his sons.

"When are you going back to Chicago?" I asked, chewing on my lip.

"Tomorrow, I'm afraid," he replied, smiling ruefully. "But today's a good day, eh?"

Ah, the Irish. Focus on the good in life. "Today's a very good day," I murmured, looking over at Rose. I smiled.

Esme was helping her with the veil.

\*O\*O\*O\*

An hour later, Rose was a Cullen.



During the ceremony, Whistler and I had kept our eyes on each other, and I knew we both thought back on our day. A day that we'll always remember, but there's no denying that the ceremony itself was a blur, and I doubt it was different for Rose and Emmett.

Their vows had been traditional ones, but they were still emotional, and when they vowed to love each other... Shit, just thinking about it makes my eyes well up. Crazy emotional day. Anyway, what I didn't know was that while Edward and I had been on our honeymoon, Rose and Emmett had exchanged their I love you's, and maybe that's why they went with the traditional vows. Regardless, it was beautiful. All of it.

She's my sister, and as I watched her speak quietly with Emmett, here in the limo, on our way to the Fairmont, I knew for certain that we were the same person. The expression she wore for Emmett mirrored the one I wore for my own husband. Husband. Christ. We're all married.

"What's with the smile, baby?" Edward whispered in my ear.

I didn't tear my eyes off Rose and Emmett as I replied.

"I'm just unbelievably happy for us all." I squeezed his hand. "They look so happy."

Edward hummed, pressed his lips against my temple, and tightened his hold on me.

"You look happy, too, princess."

My smile widened and I looked up at him. "I am, and it's all you. You and..." I trailed off quietly, trying to find my words. "It's you and your family, and I know Ro feels the same about Emmett."

He said nothing. He just swallowed hard, held my gaze... shook his head slightly as if he tried to... I don't know. But he looked unbelievably happy himself.

Closing his eyes, he rested his forehead against mine.

"Bella, I... Christ, I love you. So much."

"It's mutual." I kissed him softly.

\*O\*O\*O\*

"Have I told you how beautiful you are?" Edward asked as he helped me out of the limo.

I straightened up once I was out of the car and chuckled. "Only about a hundred times."

Irish boy flashed me his lopsided grin.

"Well, it's worth mentioning again. You look beautiful, Mrs. Cullen."

*Too cute.*



Honestly, I thought I looked pretty good, too. Rose and Emmett's theme was quite similar to mine and Edward's so us women were all in pinks, beiges, and creamy browns. My own dress was one of the pink ones – dusty pink, strapless, short – and with matching shoes and cream colored accessories, I felt like an adorable pastry.

"Even that frilly thing is, uh... cute?" Whistler asked rather than stated, and I chuckled at his sheepish smile. "I went one too far, didn't I?"

"A little," I giggled, punching him playfully on the arm. "It's called a clutch. Not a frilly thing, m'kay?"

"Uh-huh, I'll remember that," he laughed. "Come on now, baby." He tucked me to into his side. "Let's keep an eye on Emmett and Rose. They're practically undressing each other with their eyes."

I laughed and followed his gaze, and true enough; Emmett and Rose were standing in the lobby of the Fairmont, surrounded by guards, but I doubted they knew.

Once we were inside, we joined the newlyweds and made sure they kept it G-rated – much like they did to us when Whistler and I got married. And this went on. All the way up to their suite where we were to wait until the guests had arrived in the ballroom.

"Christ, you can cut the sexual tension with a knife," Edward muttered, grimacing a little at his brother. "Where the fuck are Alec and Nessa when we need 'em?"

"Don't be an ass," I chuckled at him.

It was obviously understandable that Alec and Nessa wanted to stay near their mother today and were therefore not in the wedding. It was just me and Edward.

As we all entered the suite with our security, Whistler and I followed Emmett and Rose to the sitting room because we knew very well what they could see from there – the bedroom – and if they were like us, which all evidence led us to believe, we would have to keep an eye on them before they made a beeline for said bedroom.

“How much champagne did you give Rose before the wedding?” Edward asked, pulling me down with him in a chair. “Because I’ve never seen her giggle so much. It’s a sound to get used to.”

“Ah, please,” I scoffed. “She’s not that bad. And hey, how much whiskey did you pour down Emmett’s throat, huh?”

He hummed against my bare shoulder, making me shiver, and trailed his hand up my thigh.

Suddenly the air felt even thicker.

“Touché. But you know what?”

“What?” I uttered, watching a hand that just slipped under my dress.

Focus, Bella!

“Let’s not talk about them, alright?” he murmured huskily as he kissed my jaw. “Actually, I’d rather not talk at all.”

Okidoki.

His mouth claimed mine passionately and hard, never hesitating to deepen the kiss, and I threaded my fingers through his hair, whimpering as we both pulled the other closer. It was hot, wet, and full of promises. Definitely not G-rated but fuck that. So, I hitched a leg on the other side, and once I straddled my beloved Irish boy, I kissed him even harder.



"Fuck, baby," he groaned, gripping my hips tightly. "You're... fuck... making this hard."

"I certainly hope so," I breathed, rolling my hips over his growing erection.

"That's not what I meant, princess, and you know it," he moaned quietly, nibbling on my bottom lip.

This time he thrust upwards when I rolled my hips, and it shot shockwaves of lust through me.

"What did you mean then?"

He kissed me, almost possessively, and when his fingers dug into my hips harder than before, I knew I was close to losing my mind because if there was one thing that turned me on, it was when he lost control. It happened when he was aroused beyond words or when he had done something that had to do with his work, and I obviously knew it had to do with adrenaline. Safe to say, I took advantage of it as often as I could.

"I don't remember," he groaned, and I had no idea what he was talking about, so I pressed my body fully against his, and that was that; we were both gone.

"AHEM!"

Emmett?

Ooooh, that's right. We were baby sitting two newlywed horndogs. Yeah, look how well that turned out.

"Ah, now I remember," Whistler chuckled breathlessly, leaning his forehead against mine. "We were supposed to keep our eye on them, weren't we?"

"Right," I said, smiling sheepishly at Rose and Em.

"Well, your dry-humping pretty much destroyed what we had going on," Rose said dryly.

Huh.

That means our baby-sitting was still effective, right?

Right.

"Mr. Cullen," Conn said, looking at Emmett. "The guests have arrived."

I grinned at Rose.

"Ready, Mrs. Cullen?" I teased, pushing myself off Whistler's lap.

"I am, Mrs. Cullen yes," she teased back.

"Are you ready, Mr. Cullen?" Whistler asked Emmett in a girly voice.

I gaped at him, 'cause he was mocking me!

Just FYI, he could not sound like a woman. At all.

"I am, Mr. Cullen, yes," Emmett mimicked.

Then they laughed. Hard.

We smacked the back of their heads as we passed them.

"OW!"

"OW!"

Oops.

Now, time for the wedding party to begin!

## 25 – SEATTLE IN DECEMBER

**Song used in this chapter: Galway Girl (a song with many, many versions)**

**Here's the link to the version I like:** [www.youtube.com/watch?v=kNxMHJ8YWa4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kNxMHJ8YWa4)

### Translation

*Ni neart go cur le cheile* – There is no strength without unity.

*Sláinte* – equivalent to Cheers. (Health)

*Nil aon leigheas ar an ngra ach posadh* – The only cure for love is marriage.

*Mo gra* – My love.

*Bi ciuin. Ta tinneas cinn orm* – Be quiet. I have a headache.

### **BPOV**

“Ahem... Ahem... AHEM!”

That was Whistler and he knows how to get attention. Without clinking his glass.

“Fuck,” I heard Emmett mutter. “I’m gonna pay now.”

Edward heard him. “Yeah, you are, bro. Cause now it’s *my* turn to make a speech.”

I grinned, looking over at Whistler who was staring down Emmett and Rose with his pointed looks, and he was so damn handsome. Even with his- no, wait, *especially* with his black tie loosened, sleeves rolled up, and eyes happy from the Murphy’s he and Emmett gulped down before dinner. It all made me wish I sat next to him, but this was all about Rose and Em, so I sat next to the groom while Whistler sat next to the bride, and on my other side I had Carlisle and Esme.

Ed was missing on Edward’s side, and it was only Liz, Alec, and Nessa.

And Rose's parents of course.

The Ed missing-part... felt odd. Almost as if even *I* thought he should've been here. Though, looking over at Alec and Nessa, I knew it was for theirs sake I wanted Ed here. Definitely not mine. But it was what it was and the family was adamant about making this day a perfect one for Rose and Em.

How perfect it would be for Em, now when Whistler was about to make his best man speech, well, that was to be seen.

And this time there was a microphone.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Whistler said into the microphone. "As you all know... and if you don't, you're too pissed and should quit drinking... We're all here to celebrate the union between the lovely Rosalie and the fuckwit that is my brother, Emmett."

Laughter all around, of course.

"You were all here a few weeks ago when I got married to my Bella," he winked at me, to which I giggled like a girl, "and you know what my brother put me up to. In front of you all!"

"Yeah!" a bunch of men boomed out, many of them holding their drinks up.

"Right," Whistler chuckled. "Well, I think it's safe to say that it's my turn to divulge something about Emmett. Or what do you think, Rose?" He grinned down at her.

She was pretty much bouncing in anticipation, much like I was when I was in her shoes a few weeks ago.

Rose laughed. "By all means, Edward. Proceed."

Emmett groaned and buried his face in Rose's hair. Like that would save him from humiliation.

Facing the guests again, Whistler continued. "I could tell you that I wasn't the only one checking out lingerie for my girl, because I sure a hell wasn't," he chuckled. "And I could tell you that Emmett had a pair of binoculars in his car in order to see Rose better from a great distance, because that's true, too. I could also tell you about the time Emmett waited for Rosalie to get out of the high school gym in Forks, and that he hoped he would get a glimpse of more than he should."

By now we were all laughing like crazy, and the drinks we've had sure didn't help us stop. Rose was also blushing scarlet, and Emmett had his forehead resting on the table.

But Edward wasn't done. His payback was total.

"I *could* tell you about all that." He snickered, glancing down at Em and Rose. "But I won't."

"Ah, for the love of God, bro!" Emmett whined.

"Be quiet, big brother," Whistler chastised playfully before facing the tipsy crowd again. "No, I decided to tell you about the time Emmett happened across a running Rose. Do you remember, Em?"

Emmett's head snapped up. Clearly he knew exactly what his brother was referring to, and he wasn't happy about it.

"You have got to be kidding me," he growled.

No, Edward wasn't intimidated. Not in any way. If anything, his grin widened.

And then he smirked. I knew that smirk. He was up to something.

What are you up to, Irish boy?

"Okay, okay," Whistler chuckled, holding his hands up in surrender. "I won't tell them about the time you saw Rose running in – and I quote – 'tiny shorts that hugged her tight ass, and a top that pushed her tits together'. I promise, Em. I won't tell them about your reaction."

I didn't believe him for shit but the rest did, and a rumble of complaints buzzed through the ballroom.

"Are these my sons?" I heard Esme muttered quietly, making Tanya and Carlisle chuckle. "Tits and ass, tits and ass. I swear they're just like you, Carlisle."

Holy... wow. Alrighty.

"And you love it," Carlisle responded just as quietly.

I chuckled and took a sip from my champagne, glad that the two Irish boys didn't catch that.

"...and I'm fucking glad he found you, Rose," Whistler was saying. "In a way you're just like my own wife, and I know Emmett and I need strong women that won't take our shit."

"Hear, hear!" Esme and Tanya exclaimed, making the women in the ballroom raise their glasses in agreement.

Whistler mock-glared at me when I raised mine as well.

"*Anyway...*" he chuckled, raising his glass. "Let's raise our glasses to Emmett and Rosalie Cullen." We all did, and I smiled at him as he smiled genuinely at the two newlyweds. "*Ni neart go cur le cheile*. I love you both, guys. Sláinte!"

My husband was amazing.

"Thank you, bro," Emmett said, sincerely and seriously. "Really, man. Means the world."

And I was getting emotional.

Glancing at Rose, I saw that she hadn't expected this onslaught of emotions right now either.

"Now, *those* are my sons," I heard Esme sniffle, and I knew she was also watching as Edward and Emmett hugged each other.

No ridiculous man-hug that gets awkward. A real hug because they're brothers through thick and thin.

"No worries, big bro. Just happy for you," Edward chuckled, releasing Emmett. "What's the saying? *Nil aon leigheas ar an ngra ach posadh.*"

"Aint that the truth," Emmett replied firmly. "Looks like we have it made, eh?"

This time Edward looked at me as he replied. In a sincere murmur. "Fuck yeah, we do."

The damn tears came.

*But...* this is Edward Cullen we're talking about, and he may be one of the most loving people to walk this earth, and he shows it. However, he is one for lightness. So, I wasn't surprised when he grabbed the microphone again.

"So... that's that," he said. The wide grin followed. Yeah, Irish boy, I knew it. "That wasn't so bad, was it, Em? I bet you're glad I didn't tell them that your reaction to an exercising Rosalie was to faint behind the wheel and drive into a tree."

Uh...

Wow.

Yeah.

Tension – lifted.

I almost felt sorry for Emmett. ‘Cause damn, Whistler really gave him shit.

Well, there was one thing I could say in Emmett’s defense... and I decided to do that. Soon. Because Emmett sat, gaping like a fish, blushing. Yes, blushing. And Rose was guffawing with the rest of the guests. Tears streaming down for a whole other reason. And Whistler, he was sitting down, shaking in silent laughter.

And I ask myself; how the hell can I follow that speech?

The answer was pretty simple.

You don’t follow that speech.

But as the waiters started setting up for dessert, I knew it was my turn.

Shit. I hate speeches.

Well, when I make them.

I clinked my glass. Barely.

“Ah, you gotta do better than that, Bella,” Emmett chuckled next to me, and this, Edward heard.

Leaning forward to see me ‘cause Rose and Em were in the way, Whistler asked me, “Time for your speech, princess?”

“Yeah,” I muttered, straightening my dress and all. “Brace yourselves for the snooze-fest, boys.”



"I don't believe that for a second." Em winked. "There's never a dull moment around you."

Shucks.

"Here's the mic, baby," Edward said, handing it over. "Wait, hold that thought." And then he stood up, facing the crowd. "Ladies and... the rest of you... Time for my wife's toast, so shut the fuck up!"

Gee, thanks.

"That's not my son," Esme huffed. "What happened to no cussing at weddings?"

"Here, princess," Edward said, grinning as he passed me the microphone.

I took it and stood up. Wow, lots of people. Why does it seem like there are more of them just because I'm standing?

"Thanks, Edward... for *that*," I said into the microphone, to which he winked and mouthed 'anytime, princess.' He was clearly getting drunk. But it was time to get this over with, so I face Rose, because my speech was for her. "Rose," I said, instantly smiling at her. "Much like Emmett and Edward are brothers, you and I are sisters. Not just because you've finally found Emmett, but because it was always you and me when we grew up.

"But no matter how many childhood memories we share, and how much of a sister I see you as, I knew that the second you became a Cullen we were sisters for real.

"Family hasn't come easy for either of us, and there have many times been difficulties." She nodded and wiped her tears, because it was true. It wasn't just my upbringing that was hard. Rosalie's parents haven't always been easy on her, but... well, they're here. So, I can't really voice that.

"But we've pulled through," I murmured thickly, remembering all the times she's been there for me when money was tight and I still needed to get dinner ready for Charlie.

I took a deep breath.

*That was the past.*

"Luckily we don't have that to worry about anymore," I said, smiling at Whistler who smiled softly in return. "We're lucky to be stuck with the Cullens," I chuckled. "And they may have been the ones pursuing us, but I know that I would pursue my husband just as you would pursue yours if anything were to happen."

"But Edward's right, though," I continued, glad that the hard part was over. "He told Em that they needed us because we don't take their shit."

The men chuckled before a few smacks rang out, and I knew. I knew there were many women in the ballroom tonight that were just like me and Rose.

"Since I'm no smarter than you when it comes to the Cullens, I can't really give you advice. But... well, Esme once told us something about how to treat the men in this family. You remember?"

Of course she did. Her grin told me as much, and how could we ever forget?

*"...Let them squirm for a while. It may be a man's world, but the women sure are the ones standing behind them. Doing much more than just looking pretty. Be ruthless, let them sweat, and throw in a few curse words for good measure. God knows our men need them sometimes..."*

Glancing over at Esme, I knew she remembered, too.

"We'll stick to Esme's words," I told Rose firmly, grinning cheekily at Em and Edward who were curious to say the least. "And we'll face everything with our husbands as sisters."

"Christ, Bella," Rose croaked quietly, smiling in thanks as Em handed her a tissue. Yeah, I remember. Getting married is quite emotional.

"And Emmett?" I said, placing a hand on his shoulder. "I could tell you how lucky you are to have found Rose, but... you already know that and you show it to her every hour of the day. But I want you to know that she is as lucky as you. She may tell you, but I know from experience," I gave Edward a pointed look, to which he smiled sheepishly, "that you Cullen boys need time to get it through your skulls that your wives actually love you."

"So..." I sighed, facing the guests again as I raised my glass. "To Rose and Emmett. To family. To love. Husband and wife to each other, but also my brother and sister. Sláinte."

"Sláinte!"

Rose was out of her seat in an instant, hugging me fiercely and I hugged her back.

"I love you," she whispered thickly. "Definitely sisters."

"Sisters," I echoed quietly.

"I need some love, too!"

We chuckled and released each other before Emmett picked me up in a big ass bear hug. Christ, he's just like his brother.

"Thank you," he whispered quietly in my ear. "What you said... it really mattered, Bella."

Holy hell, what is it with these Irish boys making me cry!

Before I could break down, I released him, gave him a wink, and spoke into the microphone one last time.

"By the way?" I said, gathering their attention. "In Emmett's defense, Edward walked into a wall in Costa Rica just 'cause I showed up in a barely-there bikini."

You're welcome, Emmett.

"The fuck, princess!"

"Atta girl!" Esme and Tanya cheered.

\*O\*O\*O\*

"Wanna head out for a smoke?" Edward murmured in my ear.

Smoke? Yes. Some dirty doing? Yes, yes, yes.

"Lead the way," I said, smiling coyly as he offered me his hand.

The cake-cutting and whole dessert business had gone well, pretty much in the same fashion as a few weeks ago. There had been a few more speeches, much drinking and laughing, and photos being taken.

But now it was finally over. Well, not over. But the part where we're sitting down and I can't sit next to my husband is over. Up next is mingling, dancing, and... drinking even more. I'm pretty sure Edward's playing, too. Just like Emmett had done at our wedding. But back then, Alec had joined in. I doubted he would now.

I hated that he was down. Hated it.

"Hey, what's with the frown, baby?" Edward asked, frowning himself.

We weren't the only ones going out for smokes. Christ, the tent outside our family had requested was full. And it reeked.

"Someplace else?" Edward asked, grimacing.

I guess there was *something* that was too much for him, too. Huh. Who knew?

"Yes, please," I said, and then we were off again, looking for a private space... with fresh air. "But did you say that for me or for both of us? You know... since you're smoking indoors at home."

I could cock an eyebrow. And I did. Very well, I might add.

"Cause that's the same," he huffed. "Really, Bella? You're comparing me and Em having a smoke every once in a while to a tent full of drunk smokers?"

Okay, maybe not but yeah.

"Whatever," I sighed lightly, 'cause I was too happy to press it.

Soon Edward had found us a more private place to stay, outside the hotel, and boy did he light up quickly.

"Fuck yes," he groaned, tilting his head up as he exhaled into the freezing night. "I love my brother but damn, big events like these... shit."

I chuckled at him, taking a drag from my cigarette and wondered how he couldn't like events such as this one, cause my Irish boy certainly had a thing for being in the center of attention. I mean, the playing and drunken singing he did at our wedding with Em, Carlisle, and Alec sure didn't make him run out for smokes.

"Will there be any playing and singing tonight?" I asked curiously. I knew Edward had something planned but I wanted to see him go all Irish like he did at our wedding. And hot damn, my husband can use his voice. Really.

"You bet, baby," he chuckled, moving towards me. "You really like that, don't you?"

"I love it," I murmured, tilting my head up. "Just like I love you."

He smiled that smile.

*The smile. My smile.*

"Jaysus, I love you, Mrs. Cullen," he whispered before kissing me.

He walked me backwards, never breaking the kiss, and placed his hands on the brick wall as we reached it. It was cold as hell but it didn't matter. Edward's kisses heated me up in no time. Always so loving but still eager and raw. Firm. Showing how much I owned him, because in a way I did. He showed me that when he couldn't take his hands off me. I was doing that to him.

"Fuck," he breathed into the kiss.

Smokes tossed to the ground.

I locked my arms around his neck, needing more, pulling him closer, and he wasn't far behind. He pressed against me. The kiss deepened. His tongue was pushed into my mouth. Groaning and moaning.

"Um, Bella?"

That wasn't Whistler.

I froze while Edward's head whipped in the back exit's direction so fast that I almost missed it. And he was on alert. Hand behind his back. That's how I knew.

He was armed.

Taking a shaky breath, I looked down in between our bodies, and there it was. Edward was holding his Glock.

"Oh, it's just you," Edward muttered, sneering, and pushed his gun back into his pants. "What the fuck do you want, Whitlock?"

Wh-Whitlock?

Turning my head in... yep, Jasper. The fuck?

He stood there, dressed casual. With Sidekick. Hate that fucker.

Said fucker was glaring at Edward as he tucked his gun away, and briefly I wondered if Sidekick and Jasper were armed, too.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

Whistler didn't move away from me. I was glad.

Jasper was far from comfortable, rubbing the back of his neck and avoiding my eyes, but I wasn't having any of it. They had no business here whatsoever and I wanted them both gone. To me and my family they were as much an enemy as the fucking Avellinos.

"We were at your wedding, too," Sidekick spat, glaring at Edward. "But I suppose you were too brainwashed to notice."

"Excuse me?" I exclaimed in disbelief. "What the fuck were you doing at my wedding!"

Looking up at Edward, I noticed his furious glare but... I also noticed that he wasn't surprised. He knew.

I wasn't mad. I knew he would tell me if it was important.

"You knew they were there?" I asked.

"Yeah. Emmett and Garrett kept track on them," he replied, never taking his eyes off of Sidekick and Jasper. "I didn't find out until the morning we left for Costa Rica, though. Dad told me."

Huh.

Alright.

Turning back to the dipshits, I continued. "Mind answering my question? Why are you here?"

"Surveillance," Jasper sighed.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "How is that possible? You're still at the Academy, Jasper. I'm not stupid."

"Good question, baby," Edward chuckled, backing away from me slightly as he lit up a new smoke. "And I think I can answer that for you."

"I assume your father's nearby?" Edward asked Sidekick with a cocked eyebrow. I remembered. Sidekick's dad was leading the investigation the FBI refused to drop. Persistent fuckers.

Then it hit me.

"You son of a bitch, Jasper," I growled, pushing Edward away as I headed straight for the curly fucker. "Let me guess, you thought you could do a good job since you grew up with me? Is that it, Jasper? Did Daddy Black at the FBI agree to you being here because of our history? Answer me!" I



poked him hard in the chest, over and over between my words, but I didn't need his reply. I fucking knew that was it. Why else would a Special Agent send two Academy *students* here?

Jasper stared at me with wide eyes but didn't say a word.

"You're a fucking asshole, you know that?" I hissed, and I was about to clock the fucker but Edward pulled me back. My back to his chest, I was out of reach. "Let me go, Whistler. These bastards need to learn a fucking lesson!"

"I agree, princess," he murmured quietly in my ear. "But remember that they will report it. You don't want that hanging over your head." He was comforting me, I knew that. Rubbing soothing circles on my arms, whispering in my ear. Fuck. It was working. "Good girl," he whispered. "I promise we can piss them off if that's what you want but we'll do it our way, okay?"

Deep breaths. Fine. Okay. Another breath.

I was still furious. But Edward's words had calmed me down.

"Promise," I whispered back. Because I wanted to get them back for this. Just the thought that the FBI were using Jasper as bait made me see red, but that Jasper agreed to it could only mean that he felt so strongly for the case held against *my* family. That pissed me off further.

"I promise, baby."

Okay.

"Fuck, he really knows how to brainwash the wifey," I heard Sidekick chuckle to Jasper. "What do you think he's telling her?"

That fucking mutt!

"Ah, fuck off, Black," Edward groaned in frustration. "Sorry, but my wife is quite strong and if you don't back off, I can't be held responsible for what she does."

Got that right.

With a huff, I stopped struggling against Whistler, but the glare I shot Sidekick promised all kinds of fun.

"Yeah, just go back to your binoculars," I said, looking at them in disgust. "Who knows, with you two being out here, you might miss the mafia-deal of the year!" I gasped in mock-horror, making Whistler laugh behind me. "Seriously, I think I heard Rose talking about a hit or something, 'cause you know, boys, she's a Cullen now, too. And all Cullens are evil!"

"Bella!" Jasper exclaimed, pleading with his eyes. "Don't do this! You can't really love this life, can you? I mean, they're criminals!"

Hey, I love this life! Bastard.

"Yeah? Where's the proof?" I shot back.

Were his words true? Of course, but... I was beyond caring. This was my family, the first real family I've ever had, and I'll protect it with my life. They took me in, cared for me and loved me. Not my father, not Alice, not even Jasper. He left. He was brother to me and Rose growing up but he never looked back once it was time for him to leave for school. And he knew how my father was. He knew how stiff and traditional Rose's father was, and he knew Rose and I didn't stand a chance, but did he care? No.

"Look," I said, to both of them. "You can stop turning to me or Rose. We will not give some fucking statement because one; there isn't one to give," I lied, smirking at them, "and two; even if there was, I wouldn't. I love my family and you can take your testimony and stick it where the sun doesn't shine!" Gently prying Edward's hands off me, I took two deliberate

steps in Sidekick's direction, and added, "You can tell your daddy dearest that sending you two was a fucked up mistake. It won't work. Am I getting through that thick skull of yours, Sidekick?"

But I was on a roll apparently because I came up with one last thing to tell them both.

"To come here on Rose and Em's wedding day wasn't just wrong, it was fucking disgusting," I spat out. "And you two... *disgust* me. Now I'm done." Turning to Whistler, I said, "Let's head inside, Irish boy."

'Cause I need a stiff one.

"Yes, ma'am," he murmured, gazing at me with dark eyes.

He grabbed my hand and then we left the police-boys outside.

Whistler was quiet as we walked through the corridors that would take us back to the ballroom, and I started worrying about talking too much. Had I? Had I said too much?

"Is something wrong?" I asked, squeezing his hand.

He shook his head but kept his eyes forward as we walked. "No." He chuckled, shaking his head, "Really. No. I'm... Fuck, princess..." Then he stopped abruptly and cradled my face. "You ask if there's something wrong?"

I nodded, furrowing my brow.

"No. I'm... Hell, I'm in awe, baby." He closed his eyes then, dropping his forehead to mine. "What you said out there..." Again he chuckled a little. Quietly. "Well, first you turned me on like you wouldn't *believe*, because you're one sexy little hellcat, I'll have you know."

Okay, so I grinned. Widely.

"And second," he sighed, opening his eyes. They were soft. Beautiful. "You just made me fall in love with you all over again."

I've already mentioned that Irish boy has a way with words. Yeah.

He does.

"I meant what I said," I murmured softly. "I love you and I love my family."

"Fuck, baby," was what he said and then his mouth was on mine. Hard.

Then we broke into a supply closet and he fucked me against a wall.

Yeah. I love this life.

\*O\*O\*O\*

"Oh, my God, Emmeeett!" Rose squealed.

I was right there with her, squealing.

Because they were twirling us around way too fast on the dance floor.

"Put me down, Whistler," I whimpered through my laughter.

"Never," he laughed, and then my feet left the ground.

The music was loud, the guests were happy drunks, and the dance floor was full of Irish men spinning their wives around. It was fucking insane and it was one of the happiest moments of my life.

Edward and I kept quiet about Sidekick and Jasper because when we entered the ballroom after our little uh... romp, we had caught Emmett and Rose just as they danced their first dance, and when we saw them, we knew that nothing should ruin their day. Nothing was to dampen the

mood, so we just informed Carlisle, Conn, and Garrett, and that was that. We returned to celebrating. Because this was a day to celebrate.

"Bro! It's time!" Emmett boomed.

"I'm in, too!" And that was Alec. "You, too, Uncle C! Get yer arse over here!"

I grinned at him really fucking widely, super happy that he was in a better mood now. It was all I wanted for him – to be happy.

"Alright, cub," Edward chuckled. "Let's go."

"Stay close to the stage, princess," he murmured before kissing me.

"Because our first song goes out to the wives."

"I'm always gonna be close to the stage, baby," I giggled. "Trust me, I'm your fan-girl."

That earned me a panty-soaking grin and wink.

Soon there were six men on the stage – Carlisle with his guitar, Emmett with a mandolin, Whistler with his tin whistle, Alec with his fiddle, Kellan – the security guard I remembered from the cabin – sat down behind the drums, and a man from the hired band with his accordion, and Rose and I were right there. Right in front of the low stage. Arms linked, big smiles, glassy eyes. And of course, the others. Slurring men and cheering women.

"Isn't this the life, ladies!" we heard Tanya laugh next us. She stood there with a tipsy Esme, followed by a tipsy Irina, and a downright hammered Kate. Good God is all I'm saying, but yes. This is fucking life.

"Definitely!" Rose said, nodding furiously.

"Alright, everybody!" That was Emmett. Loud voice. Wow. Really fucking loud voice. "As much as the house band kick ass, we kick it better!"

"YEAH!" That was... everybody.

"Rosie, my beautiful wife, this one's for you!" Emmett exclaimed.

But then...

"Esme, darling, this is fo-or you!" Carlisle hiccupped. "I fucking love you, *mo gra!*"

"This is for you, Bella! My sexy hellcat of a wife!" Edward shouted.

"Feck that! It's for Mags in Chicago!" Alec bellowed.

My cheeks hurt, I was grinning so widely.

Laughter, cheers, shouting, clapping, and squealing, all over.

Then Carlisle and Emmett began. It wasn't anything I recognized but the rest sure did and once again the ballroom filled with cheers and shouting.

Rose squealed as Emmett walked up to the microphone; he was the first one to sing. Another Irish boy with an amazing voice.

"Shut the fuck up so I can hear my husband sing!" Rose shouted, looking over her shoulder.

"Nice," I chuckled.

Time to listen.

*I took a stroll down the old long walk*

*of the day I-a I-ay*

*I met a little girl and we stopped to talk*

*On a fine soft day I-ay*

Right before Emmett continued on what appeared to be the chorus, Whistler, the dude with the accordion, Kellan, and Alec filed in. As did the crowd behind us. Feet stomping, hands clapping. Laughter. Fuck, the floor vibrated.

*And I ask you friend*

*What's a fella to do?*

*'Cause her hair was blond and her eyes were blue*

*And I knew right then*

*I'd be taken a whirl*

*Down the Salthill prom with a Galway girl*

He was *definitely* singing to Rose, and Rose was *definitely* swooning over Emmett.

The entire place was just... *alive*, and when Rose and I glanced back, we saw it. Life. Fun. Dancing and twirling.

But *nothing* of that mattered when Whistler took the microphone and tossed his flute to a grinning Alec.

I was in love. So in love. And he sang to me. Grinning and just... having fun.

*We were halfway there when the rain came down*

*On the day I-a I-ay*

*She asked me up to her flat downtown*

*On a fine soft day I-ay*

I was in the middle of my ridiculous fan-girling, so I wasn't exactly prepared when Edward reached down and pulled me up on the stage. Without any warning! Safe to say, I almost lost my balance. But Whistler wouldn't have that. He steadied me before twirling me around like crazy. All while singing the next chorus.

*And I ask you friend*

*What's a fella to do?*

*'Cause her hair was brown and her eyes were brown*

"Whistler!" I squealed.

He just winked and twirled me around again before pulling me close to his chest.

*So, I took her hand and I gave her a twirl*

*And I lost my heart to a Galway girl*

"Love you," he murmured closely, and then he was gone.

Tin whistle back in his mouth, standing next to a fiddle playing Alec. It was all insane, but before I could do... well, anything, I was grabbed from behind, and that's when I noticed that I wasn't the only woman on stage. Rose, Esme, and Tanya had been pulled up, too, and fuck, we were tipsy and happy. So, we just linked arms and started dancing to the music.

This time when Edward gave me one of his winks, I winked right the fuck back and blew him a kiss.

Irish boy liked that.

"Time for the heartbreak, lads!" Alec cried out, and our men all wrestled for the microphone as they sang the last verse together.



*So, when I woke up*

*I was all alone*

*With a broken heart and a ticket home*

It was sad for a second and they all showed us their drunken pouts but it was almost gone as soon as it had started, and the accordion kicked up the happy-level again for the chorus. The men sang this one together, too. And boy did they have trouble deciding on hair color and eye color for this Galway girl.

They pretty much shouted out their wives colors, hoping they would drown out the others.

*And I ask you now*

*What you do?*

*Aaahh, if her hair was blond!-brown!-red! and her eyes were blue!-  
brown!-green!*

*You see, I've travelled the around!*

*I've been all over the world!*

*Oh, boys, I've never seen nothing like a Galway girl!*

It was fucking insane!

As soon as the song ended, there were men sticking up beer bottles for our performers, and since when did the Cullens ever turn down beer?

Right. Never.

"I love you, Irish boy!" I laughed as I jumped off the stage.

He wore the silliest grin.

“Yeah! Can we get a crowd going or what!” Emmett boomed into the microphone.

I didn’t think the cheers could get louder but I was wrong.

So wrong.

More songs followed, a few calm ones, but most of them were cheery and so damn happy that it was impossible to sit still. The only one where we all just stayed put and listened was the one Edward and Alec had worked on for Rose and Emmett, and it was... Christ, so beautiful. It was Edward on guitar and vocals and Alec on his fiddle. No words could describe how much I loved those two. But it was them for me. My husband, the man I loved more than anything, and his godson. I’d die for them. I wanted to take care of them.

Eventually our men climbed off the stage and the hired band took over again. I figured Edward wanted to sit down for a while cause he, just like the other men, was a sweaty mess. Tie hanging loose, shirt un-tucked, vest ripped open, and sleeves rolled up. And don’t even get me started on his already wild hair. It was practically its own war-zone at the moment. But no, he didn’t want to sit down. He wanted to dance and drink more beer.

Which we did.

For at least an hour or so, before he panted, “I need a feckin’ smoke!”

Cause that’s what he needs. Not air. No, nicotine. Irish boy is nuts.

“Sure you don’t want to sit down-” I was cut off there.

And hell broke lose.

I heard it all but... in a way I didn't. Automatically my eyes went to Whistler and Alec. Edward's eyes searched mine before his cub. I guessed Emmett was covering Rose somewhere, just as Carlisle went for Esme... and why? Why all this?

Because there was gunfire.

I was grabbed. In the middle of the dance floor. There was shouting and barking of orders. Ear pieces.

It was a flurry and I didn't understand.

I was in a daze.

I heard Edward murmuring in my ear, leading me somewhere. I didn't know where. I didn't know!

*Snap out of it, Bella!*

*I'm trying!*

The change came too fast.

I think I whimpered.

"I won't let anything happen to you, princess." He murmured it over and over. "I promise. Do you hear me?"

*But what about you?*

People everywhere. My ears rang.

There was one thing I could focus on, though. It was yelled by guards.

"Code Black! Code Black! Code Black!"

How ironic. Because everything went black for me then.

It was just too much.

Too fast.

\*O\*O\*O\*

The hell?

"She's waking up, Edward." Female voice. Soft. I recognized it.

I groaned.

"Oh, thank God. Bella? Please, baby, can you hear me?"

Uh... ugh. No. Fuck. I don't know.

My head was throbbing and... I just didn't understand a thing.

Slowly I opened my eyes because it felt like we were in a car, but... what?

"Fuck, princess, you scared me." It was a whisper and he was right there, holding me.

I was on my back.

As my eyes found focus I also noticed that we weren't in a car. No, we were on the Cullen jet.



"What... what happened?" I mumbled, searching out Edward's eyes. "How long was I out?"

He looked tired. And worried and angry. Not at me, though. I always saw the softness in his eyes that was meant for me. But there was something, that's for sure. Something was wrong.

"About four hours," he rasped, tucking a piece of hair behind my ear. "What's the last thing you remember?"

I furrowed my brow, thinking.

Um... I... the performing... and dancing...

Gunfire. Yes. Fuck, I blacked out.

"Shooting," I whispered. My vision blurred as soon as the word had left me and I was suddenly scared shitless. My eyes, they searched the jet. I needed to see faces. Family. Rose. Em. All of them... but it were just the two of us with Kate and Irina. "Edward?" I asked shakily, sitting up on the small couch. "Where is everybody?"

"Don't worry," he said right away. "Everyone made it out alive."

Don't worry? Just his sentence sent chills down my spine.

"I need more than that," I whimpered.

Rose. Rose. Rose. God, Alec!

"Fuck," he sighed, rubbing his face tiredly. "It was men sent by the Aro."

My eyes widened as quickly as they filled up with tears.

Dread.

"Luckily, Em and Rose had already snuck out," he chuckled humorlessly. I exhaled in relief and knew Edward was relieved by that, too, but... yes, something was still very wrong. "My first priority was you and Alec," he mumbled. "There was no way I could stay, and... fuck... when you blacked out, all I could think was to get you out of there."

Leaning forward on his knees, he sighed heavily. "I managed to grab Kellan, and ordered him to take Alec and Nessa to safety, which he did. And since it was Code Black, we knew our orders. You scatter with the fucking wind." He didn't like that order, that much was clear. "Then... two hours later, Mom called."

Everything inside me tensed as I saw Edward pull out his work-phone. The phone for those untraceable calls.

"Dad was shot in the shoulder when they left the hotel."

No!

"No, no, no, no," I chanted. Tears fell. No. No. No.

"He's okay, baby," Edward implored gently, but no, nothing was okay! Nothing! "Garrett and Tanya went with him and Mom, and he was lucid. He didn't even lose conscience. And remember he's a doctor, alright?"

Uh-huh. Sure. Whatever.

"I promise I will tell you everything, princess, but I really want you to rest," he pleaded quietly. "It's been a long ass night and we have a few hours to kill before we reach Chicago. Please sleep."

No way.

"Chicago?" I croaked, my eyes flickering between him, Kate and Irina.

"Yeah, our dad told us to go there. Plus, it's protocol for Emmett and Edward in this situation," Irina murmured, walking across the narrow aisle with a bottle of water. "Want some painkillers?"

I nodded. "Thanks."

I was still confused about the whole protocol-for-Emmett-and-Edward situation, though. *Everything* was too much. Too many questions and no answers. I'd never been this confused in my life. But before I could ask any of them, Edward's Vertu-phone rang.

"I gotta take this," he muttered, giving me an apologetic smile before he stood up. "Cullen," he answered into the phone as he headed for the fridge. "I don't care about that. I just need to know if they're out of the country yet."

I instantly knew he was talking about Emmett and Rose because unlike us, they weren't spending their first night at the hotel. Emmett had borrowed one of Ed Masen's more luxurious jets, and they were spending their first night on it as they headed for a secret location in southern Europe.

"That's good. And Carlisle?" Edward inquired before chugging down half a bottle of water. Two painkillers that Kate handed him followed. "I don't care about that either, Conn." He sighed, rolling his eyes. "Portland? No, that's not good enough, you fuckwit. I want Alec and Nessa in Chicago with me and Isabella."

"Thanks for mentioning us, you ass," Irina muttered quietly.

I was used to that by now. Kate and Irina loved me and Rose, but since Edward and Emmett got out of prison and Felix and Demitri stayed, there's been resentment between the cousins.

Edward was used to it, too, and just flipped Irina off.

"Is Aunt Liz with you, Conn?" He started to pace the aisle. "Who else do you have with you and why the fuck would Liz leave her own goddamn children with Kellan?" He was getting mad, and after hearing that, fuck, so was I.

Liz left Alec and Nessa?

That bitch just lost a shitload of my respect.

"She thought it was safer?" he snapped sarcastically. "That's rich."

Apparently Conn said the wrong thing then because Edward's eyes flashed with nothing but fury. "I don't give a flying fuck, Conn! You hear me?" he growled into the phone. "I want them on the next flight to Chicago! Am I making myself clear? Because I hope you know what this means! You. Follow. *My. Orders!*"

He slammed the phone into the wall, pulled out his smokes, lighting one up before he started pacing again.

I didn't know how to react or if me being there would help, or... make matters worse. Luckily, Whistler settled it for me.

Sighing deeply, he sat down next to me, dropped his forehead to my shoulder and murmured, "I don't know what I would've done without you, princess."

And there was nothing I could do but to hold him. Which I did, because I wasn't going anywhere.

I had questions. So many of them. But this was Edward's show. He knew this, and I trusted him to bring Alec and Nessa to us. My butting in would only stall him. Instead I did what he needed me to – I was simply there for him, ready to anything.



"Fucking hate, Chicago," he muttered, taking a deep drag before tipping his head back to his seat. "And God knows how long Em and I will have to run things."

Yea, questions. But later.

"I'm here for you," I whispered, caressing his face. "Anything you need, let me know."

He sighed again but this time in content as he kissed my palm.

"This oughta be good," Kate said, rolling his eyes. "The Cullen boys running the entire organization."

"Kate," I said, warningly. She could bitch later but certainly not now. For fuck's sake. "Don't be a bitch, *please*."

"Tall order, baby," Edward snickered tiredly as the two sisters flipped him off.

I sighed.

"Can't believe Mom and Dad ordered us to go with you," Irina snapped petulantly.

"Maybe because I know how to get shit done!" Edward shouted. "And for the love of God... just... *Bi ciuin. Ta tinneas cinn orm.*"

I didn't even bother to ask what he said.

Questions would be answered sooner rather than later anyway.

## **26 – CHICAGO IN DECEMBER**

### **BPOV**

I was starting doubt my sanity.

All the things Whistler, Kate and Irina told me on the way to Chicago... they were all crazy and seriously fucked up. Edward, being the honest man he is, told me that I could ask any question I wanted and he would answer. *If* I rested in between. So, the sneaky Irish boy made a deal with me. I was allowed to ask five questions after resting half an hour, so that's pretty much how we spent our flight to Chicago, and the same went for when we landed on a tiny airfield two hours outside of the city. I rested, I asked. And they answered.

I found out that four of our guards had been taken out in order for Avellinos men to reach the Spanish Ballroom we were all in. They had also taken out three FBI agents that had been on the premises doing surveillance, and as soon as Whistler told me that Jasper was fine, I just... didn't care. I may hate Jasper but I don't want him dead. Apparently Sidekick and Daddy Black were also fine but... whatever. That didn't touch me. What touched me was that the four guards on our side had families attending the wedding. That was what killed me a little. They had family right there. Right there. Wives and children. And now they... now those wives and children didn't have their husbands and fathers anymore. Just the thought of losing Whistler... Christ... shit... Family is everything to me. Not having had that before, I'm fiercely protective of the one I finally have now, so when Edward continued and told me that Conn's team had located nine Italians and detained them all, questioned them until they had nothing to tell anymore... and then killed them... I brushed it off. They knew what they were getting themselves into. Same went for the FBI agents. They had no fucking business at the Fairmont. They barged in and then got themselves killed. That's nothing I'm going to have on my conscience. No way.

My thoughts went out to family but the rest? They can go fuck themselves.

Two of the first questions I had fired off were obviously about our closest family and about Emmett and Rose's whereabouts, and Edward told me that Emmett and Rose were long gone. They had done like me and Whistler and snuck off to start their married life. Apparently they were already in the air when the Italians barged in, and for that I was glad. It means they had the perfect wedding and could share their wedding night as they deserved. Edward felt the same and the decision had already been made to give them a few days before calling them back home, because that was unfortunately necessary. But at least they would get a few days. Obviously Whistler and I both saw the irony because I remember that, apart from us getting more time in Costa Rica, our two marriages are kicking off in the same way. Edward and I were also interrupted and we also came home to a shitstorm. That would soon happen to Em and Rose, too. But I digress.

Carlisle and our closest family came next, and I fired off question after question, ignoring Edward's five-question rule, and thankfully he answered them all. The first one about Carlisle's condition of course, but apparently it wasn't too bad. The bullet had gone straight through his shoulder, and he would be back to normal, so to speak, within the next six weeks. Meanwhile, Carlisle, Esme, Tanya, and Garrett were all in hiding in Vancouver. Well, Carlisle, Esme, and Tanya were. Garrett was to join Edward in Chicago as soon as possible, because... it all comes down to Edward being in charge of the entire organization until Emmett comes back. And why?

It's protocol.

Again I asked why.

Kate was the one who told me. "Because with Ed kidnapped, his oldest son in prison, Carlisle shot, and Emmett in Europe, Edward's next in line."

So, it dawned on me. All of it. The next man in line is obviously Liam, Ed's son. But as stated, he's in prison, and therefore Carlisle took over when Ed was kidnapped. This in turn made Emmett and Edward heads of the Cullen Family, which includes the Denalis. And now... when Carlisle's out, even if it's temporary, it means that our two Irish boys are in charge. Technically it's Emmett since he's a year older than Edward but... well, he's not here. Edward is. So... my husband is currently the head of the Masen Family. Yeah.

It sucks. He thinks so, too, of course but there's little he can do.

I understood very quickly that when I was resting on the way to Illinois, Edward was constantly on the phone, and apparently there was already a plan. An agenda. And first up was making an appointment with Liam's wife because Edward needed to get in contact with him in order to proceed, and Liam's wife had to be the messenger unless we wanted questions raised. And that was the thing – questions. Edward's job was now to keep track on the cleanup of this mess. The protocol was to make sure as many questions as possible went unanswered by authorities and the public. That was why Garrett was coming to join us soon, because he had more experience with this than Edward, and Garrett would help Whistler when it came to cleaning up evidence and tying up loose ends.

In the end I understood why we were running instead of fighting at Code Black, because this was real. This wasn't some movie where loyalty and pride got in the way. In the Masen Family you won't hear a man say 'I'll get the job done at all costs.' This was about being smart, getting everyone to safety, making sure life comes first... and *then* the plotting began.

"Revenge is a dish best served when it was planned properly. Preferably behind closed doors. Not in a crowded ballroom where bullets are flying," Edward had told me casually, like it was obvious.

And that's the thing. It *should* be obvious because it's smart.

Ed Masen may be a cruel man but he's also smart, and when he says family comes first, he's not talking about the organization. He's talking about wives and children. The real family.

He gained some of my respect, I had to admit.

So... why do I doubt my sanity?

Because after everything they told me, I still feel safe.

With Edward I feel safe.

Now, I'm not stupid. I know I shouldn't feel safe. Because this isn't one of those ridiculous times where the girl fawns over his armed man. I know that shit is fucked up and dangerous, but... fuck, I can't help it. I feel safe with him.

\*O\*O\*O\*

"No, you can leave her there for all I care," Edward snarked, once again arguing with Conn over the phone. One might think his phone shattered when he slammed it into a wall last night but it didn't. Sturdy fucking construction. But I suppose you should count on that when you pay eight grand for a fucking phone. "Where are you now?" he sighed heavily, nodding in thanks to the doorman as we entered the hotel lobby.

I followed quietly with Edward's arm around my waist.

My eyes wandered. Except for Costa Rica, I've never left Washington before and... now I was in Chicago, about to check in at the most luxurious hotels in the city, and I was stunned to silence. It was beautiful and... large.

As we walked up to the massive front desk and Edward was still on the phone, trying to get Conn to get the kids here, I stepped up to the fancy-looking woman, knowing that Edward had booked us suites under fake names. I had also received my first piece of fake documentation.

It felt weird.

“Uh, yeah, thanks, we have reservations under the name of Stewart,” I said once she was done with her rambling about how welcome we were at the Chicago Peninsula. Sliding both mine and Edward’s fake driver’s licenses over the counter, I added, “There should also be a reservation under Krystoff.”

That one pissed me off a little because Kate and Irina had refused to go under fake names, so they booked under Demetri’s name – also Irina’s name of course since they were married. The only reason Edward relented was because Demetri’s name wasn’t publicly known.

While Irina stepped forward to deal with her and Kate’s reservation, I glanced over my shoulder. Edward was standing, pinching the bridge of his nose, still arguing with Conn, and I hated it. What I wanted was for Alec and Nessa to come here. I also wanted Edward to get some rest. He needed it badly, having slept only an hour on the plane, and now it was nearing noon in Chicago.

And God, I wanted a shower. A long one. Hell, I haven’t showered since before the wedding and... all the dancing, drinking... fucking... yeah, I needed a long soak. And new clothes.

“Mrs. Stewart?”

Ugh. It’s Cullen, you twit.

“Yes?” I said instead, smiling sweetly.

"Your reservations are all in order and you have one Executive Suite and the Peninsula Suite all ready for you," she said politely as she slid our keys over the counter. "I've also been informed of the two meetings held in the Peninsula Suite tomorrow. Please tell your husband that our staff is standing by to take your meal order."

"Of course," I said.

"Did you get the request about the newspapers?" Edward asked behind me then, and I remember him telling me that they would need to pay attention to how much the media knew. Starting with checking newspapers from Washington and Illinois.

"Yes, sir," the woman said, clicking away on her computer. "Today's papers have already been stacked in your suite."

"Cheers," Edward said, returning to his phone call.

Irina and I both stifled a smile at the woman's look of confusion.

"Cheers is also a way of saying thank you," Irina explained to her, not really fighting to hold back her amusement anymore.

"Oh uh... okay," the woman chuckled uncomfortably. "Well, like I said, everything is on order. The Peninsula Suite is on the top floor and your Executive Suite, Mrs. Krystoff is on the fourth floor. I hope you enjoy your stay with us at The Peninsula." Cue megawatt smile.

"Thanks," I said, turning to Edward. "Everything's ready," I told him quietly, motioning for the elevators. He winked and draped his arm around me, before dismissing the concierge that was eager to show us to our suite. Apparently Edward had been here before and knew his way around. Then we made our way to the elevators and fuck me if Kate and Irina didn't bitch about *only* having an Executive Suite. I swear I'm *this* close to punching them.

"Shut the fuck up, you two, or I swear to God..." Edward growled, covering his phone with a hand as he glared at his cousins. "Seriously, could you sound more like a couple of spoiled bitches?"

"Says the dude in the Peninsula Suite," Irina deadpanned.

"What the fuck did you just say?" he asked in disbelief. "Are you the one holding meetings for twenty people tomorrow? Because if that's the case, then by all means, take the fucking suite!"

Yeah, what he said. Luckily that shut Irina and Kate up and they both stomped off as we reached the fourth floor.

"Christ," Whistler sighed as the elevator doors slid close. "Is it wrong that I don't want to order security for them?"

I chuckled quietly, wrapping my arms around his waist, and shook my head. "No. Completely understandable," I mumbled against his chest. Fuck, I was tired. And if I was tired, I couldn't even imagine how tired Edward was, but as I looked up at him, phone still by his ear, I knew he was fucking spent. "What's going on?" I asked, eyes flickering to his phone. "You're not talking."

"Conn is arguing with Liz," he explained tiredly. "He's tied because he can take orders from both me and her since she's Uncle Ed's wife."

Ah. I nodded in understanding. "She wants Alec and Nessa to stay in Portland and you want them here," I stated quietly. "And Conn can't do anything about it."

"Exactly. He agrees with me, though, but his hands are tied," he replied. "The only one who can give a direct order is Liam when it comes to Alec and Nessa."

"So that's why you need to talk to him?" I wondered, chewing my lip.



“One of the reasons,” he murmured, releasing my lip with his thumb.  
“Hopefully we can get all that sorted tomorrow and then the kids can be with us until this shit is over.”

He was about to kiss me but we reached our floor then, and I was eager to get us both in bed. Actually, I wanted a shower and some food first, and I was going to make sure Edward didn't leave my side because he needed what I needed... only more. So, I was going to take care of him and not take no for an answer.

“Where's Liz and Conn now, by the way?” I asked as Edward opened up our suite.

“On their way to a secret ranch in Utah,” he muttered, letting me enter first. “We believe Dad and Liz were the prime targets at the wedding...”

I sorta tuned him out cause I was looking at what I had in front of me. Luxury. It wasn't a damn hotel suite. It was a damn home. A luxury home. Insane. Huge.



WHISTLER &  
PRINCESS  
WELCOME TO...  
THE PENINSULA  
CHICAGO

“Baby? Something wrong?”

Oh, right. He's here.

"Wrong? No. Nope," I said, whipping around to face him. "It's very extravagant, you know."

Irish boy just shrugged and made a beeline for the... no mini-fridge here... no, he headed for the kitchen.

"Hungry, princess?" he called. "I made sure they stocked the fridge! Fuck yeah... salmon."

I can't speak.

I ended up in the large living room, and... hummenumph, there was a grand piano. If that's not insane then I don't know what is. I mean, why? Why would you place a huge piano in a hotel suite? Do people actually use that thing?

Oooh, but then I saw a purpose with it. I could see Whistler there... and I would be there, too. Hmmm, yeah... I could see it... God, he could take me... hard... humh...

"Shit, I really need that shower," I hissed under my breath.

"Why?"

"Ohmyfuckingshit!" I gasped, turning around as I clutched my chest.

My heart pounded. Fuck, he was right there. Wearing that all-knowing, cocky smirk.

"You're looking a little flushed there, Mrs. Cullen," he chuckled and nodded for the piano behind me. "Mind telling me why you were eye-fucking the grand?"

Then there was a sandwich in his face. Apparently he had just made one and boy did he shove it down.

I decided to play it cool. "What makes you think it was the piano? And what makes you think I was eye-fucking *anything*?"

He had been standing behind me, after all.

Irish boy chuckled and tapped my nose. "Because I married a kinky hellcat, and I know you, princess."

Well, fuck.

He just stood there, smug bastard. And more food was shoved down.

Lovely.

"Ou va a fanviff?" he asked with his mouth full of food.

Again, lovely. Horniness – gone.

Well, almost. It's still Whistler we're talking about.

"No, I don't want a sandwich, sweetie," I chuckled. "I'm just gonna take a shower before I check out the menu." Then with a pointed look, I added, "And then we *both* need to sleep."

"Yeff, pwimfeff." He mock-saluted me.

Superb.

\*O\*O\*O\*

After my shower, I got dressed in a hotel-robe because there was no way I'd get back in my dress now. Damn, now that I was clean, it just smelled bad. Drinks, sweat, perfume, and smoke. Not ideal. So, in my comfy robe I left the master bathroom, and it took a while but eventually I found

Whistler on the balcony. He was sitting in one of the loungers. Shirt unbuttoned, vest tossed on the floor, shoes thrown to the side, and pants unzipped. And he was fast asleep with his head lolled to the side.

"Whistler," I whined as I saw the smoke dangling between his fingers, still lit. "Christ, we really need to get you to bed, baby."

"Edward," I said softly, caressing his cheek as I took the smoke from him and put it out in the ashtray. "Can you wake up for me, sweetie?"

He hummed sleepily as I threaded my fingers in his hair, looking so boyish and adorable. Cute but still ruggedly handsome. Five o'clock shadow and a seriously fucked up mop of hair on his head. These past twenty-four hours hadn't been easy on him.

"Whistler, don't you wanna sleep in the bed instead?" I asked. "I'm sure it's much more comfortable than out here."

Another hum. Irish boy was awake. Sorta.

"On one condition," he mumbled sleepily.

"Anything," I chuckled quietly as he opened his eyes for me.

Damn, he was beautiful.

"If I can sleep on your boobs."

Oh, for the love of...

Jesus.

"Sure, baby," I laughed softly, standing up before I held out my hand. "Be my guest."

"Sweet," he replied, grinning tiredly, and then we were off to bed.

Pretty much like a petulant boy, Edward threw off his clothes and they landed... everywhere. The only thing he removed with care was his gun. And then he collapsed on the bed, face buried in his pillow.

"Get your boobs over here, princess. I need `em."

Yes, sir.

I was starving for food but... looking down at the bed... yeah, sleep came first.

\*O\*O\*O\*

When I woke up again, it was dark outside and Whistler wasn't next to me.

But I heard him.

I heard him on the piano.

Wrapping a sheet around me, I padded out, stopping in the doorway to the living room, and he sat there. With his back slightly hunched. Wearing nothing but a towel around his hips. Obviously he'd waken up to shower. But... what I noticed more than anything else was his expression. Brows furrowed in deep concentration, eyes closed, fingers moving effortlessly over the keys. It was dark. Both the room and the melody, and I was afraid it mirrored his thoughts. I *knew* it did. He didn't want this. He didn't want Chicago or Masen's business. He wanted fun and casual. He wanted the travelling and following of simple orders. Okay, maybe not *simple* orders but... he sure as hell didn't want this. He didn't want the entire organization weighing on his shoulders, but that was what he had now.

He looked torn and... at war with himself.

I hated it. It tore at me, too.

"Whistler," I whispered.

I saw his chest heave once and he faltered for a second... but then he picked up again, continuing the dark, haunting melody.

His eyes were shut tightly... almost as if he was... fighting... *something*. I didn't know. Anything. I felt helpless.

But then he whispered. Quietly. "*Bella.*"

And I was next to him in a flash.

His eyes were still closed and he was still playing. Shoulders still hunched. His broad, muscular back, almost silver in the dark room... but then there was the large tattoo across his shoulder blades... a tattoo that showed he was anything but a weak man. The ink showed what his form didn't. He was a *Cullen* – a strong man. To *me*... he was unbreakable. But he wasn't. Or maybe he was but... strong men also need support. And comfort.

I was almost afraid to touch him.

Then I did. Only a light touch. My hand ghosted over his shoulder.

He shivered.

My heart was suddenly pounding and I was... desperate to... fuck, just... make him feel better. Someway. I didn't know how. I didn't know what I could do but...

"Tell me what to do, sweetie," I breathed.

Slowly he ended whatever it was he was playing... so slowly... until he just sat there... with his hands dropped in his lap.

He needed *something*.

I watched him shiver again. I watched him swallow.

Then, as slowly as he had ended the song, he held his hand out. Hesitantly, pausing, moving again... toward me... He didn't watch me. He had his chin dropped to his heaving chest, and... his arm, his hand... was still reaching out for me. I didn't understand why he was so apprehensive. And when his hand reached my hip, he shivered again. Still not looking at me.

"Edward," I whimpered quietly. I was afraid. Scared shitless that... fuck, I just didn't *know*. But he was in pain and I *hated* it.

My eyes were pleading with him even though he couldn't see me.

"I just..." He didn't continue. But he pulled me to him, firmly and quickly, hitching my right leg around him, so that I was straddling him on the piano bench.

We both swallowed hard and shuddered as I settled on his lap, but still... he said nothing. He just dropped his forehead to my shoulder and held onto my hips. Tightly.

I didn't move. My hands were completely still on his toned stomach.

The tension was palpable.

So thick.

He breathed heavily, planting a soft kiss on my naked shoulder.

Still, he said nothing.

"I wish I could read your mind," I whispered.

"No. You really don't."

My eyes welled up.

"*Edward.*" It was a plea. I needed for him to *look* at me.

“Shhh...”

Shivers rocked through me as he kissed my shoulder again. Openmouthed. Slowly. Firmly. Fingers digging deeper into my flesh. Up... up... he bit down where shoulder met neck, and I whimpered, not in pain, but desperation. Then his tongue... licking... soothing the sting, once again sending shivers through me. Up again, hotly and wetly, kisses on my neck. I gave him access.

He breathed in my ear. “Mine.”

I exhaled audibly.

Yes.

Yes.

Yes.

He kissed my jaw. His hands worked the sheet, exposing me to him. Rougher now, like he was on a mission, he kissed his way up to my mouth... covering my mouth with his own in a fiery kiss. He kissed me with such ferocity that... oh, God... fuck, I whimpered, opening up to him immediately. He needed *this*. Me.

“Fuck,” he grunted as he threw my sheet on the floor. “Mine.” He cupped both my breasts, roughly kneading them as he continued devouring my mouth. Tongue pushed into my mouth, licking, tasting, and I arched into him, gladly giving him what he wanted.

“Edward,” I panted, breaking the kiss he pulled me flush to his body. “So hard...”

“For you.”



I came to life then, throwing my arms around his neck as I rolled my hips over his erection.

Shivers.

*Fuck.* More. It was a fucking frenzy all of the sudden. He pushed me away from him, only to rip his towel off, and then I was back. Right *there*. Grinding against him, making us both moan. But it wasn't enough. Not for him, not for me. It was desperate.

And his fingers... God, his fingers... teasing me... spreading my wetness around. His mouth on my neck, nibbling, nipping, and sucking. Fingers teasing, pleasuring. Yes... oh, God... more, baby... harder...

"Mine, princess," he growled as he pushed two fingers inside me. "You're *mine*."

"Yes!" I cried out, arching into him fiercely as he fingered me. "Yours, baby... please, more!"

Without warning, he picked me up and put me down on top of the piano, to the side so we didn't have the fucking keys in the way. I gasped at the cold surface but my gasp got caught on my throat when I saw Edward's expression. His eyes on me. His face. Fierce, feral... *possessive*... painful. His eyes were full of pain.

And realization sunk in.

He was afraid. He was afraid of losing me. After all that had happened during the past twenty-four hours, he was scared that something would happen to me.

"I'm not going anywhere," I breathed, willing for him to understand. "I'm yours, Whistler."

His eyes darkened, his jaw tensed.

Without breaking our gaze, he positioned himself at my entrance... before he plunged his cock inside me.

I choked on a breath.

"*Fuck,*" he gritted out.

Before I could do *anything*, he wrapped my legs around his waist and held them in place... and then he fucked me. Hard and deep. Fast.

He watched me. As I lied there, propped up on my elbows, he watched me. All of me. And I watched him in return. I watched as he pounded his thick cock into me. I watched as his abs tensed. I watched the furrow of his brow. I watched the strain of his neck. I watched it all. All of him.

"*Fuck,*" he muttered, motioning for me to sit up as he slid out of me. "I need more."

I obeyed without knowing his plan, and took his hand before he picked me up and carried me over to the plush couch. But before he could lay me down on it, I pushed myself off him and ignored his look of annoyance and confusion. Hell, that annoyance would vanish soon. So would his look of confusion... and it did. As I reached the back of the couch, I bent over and sent him a daring look.

He understood perfectly, and once again his features changed. His possessiveness and desperation was back in full force, and he reached me, immediately positioning his cock where we both needed it. And with a growl he slammed into me from behind. Hands on my hips, gripping tightly. He fucked me hard. I met his every thrust.

"Tell me, baby," he moaned pleadingly. "Tell me you need me... fuck... as much as I need you."

Oh, God...

"I need you more, Edward," I gasped.

He angled himself to reach deeper. "Not possible."

I pushed out my ass for the same purpose. "It is."

Moaning loudly, we moved together, meeting each other's thrusts, and he was so fucking hard in me. He filled me over and over, in and out, slam... harder... more... skin slapping... There was no enough. No enough of him. Forever won't cut it. Not enough time... but I will take the time we have, and I will use it. I will show him. I will be by his side.

"Oh, fuck, Edward!" I moaned. He was there. Right there. The tip of his cock, rubbing against my sweet spot. Fuck. Oh, God... I started shaking. Again. Again. In and out. So slick. Again. Harder. And then it was more. Even more. He pulled me to him, and I arched. *God*. I was gone. Pleasure *everywhere*. And his hand... oh, his fingers... right there, rubbing and stroking my clit. It wouldn't be long.

"You're so fucking close," he groaned. "Let it go... please... fuck, let it go... Come on my cock, baby."

I sucked in a breath and held it. Then it happened. It surged through me in waves, making me clench and tremble around him. Hard. And it continued assaulting me as I heard his guttural groan, as I felt his cock throb and pulse, as I squeezed harder and harder, taking everything from him. So fucking deep inside of me, and I still wasn't breathing. My eyes were shut, my face was scrunched together. Oh, God, we were still coming. Holy fuck. *Harder*. My God, my God, my God!

"Fuck!" I gasped breathlessly, releasing everything. My eyes flew open, my mouth too. *Christ*. I breathed, panted. Air. Fuck. Fuck. Stars. I saw them.

"Holy..." He was panting, too. Loudly. "Fuck." I shivered violently as he dropped his forehead on my back.

Holy fuck indeed.

That was... surreal.

"Shit... baby..."

I agree.

"Yeah," I breathed, leaning forward to press my forehead to the couch. Christ, I'm... "Spent."

I felt him nod against my back before he sighed heavily and pulled his softening cock out of me. Suddenly I felt weak. My legs were jelly for Christ's sake.

A few seconds after he was gone, he was back, wrapping me in my sheet again before he picked me up bridal-style, and my Irish boy was back. There was still trepidation in his eyes as he looked down at me, but... he was there. Bouncing back.

"I'm sorry," he murmured quietly, pressing a soft kiss to my cheek. "I shouldn't have..." He sighed. "I behaved like an..."

"Don't," I said softly, shaking my head as he studied my face. "I understand, baby. Don't make apologies. Please?"

"But-"

"No buts," I said quietly but firmly. "You're under a lot of stress, Edward, and... Christ, I can't even *begin* to understand the pressure you feel."

"That doesn't excuse my-"

"Oh, just shut up," I groaned. "Don't be a buzzkill, 'kay?" I asked, pinching his cheeks to lighten the mood. I just wanted my happy Edward back. "I'm here for you, Whistler. Always. I love you and I'm yours. It's as simple as that. I'm not going anywhere."

Irish boy was back and gaping like a fish.

Speaking of...

"I'm starving," I announced. "And that salmon sandwich you were shoving down your throat earlier sounds good now. Do we have more?"

Irish boy just nodded, still gaping like a salmon.

Twenty minutes later, we had sandwiches, fruits, snacks, and cans of soda spread out on the bed, and I was glad that Edward opened up and told me about his fears. They were pretty much what I had suspected. He didn't want Chicago. He didn't want to run the organization, and he didn't want to meet with all those people tomorrow. He was also afraid that I was going to distance myself from him because he wouldn't be my Irish boy when those people arrived, but I calmed him down. Of course he won't be my Irish boy. I already knew that. I knew that he would be a suit, all business and without mercy, and I think after an hour of telling him that I understood he finally relaxed. At last.

"You're my life, Bella," he murmured to me before we went back to sleep.

"And you're *my* life," I replied truthfully, snuggling closer to him. "I love you, Whistler."

"I love you, too, princess."

Tomorrow was going to be a long day, but as long as I had my Irish boy, everything was bliss, and I wasn't going anywhere.

## 27 – CHICAGO IN DECEMBER

### BPOV

“What’s this?” I asked, eyeing all the bags on the bed.

When I had woken up this morning, I had found a note from Edward where he told me that he had to meet up with Conn’s right hand man about our security. After I had read the note, I had taken another shower, only to realize that I had absolutely nothing to wear. And not in an Oh-my-God-I-only-have-fourteen-pair-of-pants-The-world-is-coming-to-an-end kind of way. No, I really had *nothing*. Not even underwear.

Luckily, Kate and Irina were way ahead of me, and by the time I had come out of the shower, I heard them pounding on the door. And now I was looking at one... three... ssssix... holy shit, eleven bags.

“I won’t need all this, girls,” I said, peeking down in a pink bag from Victoria’s Secret. “Well, this I need.” I chuckled and looked up at two smirking ladies. “For thinking Whistler’s such a pain in the ass, you sure like to make sure I’m sexy for him.”

“Hey, he woke us up at the ass-crack of dawn, handed his credit card over, and said ‘Bella will need clothes, and if you do this, you can buy shit for yourselves, too. Go nuts.’” Irina shrugged. “So... we took advantage.”

“And you went nuts,” I chuckled.

Kate grinned and nodded. “Yep. Nuts we went.”

Alrighty.

“So, what’s Edward wearing?” I asked. “Cause he didn’t have clothes either.”

"Don't worry about him," Kate said dismissively. "We made an appointment for him at Prada." She checked her watch. "And it's ten to eleven. He should be there in ten minutes to get fitted for a suit."

"Doesn't that take time?" I asked, confused.

I mean, it took us four days to get his, Emmett's and Alec's suits for our wedding.

"Not when you have money," Irina cackled as she handed me a bag from Dior. "He'll be here within two hours for the first meeting, suited up and ready. Now, go beautify yourself. Kate and I are going to order us some brunch."

\*O\*O\*O\*

Forty-five minutes later, I was wearing a black pencil skirt, an innocent looking top in a nude color, shoes matching the top, and I was 'beautified.' When I had joined Kate and Irina for brunch, they had eyed my outfit for about two seconds before they understood why I had chosen to wear what I wore now.



"You're going to act, too, aren't you?" Kate had asked incredulously.

To which I had nodded.

I didn't know much of my new life when it came to business but I did know that the women, though they were loved and cherished, were armcandy. They were to look exquisite, they were to be the hostesses, the pretty faces. So, yes, I had every intention of doing just that – be the hostess. Until Edward announces it's time for the meeting, I will be there and play my part as the supporting wife.

I told Kate and Irina as much and they quickly launched, giving me pointers and advice about what's to be expected of me and how Edward's 'associates' will treat me. I hadn't even thought of that because the only time I had met Masen or Cullen associates were at the two weddings. It had been a joyous occasion, though, and I quickly learned that there would be no smiling today. The men coming here soon would be completely different. They would be suits – coldhearted businessmen.

"So, we're *all* faking?" I had joked when Irina had explained this.

"No," they both had replied, frowning. And then they explained that only a handful of those attending the first meeting today were considered close enough to be invited to the wedding. In other words; the majority of those arriving soon... they're just business men. Hired and trained well. Men with eyes only for money and power.

"To be blunt, Bella... the men arriving here today are all criminals, and I'm not talking about car stealing now," Kate had said.

She had let the words hang there... as it dawned on me.

This was the Masen Family. A whole other league of fucked up and dangerous.



Murderers, robbers, kidnappers. Those were the people Edward was meeting with today. They hid behind fancy degrees and expensive suits, but even if they were lawyers, brokers, or what-the-fuck-ever, they were still criminals, helping and working with the Masens, taking orders from Ed. Or in this case; my husband.

"Are you really up for this, sweetie?" Kate asked, placing her hand on top of mine.

No.

But yes. For Whistler's sake.

"Yes," I said firmly, taking a sip of my orange juice even though my stomach rolled. But I needed this. I needed to come off as confident and strong. "Let's do this shit," I sighed, checking the time. "Whistler should be here any minute."

It was close to mission impossible.

Think about it.

Me. An eighteen year old girl from bumfucked Forks. No schooling, a fucking high school dropout. A girl with no experience or knowledge of the world.

I'm supposed to come off as a smart and confident mob wife?

Yeah, sure. Good luck with that.

God-fucking-damnit! Enough of this!

I squared my shoulders and jutted my chin. 'Cause I can fucking do this. I may not know much, but damnit, I can fake it.

"Bring it," I said, nodding firmly.

Kate nodded, too. "Alright."

"Okay," Irina said, also firmly. "First step; look classy, and you already do that."

"Yes, that outfit is perfect," Kate said. "Next up; you have to be polite and uppity. Think about Liz. She's nice and all, but she's also very fancy."

I cocked an eyebrow. "Polite and uppity?" I said dryly. "I could always think of you two. Although I don't know about *polite*..." I trailed off.

*That's right, ladies. I said it.*

*Not backing down.*

*You know you've been nothing but bitches toward my man.*

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.

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"Touché," Kate conceded with a sigh.

I cocked the bitch-brow again, this time at Irina.

"Fine!" she exclaimed. "I admit it!"

"You admit what?" And that was a smooth, velvet voice.

Looking like a God, Edward stood, leaning against the doorway with his arms folded over his chest and ankles crossed, oozing with confidence and sex, and holy mother of... fuck. The suit.

The suit, people. Oh, God...

Fuck me.

Seriously.

Fuck. Me.

His hair was in his normal, sexy disarray but everything else was just... No words, you know. The black, crisp, expensive suit. White button shirt. Black tie. Expensive watch. Fancy shoes. Freshly shaved. Jesus, that jaw of his.

He looked older, but not in a ragged way. No, he looked like a fuckhot CEO, ready to take down the devil.

I was suddenly picturing him behind me, whispering in my ear about what a bad little girl I had been and how he would punish me with his belt.

I bit my lip to keep the whimper bottled up.

It was then I noticed that Kate and Irina were talking to him, and he was replying, though keeping his dark eyes fixed on me. God, was it hot in here, or what?

"Fuck, you look sexy," I blurted out, effectively shutting them up.

Shit.

Three sets of eyes on me. Whistler was amused, Kate merely cocked an eyebrow, and Irina was watching my face as it flushed scarlet. Then she cracked up. Lovely.

"Well," Whistler said quietly and slowly as he approached me. "I can say the same about you, Isabella."

God, he went with Isabella.

I think I need to change panties.

"Hummmena." Yeah, that was my clever response.

I shook my head, 'cause this had to stop. Ridiculous for fuck's sake.

After taking a deep breath, I stood up, and to gain some damn leverage, I made sure to sway my hips a little as I met him in the middle of the room. I even added the coy smile I knew he loved, and the innocent eyes that drove him mad. A girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do. So, I slid my hands up his chest, grabbing the lapels of his jacket, and looked up at him all innocently while biting down on my lip.

"Fuck," he whispered under his breath, followed by his hands on my hips. "Bella." He shook his head slightly, for a second closing his eyes, and I knew I had him like he had me. "You're sin," he said finally, looking at me with those smoldering eyes. "Fucking sin. And you know it, too."

Hmm, maybe.

"But I'm your sin, Mr. Cullen," I whispered quietly, reading up on my tiptoes to kiss his jaw. "Only yours."

"Damn straight," he muttered before grabbing my chin. Then he kissed me. Hard and deep.

"Ahem."

"Ahem."

Fuck.

"Goddamnit," Whistler growled lowly, ending our kiss reluctantly.

"You can continue this later," Kate said. "Irina and I have to prepare Bella for the meeting."

This earned me an incredulous look from Edward. "Baby, you don't have to be here."

"But I want to," I said firmly, heading over to the table again. "I will be here to greet the fuckers and that's that."

It was easy to see that Edward was conflicted. A big part of him obviously wanted me there but then there was the other part, the part that feared I would think his life was too much. And I knew that he would let me go if I wanted out. I knew that. He wouldn't force me to stay – not that he could since he'd signed for my full consent – but he wouldn't even try to stop me if he knew I really wanted none of this. So, obviously he didn't like bringing me too close to the truly bad aspects of his life. But this was Edward Ryan Cullen we were talking about – a man who thought he knew what was best for me. Luckily, I wasn't a doormat and I never hesitated to bring him down.

"Do you want me here today?" I asked him, arching a brow.

"You know I do, princess, but this isn't some dinner or casual gathering," he said, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Look... You know how the society is, and as much as I fucking hate it, I can't do shit about it." He chuckled humorlessly. "If you knew how the men will treat you, look at you, you wouldn't want this. So..." He faced Kate and Irina. "Please do me a favor and tell my wife what she can expect today." Then he looked at his watch. "I have to go downstairs to meet Kellan. He just flew in."

I said nothing.

Edward came up to me, kissed me on the forehead, told me he loved me... and left. He thought I wouldn't be here when he returned. He thought I was going to go with Kate and Irina while he held the meeting.

Wrong.

I will be here.

Facing the ladies, I said one thing. "Prepare me, fill me in."

They saw my determination.

\*O\*O\*O\*

It wasn't long after that I heard voices coming from the foyer.

Kate and Irina were with me in the bedroom and they had uh... well, they had been sneaky, and apparently they knew some shit. Some tech-stuff, which can be explained seeing as Garrett's their dad. Anyway, I was prepared. Looking all uppity and shit.

"You ready, sweetie?" Kate asked, looking at me in concern.

Deep breaths.

The shit they had told me...

Deep breaths.

"Yes," I said.

"And you have the bug?" Irina asked.

I nodded. *I have it.*

"Will you be here the entire time?" I asked.

"No," Kate answered. "We're not allowed to listen in." She grinned wickedly. "Not that you are either, but Edward won't be mad at you. At me and Irina on the other hand..."

Yeah, he'd be furious if he knew his cousins were listening in. Not that he didn't trust Kate and Irina, but... still, they weren't close enough to him. He would never allow it.

"Right," I chuckled. "Well, let's get this show on the road."

"I have faith in you," Irina said, linking arms with me as we left the bedroom. "You're strong. You can do this."

I fucking hope so.

As we reached the living room, a part of me wanted to turn around and go back to the bedroom, but no. I refused. Instead I kept walking. Walking towards the many men gathering in the large room. All business suits.

"Isabella?" I heard Edward say, and I instantly found him entering the living room with Kellan. They were both surprised to see me there.

*Game on.*

I smiled and walked over to him, making sure I walked with purpose as the other men leered at me. They leered at Kate and Irina, too, but they were used to this, and didn't hesitate to mingle briefly before leaving. They were the wives of two car thieves after all, and apparently it didn't matter that Demitri and Felix were in prison. Kate and Irina still had parts to play.

"Nice to see you again, Kellan," I said politely as I reached the two. "Did you have a pleasant flight?"

I felt Edward's eyes on me, reading, studying me, and I hoped he would understand soon that I also could play.

I can play the part. I can ask the questions no one really cares about, I can be armcandy. I can be the pretty face my husband shows off before getting down to business.

"Yes, Mrs. Cullen?" Kellan asked rather than stated, eyes flickering between me and Whistler.

"Good," I said simply, linking arms with Edward as I looked up at him.

"Any word from Conn, *dear*?"

He cleared his throat, seemingly understanding that I wasn't going anywhere. Finally.

"Not yet, love," he said before turning to Kellan. "If you'll excuse me, I will go introduce my wife."

Yes, he knew.

Good.

"Of course," Kellan replied with a nod.

There were about ten to fifteen men gathered in the living room. All making small talk in little groups.

"Thank you," Whistler murmured quietly, steering me towards the first group of me.

"I want every part of you, Edward," I told him. "Doesn't matter what. I will be by your side."

He squeezed me, in silent thanks, but no more words were exchanged because we had reached the first group of leering fuckers.

Kate's words echoed in my mind. *"They will see you as Edward's property. Don't be surprised if they speak of you like you're not even there."*

And Irina's. *"The easiest way for them to know where they have Edward is to go through you. If Edward allows them to speak freely to you, they will think Edward is weak. In other words, this is to get a feel of Edward's way of ruling the organization."*

"That's fucked up," I had told them.



Kate had just shrugged and said, *"It's true nonetheless. They will judge him by the husband he is. If he's protective of you, and threatening towards them, they will respect him."*

I saw the logic... I guess... but it was still fucked up.

Anyway, I was ready for it. So, I held my head up high as two out of three men eyed me hungrily.

"Isabella," Edward said curtly. "This is James Hunter and Laurent Adams, two of Ed's most hired trackers. James, Laurent, this is my wife, Isabella."

"Nice to meet you both," I lied, giving a small curtsy, which was more a nod of my head.

"Pleasure's all mine, Isabella," James said as his eyes roamed over me.

Edward cleared his throat, raising an eyebrow at James in warning, and I could see how hard this was for him. I already knew how possessive Edward could be, not to mention protective, and though this was an easy way for the men to get a good picture of Edward, I still knew Edward would've thought it was easier if I was in Kate and Irina's suite now. Because right now I knew Edward wouldn't mind punching James.

But instead he faced the third man. "And this is Benjamin Cheney. I'm sure you remember him from the wedding, love." He wasn't quite as curt with Benjamin, and I yes, I remembered him from the wedding. He seemed nice enough. "He often works with Garrett, always eager to upgrade our security."

"Nice to see you again, Benjamin," I said softly, this time reaching my hand out, because I remember speaking briefly with his wife at the wedding, and she was certainly nice. "I hope Angela's doing well?"

Benjamin smiled. It wasn't big but it was sincere. And shook my hand.  
"She's well, thank you. She and the kids are visiting family in Arizona until this blows over."

"Good," I said, remembering their two sons. "Tell her I said hi."

"I will, Mrs. Cullen."

Alrighty. I can fucking do this.

Edward moved us towards the next group then, but he stopped as we passed James, and he leaned in close to him. He spoke quietly but I still heard.

"Eye-fuck my wife again and I'll put a bullet in your head. Are we clear?"

Holy... shit.

A part of me was afraid he was serious.

"Yes, sir," James said with wide eyes.

*I guess Edward has his respect now.*

This went on. Without any more threats, thankfully, but yeah, Edward introduced me to everyone. One of the two women there was Siobhan McKenna, and she had flown in this morning to give her input on what the authorities knew. Then, at last, I had met them all, and Kate and Irina had left.

So, when Edward told everyone to take their seats in the dining room area, I hugged him close for a second, both because I wanted to, but also to attach the bug on him. It wasn't hard thanks to the adhesive, so I slipped it under his black leather belt, resisting the urge to grab his ass, before I released him.

What, his ass is bitable, you know. All tight and perfect looking.

"I'll stay in the bedroom," I said quietly.

"Alright. Love you," he sighed, kissing me chastely before backing away.

"Do you have everything you need?"

I nodded. "Yep. Magazines, drinks, snacks... whatever, I have it," I chuckled. "Good luck."

He smirked. "Don't need it, sweetheart."

Cocky, sexy... God.

"Now, go in there," he said, nodding towards the bedroom. "I'd tell you about the meeting later, but that might be a bit repetitive."

Huh?

I didn't understand that, but Edward gave me a wink and then he headed for the dining room.

There was nothing left for me to do, so I went to the bedroom, plopped my ass down on the bed, and fired up the laptop that Kate had brought me earlier.

It took some time to upload but after grabbing a Coke and a chocolate bar from the mini-fridge, the audio feed came through, and I settled on the bed once more.

When Kate and Irina first mentioned it to me, I had stared at them as if they were insane, but... then I got curious. So, it didn't take very long for them to sell the idea.

"*Siobhan, why don't you start,*" I heard Edward say. "*What's the status with the Feds?*"

I sipped my Coke, disgustingly intrigued by all this. But I couldn't help it.

*"Black has no proof of anything,"* I heard Siobhan reply in a thick accent. She was really Irish. *"After the ambush at The Fairmont in Seattle, they're trying to find evidence of the Avellinos being near. Same goes for our involvement – they have no proof."*

That was a relief. I had been worried about security footage and pictures leaking out, but I guess my family knew what they were doing.

*"We got a hold of the tapes from the hotel."* That was Benjamin. *"Me and my crew destroyed all evidence after hacking in."*

*"And cleanup?"* Edward continued.

*"All taken cared of, sir,"* Kellan said, and Benjamin filled in with his own 'yes.'

*"Good. So, that's that. What about the media? Pete?"*

*"Speculations. Obviously they're blowing it up."*

*"But they're speaking of us and the Italians?"*

*"Yes, sir. The papers in Washington are worst. It's talk of Mafia war."*

Many chuckled... as if it was funny. Idiots.

*"Names mentioned from The Fairmont?"* Edward asked, thankfully not sounding amused at all.

*"Yes, sir,"* Pete replied, sobering. *"Your brother and sister-in-law were mentioned of course, since it was their wedding. You and your wife are mentioned briefly in the Seattle Times, but only as close family. Unfortunately they mentioned your father and Mrs. Masen as targets, which we all believe is correct. Since there's no word on Mr. Masen yet,*

*and no public announcement has been made, the papers are still standing firm about the kidnapping."*

"*They still believe Ed's been kidnapped,*" Edward stated flatly.

"*Yes. And since Special Agent Black went out in public with you and your brother's records, the media find it easier to include the Cullens in their ideas. In other words, since Mr. Masen's son is in prison, they now believe your father is in charge.*"

Crap, the media is basically guessing right. Sure, there is no proof but their speculations are still dead on. And if the media believes it, I'm pretty fucking sure the Feds have come to the same conclusion.

"*Alright,*" Edward sighed heavily. "*Siobhan, how many Feds were there on Saturday?*"

"*Seven. Three of them were killed on spot as the Avellinos entered the building. A fourth one died yesterday after undergoing surgery. They couldn't save him, luckily, because he was the one who saw or heard most.*"

What? Keep talking!

Reaching over to the nightstand, I grabbed my smokes and lit one up.

Yeah, now I'm smoking indoors.

There will be no living with Whistler after this.

"*Saw most? What do you mean?*" Edward asked.

"*SA Black told me that the injured agent was rambling about a man named Lettoni as the paramedics worked on him.*"

"*Caius,*" Edward spat. "*Caius was there?*"

*"We don't know," Siobhan sighed. "The agent died before he could talk more, but the good thing here is that Caius isn't known in America. Black didn't know what to make of the name."*

There was a long silence then, and for a minute I thought I had lost the feed, but soon Edward spoke up. Edward Cullen. Not Whistler, not Irish boy.

*"Hunter and Adams, I want you both to track Caius's unit down," he said, voice devoid of emotion. "You have unlimited resources. Benjamin, Conn informed me of nine Avellinos being disposed of. Did the security tapes show more of them?"*

*"Yes, sir. Twelve."*

*"Alright. Let's assume Caius is well, seeing as he wasn't one of the nine. Now, we don't know how many people Caius have, but at least nine of them are gone."*

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*"Orders, sir?" That was James. "Once we've found Lettoni and his men, that is."*

I took a drag. A deep one. And held it.

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*"Eliminate them."*

"Christ," I exhaled.

*"Consider it done."*

I was scared. Scared that this was killing my husband. He had literally just issued his first order and it was to have men killed.

It's my God's honest truth when I say that I don't think less of him, because I want Caius dead, too. Especially since he's responsible of the death of four members of our organization, and also... actually, mainly... because not only did Caius get close to my loves ones with guns, he got really fucking close to Alec and Nessa, not to mention that one of his men actually shot my father-in-law. So, no, I don't think less of Whistler. I almost love him more, but... I don't know what it's like to be responsible for someone's death. No matter how vile those Avellinos are... they're still human. Sorta. And I hope with all I am that this won't destroy my husband.

The meeting continued for another two hours, and I listened intently, quickly learning Edward's signs by just hearing his voice. I knew when he was livid, I knew when he was reluctant, and I knew when he was upset or frustrated. By the end of those two hours, orders had been issued and completely new plans had been formed.

Besides going after Caius, we also had a team heading for Italy with one single task; get information on Aro and closest men. Edward demanded pictures and video feed involving everything. All things Aro. Nothing was to be missed. He wanted to learn Aro's routines. He wanted to know names, dates and locations. Everything. And again, the team had unlimited resources to find what they could.

Next up was Siobhan, and her task was to keep close to Black, and that included his annoying son... and friend. So, that also included Jasper. Siobhan was also going to do her best to hide all things Italian in order to keep the Feds guessing.

Halfway through the meeting, Edward had called up Garrett, and with him on the phone, Edward had ordered Garrett and Benjamin to work on a

new escape plan in case Code Black was issued again. The two were also supposed to put together a routine for when we entered Code Red.

I remembered Code Red of course.

Code Red is charging. Attack. Launch. Whatever.

Which took us to Kellan. Edward promoted him to head of security because he thought Conn was a fucking pussy. His words, not mine, but I knew Conn's opinion on Liz and the kids weighed heavily on Edward's shoulders. But I digress. Kellan was now head of security and he had his men standing by while he worked with Benjamin and Garrett and their plan. It was after all the Masen security guards that would do the... attacking part of Code Red.

Last but not least, Edward ordered Pete to deal with Liam's wife. It was simple. Since Edward couldn't deal with Liam himself, which is what he would've liked, Edward thought it was best to send someone who had been close to Liam and his wife, and that happened to be Pete and his wife Sandra. So, with all that taken care of, Edward announced that the meeting was over.

I had just put out the umpteenth smoke and shut down the laptop when Edward entered the bedroom, looking tired to say the least.

But as he sniffed the air, he cocked an amused brow.

"Aw, princess, are you smoking indoors?" he gasped in mock horror.

I rolled my eyes.

"Oh, you," I muttered.

He chuckled tiredly, pulling at his tie, and plopped down on the bed.



"So..." I looked at him expectantly, wanting to know about the meeting... even though I already knew it all. But he didn't know that I knew. You know.

"So...?" he shot back, laying his head down in my lap. Then he shook his head, almost drilling his face into my stomach, and this was Irish boy's way of saying, 'scratch me, woman.' So, I did. I threaded my fingers through his hair and scratched his scalp.

"Cutie pie," I chuckled.

"Mmhmm," he hummed into my stomach. "Y'know, this top of yours is all... *itchy*. Can't you... you know... take it off?"

Nice try.

"Not until you tell me how the meeting went," I said dryly.

"Good one," he deadpanned, looking up at me as he appeared to be scratching his ass. Only, he wasn't. Shit. Oops. "Really, princess? You planted a fucking bug on me and thought I wouldn't notice?"

I averted my eyes to the ceiling and started whistling.

Then, like a freight train, his words from earlier came back.

*"I'd tell you about the meeting later, but that might be a bit repetitive."*

Repetitive.

Like... fuck. He knew from the start! He knew I would listen!

"Fuck, you're adorable," he laughed. "Seriously, Bella. Don't you think I know my own cousins, not to mention who their father is? Please, give me some credit."

Yeah, I blushed.

Then he tackled me. Tickled me, made farting noises, and kissed the shit out of me.

I loved it. I really loved how Irish boy just bounced back, and later that night, after we had eaten dinner, I confronted him about his order to have Caius killed. But Edward calmed me down and I was immensely relieved when he told me that his only fear was me thinking less of him for not feeling bad about his decision, because he didn't. All he could think about was me, Alec, and Nessa, and how close to danger we had been. Then of course also about the fact that Aro held his uncle hostage, and that Caius had killed four guards in the organization. So, when Edward had entered the bedroom after the meeting, and I hadn't seemed upset, he started to relax.

I was glad he finally saw how devoted I was to him.

\*O\*O\*O\*

The next two days went by fast, and luckily the meeting between Pete and Liam's wife had gone well. She hadn't wasted any time, and yesterday she visited Liam at the prison. Only a few hours later, Liam had used a call to his mother and ordered her to get his brother and sister out of Portland. He had been furious with his mother and he couldn't believe how she could leave them alone, with only a guard. And that was that, Liam's order to Conn trumped Liz's order, and now Alec and Nessa were being flown to Chicago.

They were due to arrive later this evening, but there were two other arriving that Edward and I focused on first.

Somehow, Emmett had been informed about the situation back home, and last night, they left their resort after only having spent three nights together. We felt bad and Edward had called him and told them to stay a

few more days, but Emmett had refused. Even Rose refused, stating that she wouldn't be able to relax if things back home were insane.

So, that's how Edward and I ended up in a limo, on our way to pick Em and Rose up at the airfield two hours outside the city – the same airfield Edward and I had landed on just a few days ago. Which meant we had two hours. Alone. In a limo.

Guess how we spent those two hours.

\*O\*O\*O\*

"Okay, princess, that's enough," Edward chuckled and pulled me away from Rose. "You two have been hugging and squealing for twenty minutes now, and we have shit to do, remember?"

Yeah, yeah, I remember.

Edward and Em are taking me and Rose to an underground shooting range, located underneath the Masen Mansion.

They want us to learn how to use guns. Yeah. Exactly.

"Fine," I said with a pout, which Edward took as an invitation to suck on it.

"Stop it," I said, slapping him away. "Shit to do, remember?"

Irish boy winked.

I sighed and linked arms with Rose, and then we spent the next couple of hours hearing about their short yet eventful honeymoon on a small island in Greece. Well, after Emmett had commented about how the limo reeked of sex, that is. So, it was a bit cold on the way back to the city, because we had all the windows rolled down.

Later when we finally arrived at the mansion, we were given a small tour before I dragged Rose with me to go change, and I won't even mention all the things we saw in the mansion where Ed and Liz lived with Alec and Nessa. Because shit... it was three times bigger than the Cullen Estate in Forks and four times bigger than our home on Bainbridge. Crazy is all I'm saying.

"What are we doing in here?" Rose chuckled as we entered the massive bathroom.

And... what are we doing in here? Come on. Time to spill, Rose.

"Well, first," I said, holding up the two bags. "If we're gonna use guns, I wanna look cool. And second... actually I just brought the clothes as an excuse to get you alone," I said, shrugging. "Cause I want the deets, you know."

"Deets about what?" she asked innocently, taking one of the bags.

"Bitch, please," I huffed. "Don't even go there. In the limo you were all 'oh, he was so romantic, B. There were romantic dinners, breakfast in bed, candles, roses, sunsets...' blah, blah, yadi, yadi. Now, quit being coy and talk dirty," I demanded.

We both knew how perfect our husbands were and how romantic they were, but what I didn't know was how Em was... you know. You know.

"Fuck, B, when did you become so fucking crude?" Rose said, arching a brow. I cocked a brow in return, and she finally let the mask fall. "Okay, he was fucking amazing, alright! He's huge, thick, and long, has the stamina of a seventeen year old, and a tongue that's magic."

I was not amused.

"Why are you quoting me, Rose?" I asked as I pulled on my new pair of jeans. "Don't you think I remember what I told you after I returned from Costa Rica?"

Because I had told Rose just that. About the thick and the long and the massive and the stamina and the magic...

Great, now I'm horny.

Rose shrugged. "I know I was quoting you. But those words apply to Em, too." She grinned deviously. "Seriously, Bella..." Dreamy sigh. "The first night was... God, it was so sweet... and then he sorta continued, you know. He was sweet and careful..."

I nodded, knowing exactly where she was going with this. 'Cause Edward used to be just like that. "So, what did you do to make him lose his mind?" I asked, grinning at her. "Cause I assume you did."

She nodded. "Yep. After our middle landing in London on the way back home, I straddled him and rode him like a fucking bronco. I think he understood then that I wasn't made out of glass, and that I wanted it kinky."

"Atta girl." I winked.





\*O\*O\*O\*

After our much needed girl talk, we rejoined the boys in one of the living rooms.

Edward let out a low whistle as he saw me, and Emmett cursed under his breath when he saw Rose, which made my idea to get changed even better. Now we weren't wearing fancy stuff. No, I was wearing skinny jeans that hugged my ass, a tight t-shirt that said 'Keep Calm and Kill Zombies.' Add some cool jewelry and a pair of glossy red fuck-me heels and you have a Whistler adjusting himself. Same went for Emmett who was watching Rose and her equally skinny jeans, tight t-shirt, hot pink jewelry and hot pick heels. We had our boys where we wanted them.

"So... let's shoot some shit," Rose said.

Yep.

\*O\*O\*O\*

"They're ugly, Em," Rose huffed, trying to return her safety glasses. "I mean... orange? *Really?*"

I rolled my eyes and put on my own fugly glasses in orange.

I admit, I love dressing up for Whistler now, and shopping can be fun, but I'm not as bad as Rose. No way.

"You gotta wear `em, gorgeous," Em said firmly as he... did some shit with a gun. I dunno.

"Alright, princess, we're over here," Edward murmured, leading me to one of the stalls. There were seven of them. Don't ask me why they would need that many.

"Okay, baby, this is target practice," he said, handing me a pair of earmuffs or... headphones. "See the target over there?" He pointed, I saw. It was fucking far. I nodded and swallowed hard. "Yeah, you're gonna shoot it. Aim for the head."

"Yeah, I don't see that happening, Whistler," I said, shaking my head. I mean, that target-thingy was at least... two hundred feet away. Cause that's how fucking huge this underground range was. Like a big ass garage. "If I'm lucky, the bullet will hit the cement wall behind." Cause it was nothing but wall. *That* I could hit. Or... if we were in a boat... I'm pretty sure I'd be able to aim for the water. Pretty sure. But we're not on water now.

"Aw, don't doubt yourself, princess," he chuckled quietly, motioning me to come forward. "I hope with all my heart that you'll never have to put your skills to use, but it's precaution. It's so that your husband can sleep at night. Now... This is a Glock 17, 9 millimeter." He picked up the gun from the table in front of us. "We use them because it's a common handgun and many authorities in both America and Europe use Glocks. In other words, we don't use guns that could identify its user."

I nodded in understanding.

"Okay," he sighed, putting the gun down again. "Pick it up, and whatever you do, don't point it at yourself... or me for that matter."

Funny Irish boy. He's so fucking funny.

"It's not loaded, is it?" I asked, chewing my lip as I picked it up. "Huh. Heavy."

"It's not loaded yet, no. But make it a rule. Always point the barrel away," he explained. "Now, pull the slide open here." He gestured and I obeyed, not understanding shit. And then Edward caught a part that was detached. "This is the magazine. We're gonna load it." He held the part-thingy up. "Here's ammunition, princess. Just watch me, and then you copy, alright?"

"Uh-huh." I was really trying to concentrate, really, but... shit, this was a lot of stuff to take in. "Okay, that doesn't look hard," I conceded in relief as I watched Edward load the... whatever he called it. Magazine? Yeah, sure. Somehow I doubt I'll find fashion advice in that kind of magazine. And now I sounded like Kate and Irina. Awesome.

After Edward had shown me, I tried, and it was true. It wasn't all that hard to load the gun.

"Good," he said. "Now, attach the mag again." He handed me the gun and gestured how it was supposed to be done. "Yes, just release the slide. Perfect." It clicked.

"And now?" I asked, holding the gun at arms-length between my fingers.

This amused Whistler.

"Now it's loaded, baby, so keep that in mind and don't point the barrel my way, okay?" He snickered. Then he grabbed the gun from me. "Watch how I hold it." And I did. I watched as his long fingers gripped the gun, and how his index avoided the trigger. "First you aim." He did, looking very



sexy. "And you use the sight on top of the barrel. You see?" I nodded. "Alright. Now, with the Glock, the safety is on the trigger. So, you just pull the trigger. Nothing else." I didn't understand but sure, okay, whatever. "Put your headphones on, princess, and watch me fire off a couple of rounds."

Before I could put them on, he shouted to Em and Rose who were occupying another stall. "You guys ready?!"

"Ready, bro!" Em bellowed.

I put the headphones on and watched Edward intently.

In a slow, steady motion, he pulled the trigger and a shot rang out. Then again, and again. Holy shit, he's hot. His muscles were... homina, homina, homina... God, I think I'm focusing on the wrong thing here. Still, thank God he decided to wear that black t-shirt, cause... his arms. Jesus.

Then when he was done, he pushed some button, and we watched as the target-thingy got closer and closer on some weird sliding-gizmo. Yeah, I'm so fucking technical it hurts.

"Hot fuck!" I exclaimed as I saw the target. Whistler had put five holes right on the face. The forehead, more correctly.

Edward just shrugged like it was no big deal, while I stood there gaping like Nemo. Oh, and squeezing my thighs together.

"Your turn, princess!" Edward shouted so that I could hear him. Shit, he was grinning like a fool now. He clearly enjoyed this part of our life. So did I. As long as I could watch him. "Just make sure you don't touch the trigger until you have your aim!"

"Okay, okay," I muttered.

Deep breaths.

I gripped the gun firmly, never touching the trigger.

Edward stood behind me but still close enough so that I could see him in my periphery, and he was looking too fucking hot. Leaning against the wall with his ankles crossed, his arms folded, black protection glasses and earplugs. And that grin. Jesus, he was really at his own version of a playground.

Anyway.

Another deep breath. I held it.

I aimed. I think.

I pulled the trigger.

Shit!

I didn't expect that. I fucking felt the way it rippled through me.

An hour later, I was pissed.

Not only was I missing the face... I was missing the entire sheet.

"No pressure, baby," Edward said after I had tossed off the headphones.

"We'll go again, and please remember not to hold your breath. You need to exhale before you shoot."

Yeah, yeah. I had heard that now for the past hour. But for some reason I still drew a breath and held it before I pulled the trigger. I didn't know why, I just did.

"Put your headphones on again," he murmured after he had loaded the gun for me... again.

I sighed and put them on.

I wasn't bitter. Not at all.

Okay, I was, but shit, Rose was acing it. She was shooting the head off her target everytime.

With the gun back in my hand, I aimed. And shot. Over and over, I didn't fucking get it. And now I had a damn audience. Em, Rose, and Whistler all stood behind me, smoking and grinning.

Fuckers.

I shot some more. I was... so... sick of it.

And then the magazine was empty. Again. And I felt Whistler come up behind me, so I threw the headphones off again.

"I'm sorry, princess," he chuckled. "But you can't shoot to save your life. I think practice is over."

I whipped around, accidently pointing the gun at him but don't worry, I lowered it before he could piss his pants. But wait... why didn't he look scared just now? He didn't even flinch.

As if I had asked the question out loud, he answered. "Point all you want. I bet the safest place to be in your case is in direct line of fire, because you won't hit it!" And now he was guffawing.

Funny, funny Irish boy.

Or not, so I sorta stepped out of my 6-inch heel and flung it at him, hitting him right in the kisser.

Yeah, take that, Whistler! The only ones laughing now were Emmett and Rose. Edward on the other hand was clutching his head and 'owwwing'.

"Holy fuck, Bella!" he groaned, still palming his face. "Damn, you really put strength in that shit! *Fucking* hell."

I felt bad. I really did. But it felt good.

"Goddamnit," he muttered. "As soon as this pain goes away, we're setting you up with throwing-knives, 'cause damn... what you can't do with a gun, I'm pretty fucking certain you can do with knives."

I was happy again, and ever happier was I when Emmett told us that their Uncle Ed had throwing knives. So, we moved to another stall, and the boys set up some weird wooden thingy, not so far off, but still... sorta far off. And I threw knives. Over and over. With a fucking grin on my face, 'cause I nailed it. I kicked both Emmett's and Edward's asses at it while Rose cheered for me.

Yeah.

Edward was pretty much beaming with pride, but he was still a Cullen. In other words; really competitive. So, he still harrumphed a few times when I beat him.

At least I'm good at *something*.

Right?

## **28 – CHICAGO IN JANUARY**

### **BPOV**

"Nervous about leaving Alec behind?" I asked quietly as we entered the suite again.

We had just eaten breakfast downstairs with Emmett, Rose, Alec and Nessa. We obviously talked about our departure but I could see that something was bothering Edward, and I had a feeling it was about Alec.

Ever since Alec and Nessa had joined us in Chicago, Whistler and Emmett had been reluctant to leave them out of their sight, so I figured this would be hard, especially since we didn't know how long we would be in Europe for. I was also reluctant to leave the kids behind. We'd grown so close over the past couple of weeks that it felt like we were a truly close knit family.

"A little," Edward admitted, kissing the top of my head. "But I'd rather have him here with Em and Rose than with us in Rome. At least for a while. And as long as Liz and Conn are still in hiding, I know Alec and Nessa are safe here without her bullshit."

I agreed there. Liz was still bitching about Alec and Nessa being too close to danger in Chicago, which I didn't fucking understand considering the fact that their permanent residence is here. She was weird. Even Esme thought her sister was insane.

I also agreed with Whistler about not bringing Alec with us, of course. The past couple of weeks had been all about planning, training and setting things into motion, and for what Whistler had planned, I certainly didn't want Alec with us. It was going to be dangerous as it was. Hell, at first Whistler refused to take *me* with him, but luckily I managed to convince him over the holidays. Not without the help of Esme and Tanya, though. Those two women sure knew the concept of Catholic guilt. Christ, they really knew how to talk. Since the Masens and the Cullens – with all associates – were still scattered across the nation, Tanya and Esme asked how Edward even dared talking about leaving his precious wife at home while he went to Rome in mid-January.

With everything going around us, we stayed low over Christmas and New Years. No big affairs or wild parties. We didn't want that. Instead we were gathered in mine and Whistler's suite – him and I, Em and Rose, Alec and Nessa, Kate and Irina, and Garrett. We ate a Christmas dinner and

exchanged gifts of course, but even though Rose and I had never shared a holiday with Esme and Carlisle before, it still felt off to celebrate without them. Granted, we had a nice time, but with Esme, Carlisle, and Tanya still in Canada, we simply decided to take it easy.

I digress.

It was on Christmas when we called them in Vancouver to wish them a merry Christmas that Esme and Tanya guilt tripped Edward into taking me with him. Christ, the words they pushed down Edward's throat...

*"It's Christmas, son, and you're talking about leaving your Bella behind?"*

*"Edward, you listen to me now; these are tough times for our family. We need to stay together. And poor Allannah, do you want to break her heart by leaving her behind?"*

*"Exactly, Edward. You would really break her heart into thousand pieces if you left her behind. She would be so incredibly alone and sad without you."*

*"Not to mention all the training, dear nephew of mine. You and your brother have trained your wives very well. They are capable, very much so. I must ask, how can you live with your decision, Edward? Can you not see the pain you would put your wife through if you left her, and only brought your team along?"*

*"Yes, listen to your Aunt, Edward. Bella would be so terribly devastated, especially since coming with you is something she is both want and need. Do you really want to see the girl I love like a daughter in tears, hmm? Hmm?"*

Yeah, they showed no mercy on my poor husband.

He looked thoroughly remorseful and chastised, while the rest of us that had listened were trying to hold back laughter.

I remember the wide eyes, the way he swallowed hard, and the way he brought me to his lap, and how he said, *"I'm so fucking sorry, princess. Of course I'll bring you with me."*

So, that was that.

"What are you thinking, baby?" Edward murmured, bringing me out of my musings.

I shook my head, smiling softly, and made things very clear to Irish boy as I grabbed his hand and started walking towards the bedroom.

He understood.

After these past couple of days, we needed some damn cuddling and loving.

Not kidding.

Fuck, Edward and Emmett were both spent, but they never quit. The two of them ruled the organization with an iron fist, and with Garrett and Kellan as their closest confidants, they had the means and power to bring the devil down, I'm sure. And yes, Rose and I had listened in on all the meetings. Only this time, I didn't plant a bug on Whistler. They simply trusted us enough to attach the device under the table, so we could listen. In fact, it was Emmett's suggestion in the first place, and Whistler just shrugged and said, "Of course they can listen." So we did. And we stood by their decisions, never faltering. Rose and I were there all the way all the time, showing our love and support.

"Do you know how beautiful you are?" Whistler murmured, dropping a kiss on my shoulder as I undressed in front of him. "Do you know how much you mean to me?"

Turning around in his embrace, I placed a hand on his cheek.

I kissed his chest.

"Yes," I whispered. "Because you make sure I know."

He smiled against my palm. Kissed it. "Good."

Once we were both under the covers, we kissed unhurriedly. Deeply and passionately, like nothing else existed.

We always had fun. One second could be intimate and emotional, and then the next it could be light and fun. It was all Edward's personality for me. He was incredible and could make me feel so fucking good. It didn't matter if it was with words coming straight from his heart, or if it was him licking me on my fucking cheek after eating his damn Doritos. He still made sure I knew I was the most important person in his life.

And speaking of light and fun...

Edward disappeared then, under the covers after flashing me his crooked grin.

*And shit! Gah!*

"Wait, wait... what are you *doing*?" I squeaked, trying to slap his hands away. It didn't work very well because my Irish boy was a strong fucker. "Christ, Whistler, get *out* of there!"

He chuckled against my stomach, which just tickled the *shit* out of me.



"Nah, I like it under the covers," he replied. Kisses, soft ones, funny tickly ones, all over my stomach. "I'll see you in an hour."

I giggled. "You're gonna spend the next hour under our covers?"

"Fuck yeah," he chuckled. Hands roaming my sides, ribcage. "I regret having breakfast downstairs. I could've eaten it here."

*Here*, was emphasized with a kiss on my hipbone, and I was suddenly glad we headed back to bed after breakfast. Because this was as good as it got. Just me and my husband, in the bedroom.

"Or here," he murmured, kissing my thigh. Hands kneading it. Fuck. "Or here." Closer, closer. God, nose grazing. "Or here," he said huskily. "Fuck, you smell good, princess." He groaned, I moaned. I wanted to see him.

"You know, it's a funny sight for me, baby," I chuckled breathlessly as he slid my panties down. "All I see is something big moving under the covers."

He laughed. Against my pussy.

"Oh, I assure you, love. Something big will move *here* soon."

*Here*, was now an openmouthed kiss- *shit*, then fuck, his tongue... entering.

"*Edward*," I moaned.

I couldn't take it. I ripped off the covers, throwing it down on the floor. I had to see him, and he grinned wickedly but didn't stop. Thank *God*, he didn't stop. Christ, his tongue. Delving deeper, and fingers. *Oh...*

"Feel good, princess?" he moaned quietly, lips moving over my clit, fingers entering me. "Does it feel good when I play with your sweet pussy?"

*Jesus.*

"Fuck, yes," I breathed, or panted, or gasped. I fisted his hair. "I... I... shit." He found that spot, his middle finger, so deep. Tongue pressing down on my clit. Fuck, I was soaked. "Edward..." Get the words out! "I... fuck, I need you, baby!"

He hummed, sending vibrations through me.

Then he had a hand on my breast, damn multitasker.

God...

"You need me right now?" he groaned. "Tell me what you need of me. You know it's yours."

Religious motherfucking experience. It's his tongue, his fingers, his words. God, now I need his cock.

"Fuck me, Whistler," I whimpered. "Please give me your cock."

"*Christ,*" he breathed. Then up, up. He climbed up my body, trailing hot kisses. "Is that it, Mrs. Cullen?" he whispered against my right breast. Tongue circling my taut nipple. "You want my cock deep inside your pussy? Deep inside your soaked pussy?"

Holy *mother* of... "Yesss," I hissed, arching against him as he bit down on my nipple.

His large hands were firm on my skin. All over, feeling. And his cock, right there. Pressing against.

"Fuck, you're so hard, baby," I rasped, clinging to him, nails digging into his shoulder blades. Fuck, he was right there. The tip of him, teasing.

"More, Whistler... please fuck me."

He kissed my neck. Hot breath, muscular body covering mine.

"Wanna know what makes my cock so *fucking* hard, princess?" he breathed out, tongue on my earlobe, circling, before he sucked it into his mouth. I was going insane. He was everywhere.

"Tell me," I moaned, again arching into him, needing to feel all of him.  
"Tell me and take me, baby."

He groaned... and pushed his thick cock inside my pussy. Stretching me, pulsing inside me, so fucking slick from my wetness.

"It's you, Bella," he gritted out, breathing heavily in the crook of my neck. "Your face, your beautiful eyes, your pouty lips." We both moaned. He kissed me. My jaw, my neck, then my lips. "Those lips are begging to be kissed," he whispered against said lips. And he moved inside me, persistently and so deeply. "Or to be wrapped around my cock as you suck me down your throat."

"Fuck!" I gasped. I threw my head back, exposing my neck to him.

My eyes rolled back.

He fucked me slowly but hard, not being careful. His weight pressed me down, and my God, I loved it. I smelled us both.

"That's not all, baby," he moaned. "Fuck, your body... your luscious tits... I want to fuck them, princess." Closer, whispering in my ear. "And I promise you that I will. Tonight, as soon as the seatbelt sign is off, I'm going to fuck your tits."

Out of control. I was out of control. My body arched to get closer, my mouth was open, my breaths were choppy and shallow, but he continued, and fuck, I could picture it. Tonight we were flying to Rome, and I could

picture it. Him taking me on the couch. Straddling my chest, soaking my breasts with his cum.

Holy... I was shaking.

He fucked me harder.

Deeper.

"I want you to come on them," I moaned.

He moaned, too, and sped up.

"Fuck, baby, you're as kinky as me, aren't you?" he grunted. "You want me to fuck them and mark them?" I nodded, unable to speak again. Then his fingers were on my clit. My thighs quivered. "God, I love you, princess... your dirty fucking mind... and it's just another thing that makes me hard." He slid out of me with ease before he slammed into me. Skin slapping, hips meeting hips. Breaths exchanged, lips touching, tongues darting out. I licked his bottom lip, he moaned.

"Your tongue also makes me hard," he whispered. "Just remembering all the times you've licked cum off my cock."

"Edward!" I pleaded. I just didn't know what I was pleading for, but he was making me lose my fucking mind. Everything inside of me was a jumbled, hot mess. I was needy and wanton, clinging to him, squeezing his cock with my pussy. "Please." I gasped, eyes rolling back once more. "Make me come, Edward."

"Not yet, Isabella," he grunted. "I haven't told you all the things you do to drive me insane yet."

Fuck... just... *fuck*.

"There's also your smile," he moaned quietly. "Especially when you try to play coy."

I could barely breathe. He sat up slightly, dragging me with him.

He slammed into me.

"Fuck!" he snarled.

His cock slid in and out of me, hitting my deep spot everytime. His hands were on my hips, fingers digging into me flesh.

"Then there are... your thighs, legs... and perfect ass, Bella."

How could he still form words?

"I love having your thighs squeezing me as I eat your pussy... Your legs wrapped around me as I fuck you... Your ass slapping against my abdomen as I fuck you from behind."

He was panting and fucking me harder.

I was a ragdoll, ready to come.

"Please!" I all but sobbed out.

Another angle, my ass was back on the bed, and his fingers were on my clit, he hovered over me, fucking me, pleasuring me. God, I was close. Throbbing and panting. We smelled like sex.

"Last but not least," he grunted. He was closer. His damp forehead resting against my own damp forehead. "Your tight pussy. How you coat my cock with your juices, how you feel as I take you deeply. I can feel you, baby. You want to come, don't you?"

*Yees!*

“So fucking tight,” he growled. “Come, princess... I can’t fucking hold it...”

He rubbed my clit hard. His thrusts were hard and causing me to gasp. Slamming into me, animalistic and raw. Fuck, I shivered. I took a breath. Another and another, shallow. Rapid. My heart pounded. I felt it take over. Slowly but surely, creeping over me, consuming me in waves.

I was gone.

Tensing around him, I exploded. I couldn’t breathe.

The head of his cock rubbed against my g-spot.

I was impossibly tight around him, and hadn’t it been for the fact that I was all but drowning in my orgasm, I would have whimpered in pain as he rammed his cock inside me one last time before he came inside of me. But as it was, the pain only prolonged my pleasure. Over and over until I gasped out loudly, lungs desperate for air.

Black spots.

“Fuck!” he panted, collapsing next to me, which made me whimper as he slid out of me.

I couldn’t move. I just lied there, clutching my chest as I tried my damndest to fucking breathe.

Safe to say, I love our moments in bed.

\*O\*O\*O\*

I expected to be sad to say goodbye to Rose, Alec, and the others I’ve grown to love more than life itself, and in a way I was, of course. But there was something buzzing inside of me, and as I watched Edward say goodbye to Emmett and Garrett, I knew what it was.

I saw it on his face, and we exchanged looks, silently conversing – we both felt the same.

It was anticipation.

We weren't going away on vacation.

This was work. This was about Edward finding out about Aro's organization. This was recon work. This was about following up on leads and facts. This was about reaching a goal. It was now about taking down Aro. Edward and Emmett had a team there, already in place, waiting for the next command. And now we were going there, another team coming with us. Kellan in the lead. This was... adrenaline rushing.

Because yesterday, Emmett and Edward both issued a 'quiet' Code Red.

The goal was to keep up the charade of hiding. Edward and Emmett wanted the Avellinos to think we were still in hiding, which we were, but they didn't know we were also about to charge.

There was a plan, a very detailed one.

Edward has ten days at his disposal at first. Then Emmett and Rose will join us temporarily for the Maserati Car Show before heading back to the states. But Edward and I will be in Europe indefinitely.

Because there were many levels and stages to go through with the plan.

Emmett, Edward, Garrett, and Ben were the master minds behind it all, and under their command they had two teams. One for the US, and one for Europe.

I will be the first to admit that I immediately loathed that prick, James Hunter, but after proving himself to Em and Edward, he took charge in Italy, and he's now waiting for us there. It was last week when they

managed to track down three of Caius' men that Emmett ordered James to take the next flight out. Hunter's closest associate – Laurent Adams – was in charge of the unit keeping track on Caius. I thought Em and Whistler would make sure to have the three men taken out, but once Whistler explained that they were our way to Caius, I understood. So, it was surveillance for them now, and hopefully the three men they had tracked down in Philadelphia would soon lead Adams to Caius.

As for the progress in Italy, well... we knew a little.

And now it was up to Whistler to find out more.

In other words; we had Emmett in America with Adams as his right hand man, and we would soon have Whistler in Europe, with Hunter as his right hand man.

\*O\*O\*O\*

There wasn't anything Rose and I could do, according to Emmett and Edward.

What a load of crock.

We didn't listen to them.

Of course there was something we could do. We may be young and inexperienced but we're far from stupid. All we need is creativity, and that was what settled it for the two of us. We wanted to help, we wanted to be useful and able. So, what can we do? Well, we could turn ourselves into weapons.

That's the plan.

We have Kellan and Alec on our sides, helping us.



Since Rose stayed back in Chicago and would have a somewhat secure 'home,' while Edward and I would spend a lot of time tracking down Aro's many pieces of property throughout Italy, it was easier for Rose to disappear for a while without Emmett knowing about it. Was it risky? Sure, but we're adamant and unrelenting. Safety comes first, always, but we're ready to learn more, and we made the decision to do this by ourselves.

Rose's new goal was to learn as much as she could about technology and surveillance, and she planned to use Garrett for that. It wouldn't be too hard for her to play it off as innocent curiosity, and as I said, we may be young but we're not stupid. Spending time around Garrett and Ben means you'll pick up a thing or two whether you want it or not, and now Rose wants it.

And my goal?

Well, here's the thing. Since we'll travel a lot, I can't really learn about something that forces me to stay in one place for long. But when you travel, you can bring books. So, at this very moment, as Edward and I are somewhere across the Atlantic, I'm studying.

Edward had taken one look at the text book in my lap, cocked an eyebrow but said nothing, before he had returned to his laptop. I didn't want to know what he was thinking because I was actually afraid he thought less of me. The book? Yeah, it's about makeup. And there was no way Whistler would understand that I had started studying makeup for the purpose of disguising. He probably thought it was some woman thing. Or whatever. But the fact remains; I'm studying makeup for one reason.

Our pictures are out there. In the media. It wouldn't be hard for anybody to find out how we look.

I'm sure Edward has thought about this, but I don't know what his plans are. I don't know what he's going to do about it, and for once, I do. If I learn this, I can make us disappear without actually disappearing. So, makeup it is. Or FX makeup to be correct.

Because the truth is; Rose and I want in. We don't want to be *just* wives. We want to work, too. We want to be a part of it all.

We feel the rush.

We like it.

We're Cullens after all.

## 29 – ROME IN JANUARY

### BPOV



"Oh, fuck," I heard Whistler groan under his breath, to which I stifled a smile. "Fucking floss this girl's wearing."

*And you're such a fucking perv for feeling me up while I'm asleep.*

My husband is a gentleman and very chivalrous, make no mistake, but he's also Irish boy, and right now as he's carrying me bridal style...

*somewhere*, don't ask me where we are, my eyes are closed... *anyway*... his hand is totally up there. Right up there, under my skirt, feeling me up, apparently inspecting my flossy underwear.

I could open my eyes and give him a lashing, but oh yawn, I'm very tired. Who knew going to Italy would take that long? Well, as it turns out, it takes three days to go from Chicago to Rome. From Chicago, we flew to New York to board the Masens private plane for international flying, and from New York, we middle landed in Copenhagen, spent a night there, and then we flew out from Kastrup Copenhagen to Paris, from Paris to Lyon. Yeah, and then we drove. Drove. Hellish ride, is all I'm saying. Because it took time, not for anything else. I mean, I'm sure Edward enjoyed the road head, and I sure enjoyed the magic fingers he used on me... while flooring it through the Rhône valley. But yeah, the ride took hours and hours, all because Edward and Emmett never enter a country where they will work any other way. After he explained it to me, it made sense of course. The airport security is far more strict, not to mention that the Avellinos could be monitoring the airports. So, we drove. From Lyon, to Torino where Whistler changed cars. And then lastly, from Torino towards Rome.

So yeah, I'm tired.

But as I heard the sound of chuckling nearby, I quickly decided I wasn't all that tired anymore.

"Are you done feeling me up?" I asked, opening my eyes.

Edward stopped, glanced down at me, and as slowly as his sheepish grin took place on his glorious face, his hand slid down my thigh.

Yeah, hi there.

"You're awake," he cleverly announced. I nodded. "You been awake for long?"

"For a while. So... are you done feeling me up?"

He huffed, like he had a perfectly good explanation. "That's what you get for wearing that skirt, princess."

Awesome explanation.

"You can set me down now, Irish boy."

"I'd rather not."

"Why?"

"Cause I like carrying you."

"Like a child?"

"Gross. And no, this is bridal style. You know. I'm not exactly placing you on my hip or anything."

"Yeah, well... I hear people."

"Dead people?"

"Funny."

He chuckled. "It's my crew. They're probably taking a break out back."

"We're in the outback? Where's that big fat rock in red?"

"Ayers Rock?"

"Yeah, but I think they renamed it."

"Doesn't matter. We're in Italy."

"No shit."

"You brought it up."

"I was trying to be funny."

"Emphasis on trying, baby."

*Smack!*

"Ow! You hit too hard."

"Are you done? This bantering is getting old and I want to use my legs."

"Getting old? Fuck, this is like foreplay to me." He waggled his eyebrows.

I grinned. "I fucking love you, Whistler."

He grinned back. "I love you, too."

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"So... can you set me down?"

He sighed. "Fine."

Then I was on the ground.

Looking around me, I noticed it was dark but... not dark as in 'it's time to go to bed.' More like, 'time to get up in a few hours.' It was beautiful. Really damn beautiful, and we were surrounded by hills and fields that stretched out forever. The sun was rising but not giving too much light yet. Still, you could see that we were in a very secluded place.

"Beautiful, eh?" Edward murmured, standing behind me to rest his chin on the top of my head. "I'm glad Em and I found the place."

Ah, yes, because the two Irish boys couldn't possibly rent a place or live in a hotel. No, they had to buy it. But he was right. It was truly beautiful.

"I think I'm gonna love it here," I murmured back, turning around in his embrace. "Any idea how long we'll be here for?"

"Hmm," he hummed, thinking it over while he kissed my forehead. "We'll travel a lot, so we won't be here all that often, but... I'd say we'll be in Italy for a couple of months."

And I'm about to tell him how fucking awesome that sounds, but a kid's laugh stuns me to silence, cause... a kid? Here? In the middle of the night?

"That's Eric's niece," Whistler said softly, obviously noticing my confusion. "You remember Eric from our wedding, right? And his brother, Joe? They were at Em and Rose's wedding, too."

I nodded, still confused... Eric was a hacker, and a part of Edward's crew here, and I remember that he was at the wedding with his... with his brother... and then it hit me.

Eric's brother, Joseph, worked for the Masens too, and was one of the guards that were killed on the night of Rose and Em's wedding.

"But... why..." I trailed off, my mind still putting things together, because... why the hell would Eric bring his niece here? Where was the girl's mother?

"Joe's wife died giving birth to Autumn," he sighed quietly, again answering my unspoken question.

My eyes snapped up.

Died... giving birth... So, it was just Joe and his daughter? And then he was killed?

I clenched my teeth, willing my eyes not to well up. It didn't work and soon I was staring at the ground, trying to reel in the fucking fury. Christ, that little girl was left all alone. No parents.

I remember her, the little girl. She was... six or seven. Emmett, Alec, and Edward goofed around with her and a few other children.

"You're angry," he stated quietly.

He knew me well.

And yes, I was fucking livid. Partly with Joe for working with the illegal shit as a single parent, knowing how dangerous it could be, but... mostly with the Avellinos. It always came back to them. Sure, there was a voice in my head, nagging me about having children in this world, but I knew I wouldn't let anything stop it. The day would come when Edward and I wanted children, and I knew there was no leaving this world for that. I didn't want to. I... I loved this life. But it came with risks. Risks that Autumn was too young to know about but still did. And now she was here with her uncle.

"We'll get them, right?" I asked, looking up at Edward again. "This will all work out, right?"

His eyes were soft as he brushed his thumbs under my eyes.

"Yeah," he whispered, resting his forehead against mine. "We'll get them."

I nodded, hoping to God he was right.

"Come on, baby girl," he said softly. "Let's say hi to the boys, so we can head off to bed."

I followed him, hand in hand, fingers threaded, but my mind was still on the girl.

She had no one but her uncle.

I knew what it felt like to have few people in your life.

It didn't take long to walk around the villa, and I was actually surprised by the size of it, especially if we were many people living here. But when I mentioned this to Edward, he explained that only Eric, Autumn, and Kellan would be living here with us. The rest stayed in Rome, which was forty-five minutes away. Then he added, with a smirk, that looks could be deceiving, because there was a basement under the villa that was twice as large as the rest. Yeah, sure. I mean, not that I didn't believe him, but... why would you need a basement larger than the villa itself? Right? But I withheld the questions, knowing that Whistler would show me around soon enough.

As we reached the backyard, I had to smile at what I saw. It was beautiful with a pool, a terrace, and an open fire.

## THE VILLA IN ROME



The men sitting on the terrace appeared to be casual and having fun. Obviously I noticed the little girl, Autumn, and now that I knew about her,



warmth filled my chest when I saw the smile she sported for Eric who had her in his lap.

With all the people I had been introduced to, both at my own, and at Rose's wedding, it was hard to remember all the faces and names, but as I saw them now, I remembered too. Eric and Joe had been much like Emmett and Edward. Close, goofy, and funny... Irish boys. And now Eric was left with Joe's daughter.

It was horrible.

"Well, well, you two finally arrived!" I heard Kellan laugh as he spotted us.

Edward chuckled, drawing me closer to him. "Yeah, well, with our pretty faces you gotta take precautions. You ugly mutts could just hop on a fucking plane. We couldn't."

"Hey, I resent that," Eric chuckled. "And pretty faces?" He cocked an eyebrow. "Granted, your wife is a beautiful one, but you? Not so much, man."

"Fuck off, Eric," Edward said, glaring playfully at him as he pulled me down on his lap. "We all know I'm a fucking treat to look at."

*You got that right, baby.*

I didn't know what to expect but it sure as hell wasn't this. Perhaps I thought it would be more... stiff. But it was far from it, and as Whistler and I reached the table that was filled with alcohol and snacks, I knew there was a time and place for everything. Clearly this was a relaxed moment, maybe a break from work or whatever, and I knew there would be no awkward moments or curt replies.

"Anyway," Edward said. "You all remember my wife, Isabella. And Bella, this is... everyone."

I smirked at him before turning to everyone. "Nice to see you all again... everyone."

Chuckles and greetings. So casual. Not that proper introductions were necessary. I had met them all before, after all. A few only briefly, but still.

I remembered Eric; he was here to run all things tech, and then there was Autumn, of course, and fuck, she was adorable. She actually looked a lot like Eric. They both had strawberry blond hair, freckles, blue eyes, and fair skin. She was smiling, but it was clear that she was exhausted and it looked like she was about to drop at any minute.



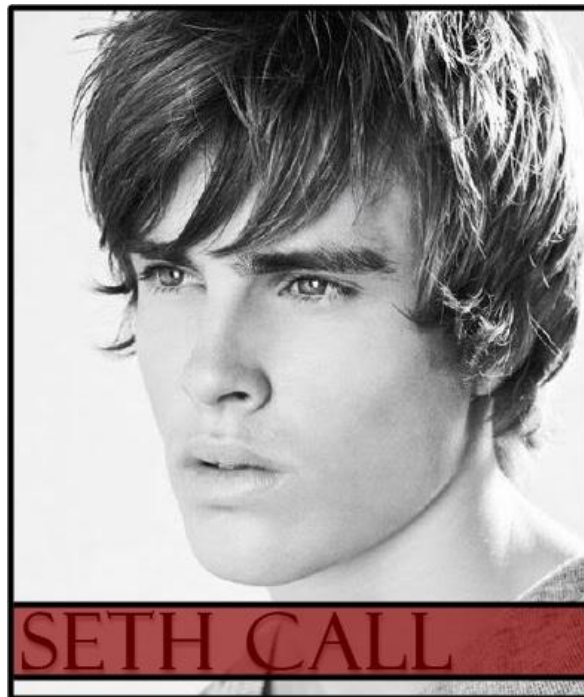
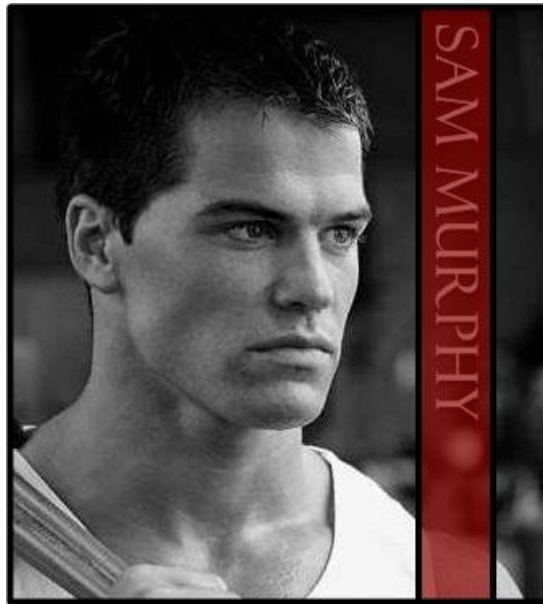
Obviously I remembered James, and I had to admit that my second impression of him was nothing like my first one. There were no suits or hard stares this time. They were all dressed in cargo shorts or jeans, t-shirts or fitted pullovers. Nothing fancy. And the smiles. They were all just chilling.



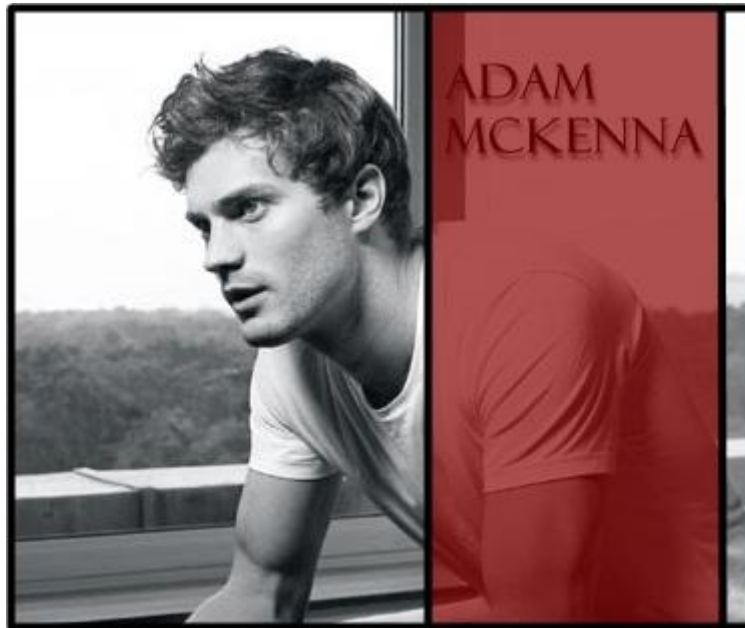
Next was Kellan, and him I knew well by now. Whistler loved the guy and trusted him with his life, which is good considering the fact that Kellan's in charge of our security here. He's a funny dude, much like my Whistler, and as I compared them all I also noticed was that they were all pretty much in the same age. Mid-twenties or late twenties.



Then there were Sam and Seth, both with the same job. Yeah, they're hitmen. They both work under James now, though in the past they worked for Liam. Sam is the huge one, well over 6'5" and all muscles. And Seth is the lanky one; Whistler said he was more lethal than Sam. Apparently Seth is a sniper.



Last but not least, there was Adam. Also Siobhan McKenna's son, and he was a genius when it came to locks and vaults. He was going to work together with Eric, and the two were a winning combination so that we could enter Aro Avellino's premises. In other words, Eric and Adam were here to crack codes, fib with security tapes, pick locks, and simply... get in. Then get out, without getting caught. Yeah. Piece of cake... or something.



So... we had Whistler, James, Kellan, Eric, Adam, Sam, Seth, myself, and Autumn.

I knew Kellan had three men flying in tomorrow, three guards, but that was it.

When they had arrived, we still wouldn't be more than twelve guys, and that's counting myself and a seven year old girl.

Awesome.

"So...Isabella," I heard Eric say, effectively bringing me back to reality.

"Cullen says you're good with knives." He grinned.

"Good doesn't cut it," Kellan snickered. "You should've seen Edward's face when she threw a shoe in his fucking face."

I grinned proudly.

"What the fuck do you know?" Edward huffed. "You weren't there."

"No, but your brother was," Kellan laughed, pulling out his phone. "And he took a picture of your ugly face."

And there it was. A picture in Kellan's phone of Edward palming his face, right after I had hit him.

"Shit," Whistler muttered, lighting up a smoke. "How many did Em send that to?"

All the guys held up their Vertu-phones.

Nice.

"All right," Eric chuckled. "Can't wait to see you in action, Isabella... but I think it's time to take this little thing to bed now." I smiled as he stood up with a sleeping Autumn. "I'll see you guys downstairs in the morning."

"Goodnight," I murmured, as did the others.

It looked like Sam and Seth were about to follow, but... all our phones chirped then.

Including mine.

"That was fast," Edward mumbled.

A few seconds later, I read the text that Emmett had sent out.

**Stage 2 is a go. 1 lost. CU done. MM next. Within 20 mins ~E.P.C**

I bit down on my lip, only able to understand half of it. I was happy to see that I was a part of it, with the whole text-receiving, but it wouldn't do much if I didn't get it. The only thing I knew was that Stage 1 had been to locate Caius, so in order for them to proceed, they had to find him, which evidently they had now. And CU stood for cleanup. Oh, and MM stood for Masen Mansion. But that was all I got.

“Get Eric back here,” Edward ordered, and Adam took off right away. “This is good news, guys.” He took a deep drag, obviously deep in thought. “Hunter, I want you to contact Adams. I wanna know who we lost.”

James obeyed.

My stomach dropped. Then I checked the text again.

*1 lost.*

Oh.

“Ford, when are your boys coming in tomorrow?” he asked Kellan.

I stayed quiet and figured I would be in the way, but when I tried to get off Whistler’s lap, he made it very clear that I wasn’t going anywhere.

“Noon,” Kellan replied, checking his phone. “Want me to call in more, boss?”

Edward shook his head. “No, three’s fine. I don’t want to raise suspicion with a larger team. But I think it’s best we all stay at the villa. Eric and Autumn are in Em and Rose’s bedroom for now, and Bella and I will be in ours, but there are two king-sized beds in the basement, and there are couches.”

“I got the text,” Eric said, walking out with Adam. “Should we head to the control room?”

It wasn’t relaxed anymore. They were all business now.

“Do you have Chicago up?” Edward asked him, and Eric nodded. “All right, let’s go.”

I didn’t understand a thing, and I became even more confused when Edward, with his hand on my lower back, led the way through the living

room, to the kitchen, and then he opened a fucking pantry. A pantry full of canned goods and... snacks and foods.

"I'm just gonna run upstairs and bring Autumn with me," Eric said. "She can sleep downstairs tonight."

"Through here, princess," Edward murmured, and then we watched as a concrete wall just... wasn't there anymore. It slid to the side. It was a fucking door. A secret one, leading downstairs.

I shook my head and clamped my mouth shut. It wasn't worth it. Questions would be answered soon enough and I didn't want to halt anyone, so I just followed. Down the stairs, and holy fuck, it was... like an underground apartment. First there was a fucking bar, and then we walked through a small living room, a kitchen, and then we... ended up in a room full of computers. I was... out of it. My eyes scanned and searched, trying to get it all in, but it was impossible. It was just too much happening.

## UNDERGROUND



"This is a safe house, baby," Edward said. "No one except us knows about this basement, and this is where we can hide if the danger's too great."



Fire can't spread and bullets can't penetrate the walls. Basically, it's a bunker."

Uh-huh. Yep, bunker. Got it.

Shit.

"We lost a man named Greg," James announced, joining us in the computer room. And Greg? Wasn't that Rose's security guard in Forks?

My answer was written on Edward's face. Yes, yes it was. Greg. Dead, gone.

"How?" Edward asked. His teeth were clenched – the only proof of his anger.

"Emmett, Laurent, Greg, and Oliver found out through Garrett and Ben that Caius was in Chicago," James replied as the others filed in to the room. "Caius' team was bigger than we anticipated. There was gunfire, sir, and he was shot in the head."

Oh, my...

"Emmett and Rose are okay, right?" I blurted out before thinking.

"They're all fine, sweetheart," Whistler said, squeezing my hand. "Em would've told us if anything else happened."

Shit fuck. Okay.

I breathed.

"Orders, sir?" Eric said, taking a seat where all the monitors and computers were.

"Bring up Ed's mansion," he told him before turning back to James.

"Anything else?"

"No, sir."

"Alright," Edward sighed. "I'm going to call Emmett for an update." He lit up another smoke. I was still absorbing. And everyone else was just quite, watching the screen where the Masen Mansion popped up. Live feed, holy shit, what's going on?

"Questions?" I heard a quite voice behind me ask.

Looking over my shoulder, I saw Kellan.

I chuckled nervously. "Only a million or two."

"Feel free to ask."

I chewed on my lip, glancing over at Edward who nodded reassuringly, having heard Kellan.

Okay, then.

"What's stage 2?" I whispered to Kellan.

Because from what I had heard, Stage 2 was about interrogating Caius for answers regarding Ed's whereabouts.

This... didn't look like interrogation to me. At all.

"To make it look like our family is under attack," Kellan replied quietly.

"Stage 1 was finding Caius and get answers." Oh, okay. Um... huh. "And that's done now." He gave me a pointed look, and yeah, okay, I got it.

Caius was no longer needed, which meant... he was as good as dead. "You get it?" I nodded. "Well, Stage 2 is actually killing two birds with one stone. Quite literally," he chuckled. Funny, funny. "See the mansion on the screen?" Again I nodded. "Caius and his crew are inside."

"W-what?" I gasped.

“Don’t worry. It’s planned this way. Our men brought them there. Emmett’s going to create chaos in the States before he joins us here in Italy.”

I swallowed nervously. Chaos? My eyes pleaded as I was unable to speak.

“We need the Italians, the authorities, as well as the media to believe we’re under attack, and what better way than to blow up Edward Masen’s home?”

I blinked.

Was he serious?

Apparently he was.

“It’s also to create a diversion,” Edward supplied from behind me, and I turned to him. He was still trying to get in touch with Emmett, I guessed. “Stage 3 is to get Liam out of prison.”

Say what!

“We need him, princess. He gave the green light through his wife,” he said, nodding at the screen. “Our boys spent yesterday emptying the mansion of irreplaceable belongings and work related shit.”

This was... fuck, I’ve said the word insane so many times since I met Edward but this has to take the price, right?

*Jesus.*

“Um.” I swallowed. “How are you gonna get Liam out?”

Adam chimed in as he took a seat next to Eric. “We have people on the inside that will start a riot as soon as the news about the Masen Mansion reaches the prison.”

"Wait, wait," I said, putting my hands up. This was insane on... insane levels. "You cannot be serious. You think it's gonna work? I mean, come on, prisons have riots all the time. That doesn't mean a prison break is possible."

"It will be now." Whistler smirked. "We know what we're doing."

Cocky fucking Irish boy.

"We have movement, boss!" Eric said loudly, effectively shutting us up.

Our eyes were glued to the screen, I gripped Edward's hand.

And yes, there was movement. A shitload of movement.

Eight or nine men were running for their lives, trying to get as far away as possible from the mansion.

*"Emmett speaking!"* I heard a crackling voice bark out. *"Are you getting this, bro!"*

It was Edward's phone. On speaker.

"Yes, speak," Edward said.

*"Holy fucking shit, do you see them running?"* He was guffawing like a fucking madman. *"Too bad it won't save them!"*

"Where are you, Em?"

*"Two blocks away with Garrett and Adams."*

"Status?"

*"Five seconds."*

I stopped breathing.

Nobody talked.

Shit.

Fuck.

Then I gasped, my hand flew to my mouth, and I watched with wide eyes as the entire Masen Mansion exploded.

The men running away... they were all engulfed in the fire.

Swallowed whole.

"Mission completed," Seth snickered under his breath.

I scowled at him.

Seriously, this was... *fuck*, I already mentioned insane. But... what about Alec? What about Nessa? It was their home. Sure, it's replaceable and they have saved photo albums and all that, but... *Christ*. And what the fuck happens now?!

"Whistler," I breathed, holding two fingers up.

He understood right away and lit up two smokes before handing me one.

*You okay?* his eyes asked.

I took a deep drag, cocking an eyebrow that pretty much said, *what the fuck do you think?*

So, he just chuckled. Chuckled.

"Look on the bright side, Bella. Caius and his men are gone."

And just like that, I calmed down.

Not fully but... a little.

His humor bothered me, though, but I was still riding high on adrenaline.

"*You still there, Edward?*" That was Emmett.

"Yeah, bro," Edward replied, exhaling smoke through his nose as a grin took over his face. "Nice work."

"*Cheers,*" Emmett chuckled. "*We're packing up now. Our flight leaves in an hour. Rose, the kids, Kate, and Irina have already boarded. Can't wait to join you bastards next week.*"

Huh?

They're leaving Chicago right now?

"Alright, call me when you land."

"*You got it.*"

Everyone sagged a little as Edward disconnected the call. The tension felt lighter, like... like it was all done now. Like tonight's work was finished, and now it was back to casual and relaxed. Honestly I couldn't see how they could operate that way. Literally, I couldn't understand how they were *able* to just relax.

"Where are they going?" I asked Whistler.

"Seattle. They need to make an appearance as soon as humanly possible in order to make people believe they were in Seattle the entire time." He paused, taking another drag, and accepted an ashtray that Eric handed over. "The alibi won't be waterproof but it will be enough. Besides..." He laughed quietly. "No one will suspect us considering the Italian charcoal they will find on the lawn outside the mansion."

Yeah, sorry, but I couldn't laugh.

I may be happy that Caius no longer walks this earth, but I won't crack a fucking smile.

I don't find humor in it.

We still lost someone. People *died*. Even if Caius' men were evil as fuck, maybe they had families. Children and wives. They matter.

*Sorry, Irish boy, but it's the doghouse for you tonight.*

I walked out without another word, because there was a bed with my name on it.

"Shit," I heard Edward mutter as I headed towards the stairs. "I just fucked up, didn't I?"

*Yeah, you did.*

His boys chuckled.

When I had located our bedroom, I locked the door.

He knew better than to pick it.

*I hope.*

## **30 – ROME IN JANUARY**

### **BPOV**

*Knock, knock.*

With a finger over my lips, I motioned for Autumn to be quiet, to which she giggled quietly behind her hand, and... I knew I was completely in love with her.

Two days had passed since I walked out on Edward, and though I never planned for it to last more than just that first night, my anger came back in full force when I spoke to Rose the day after. Apparently she was giving Emmett the same treatment, and the two of us now saw how justified our anger was. We knew killing people was now a horrible part of Emmett and Edward's life, and we certainly didn't hold it against them – we never would. What we did hold against them was how they so callously *laughed* after seeing those men go up in flames.

I'll be the first to admit that I don't care about the dead men. I care about their families, as does Rose. Because they didn't choose that profession for their husbands or fathers, but still they had to deal with the loss of them. There might be many wrongs and rights, but laughing is definitely a wrong, and Rose and I both draw a line there.

So...I have spent the past two days with little Miss Autumn Bell.

"*Bella, are you in there?*" Edward asked, obviously knowing the answer already. "*Please let me in, baby.*"

Autumn eyed me questioningly, wondering if I was going to let him in, but I shook my head again.

I was right, by the way. *Thank God*. He didn't pick the lock that first night. We all knew he could, but he respected me enough to stay away, and the morning after when he had tried to apologize, I asked him, "What are you sorry for?"

He had no answer.

So, not only did he apologize without knowing what he apologized *for*, but he couldn't see what he had done wrong.

I had told him, "Come find me when you know, Cullen."



*That* he didn't hear, *evidently*, because he's knocked on my door a few hundred times over the past two days. Not that I've kept myself locked up all the time, because I haven't. I've been all over the house, and as soon as I had gotten to know Autumn a little, we both enjoyed our shared love for the swimming pool a lot. It wasn't all that warm in Italy in January, but it worked when you added hot chocolate and an open fire afterwards.

I digress.

Edward's tried to talk to me. A lot. But I left the room. With Autumn, cause we were *this* close nowadays. She had already declared us BFFs. However, she also said, "But Edward's nice too, Bella." Yeah, she was the diplomat. Clever little girl, and hot damn did she have Edward wrapped around her finger. Actually, she had most guys here wrapped around her finger.

*Knock, knock.*

*"Bella, I know you're in there. Please let me in."*

I sighed. My resolve was slipping.

"We can have slumber party another night, Bella," Autumn whispered.

She was too cute.

"No way, sweetie," I whispered back, giving her a wink. "We're definitely having our slumber party tonight." We were all dolled up for it, too. Well, maybe not me, but certainly Autumn. I was wearing  $\frac{3}{4}$  length sweatpants in dark blue, and a snug t-shirt in black that said, "Keep Calm and Catch the Snitch." Oh, and black slippers, comfy as hell. But Autumn, who I swear is obsessed with Hello Kitty, was wearing cute cotton shorts in light grey, a pink Hello Kitty t-shirt, Hello Kitty comfy shoes, and in her arms – never really leaving her side – she had her Hello Kitty... Kitty. A stuffed animal, in other words. She was too cute for words. And we had just spent

the past hour painting our nails. Who knew there was Hello Kitty nail polish? Well, Autumn sure knew and she had a make up bag full of Hello Kitty stuff, including makeup, stickers for your nails, and brushes and mirrors.



"Um, is Autumn in there?" I heard Edward ask then. "Stupid question," he chuckled to himself. "Autumn, sweetheart, could you please open the door for me?"

Nice try, Irish boy.

"Maybe we should open," Autumn whispered, looking at the door. "Uncle Eric always says you should be nice."

Ugh. A seven year old is smarter than I am.

But still... I want him to realize what he apologizes for before he says 'sorry'.

I sighed.

"Fine, sweetie." I wasn't defeated, but I willing to hear him out. "You can open the door... if you really want to."

Autumn didn't waste time. In top speed, she darted for the door, ripping it open with a beaming smile on her face.

"Hi, Edward!" she giggled adorably.

"Hey there, Blue Eyes," Whistler said, grinning right back as he squatted down in front of her. "Is Bella done kidnapping you?"

"No, no, I like Bella lots and lots. We have so much fun, see?" She showed him her newly painted nails. "They sparkle!"

He chuckled and made me swoon as he kissed her knuckles. "I can see that," he murmured. "Hello Kitty, eh? Your Uncle Eric mentioned that you like Hello Kitty."

I hated that he brought a smile out of me, but there it was. Right there on my face, because he was so fucking hot when he interacted with Autumn. And the fact that he was wearing army pants, a white wife-beater and a baseball cap didn't exactly work against him. He had the cap on backwards, it was red, and I knew it was a Boston Red Sox cap. All things Irish, or as close to Irish as you could get.

"I *love* Hello Kitty," Autumn gushed. "Bella too. Right, Bella?" She looked over her shoulder, nodding like it would bring out my own nodding.

And for her it did. "Yeah, sweetie. How can you not love Hello Kitty?"

Edward watched me intently, and I found it impossible to look away.

I could see how tired he was. Hell, I was tired too. I couldn't sleep without him, and now I had made us suffer for two whole nights.

"Well," Whistler said, looking at Autumn again. A smile in place. "I have something for you that I think you're gonna like."

"Like a present?" she gasped.

"Yep." Still squatting down, he reached for something on the other side of the wall, outside the room. "I found it online and sent Kellan to pick it up in Rome." Then there was huge package in bright pink wrapping, and Autumn was beaming brighter than the sun. "Go on, open it."

They both sat down on the floor, right there in the doorway.

"Oh, it's so pink, Edward!" she whispered loudly. "So, so, so pretty."

She tore at the paper, still beaming brightly, and I could see how much it mattered for the guys to have this little girl here. She brought smiles to everyone, despite the recent loss of her father. That's not to say that Autumn is doing peachy or anything, because she isn't. There have been many tears, too, but luckily we are many here, eager to see her smiling again, and Eric is amazing with his niece.

"Edward!" she gasped, and I think I did too, when the gift was revealed. "It's Hello Kitty!"

It wasn't just Hello Kitty. It was a freaking laptop. A light purple laptop with Hello Kitty on it.

The other day, Autumn and I had sat out on the terrace, watching a movie on a laptop, and Autumn had mentioned that the laptop would be 'sooo much prettier with stickers on it.' Apparently Edward had heard her.

"You like it?" He grinned.

"So much! Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

"Anytime, sweetheart." He smiled. "You know what to do." He pointed at his cheek.

My face was close to splitting, I was sure of it.

Autumn giggled and all but jumped into his arms, giving away a loud 'MWAH' as she kissed his cheek.

"Can I show it to everyone?" she asked, holding the laptop close to her body. "Everyone should see I got the prettiest computer."

Wow, Irish boy was clever.

Not that Whistler would buy a gift for Autumn just to get me alone, because there were hundreds of ways for him to do that without sending Kellan to Rome for an amazing gift, but... yeah, there was definitely a part of him that knew she would run around and show her new Hello Kitty item off, which would leave me alone.

"Of course," he said. "You should start with your Uncle Eric, 'cause there might be a Hello Kitty bag for this laptop, and he has it in the basement."

Another gasp. Then a whisper, "Is it pink or purple?"

Edward whispered, too. "Both, and it sparkles."

Yeah, Autumn was a goner.

After another kiss on his cheek, she left in a rush.

Edward and I both sighed once we were alone, but his was a sigh of resignation, I think, whereas mine was just plain ole' girly because of what I had seen between Edward and Autumn. I couldn't help it. I loved everything that made her smile, cause I had heard her crying in the middle of the night and I had heard Eric trying and trying to make her feel better. But we knew it would take a long time for her to get past this.

"So..." That was Edward as he got off the floor.

I stayed put on the bed.

"Can we talk?" he asked uncertainly.

I motioned for him to talk, 'cause I wouldn't do any of the talking. I was willing to listen, that's all.

He met my look of indifference with one of frustration.

"Look," he said, pinching the bridge of his nose. Oh yeah, he was frustrated alright. "I have no fucking idea what I did to piss you off, Bella, but I've had it with the silent treatment." I cocked an eyebrow and he actually glared at me. "Obviously I did something wrong," he gritted out. "And since I don't know what it is, it would be rather fucking nice if you enlightened me."

I hated it, but I knew he was right.

I was giving myself whiplash in this fucked up mess, but I couldn't help it. I was young and this life was messing with my head. I enjoyed it, and I embraced it, this life... but I needed time to adjust and take it all in, damnit. I will make mistakes. But that means... I have to allow Whistler to make mistakes, too. Fuck. *Now* I'm all logical and shit? It couldn't have come earlier?

Damn.

I know I won't budge when it comes to his reaction to the murders. I won't ever accept laughter and a cheery 'job well done.' But he was right. If he didn't know what he had done wrong, I had to tell him so that we could talk about it.

I blew out a breath and spoke calmly. "You laughed." His brow furrowed in confusion, though I could also see relief... most likely 'cause I was actually talking. "You laughed when those men died, Edward. Your reaction pissed me off."

"Wait, what?" He was still confused. "You've ignored me for the past two days because I laughed at the death of murderers?" Holy fuck, he couldn't see it. He actually didn't think he'd done wrong. He laughed incredulously, only pissing me off. "Are you serious, Bella? So fucking what if I laughed!" Now he was mad, really fucking mad. "Those bastards were right there in Seattle, killing our men! Killing Autumn's dad! What if it had been you, Bella? What if they had fucking shot *you*!" His chest heaved. "I can't fucking believe this," he muttered, shaking his head. "Or you know what?" He looked at me. "What if they had shot *me*? What if *I* had been killed—"

"Don't say that!" I snapped, kneeling on the bed. I couldn't handle him saying that. No fucking way. The thought of it... fuck, no. "Don't say it, Edward. *Please.*"

But he went on like I hadn't interrupted. In a calm voice. "You can't hide from this. And if I was killed, you would seek retribution, right?"

I blinked.

"Of course I would," I whispered, sinking back on the bed.

There was no doubt. If I lost Edward...

"This is what this is all about," he said flatly. "And I *know* you love me, princess... So, tell me, would you laugh or express your feelings once the man who killed me was dead?"

I understood where he was going with this... but I disagreed. Fuck... there were just too many sides. Too many perspectives. I didn't know if I would've laughed. I couldn't know that, but what I did know was that one

death didn't erase another. If I lost Edward, the death of his killer wouldn't bring me my husband back, nor would it bring me relief, because Edward would still be gone. Then on the other side, I knew I would want that fucker six feet under, but that was never the point. I never blamed Edward for what he had to do. I just disagreed with his reaction. Again, I could see his point, but... why couldn't he see mine?

*Maybe cause I haven't explained how I see it.*

Yeah, start talking, Bella.

"I also had Autumn in mind," I said calmly. "But I was more thinking about other Autumns. I was thinking about the fact that the men that died had their own Autumns at home, and you were laughing at the death of their fathers." He narrowed his eyes at me – not at all the reaction I was looking for. But I continued. "I'm glad that those men are gone, Edward, I really am. Because they killed people, Autumn's dad included, but... There are Autumns all over the world. And..." I shrugged with one shoulder. "I was thinking it was a disgrace to shove that laughter in their faces. Because the thought of a killer laughing at Joe's murder..." I shook my head, fighting nausea. "You can't say you want that, Edward."

"Of course I wouldn't!" he snapped angrily. "But there's a difference between you and me, Isabella."

"What?" I asked, actually feeling fear of the man standing before me. Not that he would ever hurt me, but because I saw the difference, too. It was a great one. Massive. Yes, I saw it.

"I don't care about other Autumns," he said dryly, and there it was. "I only care about those on our side, those in my family."

We've reached an impasse then.

"You don't care about the children growing up-"



"No," he said right away, cutting me off. "Spare me the rant, and I'll spare you some time. I couldn't give two shits about the children and the wives living with the Avellinos. I care about my own, that's it."

I stared at him.

Just... sat there on the bed and stared at him.

My mind was spinning, and for once I tried to look at from his point of view. I tried to see it his way, but I couldn't. I knew he grew up with this, one way or another. And he chose to focus solely on his own family, which... in a way I could understand. Because as God is my witness, I would give my life to protect my family. Now that I finally have one. I'm fiercely protective, but... I can still see how messed up this is for *everyone*, not just one side. Is it wrong of me to think about those caught in the middle? Is it wrong of me to see all children as equally worthy, regardless of their last name?

This had blown up way out of proportion. It wasn't a simple reaction to a single event anymore. It was about... how we saw the fucking world. In a way.

"You're awfully quiet," he chuckled humorlessly, lighting up a smoke in the middle of the bedroom. "Let me guess; you think I'm less humane or something."

What the fuck was he doing?

Where did all this come from?

This wasn't my husband.

This wasn't Whistler at all.

"I guess you're married to a monster after all," he muttered bitterly. Then he smirked. It was fake, so fake. "Fuck this. See ya later, Bella."

He left without another word.

I was stunned.

Again my mind started spinning.

Fast as hell.

And as the seconds ticked by, it started falling into place. Bits and pieces. I started to understand better. Theories, conclusions, plans, and perspectives. I thought and thought, because I knew I had to fix this. It was all fucked up, and I wasn't going to apologize for feeling the way I did, but I *was* going to apologize for leaving Edward hanging, because it was all very clear to me now. Had I not waited, had I not purposely ignored him for the past two days, he wouldn't give me this attitude now, and I recognized it. I remembered it. Back from when he first approached Charlie, *that* was the man I met. Edward Ryan Cullen. Not Whistler, not Irish boy, and I needed those two back. ASAP. Because Edward Cullen had his defenses up. Time for me to tear that fucking wall down.

I still had a lot to process about all this, but I wasn't going to let two opinions stand in my fucking way. So what if we didn't always see eye to eye? What couple does? There will most certainly be more in the future where we disagree.

First things first; find Edward.

Second; give him a piece of my fucking mind.

So, I left. Down the stairs, and I ran into Eric and Autumn in the kitchen.

"Basement," Eric said right away, knowing that I wanted.

I nodded in thanks, yanking the pantry door open before I punched in the code I had learned.

The door slid open, and I headed down the stairs before following the voices I heard.

"Hey, James," I said, ignoring his chuckle. He knew I was on a mission, most likely. "Where is he?"

"Control room with Seth and Kellan." He pointed with his thumb over his shoulder. "He's pissed."

"Thanks." Then I stopped again, cause pissed could mean two things. "Drunk or angry?" I asked, but shit, I had seen him ten minutes ago. You don't get drunk that fast. "Never mind, he's angry."

He just grinned and nodded.

It didn't take many seconds to reach the control room, and once I was there, I said, "Kellan and Seth, please leave." There was authority in my voice. I was Mrs. Fucking Cullen. I could be boss-lady when I needed to be. "And close the door behind you."

Kellan and Seth walked dutifully towards the doorway I had just passed through.

"Hold the fucking phone," Edward snapped, getting out of his chair. "You're not going anywhere. We have work." He all but sneered at me. "Sorry, Bella, but you have spent two days ignoring me; surely you can wait a while longer for a fucking chit-chat."

"No, I can't," I said, not missing a beat. "We're gonna get this shit out."

I gave Kellan and Seth pointed looks.

They left.

With my hands on my hips, I faced a furious Edward.

*I won't back down, baby.*

"I'm sorry," I said first. "I'm sorry I ignored you for two days, Edward. It was juvenile, I admit." Again, he narrowed his eyes at me, maybe not believing me. "I should've talked to you right away about what I thought- and *still* think... you have done wrong." I took a deep breath. "You have every right to be upset with me when it comes to how I handled the situation-"

"There is no situation," he said flatly.

"*Shut. Up,*" I gritted out. "Because *yes*, there *is* a situation, and you fucking know it." God, he was driving me insane. "Now, can you please just hear me out?"

He shrugged, taking his seat again. "Like you stopped to hear me out, you mean?"

Touché.

I deserved that.

"Fine. Do you want me to leave?" I asked, cocking a brow.

Another shrug.

Fucker.

I could leave. It would be so easy. I knew he didn't want me to leave but I also knew he was too proud to tell me to stay in this room right here and right now. So, I stayed. Because this was going to end now. No more bullshit.

"Like I said, I'm sorry," I said once more. "I shouldn't have ignored you, but I did, and now I can try to fix it." Another deep breath. "Will you meet me halfway?"

Fuck me if the bastard didn't shrug again.

I saw through him, though. I knew he was scared shitless of me leaving, which was why he put that damn wall up. This was him making assumptions about how I saw him.

"What's to say, Bella?" he sighed, trying to look bored. Emphasis on trying. "It's all pretty clear to me. You care about people, regardless of the family they were born into, and I don't. I only care about my own family."

Christ.

"Yes," I said slowly, choosing my words carefully. I knew I was about to explode. "But what you did that royally pissed me off..." Holy shit, not blowing up was going to be hard. "-was putting words in my mouth." I gritted my teeth, trying to reel it in but when I heard his sigh or boredom, I snapped. "You know what, Edward? Fuck you. If you wanna sit here and try to act like this is nothing to you, then be my fucking guest." I was fuming. "I admit that I was wrong, but I'm not the only one making mistakes here, and excuse me for fucking up at times, but this life is kinda new to me. I didn't grow up this way, Edward. I'm from a small town where *nothing* happens. My father was the Chief of *Police*. Can't you understand that this is confusing to me? I'm only eighteen, and you know what? We only met in August last year. That gives me five months. Five. Months. To get used to this. Five months to go from a clueless high school chick to a fucking mob wife!" I was close to panting, and thank fucking God, he had the decency to wipe the fucking face of indifference off. "You know, I thought I'd done pretty well, but maybe I was wrong." He closed his eyes. I saw pain. "I met you, I fell for you, I married you, I accepted *everything*, I asked questions but I *never* judged you. I supported you

through everything, Edward. I was there by your side. You say you know that I love you, but I really doubt it, because if you knew I loved you, you wouldn't put this wall up." His eyes snapped open. "What, you think I didn't see through it? Please, give me some credit." I sneered. "I know you. I know you well. And if you knew me? You'd know that hate it when you make assumptions about me!" I shouted. "Have I ever called you inhumane, huh? Have I ever called you a monster?" My eyes welled up, I hated it. This had blown up... like I said, way out of proportions. But I was furious now and there was no way to stop it. "I don't give a flying *fuck* about the men you order to have killed, and I never held anything against you. Fuck, I want them dead, too! I just hated that you laughed because it felt like you were kicking their families to the fucking ground!"

I wiped away tears of anger.

"But I would never call you a monster." My voice cracked. "I can't believe you would think that I thought that about you. You make assumptions--"

"Bella--"

"No," I said, shaking my head. "I know I made a mistake, but what you're doing right now is worse. I may have ignored you, but I never *said* things to actually push you away. And you know what? I will probably make more mistakes, but I wonder if you can handle it."

Will he act like this everytime I make a mistake? Will he put that wall up?

God, I was just so confused.

I had questions, many of them, but... everything was jumbled.

"Bella," he said quietly, and I was finding my feet very interesting to watch. "This is..." He sighed heavily, tiredly. "Just fuck."

Right. Okay.

But then I heard him come closer, and I hoped, God I hoped he wasn't done. I hoped he wanted to solve this. I hoped he wouldn't run again. I hoped... I could get some fucking clarity.

"Hey," he whispered, tilting my chin up. "I'm sorry." It was quiet but he never looked away. "You're right. I did try to push you away, though I knew I would never last," he chuckled humorlessly, looking down for a second before meeting my eyes again. "But can't you see, Bella? Can't you see why I did it?"

"No." I really couldn't.

He smiled, it was a small smile, and sad. "Because you're the only one with the power to destroy me."

Right.

Well, anger's back.

"You mean I'm your only weakness?" I asked, and he nodded once. "Well, thanks for the vote of confidence, Edward. You see me as your weakness instead of seeing me as your strength."

"No, Bella, that's not what I mean—"

"Shut up, Edward. That's exactly what you mean."

"Now who's making assumptions?" he snapped, taking a step back. "I'm just saying that I have to protect myself!"

"Not from *me*!" I shouted angrily. "Goddamnit, Edward, you shouldn't ever feel the need to protect yourself from *me*!"

I fucking had him there, and he knew it.

Christ, I had no idea he had those insecurities. I thought he knew how much I loved him. I thought he knew by now... how fucking much he owned me. But evidently he didn't. Evidently he still thought I would run.

It was then it hit me how fucked up arranged marriages were for the men, too. Especially if they wanted love and not convenience. Would he never realize that I was here willingly? I mean, he *had* given me full consent. I *could* divorce him if I wanted to, so *why* didn't he believe me?

Edward was about to say something, something that felt like *finally we would start solving this fuckery*... but an alarm went off on one of the monitors.

"Fuck," Edward cursed under his breath. He turned towards the screens, but stopped and looked at me with pleading eyes. "Don't leave... please?"

"I won't leave," I said, hoping he'd get the double meaning. Because I meant it. I wasn't going anywhere. Not now, not ever. I just wish he knew that.

Fuck it, I'll just have to convince him. I'll spend my life doing that if I have to.

"Whistler," I whispered, walking towards him as he turned. "I'm not going anywhere." I could see it so clearly on his face. He had opinions, and he stood firm, but he was still terrified that this life would one day be too much for me. But he was wrong. So, I cradled his face. "I love you." He closed his eyes. "We have a shitload to talk about but we'll work it out, okay?"

I could hear the others approaching outside, obviously getting ready for work, but I needed this first.



"I'm not going anywhere," I said once more, and that was what it took. He relaxed, if only a little, and then he dipped down and captured my mouth with his. Hard and passionately.

"I love you," he breathed into my mouth. "Tell me you won't give up on me."

And my Irish boy was back.

"That's impossible," I replied. "I'll make you believe me."

He kissed me again, pouring everything into that kiss.

Unfortunately our time was up, and the other guys entered the control room with Eric in the lead. With one last kiss, Edward silently told me that we'd talk later, and that was enough for me now. As long as I had that promise to go on, I was fine.

"Okay, what do we have here," Eric said, rubbing his hands together before he did his *thing*. Seriously, it was too much to keep up with. His hands flew over keyboards and... yeah. He knew what he was doing.

"Boss, it looks like Aro's decided to go to his vacation house in Cerveteri."

For once I didn't feel completely out of it. I knew that Edward's crew had spent the two days prior to mine and Whistler's arrival setting up surveillance around Aro's four villas in Italy, all of them located near Rome. Aro's permanent home, which was more of a fucking palace, was somewhere in Tuscany, but according to the Masens' previous work, we knew that Aro always headed to one of his four villas around Rome when something had happened, and this was evidently true since he was now moving.

The next plan was to get inside, and to do that we needed to know where he was, and now we knew. Cerveteri. Which meant the boys were most likely heading out tonight.

I had asked Kellan why they didn't just break in and planted their cameras and shit in all the four villas instead of waiting to see which one Aro moved to. I mean, it wasn't like Edward and his crew couldn't afford the technology, but Kellan had explained. *"The first thing they do when they arrive is to sweep the villa for bugs. So, if we already have our shit there, they will find it. In other words; we have to get our shit in place after they've done their search."*

Yeah. So, now they will break into the villa, without getting caught, and plant the bugs and cameras.

"That's not far from here," Edward pointed out. "What's the status on activity so far?"

As Eric worked on the answer, Edward pulled me close to him, resting his chin on the top of my head. I loved that, there was no denying it, and I made sure he knew I loved it as I held him to me.

"Well, Aro's closest have arrived," Eric said, zooming in on monitor 4. "Kitchen staff, cleaning crew." He pointed at the screen where a bunch of people were emptying a few vans. "And guards." He zoomed in on four men standing outside the three story villa. "That's Stefan Ztano, Aro's head of security, and if he's already there, I'd say we had less than a day before Aro arrives." He brought up a map, leaving the road – from where we are to Aro's villa – in the color red. "This is the road we'd take, and we know that Aro will fly in by helicopter." On screen 3, an image of a helipad showed up, and I remembered Kellan telling me that he always travelled by helicopter, using only a pilot and two guards.

There was another screen showing the plan of the house, and a room on the third floor had been circled, which I knew was the room they guessed Aro had his office. I remember Kellan, Eric and Adam talking about ways to get inside the house... and I remember feeling that feeling. Adrenaline, once again reminding me that I wanted to help and... feel it.

Edward checked his watch then. "It's almost eight thirty PM." He sighed. "How soon can we leave?"

I swallowed.

"Within the hour," James answered from behind us. "Since it's the villa in Cerveteri, we need four men." He paused, lighting up a smoke. "When Seth, Adam, and I were there a few days ago, we noticed the new security system they'd installed. It's a three story villa to boot. So, we need Eric here, working the computers, and Sam's too big," he chuckled, as did they others. I was lost now. "I'd say... Cullen, myself, Adam, and Seth."

I felt Edward nod.

I concentrated on breathing.

"Sounds good," Edward said pensively. "McKenna, you have your gear, right?" He pointed at the screen where the entire villa was up. "You need to scale that fucker."

"I have everything I need, boss," Adam replied.

"Good. Let's gear up, boys. I want Seth in a fucking tree somewhere with his automatic." Again with the chuckles. Not that I minded, I was just confused. "But I do want Sam to tag along. He'll be in the car in case we need his muscles." More laughter. "And James, you'll be on the lookout. I'll go with Adam."

"How are you gonna get past the motion detectors?" Kellan asked, walking closer to the screens. "They're included in the new system they installed." James nodded in thought. "And I'm willing to bet the windows have them, too."

I looked up at Edward for answers.

"We have to go under the wall," he said, pointing at the concrete wall that surrounded the villa. "We have equipment for that." He shrugged, seeing no issues. "As for the windows... Eric has a plan there." He smirked.

And every set of eyes went to Eric... who was also smirking.

Cocky bastards the lot of them.

"I hacked in," Eric said simply. "Unlike us, they run everything through a computer system, which is their fuck-up, because it's almost too easy for me to turn it off now." They were... fuck, so confident.

But wait...

"If you can turn it off, why not turn the fence-thingy off, too?" I asked, ignoring my lack of a correct term for whatever they worked on. Fence-thingy worked very well for me, thank you.

"I could, but their guards would hear it, because their wall is also electrical, and it's connected to the sensors," Eric explained. "It's like crickets. You hear them, like a never ending buzz. The electricity flowing through the wires on the wall is pretty much the same. You hear it, and I can't cut the sensors off without shutting the power. "

Huh.

Slowly I nodded. I understood.

"Where are you going in?" Kellan asked Adam and Edward.

They were all focusing on the screen where the plan of the house was, and since Edward mentioned scaling, I knew they planned on entering on the third level right away.

"Well, the area right next to what we believe is Aro's office is most likely a bathroom," Adam replied, pointing at the smaller room on the monitor. "That should be the safest place to enter without running into someone."

"No can do, man," Eric said, shaking his head as he rearranged and zoomed and... shit. "You won't fit through the window," he said, and there was a picture then. I assumed James and his boys had taken it while they got the other cameras up. "And judging by the balcony right next to it, I'd say that's a bedroom, and you'll be there late. There's a possibility of someone being there."

I listened, very intently, but I was still focusing on the window. The bathroom window. It didn't look *that* small. At least not for me.

"What about the office window then?" Seth asked.

Both Edward and Eric shook their heads. "It's barred, which is why we think it's his office," Edward sighed, obviously deep in thought. "Fuck... that leaves us with the second floor." He frowned. I could see he didn't like that idea, and it wasn't too hard to understand why. Hell, I was catching on, because I actually saw it. If Edward and Adam entered the house on the second floor, they'd have to go up the stairs – a place easy to get spotted. And it was easy, after watching the guys work, to see that they wanted as little moving around as possible. They didn't want to move around too much in the villa.

And when I thought about it, it hit me just how eager I was to not only help, but to make sure their plan went off without a hitch. I didn't want to see them running around in that villa with Avellinos patrolling. So...

I blurted it out. "I can get in through that window!"

Just in and out, right?

"Are you *trying* to give me a heart attack?" Edward muttered, not missing a beat. "Forget it, princess. I need you safe. Moving on."

They moved on... but I noticed Kellan. He was regarding me, and I sorta knew, knew that I most likely had his approval. I think he saw potential in me.

He kept quiet, though.

Until Edward, Sam, Seth, Adam, and James had left an hour later.

Yeah, they left. Geared up and ready to try the bedroom window on the third floor, they left in one of the three black SUV's Edward had bought for the crew.

For a while, after they had left, I was shaking with nerves.

Edward had assured me that they would return before dawn.

Yeah. That didn't really calm me down.

However, I soon had something to focus on, because Kellan approached me.

He asked, "Are you ready to play with the big boys, Bella?"

And I replied without hesitation. "I am." Because I could feel it.

Shortly after, there was a plan.

There was gear. A harness, rope and wire, because I was getting up there. There on the third floor, through the bathroom window. There was a bullet proof vest. There were my two favorite knives – my boot knife and my butterfly knife. There was an SUV. There were gadgets that Eric surrendered after a minor argument about telling Edward.

Kellan and I won that argument.

And soon we were on the way to Cerveteri.

I needed to drive, I needed to feel it. And boy did I feel it.

I gripped the wheel tighter and floored it.

### 31 – ROME IN JANUARY

#### BPOV



“Tighter, Bella,” Kellan said.

I obeyed and pulled it tighter. The harness was really fucking tight, and my expression told him that, to which he nodded in approval. Standing at the edge of the wooded area, Kellan and I finally got ready to enter Aro’s premises – I couldn’t fucking wait.

“Do you remember everything?” he asked, handing me the earpiece that would keep me connected to Kellan as well as Eric, who was back at our villa.

I nodded and took deep breaths. I knew the plan.

It wasn't about ruining anything for Edward and his crew – it was about proving myself useful. Which was why we waited. The plan was to *not* run into Edward and Adam.

“Okay. Digital camera?” he asked. I patted the left pocket of my hoodie. “Flipline?” I turned, showing the right back pocket of my jeans where I had stashed the rope and wire for now. “The links?” Left pocket. “Good. And your knives?” I pushed my jeans up, showing the boot-knife strapped to my calf. “Butterfly knife?” Strapped to my wrist. “Phone?” Right front pocket of my jeans. “And you're wearing the vest,” he stated. “Gloves?” Shit. I darted over to the SUV and found the gloves in the backseat. “Good,” he chuckled. “Moving on. Mouthpiece?” Attached to my other wrist. I would use it to communicate with Eric and Kellan. “Okay. Ready?”

Deep breaths.

I nodded.

“Oh, and you have the watch?”

Another nod. There was a tiny flashlight on my watch that I would have to use once I was inside the house.

With everything in place, we started walking through the woods.

I was focused with only one thing on my mind – get this done correctly.

It was a mindblowing feeling.

I felt high.

Twenty minutes later, Kellan pointed ahead, and I saw what he was pointing at – James and Seth. They were both standing at the edge of the woods, most likely guarding the area where Adam and Edward had gone



in. Kellan and I had anticipated this, and now we had to include them. Otherwise we wouldn't be able to get in.

"Eric," Kellan said into his own mouthpiece. He was armed and geared up, too. "We're about to approach Seth and Hunter. Alert them."

"*I'm on it,*" I heard in my earpiece.

Seconds later, Kellan and I watched as Seth and James spun around, trying to scan the area around them, and it was obvious that Eric had just told them.

So, we walked out.

They studied me for two seconds before James spoke to Kellan.

"Cullen's gonna kill you."

And I said, "I won't let him. Now, are you gonna let us through?" I cocked an eyebrow.

"Cullen and Adam are still in there," James pointed out. "I doubt you wanna run into them."

No, I don't. And I have no plans to do so.

"I won't run into them," I said. "In fact, just act like we're not here, and when you're done, tell Edward that you-" I motioned for the hole they had dug that went under the concrete wall, "-filled that up. Kellan and I will take care of it when we're done."

Seth was trying not to smile but James was reluctant. Yes, he had turned out to be quite the obedient puppy when it came to following orders. However, I could see that he was intrigued. And let's face it, I wasn't going anywhere. If there was anything he had learned about me, it was that I was a determined little bitch.

"I swear you'll be the death of me, woman," James muttered. "You're as stubborn as the other Cullen."

I grinned and patted his shoulder.

"Maybe it comes with the name."

He huffed.

And that was that.

Kellan and I made sure with Eric that everything was clear, and then we got dirty. Literally, as we made our way through the tunnel they had dug. And once we were on the other side, we quickly ran across the garden – massive motherfucking garden, by the way – and thankfully it was in the middle of the night, which made us invisible.

"You okay?" Kellan whispered as we crouched behind a few bushes. I nodded, and he nodded once in return before he spoke to Eric in the mouthpiece. "We're here, Eric. What's the status?"

*"Both Cullen and Adam are in Aro's office." My eyes quickly searched out the window on the third floor. Of course there was no movement that I could see. "And there's been a change of plans. Cullen wants more. He's gonna head downstairs to set up more bugs, which means he has no plans to leave anytime soon." Fuck, Edward! "The good thing is that you, Kellan, can use Adam's line to get to the roof." Okay, that was a good thing, I suppose. "But Bella? You better watch your ass once you're inside." Noted. "Whatever you do, don't run into Adam in there. He will flip."*

"Got it," I replied quietly. "So, Adam will leave before Edward?"

*"Affirmative. Adam will get out the way he came in, and Edward will get out from downstairs."*

Shit. Okay.

"Alright, am I good to go then?" Kellan asked.

Before he could ask me for it, I reached back and grabbed the rope from my pocket, making sure I still had the flipline, and then I handed it over to Kellan.

*"Aye, you're good to go. Just watch out for Aro's crew. They're currently on the terrace."*

"Understood. Bella and I will split now," Kellan said, nodding to me, and I wasted no time.

Still crouching slightly, I ran the last distance, not stopping until I reached the house wall. As soon as I was in place, I could see Kellan running, too. Though, he headed for the spot where Adam had climbed up, which was just around the corner. And as I waited, I attached the flipline to my harness.

*"Bella, you there?"* I heard Eric ask in my ear.

"Yes," I whispered against the mouthpiece attached to my wrist. "On the ground, directly below the bathroom window."

*"Good. Cullen just left Aro's office and is heading to the second floor. I asked Adam to bug the bathroom and open the window. He will do that now before he leaves."*

I frowned in confusion, because when we had left the villa, the cameras had shown us that the bathroom window was already open, which was why I didn't have to learn how to pick a fucking lock in two hours time, or smash the window in for that matter. I was very relieved by that, you know.

"Elaborate," I whispered. "That window was already open."

*"Someone closed it," he replied simply. "I guess someone used the bathroom and then closed the window, but it can be a good thing."*

"How?" I hissed. Hadn't it been for the fact that Adam was going to open it again, this whole thing would be impossible.

*"Because it means they're not around. My guess is that someone closed it, thinking it was for the best if they were all sitting on the terrace anyways."*

I sighed. Farfetched to me. And like Eric said, it was just his guess. What if he was wrong? What if they closed it because they were suspicious or had heard noises out here?

"Are you getting this, Kellan?" I whispered.

*"Yes, I heard. It will be fine, Bella. By the way... I'm on the roof now. Are you strapped in?"*

I checked my harness once more, making sure everything was done correctly, and it was.

"Yes, I'm ready."

Deep breaths.

And then I heard a faint sound from above me, making me look up, and I saw that the bathroom window was now cracked open again. Good. It made me curious, though. I wondered what Eric had told him in order to keep Adam in the dark. All I know is that I would've been suspicious if I was Adam and was told to open the window. But it didn't matter now. The window was open and I was ready to get up there.

*"Eric, are we good?" Kellan asked. "I'm ready to lower the rope for Bella."*

I looked up, and there he was, up on the roof.

*"We're good. Adam just entered the bedroom. He's getting ready to leave, so hurry the fuck up before he sees her."*

Two seconds later, I held the end of the rope Kellan had lowered and I quickly attached it to the flipline, giving it a tug to alert Kellan. He understood right away, and soon I left the fucking ground. Shit, that was a feeling I hadn't anticipated. Good thing I wasn't scared of heights. But still, damn butterflies.

I passed the second floor, peering into the window and fuck me if I didn't see Edward there as he planted bugs. He was dressed like the rest of the guys – cargo pants and fitted hoodies in black, and beanies. Sure as hell made me happy about the hour we were here, because I knew he wouldn't be able to see me even if he tried.

"Everything okay, Bella?" Kellan asked from above me, and yeah, I was grateful that he used both his hands when it was my life dangling almost three stories off the ground.

"I'm fine," I murmured. "A few more feet and I can reach the window."

A few feet later, I was there. First I checked to see if the window creaked, which it didn't since I opened it carefully – thank God – and then I opened it fully before I made my way inside. Fuckers were right. The window was fucking tiny. But I made it, and somewhat gracefully I landed on the floor.

"I'm in," I whispered before I detached the rope. "Status on the third floor, Eric?" I whispered next, giving the rope two tugs, and Kellan got it, quickly pulling it away before I closed the window.

*"The third floor is empty," Eric told me, much to my relief. "But Cullen mentioned that the office door creaks, so be careful. And Kellan? Is the rope gone and shit like that? 'Cause Adam is on his way down now."*

"*I have it,*" Kellan whispered.

Okay. This was it. My time to prove myself.

"I'm leaving the bathroom." And with that said, I slowly opened the door and made sure the coast was clear before I headed out. Silently I made my way down the dimly lit hallway, and then I reached the office door. I held my breath. So, so, so slowly, I pulled the handle. Still not breathing. And yes, the door creaked a little, but I made it after a while. It wasn't until I was inside the office and the door was shut behind me that I could breathe properly again.

"I'm inside the office," I breathed out, and then I used the flashlight on my watch to look around. I couldn't see much at all, but dragging around a bigger flashlight would've been impossible. Plus, my pockets were already full. "There's a cabinet next to the desk," I whispered. "Should I start there?"

"No," Eric said. "*Start with the desk. The cabinet is most certainly locked, but if there's a key...*" He trailed off, and I understood. If there was a key, the chance was that it would be in the drawers. So, that's where I started. Without making any sounds, I checked every drawer. "*Anything?*"

"Papers," I mumbled, not understanding a thing as I read. "They're all in Italian."

But I still took my camera out and snapped shot after shot because I may not know Italian but someone would.

"*Doesn't matter. Take pictures anyway.*"

"I am."

He chuckled. "*Maybe Kellan's right. You seem to fit in well.*"

I grinned and snapped a few shots blindly. Maybe photos of the office would give us something. Who knew?

"There's no key, though," I sighed quietly, chewing on my lip. Just in case, I tried the cabinet but Eric was right; it was locked. Then I turned back to the desk, checking out more papers. I mean, we had no idea what we would find, and let's face it; Aro would probably bring the most important things with him – whatever that was. We doubted we would find much here. Not that it kept me from trying. So, I kept searching. And then I actually saw something. Names. Papers filled with nothing but names, and they had my attention because they weren't Italian names. "Eric, I think I found something." Immediately I started snapping shots, eager to get as much as possible. "Lists of names." I scanned through the papers as my camera worked. "I recognize a few last names. Not personally but... I think they're Irish."

*"Take photo-"*

My gasp cut him off.

Edward Masen.

"Ed's on the list," I whispered.

*"Keep searching, Bella,"* Kellan urged. *"We will have time later to check the names."*

Okay. Okay. Got it.

*"Cullen's getting ready to leave,"* Eric said. *"The entire house is bugged now."*

And pride surged through me.

Call me fucked up if you will, I don't care. My husband fucking made it.

That had me working harder, and I spent the next fifteen minutes taking photos of everything I could.

*"I think it's time to get out of here, Bella," Kellan said. "We don't wanna push it, and I'm surprised Aro's crew hasn't headed to bed yet."*

*"He's right," Eric agreed. "It's just the two of you now. By the way, James left gear for you, Kellan."*

*"For what?"*

*"You gotta cover the fucking hole," Eric chuckled.*

*"Awesome... Can't wait. Sarcasm, by the way."*

"Okay, I'm done," I said.

"Good," Eric responded, all business now. *"Be careful when you leave, Bella, I swear to God..."*

I knew. This was what Eric dreaded because now it was just me. Adam and Edward were gone, and Eric had no clue of what was happening on the other side of the door. It was much easier when he had Edward and Adam to report to him. But yeah, it was just me now. Flying solo and blindly.

"I promise," I whispered, quietly making my way out of the office.

Luck was on my side and I entered the bathroom without any troubles.

"Lower the rope," I said quietly, opening the window.

As soon as the rope was firmly attached, I once again climbed through the window, and holy shit, I made the mistake of looking down. Worse this time. Definitely worse this time. Maybe because I was going out of the window head first! Good God. Deep breaths.



"You okay, Bella?"

"Yeah," I breathed out shakily.

"Don't look down."

Right. Okay. Shit.

Thankfully Kellan lowered me to the ground swiftly, and I breathed out a huge breath in relief once I had both feet on the ground.

"I'm ready," I said, knowing that he would toss me the rope soon.

Which he did.

*"Wait for me by the bushes," Kellan instructed. "I'm gonna get down on the other side."*

I knew that. He was going to jump ten feet down to a third story balcony, which scared the shit out of me, but apparently he had done it before so I trusted him. Then there was a tree close to the balcony that would be his way to the ground. Fucking monkey, that man.

"Be careful," I told him before I ran towards the bushes.

I only heard his chuckle.

Cocky bastards.

It didn't take long for Kellan to emerge, and soon we were running towards the bushes where we had our exit.

"You did good, Cullen," Kellan chuckled as I squirmed my way through mud. "And I was right," he grunted, following my lead.

"Right about what?" I said breathlessly, still glowing 'cause he called me Cullen.

I tried to wipe off some dirt but it was useless. It was everywhere. Not that I cared, but I didn't want the shit on my face. Tasted nasty for fuck's sake.

"You're an adrenaline junkie," he grunted again, and I held my hand out for him as he pushed himself out of the hole. "Just like that husband of yours."

Wordlessly I handed him the shovel that James had left us.

And yes, I suspected as much when it came to adrenaline. I mean, I wouldn't call myself a *junkie*, but I did enjoy the thrill. Immensely.

Right now, though, I didn't feel... much of anything. I was kinda blank.

"Thanks," he sighed, wiping his forehead. "Let Eric know we're out. I'll get this shit done." He gestured for the hole, and the pile of dirt next to it.

I nodded and spoke against my wrist.

"Eric, we're out. Kellan's filling the hole and then we're out of here."

Eric's response was instant. "*Good job. And Bella? Please hurry home, 'cause I have a feeling you have to save my life soon.*"

I giggled, still breathless from the run.

"*And if I'm not wrong, you're in charge of James and Seth, too.*"

"And me," Kellan muttered.

"Don't worry," I grinned, "I won't let Edward shoot you."

\*O\*O\*O\*

"There are so many names," I mumbled to myself, checking the display on the digital camera as Kellan drove. But I couldn't fucking understand why

my hands were shaking. "Most of them are American. Or Irish... or English... or whatever." Fuck, I couldn't sit still. My knee was bouncing, my hands were shaking, and my entire body was buzzing. "What I mean is, they don't look Italian."

Kellan gave me a sideways glance, noticing how I sat.

"Read the names you believe are Irish," he said, stepping on the gas.

I took a deep breath.

My eyes scanned the names on the photos I had taken of the lists.

"Kim O'Brien, Riley Gallagher," I mumbled, eyes searching and hands fighting to keep still. So many names. Harry Smith, Robert White. "A few female names," I noticed. Renee Dwyer. Margaret Platt. "And then Edward Masen as I said." Jesus, there had to be hundreds of names. "Chelsea Murray, Steve Murphy--"

"Shit," Kellan cursed. "Murphy? Common name, but... Steve. Fuck." I was confused. "It could be anyone, really, but Sam's dad went missing last year."

Sam's last name was Murphy.

"Is his name Steve?"

Kellan nodded. "Sam's gonna go apeshit."

I was about to reply, but my phone rang, so I quickly fished it out of my pocket and saw Eric's name on the display.

"Bella," I answered.

*"Yeah, you have a problem on your hands."*

Again with confusion.

"What are you talking about?"

*"Well, Cullen and the others returned. You weren't here. James spilled the beans."*

Shit.

Fucking James.

"How mad is he?" I asked, chewing on my lip.

*"Good thing I look good in bruises,"* he said dryly. *"And James and Seth are locked up in the conference room with Sam guarding them."*

*Jesus.*

"I'm so sorry, Eric—"

*"Don't bother, honey. I wouldn't have helped you if I didn't agree with you. Relax."*

"It's still my fault," I argued, feeling like shit. "I thought I would reach Edward before he could throw punches."

I groaned.

This was a mess.

I knew Edward would flip, I wasn't stupid, but I thought I would have time to calm him down before his anger reached his crew.

*"Doesn't matter now,"* Eric chuckled. *"Just know that he's heading for you. He'll probably reach you in twenty minutes or something like that."*

Fuck. Okay. I could deal with this. I just had to make sure Kellan wasn't here.

"I'll fix this," I said firmly. "Talk to you later, Eric."

After hanging up the phone, I turned to Kellan who was grinning wryly.

"You can drop me off here," I said. "Whistler's on his way, and if he sees you..." I trailed off.

"I'm not dropping you off at the side of the road in the middle of the night, Bella." He rolled his eyes. "Besides, I can take a punch of two. It doesn't matter, because I know Cullen will realize that we're right. He just needs to let shit sink in."

"I don't care," I told him. "He's already punched Eric for helping us, Kellan." This was insane. "And you know that the only one strong enough to fight Edward off is Sam." I said it with both pride and reluctance. It was true. My husband was a strong fucker, and lethal to say the least. I was proud and impressed, but in this situation it sucked ass. Because... "I'm the only one he won't hurt." It was a fact. "So, just drop me off here. Edward will see me."

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"You're still armed, right?"

"Yes. But why would I need anything?"

"For protection if anyone shows up, of course."

"The road is deserted, Kellan."

"But still..."

"Just drop me off. I have my knives if that makes you feel better."

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“On one condition.”

I sighed. “What?”

“Take my Glock.”

“Fine.”

\*O\*O\*O\*

I paced. I couldn't stand still.

My hands were shaking, my breaths were choppy, my skin prickled.

Minutes passed and I still couldn't relax.

Everything just got stronger and stronger.

I tried to breathe deeply through my nose.

Shit.

My phone rang.

“Edward.”

*“Where are you?” he asked in an eerily calm voice. “Good move to let Kellan drive off, by the way. I just passed the fucker.”*

I swallowed hard.

“Just keep driving,” I said quietly. “I'm on the side of the road.”

He hung up.

Yeah, I was fucked.

A couple of minutes later, I saw the lights on Edward's car.

I walked out just enough so that they would catch me.

Which they did, and Edward pulled over, twenty feet away from me.

He left his car, slammed the door shut, and... then he was here.

"Are you hurt?" he gritted out.

My fingers itched to touch.

I shook my head.

I looked like shit with a messy ponytail and dirt on my clothes, but no, I wasn't hurt.

I couldn't speak. I could barely breathe.

"Get in the fucking car," he commanded quietly before heading back to the car. "Now, Bella!"

I whimpered.

I didn't know what was happening to me.

But I obeyed him, and soon I was in the passenger seat.

He didn't look at me.

Placing his arm behind my seat, he looked back as he turned the car around, and then he revved the engine before speeding towards the villa.

Again I swallowed hard.

My instincts told me I needed him.

*Something.*

Fuck, it was powerful. Surging inside of me, making me whimper again. And it hit me. It was the adrenaline.

"You're coming down," he muttered, never even glancing at me. "Give it an hour or two and you'll feel normal again."

I breathed.

I watched him.

The events of the night came crashing down.

"*Edward,*" I whimpered.

The grip he had on the wheel was tight. His sharp jaw with two days worth of stubble was clenched. His expression was murderous.

"Why did you do it?" he gritted out. "Why the *fuck* did you go to Aro's villa?"

He shook his head.

I rubbed my thighs together.

Holy fuck.

Oh, *God.*

"*Whistler.*"

"Shut up, Bella."

I closed my eyes.

I bit down on my lip.



Scrunched my face together.

I was out of control.

And then I couldn't keep it in anymore, so I launched. I attacked him with openmouthed kisses. His neck, his jaw. The car swerved but I didn't care. My hands were everywhere.

"Stop, baby," he grunted. I whimpered again, unable to obey. "Fucking hell, stop it!"

With a push, I was back in my seat, but instead of feeling rejection, I was pissed.

"Stop it?" I asked incredulously. "The only reason I'm in this position right now is because you refused to give me credit!"

"Credit for what?" he snapped. "You went in there to snap a few shots? Yeah, Eric talked. How fucking stupid are you!"

"Don't call me stupid!" I shouted, close to panting. "I just wanted to be a part of it all! I wanted to help you!"

"We didn't need your help, Isabella!" he shouted back, stopping the car on the side of the road. "It was a simple fucking gig and we got the shit done without you!" He turned in his seat, glaring at me. "Do you know how fucking close I got to shooting James? Do you know how I felt when I found out that you and Ford were in that house? No scratch that," he laughed humorlessly, "Kellan was on the fucking roof. You were in there all alone! I thought I was gonna have a fucking heart attack!"

Before I could shout back, he left the car and started pacing in front of it.

I followed.

"I made it, didn't I?" I argued, slamming the door shut behind me. "And guess what, I fixed shit that you and Adam didn't!" *God*, it felt good to get that out. "I found papers you would've found if you weren't so damn focused on the bugs!" In pure frustration, I pushed him against the front of the car. His eyes widened. Yeah, I had taken him by surprise. "I'm sick of you treating me like a fucking doll, Edward," I seethed. "I love you and worship the fucking ground you walk on, just like you do with me, but you seem to think that I'm made out of glass, and I'm sick of it!"

"Oh, yeah?" He sneered at me, surprise worn off, then approached, not stopping until he towered over me. "So, all this shit was to prove something? You did all this just to make me see that you're able to join in?" I nodded. "Well, *fuck* that. By doing this you just proved how fucking reckless you are!" he growled. "All you had was Kellan, and of course Eric who was hours away." He let out a snarl, shaking his head. "What would you do if things had gone wrong?"

"Kellan was armed," I huffed. "And I was, too." Only with knives, though. Shit.

"He was on the roof!" he shouted angrily. "Can't you fucking get it? Even *I* had backup in there, and I know my goddamn job! You don't!"

And I had nothing to say.

Because he was right.

"If someone would've caught you-" He choked. Deep breaths. We both took them. Then he spoke flatly. "They wouldn't hesitate to put a bullet in your head."

My insides churned.

And Edward backed away before turning to the car, but I couldn't allow that.

"Don't walk away from me, Edward." I grabbed his arm. "We're gonna fix this right now," I told him. "I'm sorry I didn't think things through, but I won't give up. I still wanna be a part of this."

"Forget it."

My fury was back.

"You can't stop me!"

"Watch me."

"No, Edward. I won't. Because I will be busy making sure I'm there the next time, too."

His eyes flashed with rage.

My back was against his car door.

Again he towered over me.

"Do you know how fucking *infuriating* you are?" He once again spoke through clenched teeth. "Fuck, I wish you could just..." He blew out a breath, shaking his head at me again. "I wish you could listen to what I say, and fucking obey."

"Do you?" I shot back because I didn't believe a word of what he had said. He *knew* me. He *chose* me. For who I am. "Do you really, Edward? Would you want me to just sit back and do nothing?"

He blinked at me.

Chests heaving from anger and... frustration and... Christ, I don't *know*.

I saw annoyance and fear in his eyes. I wished I could read his fucking mind.

For a second he stood still, pinching the bridge of his nose.

Then he muttered, "You sure know how to piss me off." And before I could do anything, he pinned me to the car and crashed his mouth to mine. Hard. It ignited me faster than I had ever experienced, and my body was on fire.

"This isn't over," he growled against my lips before pushing his tongue into my mouth.

I tugged on his hair, making him grunt.

I wanted to snap at him, or fucking slap him, because though I was inexperienced, I was ready to learn. But my body was in control my body decided to wrap my legs around his hips.

"Infuriating fucking woman." He planted frantic kisses along my jaw and neck.

Ignoring his remark, I lowered myself to the ground again and started unstrapping the harness.

"Just shut up and fuck me," I mumbled, eyes trained on the straps.

"Demanding little bitch, aren't ya?" He sneered as he unbuttoned his cargo pants.

"*Motherfucking* asshole," I shot back. I couldn't fucking believe he had just called me a bitch. "Just do me a favor and keep that mouth shut before I punch it."

He smirked like the cocky fucker he is.

But I didn't care because my body was still in control, and I was aching for a major release that would hopefully allow me to calm the fuck down. Because what I was going through was insane. My skin wouldn't stop

prickling, my breathing wouldn't calm down, and my muscles wouldn't relax. So, I just kept quiet, lowered my jeans, and turned around, placing my hands on the car window.

"Ready for me, *princess*?" he hissed in my ear, coating his rock hard cock in my wetness. "And why this position? I want your legs wrapped around me."

"Forget it," I snapped, looking over my shoulder with a glare. "If you don't mind, I'd rather not look at you right now."

My knees nearly buckled when he pressed the head of his cock inside of me.

Somewhere in my mind, I registered the fact that we were about to do this on the side of the road, in the middle of the night, but I was too far gone to care or do anything about it.

"Your wish is my command," he muttered. "*Apparently.*"

Then he slammed into me.

"Fuck!" I gasped. Eyes wide, mouth popped open.

"Goddamnit," he grunted.

Plain and simple, he fucked me hard.

Against the car, he pushed his cock inside of me, hard and deep, never stopping, never slowing down, and anger, lust, desire, and frustration rolled off us in waves. Yes, it was a fucked up way to handle the situation but it worked for us. Apparently. Because then the desperation kicked in and we needed more and more and more and harder and harder and deeper and deeper.

I met his every thrust.

His grip on my hips was bordering painful.

He hit *that* spot, making me clench down on him.

"Jesus."

"Whistler," I whimpered. My fingers tried – unsuccessfully, of course – to dig into the glass of the window. "Oh, *God*."

The buildup was insane and consuming me.

My legs started to shake.

*I need you, Whistler.*

"I know," he breathed, and then he was gone, only to spin me around, wrap my legs around his hips, and thrust in again. He was desperate, too. I was it so clearly. "I *know*, baby."

He kissed me hard. With so much *passion*.

My fingers were finally in his hair, pulling and twisting.

"Don't ever change, princess," he moaned in my mouth. "Don't ever fucking change."

"I won't!" I cried out, feeling my orgasm approach. "Same goes... *ungh*... for you."

I... oh, *God*... yes, and there. Fuck. Harder. We were both so close.

"Understood," he groaned against my neck. "*Fuck*... I love you, baby. *God*, I love you."

Hotter, spreading, *everywhere*.

"Whistler," I moaned, clinging to him. "You too... Christ... Love you too!"

The head of his cock rubbed against my spot, and I started convulsing.

Yes.

I was gone.

"I can feel you, princess," he grunted. "Shit, I'm... yes..."

We were both gone.

By the time our orgasms had subsided, we were both panting, still clinging to each other.

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"You'll be the death of me, Mrs. Cullen," he breathed in between soft kisses on my neck. "Not kidding."

I chuckled breathlessly as I threaded my fingers through his hair.

"I love you." I was all I could say. "I love you so much, baby."

"Love you, too," he murmured, kissing my nose. "Now shut the fuck up and let me hold you for a while before we face the shitstorm back at the villa."

My Irish boy.

## 32 – ROME IN JANUARY

### Whistler's POV



"Pull up the feed from the downstairs living room," I tell Eric.

I take a seat next to him, lighting up a smoke before I kick up my feet on the desk. Eric eyes my feet but says nothing. He may work the control room but it's still mine.

Besides, he's too smart to bitch with me now.

Don't even get me started on Kellan and James, and even Seth.

It's been two days since Bella and Kellan went to Aro's villa without my knowledge or consent.

Two days of me snapping.



Problem is, Bella's work is paying off.

And I don't really wanna admit to that shit.

But it's true nonetheless. The lists she photographed will lead us somewhere. We just don't know where yet, but the names matter, that much we know.

Bella. Infuriating fucking woman.

She has a knack for driving me insane. The woman keeps me on my toes, and the fucked up thing is that I wouldn't have it any other way. From day one, pretty much, I've known that she's different. Same goes for Emmett with Rose. He and I get bored easily. Safe to say, we don't have that issue with Bella and Rose around. They're both stubborn as hell.

"Nothing yet," Eric says, monitoring the screens.

I take a drag of my smoke, thinking about other possibilities.

We need to know where they have my uncle.

"Anything from Emmett?" I sigh.

He's supposed to be here soon. He, Rose, Alec and Nessa. But much like Bella and I, they can't exactly enter the country through an airport.

"They left Lyon a couple of hours ago."

All right.

"What about Liam?"

Eric smirks, and I know. I know that everything's fine. Not that we were worried, but a prison break sure as fuck wasn't easy to pull off. But we fucking did it. Well, the boys in the States.

"Last I heard, he's on his way to the safehouse in Colombia."

I grimace a little, exhaling some smoke. "Fucking Colombia," I mutter. That's just Liam. He's fucked up. I love him, 'cause we're family. He's my cousin, but... damn, I don't know why he's gotta get involved with drugs. He's not hooked on it, but he's selling it.

"He's only hiding, Cullen," Eric says, but I'm not sure I believe him. Liam's always been into heavy shit. Much like his dad.

"Whatever," I sigh. "Anyway, is Dad back in Chicago?" That's the plan, at least. He's gonna run Chicago with Garrett and Ben. Mom and Tan will be there, too.

"Yep, they arrived this morning."

Good.

And now... for the papers... "Any more luck on the names?"

A part of me hopes he'll say no.

What, I'm a competitive asshole. Fucking sue me for not wanting my wife to outsmart me. Then again, if someone has to do it, it might as well be her. And I have to admit that I'm a bit proud of her. She's fierce as hell. My little hellcat. But seriously, I will have a goddamn heart attack if she pulls another stunt like that. Jesus, I wouldn't fucking survive if something happened to her.

"Still sorting them," he tells me. "Adam's helping me. First we're sorting out all the women."

I nod pensively.

"You haven't told Sam, I hope."

We're still not sure it's his dad's name on that list, but we suspect it is, which is why we believe the lists will give us answers. Because if it is in fact his dad, then we can start looking for disappearances. And if other names add up, we can assume that the names on the lists belong to people that Aro has killed, kidnapped, or something equally shitty. After all, Ed's name is on that list, too. So, it would make sense.

Eric chuckles dryly. "Nope, and I'd rather not be there when he finds out."

Fuck, I wouldn't wanna be there either, but someone's gotta give him the news.

I know it'll be me.

*Knock, knock.*

"Come in," I yawn, reaching for another smoke.

The door opens behind me, and I take my first pull as I look over my shoulder to see Bella and Autumn entering the control room.

"Evening, ladies." I wink at Autumn. That little girl has me so fucking wrapped around her finger, it aint funny. "Looks like a glitter factory exploded all over you, baby girl."

I'm guessing they're having another girly night, 'cause that includes pajamas and makeup.

"I put makeup on Bella, Edward," she giggles, bouncing over to me, and I put out my smoke before she can jump, which she always does. And I'm always afraid she's gonna hit my family jewels. Hey, I'm a dude.

"You did, huh?" I chuckle, positioning her on my lap before I look over at Bella. "Well, well..." She looks... cute. All glittered up. "Is there any way you can kiss me without getting glitter on my face, princess?"

She grins and walks over to me, and as much as I hate the shit she pulled two days ago, I can never stay mad at her for long. Sure, we've argued a lot, especially since that night, but we're still solid. And yeah, I gotta remind myself of that sometimes, but pardon me for doubting. It aint all that weird if you think about it. I never thought I'd even find love. How the hell am I suppose to believe I'd not only find true love, but also a wife that would embrace the life I live?

But I did.

I just have to remind myself.

"Let's find out, shall we?" she teases, dipping down to kiss me.

I doubt she knows how much I love her.

Seriously.

She's my life.

"Mmm, I've missed you today." She hums against my lips. I nibble on her bottom lip before sucking gently on it. But... I have a kid on my lap. A kid who is currently giggling. So, I end the kiss with a few chaste ones.

"You've been holed up in here for hours," she says softly, threading her fingers through my hair, and I swear I could just purr like a fucking cat.

"Have you at least eaten?"

"Yeah. A few hours ago," I sigh contentedly.

I shiver.

She kisses me on the forehead.

That's Bella. A hellcat and a sweetheart, all wrapped up in one sexy young woman.

"Want me and Autumn to bring you some snacks?"

"Fuck, yes," Eric pipes in.

I chuckle and give Bella a nod. Because who the fuck says no to snacks?

But... "I don't think you should bring this little one, though," I murmur, looking down at Autumn. I'd say a minute or two and then she's out. She's a firecracker but she can also go from a little freak to a sleeping rock in two seconds. And right now she's about to drop on my chest. "Awesome," I mutter, rolling my eyes a little. "I'll get glitter all over."

"Aw, but you'll look so good, baby," Bella coos.

I shoot her a playful glare. "Sure, I can be your little fairy," I reply dryly.

She just winks, then she leaves, and I watch her delectable ass.

I tend to do that.

"Let me know if you want me to take her," Eric says quietly, giving me a sideways glance.

I wave him off. "Nah, she's good here."

She's my fuel.

This seven year old little girl is one of the reasons I do what I do.

I need the revenge.

I mean, fuck, what if it had been my kid, and Bella and I had died in Seattle?

Eric's all she's got left. A twenty-five year old uncle.

Family comes first, and that's fucking final.

"By the way, your gear arrived this morning."

"Shit, for the car show?" I ask.

He nods. And grins.

Fuck yes. "Nice."

I can't fucking wait. In just a few days, I'm off to do what I do best. Emmett, too. I know he's eager. And then we have the wives, of course. This is where I'm thinking that... *maybe*... I can include Bella. If only a little. Theft is a whole other matter, ya know. So, if she really wanna get in, this would be it. But I sure as hell don't want her anywhere Aro. Just the thought of it makes my insides churn.

There's another knock on the door then, and Adam soon enters, walking in while looking at papers he's holding. I'm guessing it's the lists.

"Eighteen women," he says, never looking up. "All of them are linked to the Masens in one way or another, except for one." Now he looks up. "A Renee Dwyer from Arizona."

"You did a full background on her?" I ask.

"No, just a partial until I have access to this," he replies, nodding at Eric's impressive system. "From my computer, I can't hack into much without getting caught."

"All right," I shrug, "have at it."

And so he takes a seat on the other side of Eric, and the two starts working on the names.

"What do you have on her so far?" Eric asks him.

"She's from Arizona, but I only have... hmm, let's see..." He trails off, checking a notepad. "When I backtracked, I lost her in the early nineties." He sighs. "Late March in 1991 is the first entrance I have on her. She was in Phoenix then, but what she did before I have no idea."

"Maybe she's related," I say. "If she's involved with the organization, it's quite possible she changed her name to get away or whatever."

Eric's about to say something, but all our phones go off.

Which can only mean urgency.

Careful not to wake up Autumn, I bring out my Vertu and read the text.

**Trying to lose a tail in Torino. Definitely Avellinos – EPC.**

"Fuck," I hiss under my breath before quickly typing a reply.

**Elaborate – ERC.**

His response follows shortly.

I know my boys are waiting for orders now.

**4 SUVs. B-proof. Noticed the 1<sup>st</sup> in Grenoble. Thn 2 followed at the border. Now 1 more in Torino. Me and Ro + 2 kids. Two Glocks – EPC.**

"Get James down here," I order, already typing again.

**Floor it to Asti. It's close to Torino. Dad has a garage there + helipad. Ready to fly? – ERC.**

Wordlessly, Eric takes Autumn from me, and I start pacing, eyes never leaving the phone.

I light up a smoke.

*Fuck. Answer, bro.*

I run a hand through my hair as Bella enters with the rest of the guys.

My phone alerts me of Em's reply, so I hold up a finger, silently telling them to wait.

**No-go. Dad just called. The garage is gone. Fire – EPC.**

"FUCK!" I bellow, resisting the urge to smash the phone against the wall. Instead, I spin around and speak to Eric. "Bring up the garage in Asti. It's where Bella and I changed cars on our way down." I proceed to give him the address so that he can find the coordinates, and then I type to Em again.

**Any way u can lose them in the city? – ERC.**

"James, I want you, Sam and Ford to get ready," I tell them. "Gear up fully; we might have a chase on our hands." Next I face Seth. "You're in charge and I want you ready to go." I give him a pointed look – he knows. He knows it can get bad, and he's our sniper. "And Bella," I face her, all but pleading with her, "you *have* to stay here, princess. No excuses."

"I'll stay," she promises, eyes flickering to Autumn, and I exhale. I see the truth, 'cause my wife can't lie for shit. Well, she can, and very well, but not to my face. "But I need to know what's going on."

The guys hurry out of the room to get their shit ready.

And I'm about to fill her in when my phone beeps.

"A second," I mutter.

**Impossible. Trying but failing. Wrong car for this shit! – EPC.**

*Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck...*



## **What car? – ERC.**

While I wait for his reply, I fill Bella in, and soon the boys return.

She reacts the way I thought she would. Blazing fury and fear.

Their names go on repeat in my head. Echoing. Alec. Nessa. Em. Rose.  
Alec. Nessa. Alec. Nessa. Alec. Alec. Em. Rose.

Bella hands me a smoke, knowing how close I am to blow up.

I can only nod in thanks.

Deep drag.

*Come on, Emmett. What do you have? A car for speed, or for safety?*

Then, finally.

## **Range Rover. Tinted, b-proof. Slow as shit! – EPC.**

“God-fucking-damnit!” I growl. Okay, fast thinking. I turn to Kellan. “Ford, I’m in too. We’re gonna need speed.”

My eyes flicker to Bella; she’s chewing on her lip. I pull her close to me, forcing myself to stay still for just a moment. “It will be fine, baby,” I whisper in her hair, then I rest my chin on the top of her hair as I give Kellan my attention.

“You have the Gallardos here,” he says, and I nod in approval, silently thanking God that I bought one for me and one for Bella. Hell, she hasn’t seen them yet. “I’ll fill them up.”

“I’ll take mine,” I tell him. “And James, you go with me. Ford, you and Sam will take Bella’s.”

Bella hears her name, of course. “Mine?”

“Long story short; I bought you a car. You’ll see it later.”



*If it survives*, I add in my head.

“We’re ready to go,” James says with a firm nod.

Good.

With that out of the way, I motion for them all to follow me, which they do, and as I head upstairs, I reply to Emmett.

**We’re on our way. Aim for Rome. Hopefully we’ll meet up in Florence. Srsly, Em. Fucking floor it. And text your details to Eric, so he can keep track – ERC.**

“Eric, I need your ass glued to the monitors,” I order, heading for mine and Bella’s room. “Em’s gonna text you his GPS. You need to watch him, and then you report straight back to me every ten minutes, understood?”

“Aye, boss.”

I locate my Glock, then my Sig.

And when I turn around... Bella’s holding up my vest.

While trying not to cry. Eyes downcast. Lip-chewing. Fists clenching.

*Fuck.*

I take it from her, quickly putting it on, over my t-shirt, followed by a black hoodie.

"We're gonna drive toward Florence," I tell the guys, quieter now, as my eyes linger on my wife. "It's halfway to Torino. We'll probably beat Em there, but it's a start."

I give the guys a nod, dismissing them.

They leave.

"You'll come back," she states, daring me to defy her. Eyes on fire. Pain and fury. "I swear to *God*, Whistler..." And her voice cracks.

"Come here, princess," I murmur, and as soon as she's within reach, I pull her to my chest. My arms hold her tightly to me. "I'll be fine, I promise," I whisper. "And you'll be right here with Autumn, Eric, and Seth." She nods against my chest. I kiss her hair, hating that I have to go. "We'll be back tomorrow morning at the latest, all right?"

"You better." She snuffles. "I love you, Irish boy."

I smile a little.

"I love you too, princess." Tilting her chin up, I kiss her hard and passionately, pouring myself into the kiss. "Take care of Autumn, will ya?" I breathe heavily, cradling her beautiful face.

She nods, forehead against forehead. "And you bring Alec and the others back."

"I will," I promise her, as well as myself. "Love you."

"You, too."

\*O\*O\*O\*

With the way we drive, we reach Florence two and a half hours later.

So far, Emmett has been able to keep a distance but according to Eric, the Italians are getting closer and closer. The only relief is that they are driving the same kind of cars. In other words, they're not going for speed. Same can't be said for us, and hadn't this been a fucking shitfest, I would've taken time to enjoy my new Lamborghini, but I can't. Not yet. I will, though. As soon as we've gotten rid of those fucking Avellinos.

"Anything?" I ask Eric.

He replies in my earpiece. *"Keep driving. Em's not near Florence."*

Fuck.

I step on the gas.

*"He's trying to shake them in Carrara."*

I shake my head. "That's a tiny ass town. It won't work."

*"Wait... fuck..."*

I frown. "Eric?"

No answer.

And I'm so not in the mood for bullshit!

"Eric!"

*"Fuck, Aro's on the move."*

For the love of...

"You're keeping track on him, too," I state flatly, not really expecting anything else. Eric Bell is one helluva multitasker. "What's up?"

I hear him clicking away on his computers in the background. *"I don't know yet,"* he mutters. *"But he just left his villa with four guards. I'll keep track."*

"Alert Seth," I order. "And keep the girls in the basement."

I highly doubt they know where we are, but to be safe...

*"I'm on it."*

Twenty minutes later, I finally hear from Emmett as he calls me.

"Jesus fucking Christ, bro!" I bark out. "Where the fuck are you?"

*"Trying to stay alive,"* he snaps. *"We're entering Prato. Where are you?"*

I check the GPS.

"Ten minutes away," I respond. My body wakes up. "I'll get Eric to make sure we cross paths."

*"Good. We need a plan. These fuckers are right behind us. There's no time for strategies."*

I knew that already.

"We charge," I reply. It's the only way. "I'll fill the guys in. Keep in touch with Eric, and when we're on the same path, you keep driving while we take over, all right?"

*"Sounds like a plan. Sure you don't need help?"*

"No, you get the kids to safety."

*"Okay-... Fuck!"*

I heard that.

"They're opening fire?" I growl, even though I know the answer.

My knuckles are white from the grip I have on the wheel.

The engine purrs as I floor it.

Alec. Em. Nessa. Rose. Alec. Em. Nessa. Rose.

I hear more gunfire.

"James, make sure our coordinates--"

He cuts me off with a sharp nod, already knowing, and then he speaks into his own mouthpiece.

"Em, you there?" I ask.

Frustration. I fucking hate it.

My fingers itch to use my gun.

*"Yeah... They're aiming for the tires."* And I hear the screeching in the background. *"Fuckers getting too close for my liking."*

"We're already aligned," James informs me. "Five minutes."

I take a deep breath.

Fuck. Finally.

"I'm gonna let you go, Emmett," I tell him. "We're on the same road. Just keep driving. You'll see two Gallardos soon. That's us."

*"Got it. Good luck."*

He hangs up, and I tell James to inform Kellan and Sam in the other car.

Then we drive.

It doesn't take long before we see Emmett's Rover.

With a two-finger wave that he returns, I keep driving, and I'm glad he's behind us now.

The kids are safe.

"Get ready," I mutter to James. Then I address Eric. "You there, Bell?"

*"Yes, boss. You should be able to see your tail."*

And then I do.

Okay. Here we go.

I nod for James, and then I slow the car down.

Deep breaths.

I focus.

As soon as I've pulled the car over, I step out, making sure the car door is in front of me.

I pull out my Glock.

Loaded.

I'm ready.

We all are. Kellan, Sam, James.

Me.

We stand behind our doors, using them as shields.

As we aim.

I'm calm.

The SUVs get closer.

And closer.

Until they're close enough.

"Tires out!" I shout.

Shots ring out, over and over, and I feel the corners of my mouth turn up as I see the first two SUVs swerving.

Closer.

I fire again, aiming for the window.

Again.

Again.

Again.

*Come on, crack, you fucker. Bullet proof my ass.*

"Orders, Cullen!" Kellan shout from the other side of the road.

The SUVs are close.

Maybe sixty feet away.

It's my call.

I take a deep breath.

"Take them out," I order.

With that decision, I take my Sig out, too.



Adrenaline's rushing through my system.

Both guns up. The boys follow suit.

We fire.

No recoil.

We know our fucking jobs.

And I aim... for that special spot.

Over and over.

*Burn, fucker, burn.*

Then, it's more.

Four men from the SUV in the back step out.

"Stay covered!" I bark out.

Bullets fly.

"Aim for the gas!" I growl, and just then, fucking finally, I get the first one.

The first SUV goes up in flames.

I shudder.

It's not enough.

We need closer.

For a second I close my eyes. I see my wife.

"Cullen," James says, and I know. I fucking know. We can't stay here.

So, I nod. Only once. Okay. Shit. "Approach!" I order.

They know the drill.

And then we run.

The fire of the first car hides us for a moment, but it won't last long, and soon we reach their vehicles. Three SUVs still standing. Again, we aim for the gas tanks, and we fire and fire and fire, never relenting. We don't understand why the fuck they won't come out. Their cars won't protect them forever, which a few of them seem to understand. Slow fuckers. So, when a few more step out of, we aim for them instead. They shout bullshit in Italian, they fire, they run, we fire right the fuck back. Shoot first, ask later.

One man aims for Kellan.

I fire, hitting the Italian in the shoulder. Not good enough, I decide. I see red. I fire again. Autumn's parents. Bella. My wife. They killed people at my brother's goddamn wedding. So, I aim... to kill. For the first time in my life. I take people out by my hand.

The third SUV explodes.

And... "GODDAMNIT!" I scream, feeling searing pain in my leg.

Blinding. Shooting through me.

"On your left, Sam!" James growl.

Gunshots.

I blink.

I fire again, breathing through gritted teeth.

*Motherfucker.*

Closer.

"Cover me, James," I bark out.

We're just a few feet away, and then we're there. I waste no time. I rip the car door open of the second SUV, not hesitating to fire up close, so I do. Three shots, and two men slump over.

"Two running!" Sam bellows. "Right side, out on the field!"

I quickly scan the car, making sure it's empty.

"Get those motherfuckers!" I spit out.

James runs after, he's a fast fucker. I'd join him.

If I could!

"Watch out, Sam!" Ford yells.

Sam quickly jumps to the side, and Kellan goes for the fourth SUV; I aim, too. Again for the gas tank.

Something flies by me. Whistling through the air. It takes no genius to figure out what it was.

"You fuckers just can't do shit right!" I scream, approaching with Kellan. Guns pointed.

Guns firing.

"FUCK!" That was Sam, and my eyes find him. Fucking shit! Clutching his shoulder.

"I'm fine!" he snarls. From the ground, he aims and fires.

I follow suit, and we try to take out the last men. We can count... four of them. Six if you include the two that James are hunting.

Kellan gets hit in the chest, and I scream as I raise my guns again.

Luckily, we're all wearing vests.

"To your left, Cullen!" Sam coughs.

To the left; I zero in. I shoot. I don't miss.

"Cover for Kellan," I shout hoarsely. He's not up yet, and Sam needs to cover his ass, 'cause this fucking shit ends now.

My leg hurts like a motherfucker.

Just above my knee.

I shake my head, clearing it.

Focus.

Deep breaths.

Thinking comes later.

I aim again.

Two quick shots.

Two men go down.

In the distant, I hear more gunfire, and I hope to God James got the fuckers.

One last shot rings out, and I look over at Sam, then follow his gaze.

He took the last man down.

Jesus.

I sag.

Only slightly, but... fuck.

Looking down, I see that I'm losing a lot of blood.

Too much, too fast.

Kellan coughs and splutters, waking up slowly but surely. Groaning. Yeah, we're all fucking groaning.

Good thing it's nearly dark.

"We get 'em all?" Sam groans.

"Yeah," I hear James pant. He rests his hands on his thighs. "I got those two. What about here?"

I sigh and sit my ass down in the middle of the road.

"We got 'em," I cough as I accidentally breathe in smoke from one of the fires. "Fucking shit, guys."

"You can say that again," Kellan says gruffly, walking over to me. He hands me a smoke; I graciously accept the fucker. 'Cause I fucking need it. "Fuck, Cullen. That doesn't look good out here." He crouches in front of me, eyeing the wound. It's too dark to see it all, but yeah, I know it's bad. I fucking feel it.

"We're gonna need cleanup as soon as possible," James mutters, looking around him. I kinda do the same. I see the bodies. Sweet Jesus. "Who the fuck can we call?"

"For starters, get Emmett back here," I croak. "Sam needs to get back before he loses more blood." He's worse off than I am. "Then I think it's time we get Liam here. We can't wait till next month."

We need to take the Avellinos out.

"I hear ya, boss, but we need to deal with this," James says, waving his hand around. "We're lucky no one's passed here."

I sigh. I know. I take a deep drag.

My hand is covered in blood.

I grimace. "Carry the bodies to the vehicles," I decide, trying to fight the dizziness. "Let them burn."

"And the rest?" Kellan asks, removing his hoodie. He hands it over to me, and I nod in thanks, keeping the smoke between my lips as I tie the fabric around my leg.

"Feck it," I grunt. "It's pretty fucking clear that Aro knows we're in Italy. As long as the authorities can't tie us to this scene, I don't give two shits about what we do." I cringe and curse as Kellan tightens the hoodie around my leg. "We're gonna have to deal with Aro now anyway. No reason to hide. Well... except for the villa. No one can find the villa."

I don't wanna think about that happening.

"You okay, Sam?" Kellan calls.

We hear him cough, about fifteen feet behind me. "Yeah. Fucking peachy."

Okay, time to get this shit over and done with.

"James, you fill Eric in, and Kellan, you make sure my brother gets back here."

They obey.

I sink back to the ground, looking up at... nothing.

Minutes pass.

.

.

“Emmett’s on his way,” Kellan tells me. “I’ll start with the bodies.”

I think I nod at him.

Then James returns. “I can’t reach Eric. It’s just static.”

Nausea.

Fear.

Panic.

### **33 – ROME IN JANUARY**

#### **BPOV**

If there was one thing I knew about this life, it was that plans changed. All the time. And it didn’t take long before plans changed again – after Whistler had taken off with James, Kellan, and Sam. Because when Eric saw that Aro was leaving his villa with four guards, we had a new agenda.

What Whistler didn’t know was that I had made a decision.

Eric and I had watched the screens intently, following Aro’s movements on the tracking device James had installed for Eric, and it didn’t take long before we realized that he was heading straight for us.

Then he stopped halfway here. We figured that Aro had no plans on putting himself in danger by coming here, so he was going to wait nearby, most likely with more guards. Just a thought, but very probable.

Fear ripped through me, all but paralyzing me, but when Autumn's voice rang through, I knew there would be time to panic later. Eric felt the same, I saw that. So, I ordered Adam, who was on his way to Rome for a supply run, to get his ass back here as soon as possible. Oh, and he was also going to contact Kellan's three guards that lived in Rome. Only problem was, it was going to take time.

Then it was just me, Eric, Autumn, and Seth.

So, I made the call.

"Don't let Edward know Aro's coming this way," I'd told Eric.

Eric had stared at me, studying me, trying to come up with alternatives. But we both knew Whistler was too far away to return now, and besides; Emmett needed them. Rose, Alec, and Nessa needed them.

We were on our own.

In the end, Eric had nodded and turned back the screens. "Yes, ma'am."

After that, I had headed for mine and Whistler's bedroom.

I had brought out my knives – my butterfly, and my set of throwing knives. Then the Glock I barely knew how to use. And Edward's brass knuckles. Pepper spray. Changed into a pair of cargo shorts and a hoodie. And my vest, of course. Because this was happening. Edward wouldn't approve of my shorts, stating that my legs would be bare and without the slightest protection, but I needed room to move freely. Plus, I needed to keep the knives in one of the side-pockets.



Last but not least, my blue All Stars. I figured there would be running involved.

But I refused to think about just what I was going to do.



And that brought us to now...

"Here we go," I muttered to myself. Defense. That's what I chalked it up to be. In any way I could, I would defend myself and our family.

When I returned to the basement, Eric had already filled Seth in; both were now also geared up. Same went for Autumn. Eric had put her own little vest on, and yeah, she was crying. It killed me. Clinging to her uncle, she cried silently while Eric tried to get us ready – when it came to security. Five monitors showed the villa, our villa in different angles, and we would be able to see where the Avellinos were. Where they entered, and where they lurked.

They wouldn't have the element of surprise.

"You okay, Mrs. C?" Seth asked me.

"No," I answered truthfully. "But I will do my best not to lose my shit."

Eric and Seth chuckled quietly, but I was glad to see focus and determination. They were all business now.

"Okay," Eric sighed, turning back to the monitors. "This is what we know. Aro left his villa in Cerveteri with four guards." Seth and I nodded. "Then he stopped halfway here, and we think he met up with more guards there. We also believe that Aro himself won't be here."

I lit up a smoke, thinking. I kept trying to channel some inner Whistler-voice, but... I had none. The only thing I knew was that flight always came before fight. That's how the Masens stayed alive. They never tried to be heroes by fighting blindly just for the sake of it. They weren't above hiding. There was nothing "lame" when it came to protecting family.

But, it was too late to run.

"Eric, you stay here with Autumn," I said. We needed him here where he worked the technical shit. Plus, he was the best protector for Autumn. "And... fuck." Shit, I had nothing. I glanced at Autumn. How she kept herself together, I had no idea. She lived with foulmouthed men, and damnit, I wasn't much better. But I loved her with all my heart, despite my lack of caretaking skills, and... I refused to have anything happening to her. So... how the hell was I going to do this?

"May I suggest something?" Seth asked, understanding that I was at a loss here. I mean, how could I not be? An eighteen year old chick? Come on.

"Please," I said with a nod.

He nodded, too. "Right. Well, I suggest that I go outside." I didn't love that idea, and took a calming drag of my smoke. I just wanted everyone safe. Shit. How did Edward do this? How could he stay calm through all

this? Exhale. "I'm stronger on the outside, Bella. I can hide easily, and I can sneak up on them without them knowing. It will give us two attack points. They will see the villa and enter, not knowing that I'm behind them already."

Yeah, and I loathed that his suggestion made sense.

I had to remind myself that they knew what they were doing.

"And Bella?" Eric said softly, still comforting a sniffling Autumn on his lap. "This isn't on you."

I chewed on my lip, and Seth continued. "He's right. None of this falls on you. Whatever happens is because we all decided it. No one's forcing us to be here."

Right. Sure. Not really helping.

"Okay, whatever," I said, waving it off. "What about me? Where do I go? I want to help. I *need* to help, and I refuse to stay behind."

They exchanged glances, frowning, thinking. I knew what they had to consider. Possibilities, dangers, alternatives, consequences, and in the end; a livid Edward if I so much as got a papercut.

"You know I'm able," I told them pointedly. "Don't base this on Edward."

Eric sighed.

As did Seth.

Then, Eric spoke. "Well, If I'm staying here with the little one, we make this our main space. The control room is the place we need to protect." I nodded in understanding. It was this room that kept us up to speed with everything. "So, I suggest that you stay close to here, Bella. Hide here in the basement, maybe behind the bar, and if anyone comes down, you can

take them out. Hopefully it won't come to that, because finding the door to the basement isn't the easiest."

Jesus.

Take them out.

Take them out.

Take them out.

"Use your gun if you can, Bella," Seth advised. "It'll be easier when you're closer to the target, anyway. Aim for shoulders, legs – thighs are good; they will lose enough blood, which will make it impossible for them to continue – and if you feel confident enough in your aim; the gun-bearing arm or hand. We know you don't want to kill anyone."

I swallowed audibly.

I squeezed my eyes shut.

*It's defense. All about defending the family. Self defense.*

Right.

"Okay," I exhaled. I could do this. "Okay." It was for the loved ones.

"Right. Yeah, okay. I'm ready."

I took a final pull from my smoke before stubbing it out, and then we continued with our plans.

We kept track on the car that was approaching. We made sure the basement had cameras hidden; Eric was going to be our eyes from the control room. And then there were earpieces and mouthpieces attached. Last but not least, we dimmed the lighting in the basement with a switch in the control room. It would give me the advantage, because my eyes

would be adjusted to the darkness if the Avellinos did find their way down here.

"They're five minutes away," Eric announced then.

I took deep breaths. I found focus.

"I'll get into position on the roof," Seth said as he attached a silencer on one of his guns. Or compressor... or whatever they called it.

"Yeah, and get down quickly, man," Eric reminded him. "That's the only place where we don't have a clear visual."

He was worried about that, Eric. As was I. I didn't like that Eric wouldn't be able to see Seth up there, but we didn't have time to install any more cameras. So, it was what it was.

"I'll hurry," Seth replied, and after bumping Eric's fist and kissing my cheek, he left the control room and the basement. And I figured it was time for me to get ready, too.

"All right," Eric sighed, spinning his chair to face me. "You ready for this?"

I nodded, focused on my fucking Glock. Had to make sure it was loaded and whatnot. I still didn't know shit about guns, but I was relieved about Glock's not having a safety-whatever-it's-called. Yeah, I'm so fucking savvy it hurts. Seriously, though, I was happy that it was just to pull the trigger.

"Lemme see," he said, reaching out for my gun.

I gave it to him, and he checked the magazine and made sure I had done everything correctly, which I actually had. Yay for me.

"Looks good," he said, grinning. "You can do this, hon. I have faith in you, and as for what Seth said; feel free to use your knives, too. He's the gun-

nut. But *your* strength is definitely in those titanium blades there in your pocket." He smirked. "Feel free to use them. Besides, they're quieter."

Uh-huh. Sure. Breathing. I breathed. Yeah. Jesus.

"Relax, Bella. Roll your shoulders. Breathe in through your nose."

I obeyed.

Or tried.

"I'll be close by," he reminded me, standing up with Autumn on his hip.

"And I'll see every move you make."

I nodded and kept my eyes on Autumn. She was all cried out. Scared but tired as hell.

Deep breaths.

I refused to think about my husband. It would be hours before he could be back, anyway. Last Eric heard, Edward and the others were a few minutes away from Emmett, meaning; he could be in the middle of a gun-fight now for all I knew. So yeah, I rather put that shit in the back of my mind.

I flexed my fingers around my butterfly knife, hoping I wouldn't get the chance to use it. Because if I did, it meant that I was too close. If I had to use anything, I hoped for the throwing knives. My aim was good enough. To say the least. I had practiced a lot, and I knew anything within ten yards was in danger. So, that's what I focused on. I focused on the guys supporting me, moving the targets further and further away. My aim was even good at thirteen yards but I still needed practicing there.

"Better," I heard Eric say.

And I realized that I was calmer.

Which was good because Seth's voice came in through my earpiece then.

A whisper. I also heard it on Eric's speakers. *"One SUV pulling in."*

That was my cue.

I kissed Autumn on the forehead, Eric on the cheek, and then I left the control room.

Deep breaths.

I walked through the kitchen, the living room, and then the narrow hallway that lead to the bar, which was right next to the stairs.

It was dark but light enough for me to see.

I hid behind the bar.



"I'm in place," I whispered into my mouthpiece.

I heard Eric's quiet chuckle. *"I know. I can see you."*

Yeah, I rolled my eyes at myself.

Then I sent him a timid smile through the camera in the corner.

*"Five goons stepping out of the car," Seth whispered then. "Shit. Are you getting this, Eric?"*

Holy fuck. Five of them.

*"Fuck. Yeah, they have dogs."*

"Oh, God," I whispered. "Does that mean they can find us down here?"

*"Stand by," Seth said abruptly. "I'm starting now."*

Eric and I knew what that meant. He had a clear sight and was going to start shootin-

*"One down..."*

Jesus. The first down.

*"Two down..."*

*"They're running," Eric said, most likely to keep me informed. "Seth, your two o'clock."*

*"Got him. Three down..."*

Three men shot. Dead? I didn't know, but I did know that Seth was an assassin. I highly doubted he aimed for their toes.

*"Shit, two more SUV's coming, Eric," Seth growled quietly. I heard Italians shouting in the background. "Four down... by the way. And I got the fucking mutts, too."*

*"James just called in. They got the job done. I gave them static in return," Eric told us. "That oughta motivate them to get their asses back here. And Seth, can you see how many fuckers there are in the second car that just pulled in? I can only count four from the third car."*



Fuck, it was a lot to take in.

Okay. Whistler's okay. Goddamn, that felt good.

*"Five in the second car,"* Seth whispered. And more shouting in Italian. *"And I just got the last one from the original five. We have nine left now, and I don't have much time left up here. Only a matter or... wait... One more down... Anyway, just a matter or time before they know I'm up here."*

And then we heard gunfire. Safe to say, our visitors didn't use silencers.

"Seth, get down from there," I pleaded quietly. If they had started shooting, did that mean they had found him?

Maybe... fuck, maybe I should just go up there...

No. Shit. I wouldn't make it.

*"Not yet,"* Seth hissed quietly. *"They're still too many to handle if they get inside the villa... We're down to seven now."*

*"You have two heading for the garage,"* Eric supplied. *"Oh, and Cullen's frantic. I bet they're on their way back now."*

"You keep giving them static when they call in?" I whispered.

*"Yeah."*

*"Two more out. Five left."*

I didn't know what to feel about that. But Eric was right. We needed the guys to hurry back.

*"Fuck!"* Eric shouted then. *"Get down, Seth! Three are inside!"*

"Shit," I whimpered.

No. No. No time for panic, Bella! Oh, God...

Deep breaths.

I rolled my shoulders again, breathing deeply, tensing and relaxing.

"Seth?" I asked.

"*Seth, respond!*" Eric snapped.

But he didn't.

"*Bella, can you hear me?*"

"Yes."

"*You have your Vertu?*"

"Yes." I pulled it out from my back pocket, ready to use it.

"*Good, text Emmett. Last I heard, he's closer to us. Fill him in. I have to go up.*"

"No!" I whisper-yelled. "You're not leaving the basement, Eric!"

At the same time, I fired off a text to Emmett.

**5 Italians here. Come quick! – BMC.**

"*I have to- Feck!*" That was Eric.

We heard it. An explosion. Above us. A small one, but still...

"Eric?" I breathed out.

"*A second... fuck... fuck, fuck, fuck.*" I heard him typing away on one of the computers. "*Okay, get ready, Bella. We have five men inside now and we have a fire on the terrace. I'll be with you in five minutes.*"

Fire? What the...

And what about Seth!

Eric said something else then, but I was focusing on my phone. It alerted me of a text and I asked Eric to repeat himself.

**We're 1 hour away. Em says elaborate if you can! – RLC.**

Rose. Oh, God...

*"I said, I think they know where we are!"* Eric repeated in a growl, and I was close to losing my mind. *"Fucking shit, Bella, you better get ready. They're heading straight for the kitchen. I'll be right there, okay? I just gotta set off the sensors out back before the fire spreads."*

"Son of a bitch!" I cursed under my breath.

It was too much to deal with. Way too much.

I breathed choppily, unable to do better, and my fingers shook as I quickly typed a reply to Rose.

**They found us. Hurry. 5 against 2. Me + Eric. Don't know where Seth is – BMC.**

As I stashed away my phone, Eric appeared behind the bar, crouching right next to me.

"We're blind, but I can't stay in there," he explained quietly, pulling out his gun from his waistband. "I don't know how but they must've known about the basement. They'll be here any minute now."

This was it.

This was really it.

It was happening.

The two of us were alone.

Against five men.

The only thing we had was the element of surprise.

And two guns, six knives. Not counting my butterfly yet.

"Where's Autumn?" I whispered.

He grimaced. "Asleep in the control room. I had to cuff her to the fucking chair in case she wakes up."

The pain on his face was clear as day. He loathed having her here for this.

"She's going to wake up, isn't she?" I asked, chewing on my lip.

"Most likely," he replied quietly. "The control room is all but sound proof, but..."

He didn't finish. He didn't have to.

I knew what he was going to say.

*But... we don't know if we can keep the Italians away from there.*

I swallowed my nerves.

And then we heard banging coming from upstairs.

It was official. They had found the door leading down here.

"Ready?" he asked.

I nodded firmly. It wasn't going to get any better than this.

My phone vibrated but it was too late.

There was no time.

*Bang!*

*Bang!*

*Bang!*

Gunfire.

We both inched closer to the bar, knowing that it was the best place to hide down here.

It shielded us well. Someone would have to look over the counter completely in order to see us.

With a final deep breath to push down the nerves, I brought out my knives – or three of them. Then I handed my gun over to Eric. It was for the best. He had good aim – I didn't. He could use two guns, and I could use my knives. So, if I managed to take one out while he took two, we'd be even in numbers. Yeah. Shit.

"Keep close," he ordered quietly, taking my gun. I didn't have to explain why I handed it over. He knew why already. And I nodded at him as another muffled shot rang out from upstairs. "Good. Now, here's what we'll do. We'll let them pass; don't do anything unless they look for us here. Then we get them from behind."

I nodded.

He nodded back.

My fingers gripped two blades.

*Bang!*

*BANG!*

And they were in.

I held my breath as we listened to the footsteps. Down the stairs. Quiet mumbling in Italian.

I shuddered in fear and disgust.

But I was calm enough. Focused.

One...

Two...

Three...

Three men had passed the bar.

Time was running out.

Four...

Come on.

*Come on.*

And then the fifth.

Eric gave me a sharp nod, and that was that.

*Self defense, Bella. It's self defense.*

We stood up, slowly but surely, and we both saw five men as they very slowly moved toward the darkened living room, which would in the end lead them to the control room.

Where Autumn was.

I held my breath again as I saw one man take a right by the supply closet and bathroom – gun ready to be fired. He was closest to us, and I knew I was up.

I stood up with a straight back.

I zeroed in on him. His back.

Again, my fingers flexed around the titanium blade.

I exhaled and aimed.

Then, with a quick flick of my arm, I threw the knife with all the force I could muster, and I didn't breathe until I saw the man arch and scream out in pain.

"Ah, *cazzo!*"

I'd hit him in the spine.

I pushed down nausea. There was no time for that, and Eric emphasized on just that as he fired off two shots, hitting the two men closest to the kitchen.

I followed right away, throwing another knife that made impact in a man's chest.

Screaming.

Gunfire.

I threw another knife and missed.

"Goddamnit!" I cried out, throwing my fourth knife.

Luckily I didn't miss this time, but I only got an arm.

Tears were forming. I blinked them back. Fear, dread, fucking fury.

More shots rang out, and before I could throw my fifth knife, Eric pushed me down behind the bar again.

"Eric!" I shouted.

"Stay down, I've got it now!" he growled, firing both guns again.

I was shaking.

"*Figlio di puttana!*" some fucker screamed.

I didn't understand, but Eric evidently did, and shouted right back as another round of shots rang out. "You're the son of a bitch here! A very lonely son of a bitch, since your friends are *dead*. *Che peccato.*" He spat the last words out.

Oh God, oh God, oh God...

I could taste blood after biting down too hard on my lip.

And I heard a cry then. Autumn's.

More shots. Eric never ceased.

Tears blurred my vision.

Another shot...

Then, silence.

For a moment.

Then I heard us both. Me whimpering, Eric panting.



"It's over," he said hoarsely, and before I could even react, he pulled me to a stand. "We have to make sure there aren't any more of them." Then he dragged me with him, all the way to the control room.

I saw the bodies as we walked.

Five of them. Blood seeping out.

"They're all dead, don't worry," he muttered.

I was ready to fall apart.

But I couldn't. Not yet.

Once we were inside the control room again, Eric tossed me a key, and I immediately ran over to Autumn and uncuffed her before I wrapped my arms around her. I held her tightly, rocking her back and forth as she cried and cried. In the meantime, Eric was frantic as he checked the security cameras, eager to make sure we were alone.

He cursed loudly at one time before he started shutting things down.

"We have to get out of here," he said, lighting up a smoke. "For all we know, more can be headed our way."

"Sshhh, baby," I whispered shakily into Autumn's hair. "It's okay, sweetie. It's all okay."

What a lie.

"All right, we're in the clear for now," Eric grunted as he started detaching computer parts. "We're leaving in two minutes."

"Okay," I breathed out.

I saw what he was doing then. Memory cards and hard drives were shoved down in a paper bag. USB sticks and CDs.

"Stay behind me, okay?" he said, standing up.

I nodded and picked Autumn up.

Then we made our way upstairs, slowly, with Eric making sure that everything was safe.

Which it was for once.

But... when we passed the windows in the kitchen, I saw something out on the terrace.

Two things.

The spot where the fire had been, and...

"Oh God, Eric-" I choked up.

"Don't look at him, Bella," he said firmly, forcing me to continue. "He's gone. I saw him on the screen."

I swallowed a sob.

It was Seth.

Blood *everywhere*.

As I pushed nausea and hysteria down, I focused on Autumn instead.

And soon we were in the garage where we jumped into Edward's SUV.

Autumn sat on my lap, refusing to let go, as I buckled us both in on the passenger side.

Eric started the car.

For thirty minutes, I just sat there as he drove.

Tears fell silently.

I needed my husband.

“Just texted both Cullens,” Eric sighed tiredly. I kept looking out the window. “I told them we’re on our way to Rome. Adam’s arranging a new safehouse.”

I said nothing.

I was in shock.

## **34 – ROME IN JANUARY**

### **Whistler's POV**

Motherfucking paranoia. The last thing I need.

Eric’s text flashes before my eyes whenever I blink.

***We had company. Many of them. Driving to safehouse in Rome. Me + Autumn + Bella. Seth’s out. They knew of the basement. Time 2 check for a snitch. Avoid the villa – EJB***

Seth’s dead.

Dead.

My wife was in danger.

Emmett and the kids had been close to us when we got nothing but static from the villa. Five minutes away... and Sam needed Em’s doctor skills. Hell, I needed them, too. But yeah... they returned. We didn’t care about the fucking cleanup. We just left it all after making sure it couldn’t be traced to us.

So now... Kellan and Sam are in Bella’s Gallardo, and James is in mine.

I'm in the backseat of Em's Rover. He's working on my leg.

Rose is driving.

Alec and Nessa are cramped in the passenger seat.

"For fuck's sake, Em," I grunt.

He sure as hell didn't go to med school or some shit like that, but Dad taught him well.

"Gotta get the fucking bullet out," he mutters, eyes glued to my leg. Fucker had torn up my cargo pants. A big gaping hole was left. "Smoke that joint and shut up, will ya?"

I do. I take a deep drag, holding the smoke in my lungs for a while. I can thank James for it. Sam's smoking, too – in Bella's car. It's what we have. Works better than painkillers.

Through the open window, I blow out smoke.

"Has Eric answered yet?" Rose asks, looking at me through the rearview mirror. I shake my head, turning my glare to the phone in my hand.

Eric refuses to answer.

I know why, too.

It's his way of telling me that I can't handle details right now.

So, all I know is that he, my wife, and Autumn are on the way to Rome.

And that Seth is gone.

"Sweet Jesus," I hiss, and I'm stupid, 'cause I don't look away as my brother gets the bullet out of my leg.

Alec's comforting Nessa.

I hate it all.

"Who can we trust?" Em asks, starting to clean out my wound. "Focus, bro. Think of who we can trust."

I take deep breaths.

Trying to keep focus.

Shit, I'm dizzy...

The pain is searing. Sharp flashes of paralyzing pain surges through my body.

Focus...

Who can we trust?

"Everyone here in the car," he says, willing me to stay awake by talking. "Who else? This is your crew, Edward."

Shit...

Yeah...

I drag a hand over my face, trying to... function... focus...

"My wife," I mumble. I blink. I try to see her face. I blink again, but all I see is that fucking text message. Fuck. "Eric," I continue. I take another drag from the joint.

"Right. Us right here, Bella and Eric. The little niece, of course. Who else?"

My brother's persistent.

"Ah, shite!" I cough. More pain. The fucker's pouring alcohol... "You tryin' to kill me, bro?" I rasp.

"I gotta get this cleaned before you switch cars," he explains, even though we already know this. Once he's done with me, I'll take Sam's place next to Kellan in Bella's car, and Sam goes with Emmett so that he can get the bullet outta Sam's shoulder.

"Kellan," I say, but then I hesitate. No. Yes. "Shit."

"Keep talking," Em orders quietly. "Give me a reason why we can't trust Kellan."

I try to think, I try to come up with reasons...

He put Princess in danger at Aro's villa...

But they got the job done...

He's head of security... and if he was working for outside players, he could've gotten us before...

But he's not a Cullen. I can only immediately trust my own family.

Eric is the exception since he got my wife out of the villa, and whatever happened there... He also has his niece here. He lost his brother in Seattle. He wants revenge as much as my brother and I do.

"Kellan was mine and Nessa's guard before... in Chicago," Alec mentions quietly, throwing in his two cents. "Mum and Dad trust him."

True.

I nod slowly, acknowledging Alec's statement.

I *think* Kellan's trustworthy, I do, but... fucking hell, paranoia's a hateful bitch.

"What about James?" Em moves on.

"He's been nothing but loyal as far as I know," I sigh tiredly. "He was highly recommended by both Liam and Uncle Ed. But... feck if I know. Maybe he's in it for the money."

Em doesn't miss a beat. "What about Adam?"

"His mother is Siobhan. She's worked with us for years through the FBI," I think out loud. "Hell, the McKennas are as tied with the Masens as we are. Almost, anyway. The only thing separating us is DNA."

"True, but..."

Yeah. I know.

"What about Sam?"

"He can be trusted," I decide. Gut instinct. He's a Murphy. We go way back, all the way to Ireland. Plus, Sam's dad was really close to Uncle Ed.

"Okay. So, when we arrive in Rome, who will be present when we discuss our next move?"

Good question.

I cringe as he starts covering my wound.

I take a pull from the joint, last one, and throw it out the window.

I hold it the smoke inside.

My eyes glaze over.

It's the only thing stopping me from kneeing my brother in the fucking face.

Sure, he's doing good, but... fuck! Hurts like a son of a bitch...

I exhale.

"All Cullens," I say automatically. "And Eric. Sam."

"Can I listen, boss?" Alec asks quietly.

My heart clenches.

"Yeah, most of it," I answer thickly. "You will have an important job."

Autumn. That little girl is as precious to me as Alec and Nessa are. I need those three safe.

"What?" he asks, and he's just like me and Em. He wants something to do. He's a protector, even as a twelve year old kid. Well, thirteen soon.

"You'll be in charge of your sister and Autumn," I tell him. "And my wife," I add, trying to smile, if only a little.

"You want me to be in charge of Tush?" he chuckles quietly, arching a brow at me. "You bloody mad, boss."

*Yeah, but I got you to smile, cub.*

Emmett looks up at me, understanding what I'm doing.

Family comes first. Keep them alive, keep them well, keep them content.

"I think you're good for now," Em said firmly, straightening in his seat. Then he lifts my leg up, keeping it in his lap. "Twenty minutes, and then I'm booting you for Sam."

"Gee, thanks," I say sarcastically.

As we fall silent in the car, my mind starts to spin again.



It always comes back to Bella.

I need to know.

But again, Eric doesn't answer his phone. He clicks me, the fucker.

I sigh.

*She's alive.*

*She's alive.*

*She's alive.*

But has she been harmed?

"She's fine, Edward," Em says quietly.

I fucking hope so.

"She's strong," Rose adds, nodding firmly. I think she's convincing herself.

"You're a good driver," I compliment, changing the subject instead.

"Almost better than your husband."

"Fuck you," Em chuckles.

I shrug and try to get comfortable. Impossible, though.

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"We can't wait a month," he all but whispers a while later.

I know what he's talking about, and he's right. I was thinking that earlier, as well. We can't wait a whole month to take the Avellinos out, which was the earlier plan. Well, not all the Avellinos; they're a huge fucking organization. But the inner circle—we're going after them. And no, we can't wait.

"I agree."

He nods.

It's time to get Liam to Europe.

\*O\*O\*O\*

"You okay, Cullen?" Kellan asks as I sit my ass down in the passenger seat of Bella's Gallardo. "Your brother stitched you up, eh?"

I nod, hating the fact that my Glock is ready to be used.

Tucked in the waistband of my cargos.

Just to be safe, Emmett had said. It sucks. I'm supposed to know that I can trust Kellan. Fuck, he's been my right hand – he and James. Especially since Conn fucked up with Aunt Liz, refusing to disobey her when it came to the kids.

But it is what it is.

For now.

"Yeah, just floor it," I mutter. "I wanna get to Bella."

Kellan nods, obeying my order by starting the car right away.

As soon as we pass Em's Rover, I take out my phone again.

Time to call Dad.

*"Carlisle Cullen speaking,"* he barks out.

I'm not surprised to hear him pissed. My guess is that he's been trying to reach us for some time now.

"It's Edward," I tell him, and I hear him breathe out in relief. "You heard?"

*"Yes, the scene is on the local news already. You got away good?"*

"I got shot in the fucking leg," I grunt. "But I'm fine. Em fixed it for now. Sam's worse off. Emmett's working on him. Got hit in the shoulder."

*"Fuck. All right... You're on your way back to the villa?"*

I rub my chest.

"No." I release a breath. "They tricked us outta the villa by tailing Emmett and the kids," I explain. "I brought Ford, Sam, and James with me, leaving Seth, Eric, and Bella alone at the villa. Autumn, too. And I sent Adam on a supply run for the car show."

*"Go on,"* Dad says carefully.

"We got rid of the goons following Em, but in the meantime, Avellino sent a party to the villa. They fucking knew about the basement, Dad."

Wordlessly, Kellan offers me a smoke from his pack.

I don't take it.

But when I reach for one of my own ones, he certainly fucking gets it.

Thankfully, he seems to understand it's just business. He knows I have to be careful.

*It better not be you, Ford... I swear to God I'll kill you with my bare hands.*

"Any ideas?" Dad asks, all business, and I know he's asking for suspects.

"Not yet."

*"Understood. So, what happened at the villa?"*

That's when I hear Mom in the background, and I groan as I exhale smoke out the window.

"You have Mom on the fucking speaker, Dad?" I ask incredulously. "She's gonna freak for feck's sake!"

*"Just answer my question, son!"*

"Fine!" I snap. "You wanna know what happened at the villa? Seth got killed. Yeah, that's right. *And*, my fucking wife was put in danger!"

I hear Mom gasp.

Fucking idiot for letting her listen in.

"We're on our way to the safehouse in Rome, but we're not staying," I continue. "Now, for the reason I called. I need you to get Liam and his boys over to Europe. ASAP. We're taking the Avellinos down – the inner circle."

To calm my temperamental ass down, I take a deep drag from my smoke, wishing I had another goddamn joint.

*"You will do no such thing, Edward!"* Dad shouts. *"I'm in Chicago, I make the fucking rules. Am I making myself clear?"*

"Chicago's not the HQ anymore," I say dryly, readjusting my throbbing leg. "Sorry, Pop, but we need to clear this shit before more people die."

*"Your job is to protect, and to look for your uncle," he states flatly. "I won't have my sons running around killing anymore. That's not what I wanted for you."*

"Yeah, no shit," I mutter, taking another pull. "But things change. Get Liam over here before I do it myself."

I respect my parents. As God is my witness, I do. But this shit ends now.

*"Fuck,"* I hear him sigh.

He knows I'm right.

Then I hear him and Mom arguing for a while.

No surprise there.

Ma's pissed.

She's got quite a few colorful words in her vocabulary.

I flick the smoke out the window.

"How much longer?" I ask Kellan.

"Twenty minutes, boss."

Twenty minutes.

Twenty minutes 'til I see Bella again.

Jesus fucking Christ, I hope she's all right.

*"Fine."* Dad's back. *"You there, son?"*

"I'm here."

*"Good. Here's the plan. You go and meet up with your crew. Make sure everyone's fine. Then you regroup in London."*

I'm already shaking my head. "No way. London, sure. Good place, but not until Em and I have worked the Maserati show."

*"Have you lost your fucking mind, boy?"* he shouts. *"Screw the cars!"*

I huff.

Roll my eyes for good measure.

*You'd be proud of me, princess.*

"Give me some goddamn credit, Dad," I snap. "It's not for the cars anymore."

*"Then what?"* he grits out.

Simple. "I think Aro's gonna be there for the latest concept car."

\*O\*O\*O\*

"Motherfucker," I mutter, annoyed with the fucking pace we're walking at.

My arm is around Em's shoulders, my leg is fucking killing me, and I know that everything will just suck until I have Bella with me. It's always like that with that woman. Under her goddamn spell and everything. Not that I'd have it any other way, but man am I whipped for the girl.

"You curse more than Emmett," Rose snorts as we enter the safehouse, which is pretty much a warehouse with tight ass security. "I didn't think that was possible."

"Bella says I'm foulmouthed, too," I mention.

"What, does she want you to tone it down?" Em chuckles.

I laugh a little, but stop when my flashes of pain shoot up my leg.

"No, she doesn't. My dear wife can out-curse a fucking sailor."

True. Really, she can. And when she complains about my temper, I just do it right the fuck back, 'cause she's as hotheaded as I am.

Gotta love it.

Anyway...

We finally reach the back of the warehouse, and James goes first, keeping his Glock by his thigh as he knocks.

"*Who is it?*" We hear Eric ask from the inside.

My heart starts pounding furiously in my chest.

In there, it's simple. Just two rooms, not very big, but the others can go fuck themselves for all I care, 'cause one of those rooms are reserved for me and Bella. I gotta get my hands on her, make sure she's okay and without a single fucking scratch. I'm exhausted as hell, and it's officially morning, but I refuse to close my eyes until I know she's fine.

"Open the fucking door, Bell!" Em shouts at him, to which I deliver a blow to his ribcage. "The fuck, bro?" he grunts.

"Watch your fecking mouth around Eric," I warn him.

Hadn't it been for Eric...

I owe that man.

Bella's my life.

Thankfully, Em sees this in my eyes, and nods in understanding.

When the door opens, the boys step aside, and Em and I enter first.

"Fucking hell, boss," Eric mutters.

I hug him best I can, what with my arm still around Em and all, and I'm goddamn relieved Eric's okay. At least he looks okay.

"You okay?" I ask, grasping his shoulder.

The room is empty. Just couches, a TV, and a fridge. I guess Bella and Autumn are in the other room.

"Not complaining." He shrugs before nodding at my leg. "You?"

I wave him off. "Peachy. Now, give me the rundown."

While we walk across the room, he tells us that Bella and Autumn are asleep in the other room, and I'm relieved. 'Cause I need to hear this first. He also tells us that Adam's out getting us cars since we have nothing here but one SUV and two Gallardos.

"Christ," Sam moans as Kellan lowers him onto the biggest couch. "This pain is... fuck."

"James," I say right away. "Run out for essentials, will ya? And that includes a shitload of painkillers."

He nods and leaves.

We'll only stick around for a few hours, but I'm not sure Sam will be able to take it. If it comes to it, Kellan will stay behind with him, get him to a fucking doctor or something. But at least the bullet's out. Problem is, we can't take him to a hospital in Rome. We gotta put some distance between us and the fuckery we went through.

"Can I go to Bella, Edward?" Rose asks, bringing me back to now.



I shake my head. "Let her sleep. I have a feeling she needs it, and I'm gonna wake her up soon as it is." Then I turn to Eric. "What happened at the villa?"

And...

Fuck.

When Eric tells us everything, I'm pretty sure that heart attack is a "when" and not an "if."

I'm in disbelief.

The anger surging through me is close to all-consuming.

Not to mention the fear.

The mere thought of having my Bella close to that kind of danger is crippling to me, but... to actually hear that it's happened...

Sweet Jesus.

Eric's words go on repeat in my head as I pinch the bridge of my nose.

*"Three SUV's came. Fourteen Italians. Three dogs."*

*"Seth was on the roof. He took out the dogs and nine men before we lost the connection with him."*

*"My guess is that they spotted him on the roof, 'cause next I knew they threw a fucking Molotov cocktail on the roof."*

*"Bella... she was in the basement, armed with her throwing knives and one Glock."*

*"I was in the control room with Autumn, keeping track through the cameras we set up."*

*"Five goons made it inside, and they headed straight for the pantry in the kitchen."*

*"They obviously knew about the basement."*

*"I left the control room to be with Bella. She... fuck, she was strong as hell, Cullen."*

*"We had five to take care of, so she handed me her Glock."*

*"We hid behind the bar. Once they had passed, I took out two and Bella took out one."*

*"When I knew I had it, I pushed her down behind the bar again."*

*"Then, when it was over... I just grabbed the hard drives, the USB's and shit... And we left."*

Over and over, leaving my head throbbing, the words echo in my head.

I feel like a fucking failure as a husband.

I promised her I would never allow her to get close to danger.

I should've known I had no business making that promise.

"You okay, little brother?" Em asks quietly.

I clear my throat, swallowing my emotions, and nod tiredly.

"Yeah," I reply hoarsely, facing Eric. "One question. Did she kill anyone?"

Eric hesitates, and I push down nausea.

"She doesn't think so," he sighs, running a hand through his hair. "She has good aim." I nod with a dip of my chin, and I'm fucking proud of my girl, but devastated that it has come to this. "She aimed for arms and

legs, but she got one in the spine. I shot him in the head later. Bella's hit would've only left him in a wheelchair for the rest of his life." He releases a breath. I know I haven't heard the worst yet. "The last one, however... She hit him in the chest. He wasn't breathing when I pulled the trigger on him, just in case. Was he alive? No idea, but if he was, it wasn't lasting."

"Fuck," I exhale, rubbing my face.

*I'm so fucking sorry, princess.*

"I'm gonna check on Sam," Em sighs, walking over to Sam's couch.

"Fuck it," I mutter, waving for Kellan to help me off the goddamn couch.

"I'm gonna wake up Bella. Don't interrupt us."

"I'll get Autumn," Eric says.

I grimace and cringe at the pain in my leg, but when I reach the doorway to the other room and I see Bella asleep on the bed in the corner, my own pain doesn't matter. All I need is her right now.

"We're out of here in four hours," I tell the other guys. "Do yourselves a favor and rest. Emmett, you stand guard, yeah?"

"Got it."

I'd leave the job to Kellan but... I'm still not sure about him.

"Rose, watch the kids," I add softly.

She nods, giving me a rueful smile.

I don't really know what she's lived through in Chicago, but I doubt it's been like this.

She's in for a rude awakening, and my guess is that Em will go through what I've been through with my own wife.

"All yours, boss," Eric says quietly, passing me in the doorway with a sleeping Autumn in his arms. "Want me to check the media?"

"Please." I nod.

We need to know what's going on, both nationally and internationally.

With a small shake of my head, I dismiss Kellan and lock the door once I'm inside, then I wobble my tired ass toward the bed.

I see her tear strained cheeks.

Her messy ponytail.

Her phone on the nightstand.

Her butterfly knife that I bought her.

A hoodie and cargo shorts on the floor-

"Fucking shorts," I whisper under my breath. Only Bella would wear shorts when she's under a goddamn attack. But knowing her, she'd say something about the ability to move around easier.

I strip down, eager to get off the bloody cargos, not to mention properly torn since Emmett fixed my wound, and when I'm in nothing but boxers, I crawl into bed with her. Shivers run through me when I bury us under the covers. My fingers flex on her soft hip. I blink back traitorous tears. I breathe her in. I scoot closer, pressing our bodies together firmly. Fuck. I breathe. In and out. She's safe. She's right here. And I allow my hands to run over her skin. Her arms, her hips, her thighs, her stomach, her collarbone. I lean in. I smell her hair. I'm a fucking goner when she stirs.

"Wh...Whistler?" she croaks quietly. She blinks.

"I'm here, princess," I murmur, and as soon as my words are out, she gasps and throws her arms around me, immediately starting to cry against my shoulder.

"Shh, baby... I'm here..."

"Oh, God... Edward, it was awful," she cries.

Christ...

I hold her tightly, kissing her hair, her wet cheeks...

She gets it all out.

She sobs about Seth.

It feels like someone's stabbing me.

She cries about Autumn.

Churning and twisting...

When she hitches her leg over my hip, I bite the inside of my cheek, forcing myself to keep shut about the pain. It's the last thing she needs right now, and truth be told, I want her as close as possible. So, I say nothing. Instead I encourage her to hug me even harder, which she does, and I do the same, keeping my hand on her back.

"Eric told me," I whisper, kissing her forehead. "I'm so fucking sorry, Bella."

*Sorry I wasn't there...*

*Sorry I broke my promise...*

*Sorry I dragged you into this...*

"Don't apologize," she whispers forcefully. "It's not your fault."

Her eyes meet mine, and... *Jesus*, she's being truthful.

"I love you." It's all I can say as I press our foreheads together.

"I love you, too," she whimpers.

With my right hand, I cup her cheek. My thumb brushes away a tear.

And how she loves me... I don't know.

But she does.

I can see it so fucking clearly.

So, I kiss her. Softly and gently at first, but apparently that's not enough for her. Good. Me neither. Our kiss deepens, and I stroke her tongue with mine, eliciting a moan from her that I really don't need right now. Truly. Don't moan, Bella. I won't be held responsible for my actions.

"Whistler," she whispers softly against my lips, and she owns me.

"I love you," I tell her again as I nibble on her bottom lip. "I love you."  
She kisses me forcefully again. I'm gone. My hand goes to her delectable ass, and I pull her impossibly close.

Her whimper tells me that she can feel the evidence of my arousal against her stomach.

"Stop me," I groan, pushing her down onto her back. "You better fucking stop me, princess."

The warning is real.

She has to stop me.

We shouldn't do this. She's in shock. She's scared, she's...

"I need you, Edward," she breathes out.

She has me by the fucking balls.

"We shouldn't," I grunt when she takes control by pushing me onto my back, much like I did to her a second ago. "Baby, we... fuck..." She straddles my waist, reaching down to kiss me again. I thank God that I was shot above my knee. A few inches higher, and I'd be screaming now. "Jaysus." She pulls her tank-top off, exposing her spectacular tits for me.

"No, we shouldn't," she agrees, standing up on the bed, only to slide her sinful panties off. Fucking ruffles. My undoing. Those and her thongs...

"But I *need* this."

"Goddamn," I moan when she tugs on my boxers.

But then she stops.

And I know...

I know that she's noticed the bandage around my knee.

Her eyes are on me in a flash.

Talk about erection killer.

"Flesh wound," I tell her quickly. It's only a half lie. "Emmett checked it. He got the bullet out. It's really okay, baby. I promise."

She gasps. "But..." Her bottom lip trembles, eyes flicking between my leg and my eyes. "You were..." She swallows. "Someone *shot* you?"

Ignoring the pain, I sit up and cradle her face.

"I'm fine, Bella," I tell her imploringly. "I'm right here. I'm fine, okay? It looks worse than it is--"

"No, no, you don't get it!" she hisses. "Someone got close enough to put a fucking bullet in my husband!" She punches her palm.

Unable to help myself, I crack a smile.

Can't fucking help it, but I love how fiery and passionate she is.

And I love to be referred as her husband.

"*Again*, I'm fine," I say softly. "And you should see the other geezer," I add, attempting to lighten the tension.

My hellcat huffs. "He better be dead."

Well...

"He is," I admit, looking at her nervously.

I expect her to gasp in horror, maybe... or more crying... or... something else, but what she does...

Shocks the shit outta me.

She crashes her mouth against mine, kissing me harder than ever before, and there's one helluva tongue-action going on, which sure as hell works to get me hard again. Doesn't help when her titties rub against my chest.

"Fuck, baby," she pants, cradling my face. "Are you sure?"

"Christ, yes," I groan, and I finally allow myself to cup her luscious tits in my hands. I squeeze them lightly, earning myself another moan from her. "I promise, I'm good."

She smirks. "Oh, I know you are, Irish boy."



Dirty. Fucking. Girl.

Then she goes back to tugging my boxers down, and I release her breasts for a second to lift my ass off the bed. And then she's right there, straddling me again.

"Once again, are you sure?" she asks breathlessly. "Does this hurt? Should we maybe lay down-"

I cut her off with a kiss, 'cause I'm fucking fine.

"As long as you stay away from the wound, it's all good," I tell her, and she nods while placing kisses along my jaw. That shit feels good. But... "Stop teasing me, woman."

She hums and pushes me down again.

"You're right. No teasing." She takes my hand, and... I groan when she brings it to her pussy. "Let me make you feel good, Whistler," she whispers in my ear. Again, her tits rub against my chest, and I'm about to lose my fucking mind.

"I need you to sit on my cock, Isabella," I growl in need.

She whimpers and I push two fingers deep inside of her.

Oh, she rides them...

"Don't you wanna ride my cock instead, baby?" I ask huskily as I curl my fingers inside of her. Fucking soaked. "I swear it's much more pleasurable."

"Oh, I know," she moans. "But you still have magic fingers."

I let out a chuckle, but it's cut off when she wrap her fingers around my painful erection, and before I know it's even happening, she sinks down

on it, not stopping until I'm all fucking in. Hell, my fingers are still in the air, in the same position they were when she rode the fuckers. Of course, she notices my expression of shock.

"Close that mouth of yours," she moans breathily.

And I do. Close my mouth, that is.

Well, after I've sucked my fingers clean from her juices, of course.

"Fuck," I exhale sharply, looking down as she takes me in.

Again and again...

I can't look away.

My cock is soaked in her wetness.

And she feels...

So fucking...

Amazing.

"That's it, princess," I moan loudly, bucking my hips to meet her every movement. My leg hurts like a motherfucker, but I push that shit down.

"You love this, don't you, baby?"

"Yees," she gasps.

Once more I ignore my pain as I sit up, but those luscious tits can't be ignored anymore, so while I enjoy her fucking me hard, I suckle her nipples good, which she loves. My kinky wife likes it rough. A little biting has her going.

"Oh, fuck!" she moans, placing her hands on my shoulders for support. I keep sucking on her those perfect titties. 'Cause I fucking love them. "So, good... ungh... Edward..."

Gripping her hips, I slam her down on me.

Oh, yeah, the pain... *Jesus...*

But... then the pleasure of feeling her wet pussy suck me in...

I groan loudly.

My tongue swirls around her left nipple before I suck the pretty little nipple into my mouth again.

Then I gasp. "Holy shite!" Because she cups my balls, tugging slightly and that... yeah... fuck yeah... feels goood...

"My Irish boy," she giggles breathlessly. "Shite, eh?"

"Shut up and keep fucking me," I grunt. "Fucking goddess."

"Pun intended?" she pants.

I slam her down again as I bury my face in the crook of her neck. "You know it."

I suck on her neck, making damn sure I leave a mark.

Mine.

All motherfucking mine.

"I'm so wet for you, Edward," she whimpers, and I'm about to blow my load if she keeps up the dirty-talk. "Can you feel my juices on your fat cock-"

"Seriously!" I pant, shutting her up. "One more word out of that... *dirty* fucking mouth..."

Wet girl, constricting around me...

Closer...

*Jaysus.*

More massaging...

"Close, princess," I breathe out, starting to rub her clit furiously.

My stomach tightens, and I cringe slightly at the pain, but when Bella thrusts her breasts in my face, I'm fucking golden again.

I feel her soft lips and heavy breaths against my temple...

I shiver violently and suck her right nipple into my mouth, needing her to come before I finish without her.

"I'm... I'm... oh, God... *Edward...*"

And then she's climaxing... so hard... around me...

I squeeze my eyes shut.

I let go.

Deep inside of her pussy, I come hard. Ripples of pleasure courses through my body, leaving me utterly fucking spent.

"Holyfuckingshit," she gasps, dropping her forehead to my shoulder.

Yeah, what the woman said.

"Yeah," I pant.

I kiss her neck, letting my tongue dart out to taste her. The shivers running through us both make us tighten our arms around each other. Christ. Deep breaths. I slide my nose along her jaw. I kiss and nip. Our mouths meet, and I kiss her passionately, feeling her return it with the same passion. I doubt I'll get used to it.

"Love you, Whistler," she whispers.

I smile and kiss the corner of her mouth. "Love you, too."

She hums and drags her fingernails across my back, to which I moan quietly, and again with the shivers...

"How's your leg?" she murmurs.

In case she has any plan on removing her sexy ass from my lap, I keep my hands on her hips.

"Okay right now," I tell her truthfully.

"Good." She chews on her lip, so I kiss her again. "Wanna rest for a while?"

Fuck. Yes. Please.

"Can I stay inside you?" I ask, swiping my tongue over her plump bottom lip. "Cause I really fucking love it in there."

What, I'm just telling the truth. The woman deserves to know.

She grins and shakes her head at me, but when I lay back down on the bed, she doesn't make a move to get off me, so... I get my wish, and soon she falls asleep on my chest.

It doesn't take many seconds before I succumb to sleep, as well.

## 35 – ROME IN JANUARY

### BPOV

“Ready to play?” I asked Rose, watching her in the mirror as we got ready for the Maserati show. “You look nervous.”

We all had roles to play tonight.



Emmett and I were dressed to the nines. Me in a satiny dress in rustic orange – matching heels in suede – and Emmett in a fancy suit. He was my date since Whistler’s leg held him back. Well, Emmett, Alec, and I had played a part in that, too. But he pushed us to do it with his talk about going tonight. So, Alec and I had sedated him, and Emmett had put a damn cast on his leg. Not a big one. Half a foot under his knee cap, and about a foot above it. It would keep him from doing anything foolish, such as running with a fucking gun or something.

He’d been furious when he woke up, of course, but I had sucked him off, and that was that.

Okay, he was still pissed, but at least he wasn't shouting anymore.

Besides, our plan wouldn't work if he attended, anyway.

I digress.

Rose also had a part to play, but she wouldn't enter the "show" until later.

"Yeah, I am," she chuckled nervously, zipping up her black hoodie. "How are you not?"

"Oh, I am," I assured in a huff. Hell, nervous didn't cover it. I was scared shitless. "But it is what it is, and if there's one thing I've learned here in Italy, it's to close off. Keep family on your mind, that's it. We're doing this for family."

I was still convincing myself of what I'd just told Rose, but I was getting there. Hiding wasn't a life I wanted, and that was the only option if we just walked away. Plus, we wouldn't get Ed back.

After applying my makeup, I turned to Rose again.

"No, tonight isn't just about family, but..." I shrugged. "We can't help who we love, remember? And unfortunately we love those Irish dickheads."

She rolled her eyes, but I saw the small smile, too.

"Don't hold back," she joked.

"I won't," I replied bluntly, checking the mirror one last time. "I already told Edward what my thoughts are about tonight."

I really had.

Tonight's main goal was to make Aro believe that we were amateurs, and we had a detailed plan for that, but it was also because Whistler and Emmett wanted to send Aro a message. Yes, they were going to steal the

Maserati concept car, only to blow it up in front of Aro's villa in Cerveteri. Their little way to let him know that "it was on." Fools the lot of them.

There was one more thing, though.

Emmett and Whistler hoped they'd find out who the leak was tonight.

Ever since we left our temporary hideout yesterday, they had taken James, Kellan, Adam, and even Sam aside. One by one, they had all been fed with a lie. And tonight we would find out if this lie reached Avellino. For instance, Emmett had told James that we were heading to a certain hotel after the car show tonight, which we weren't. So, Eric had driven over to said hotel, and used his magic to hack in to their security system. If Avellinos showed up at the hotel, we would know that James had informed Aro of this. Then there was Adam. He was driving us to the car show tonight, and we had told him to pick us up in front of a hotel we weren't staying at. If Avellinos visited this hotel, we would know.

And so on. One lie for each one of them.

The only problem was Sam. He was out of it tonight, resting in a hotel. He needed it after what he'd been through. But we figured he could still get in touch with Italians. I mean... he had a damn phone, after all.

It was only a first try, and Whistler had told me that it could be a while until we caught the bastard, but it was what we could do. And until then, we were separated. The "suspects" didn't receive important tasks, and we no longer lived together. Rose and I were at a hotel with our husbands and the children. Eric was here, too. And then we had the others – who were unaware of where we lived – in another hotel.

Eric and Whistler were gonna keep track on them tonight.

\*O\*O\*O\*



"Lookin' fine, Bella." Emmett let out a low whistle.

Yeah, he was doing this to get a rise out of my possessive husband.

Mentioned husband was sitting behind Emmett, on a couch. There was growling as he and Eric worked on the computers that took up the entire space of the coffee table.

"Thanks, Em," I chuckled, passing him to reach Edward. "Everything okay, baby?"

"No," he grumbled, eyes on one of the screens. He smiled, though, when Autumn – who was clinging to his back – reached forward and kissed his cheek. "But I guess I have Blue Eyes here to keep me company tonight."

"I have blue eyes, Edward," Autumn said.

"I know, baby girl," he chuckled.

God, they were so fucking cute.

"Will you keep an eye on him tonight, Autumn?" I asked, smiling when Edward shot me a scowl. "He's a little grumpy."

She giggled. "Edward is funny when he's mopey."

Hmph.

"Time to get ready, Bella," I heard Emmett say behind me.

Looking over my shoulder, I saw him hugging Rose tightly. I knew she was worried.

"All right," I sighed, turning back to Edward. "Earpieces?"

The ones we were using tonight were a lot smaller, and you had to use tweezers to get the little fuckers out, but it was just to make sure others couldn't see 'em.

He nodded, and Emmett came over to help him up from the couch.

Once Emmett, Rose, and I had been given earpieces and mouthpieces, Edward told everyone to leave the room.

He was worried, too.

"Butterfly knife?" he asked, and I opened my dark blue clutch where I had the knife, a credit card, my Vertu, and a can of pepper spray. He checked the contents, nodding to himself, and I reached up to smooth out the crease between his eyebrows. He really hated this part. "And where's the mouthpiece?" I held up my wrist. I had attached the piece to the strap of my watch. "Earpiece?" I turned my face, showing him my left ear. "Good. And you remember everything? The plan? The lines?"

"I remember," I replied softly, looking up at him. "I'll be fine, baby. And I have Emmett, okay?"

He huffed quietly. "He better keep his fucking hands to himself."

I sighed.

He was just being ridiculous.

Emmett was as addicted and faithful to Rose as Edward was to me.

Men, eh?

"Don't roll your eyes at me, woman," he argued. "Have you seen the way you look?" He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Fucking sin."

I smirked.

"Your sin, remember?"

Yeah, that thawed him up a little. So, I closed the distance and placed my hands on his chest. "Only yours." I reached up and kissed his jaw. "And tonight, when Emmett and I return, I want you to show me just how yours I am."

"Fuck," he cursed before kissing me.

*Ungh.*

"You insatiable fuckers, we gotta go!"

Emmett. Damn you.

"Love you," I breathed out. Foreheads connected. "I'll be fine, okay?"

He nodded minutely, eyes closed. "Be safe. Promise me, princess."

"I promise."

To lighten the tension, I added, "Now lemme go steal the new Maserati concept car."

It worked, and he was *totally* jealous.

\*O\*O\*O\*

"Anything?" Rose asked, sitting across from us.

I sat with Emmett for a reason. All part of the plan. Important.

Especially now with Adam here.

I shook my head, still going through the VIP-list for the show.

"Not yet," I said, flipping a page.

We were in the limo, on our way to the car show, and Adam – who was driving us – had provided us with the guest list, which we were going through now, Emmett and I. It was to see if we recognized any names. But apart from Aro Avellino, we couldn't find any.

Wait. "That one," I told Em, pointing at a name. "Stefan Ztano. He works for Aro, I think."

I vaguely remembered the name from when we were in Cerveteri.

Turning on my mouthpiece, I repeated the name for Eric and Edward.

It didn't take long before Eric responded in our ears. "*Yep. Aro's head of security. Good job, Mrs. C.*"

I smiled to myself.

I could fucking do this.

"You know your shit, Bella," Emmett chuckled as we continued checking the list. "Italy's done you good."

I blushed a little.

"We're here, guys," Adam announced from the front.

Deep breaths.

We were ready.

"Here," Rose said, handing me the photo of the car we were here for. "I'll see you tomorrow," she added in a lie.

We didn't know if Adam could be trusted yet – despite him being Siobhan McKenna's son – so the official story was that Rose didn't feel well, and after dropping us off, Adam was gonna take her to the ER for "headaches and abdominal pain."

What Adam didn't know was that my Lamborghini was waiting for Rose at the hospital.

We'd see her again in an hour.

"And Bella?" I nodded to her, studying the photo. "Don't get too close to my husband, okay?"

She was a good actress.

"Rosalie," Em sighed heavily.

He was also good.

*"Tell her she's ridiculous, Bella," Eric told me in my earpiece. "Adam knows how solid you and Edward are. Only physical contact will make him believe otherwise."*

Right.

We knew that this would be the hardest to pull off; to make the others believe there was something wrong between me and Whistler – seeing as they had lived with us for weeks now. It was easier for Rose and Em, simply because the crew were still new to them.

"Don't start again, Rose," I warned her. "It's not my fault that you're insecure."

"Enough," Em said firmly before turning to me. "Done with the photo?" he asked me softly.

I knew we had Adam's attention.

I nodded and looked at the photo one last time.

Just like at the car show in Frankfurt, Maserati was showing both their concept cars tonight, but it was only one of them we were after. The

GranCabrio Fendi was the one. A sleek little thing in dark grey. A sports car. It was the fashion house Fendi that had partnered with Maserati to create it, and according to Emmett and Edward, Aro had a thing for sports cars, which was why we were ignoring the other concept car – the Kubang SUV.

This was Rose's game. Since we had parted ways in Chicago, she had become really fucking savvy when it came to cars.

"Okay, I'm done," I said, and I gave Rose a final look. A pointed one. One that told her to be on her guard. Because, as mentioned, we didn't know if we had Adam's loyalty, and now she was alone in a car with him. However, Adam wasn't armed – made sure by Emmett – and Rose was. And she knew how to use her Glock.

She nodded once in return.

*Okay. It's time.*

It was on purpose that Emmett reached for the door before saying goodbye to Rose.

"Here we go." He smirked and opened the door, stepping out before offering me his hand.

"What about me, baby?" Rose asked as I stepped out.

Emmett sighed again, and leaned in to kiss her goodbye, then he slammed the door shut.

It was quite clear now to Adam that Emmett and Rose's marriage wasn't as stable as mine and Edward's.

Now we just had to convince him that there was a rift between me and Edward, too, which would be considerably harder.

And it wasn't just Adam. No, it was all the others, too. We were creating chaos here, not just for tonight's drama, but more on that later.

"Finally," Emmett chuckled.

In my periphery I saw that the window was rolled down on the passenger side of the limo. In other words, Adam could hear us.

"Was she like this in Chicago, too?" I asked, touching his bicep.

"Afraid so," he replied, placing his hand on the small of my back. "But let's not think about that now, eh? Not when I have gorgeous you on my arm."

"*You better behave, bro.*" Edward's voice came through in our ears, and Emmett just laughed. "*Seriously!*"

Oh, for the love if...

"Okay, let's go," he chuckled, and then we were off, walking toward the entrance. It was very flashy, of course. Fancy dresses, expensive suits. Hell, there were even a few celebrities, meaning there was a red carpet, not to mention paparazzi. Thankfully, we were unnoticed by cameras as we walked on the carpet. If only they knew why we were here.

"Quite the event," I murmured.

"To say the least," Em agreed. His eyes were scanning the crowd. He was working, plain and simple. Then he leaned down and whispered in my ear. "James is at the entrance."

I giggled and smacked him on the chest.

Inwardly, I was rolling my eyes at myself.

But I had to play, ya know.

We knew, of course, that James was here, and he knew that I was here with Emmett. He just didn't know that we were gonna make him doubt the bond between me and Whistler. And as we got closer and closer to the entrance, I noticed that he eyed us with interest, obviously wondering why Emmett and I were so close.

James, Adam, and Kellan all had tasks here tonight, but they were under the strict order of "follow without asking questions."

*"Kellan is already inside,"* Eric's voice informed us. *"He's found three in the Maserati security that he believes work for Aro."*

Noted.

To others, it would seem like Emmett dropped a soft kiss on the inside of my wrist, but I knew better, of course.

"Any word from Rose?" he whispered against my mouthpiece.

He was worried sick. I knew that from the Cullen-frown.

*"Two minutes away from the hospital,"* Edward responded. *"I'm keeping my eye on it."*

Emmett breathed out in relief, if only a little.

We reached the entrance then, and as planned, James appeared to work the security for the event, and we only exchanged a small nod as we passed him.

### **Whistler's POV**

I pop a piece of chewing gum in my mouth as I give James a go.

"Rose is at the hospital," Eric informs Emmett as James tells me that Emmett and Bella have passed him at the entrance.



"Anything suspicious?" I ask James as I run the latest codes on one of the laptops.

*Finally.*

I give Eric a nod. We're in. As in, we managed to hack into the security system at the car show, which gives us footage.

"Um... No, boss," James replies.

He hesitated.

I'll remember that.

I adjust my headset before reaching for the smokes.

"Adam, you there?" I ask.

"Yes, sir."

I light up a smoke. "You on your way back to the show?"

Alec pops his head in, telling us that he's gonna start the movie night with Nessa and Autumn in mine and Bella's room, so I give him a nod and throw him my wallet. "Roomservice," I mouth to him.

"Yes, sir," Adam responds. "Um, Edward?"

"Yeah," I say, turning back to the laptop. All screens are running, and I zero in on Kellan who's standing by one of the concept cars. The Kubang, I recognize.

*"Am I on the same line as your brother and wife?"*

I smirk. "No." Lie. We're running all of them on the same line. Okay, not really, but Bella, Emmett, and Rose can hear what Eric and I can hear.

They couldn't a few minutes ago, but we have them all on one frequency now. 'Cause Eric's got skills.

*"Okay, um... I couldn't help but to notice something, and maybe it's not my place..."*

Eric chuckles at me, obviously hearing Adam through his own headset.

"Speak, McKenna," I tell him firmly.

I take a drag, hoping to God that he's not the rat. I'd hate to kill Siobhan's son.

I want them all to be honest, and a part of me hope we don't get proof of otherwise tonight, though I know there's someone letting his mouth run.

*"I noticed something between your brother and sister-in-law,"* he says hurriedly, and I appreciate the honesty, I do. *"They seem to fight a lot, and I wonder if they're up for tonight."*

Kellan's line blink, and I thank Adam for his observation before letting him go. Then I change the frequency. "Go, Ford," I say. In the meantime, my fingers are busy on the keyboards. Four fucking laptops for me, and four for Eric. We're busy fuckers to say the least.

*"Just spotted Emmett and Bella,"* he reports. *"They're moving toward the GranCabrio."*

Good. I already know this, though.

And fuck me if Bella doesn't look sinful in that fucking dress of hers.

"We have footage," I tell him, taking a pull from my smoke. "Anything on the Italians or authorities?"

Eric nudges me, and I look over at one of his screens, and... shit.

Aro has arrived.

With some bimbo on his arm. Not his wife, I note.

As I look closer, though, I see that the trashy-looking woman is older. Maybe in her mid-forties.

*"There are two guards,"* Kellan continues as I motions for Eric to tell Emmett by pointing at him on the screen. *"I think their higher-ups, boss."*

Fuck. Not what we need tonight.

We know it's a possibility, though. FBI, CIA... Interpol. We're prepared for them all.

"Interpol?" It's my first guess, obviously, since we're in Europe.

*"I'll keep my eye on them,"* he tells me. *"So far, I'm not sure, but I'll get closer."*

I nod even though he can't see me. "Good. Just don't blow your fucking cover. They're smart."

*"Got it, boss."*

I change back to the main line and tell Emmett and Bella to walk toward the Kubang instead. If they look too interested in the GranCabrio, Aro might get suspicious. Then I say Rose's name.

*"I'm here, Edward,"* she replies. *"On my way back to the show."*

Good. I hear Bella's engine purr in the background.

"Enjoying the speed, Blondie?" I chuckle.

*"You know it,"* she laughs quietly.

Fucking knew it. They're both hellcats.

"All right." I take a final drag before dropping the smoke in a coffee mug.

"Report back when you're at your mark."

*"Will do."*

"Aro and Armcandy are inside now," I hear Eric tell my wife and brother.

"You guys ready?"

I bristle when I see Emmett speak against Bella's mouthpiece, but I can't fucking help it. I'm a possessive bastard and that's that.

*"We're ready, bro."*

*"Holy shit!"* Bella whisper-yells, and I'm instantly on high alert.

"What's wrong, baby?" I ask, zooming in on the screen.

## **BPOV**

*She* was Aro Avellino's armcandy.

I couldn't believe it.

Every piece connected.

Piece by little piece.

I was vaguely aware of Emmett speaking to me.

Same went for Whistler through my earpiece.

But I couldn't focus on them.

All I saw was her.

In shock, I stared at her with wide eyes.

The photos my dad kept in his room, back in Forks...

Her name...

Make that plural.

Two names.

Renee Dwyer – the name I found on those lists.

Renee Swan – the woman who gave birth to me.

Aro's armcandy.

I was in disbelief.

I was also out of time, because they stood right in front of us then, and it was quite clear that they knew exactly who I was.

He looked like the vile man he was. Long black hair, a fancy suit, a sinister smile, beady eyes...

Then her.

She looked... cheap. Botox. Fake tits. Skimpy dress. Hair in a tight bun. Cold eyes. Mild amusement.

"My, my, my," Aro cooed. I was immediately repulsed, and I shuddered in disgust. "She is much more beautiful in person, Renee."

Emmett stiffened and moved closer to me.

I was pale, I was sure of it.

"You okay, *sweetheart*?" Emmett asked, softly but loud enough for them to hear, and it was what brought me back. I had a role to play, and *nothing* was gonna ruin my shit.

"Sweetheart, you say?" Aro asked, tilting his head at Emmett. His accent made me shudder again. "I am quite positive this lovely *bellezza* is married to your brother, is she not?"

I leveled Renee with an indignant stare. I was so fucking above her.

*"Princess, do you hear me? I'm fucking worried here,"* I heard Whistler sigh heavily. *"Eric and I can see you. Can you please nod or touch Emmett's arm or something if you're okay? Please."*

Emmett looked down at me as I looked up, and I gave him a small nod, meant for both him and my husband. What I also had to do was make sure Emmett and Edward found out that the woman in front of me was actually my mother.

So, I turned back to Scum One and Scum Two.

"What Emmett calls me sure as shit isn't your business," I told them flatly. "I'm curious, though, since we're exchanging pleasantries and all... What name do you go by nowadays, Renee?" I cocked the bitch-brow for good measure.

*"There's my girl,"* Edward sighed in relief.

"Whatever do you mean, Isabella?" Renee asked sweetly. Too sweetly.

I put my hand on my hip. "Fuck that. I'm Mrs. Cullen to you."

*"I don't know what you're doing, baby, but behave. You have a role to play, remember?"*

Right.

Shit.

Fine.

"Emmett," I said softly, placing my hand on his chest. "It looks like the slut on Aro's arm is my mother."

His eyes widened.

"*Say what?*" Edward growled. "*Are you fucking kidding me! That goddamn, cocksucking, motherfucking bitch of a-*"

*Stop it, Edward!*

But he didn't.

I cringed as he continued. Cursing, growling, threatening... both in Irish and English.

It was quite impressive, but it hurt like hell in my ear.

"Damn it!" Emmett hissed, and the two of us were both trying to keep our fingers away from our ears. Thankfully, Eric managed to calm Edward down, and soon it was somewhat quiet in our earpieces again. Holy hell, Irish boy can curse.

"*Apologize, Bella!*" Eric barked in my ear. "*Emmett, make it look like you just cursed at Bella for acting out!*"

Fuck. I forgot.

Jesus.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled, burying my face in Emmett's arm.

Emmett ignored me and turned to Aro instead. "I apologize. She isn't usually this... bratty."

Oooh, Emmett was gonna pay for that line later!

*"Dude. You called my wife bratty? She's gonna rip off your pecker,"*  
Edward chuckled.

Pecker? Really, Whistler?

*By the way, you're in trouble, too, Edward.*

Whatever.

"But the feisty ones are funny, no?" Aro commented, amused.

I wanted to kick him in the balls with my heels.

Renee just looked bored, which infuriated me.

"Perhaps," Emmett conceded.

I snorted internally. There was no perhaps about it.

Emmett and Edward wanted exactly what Rose and I happened to be.

Ladies on the street, and freaks between the sheets.

Only, we weren't all that ladylike on the street.

But this was Emmett playing a role, I reminded myself.

"So, do tell me, Mr. Cullen," Aro goaded. "How is your lovely villa standing?"

Oh, shit. He didn't.

One name echoed inside my head.

Seth. Seth. Seth. Seth.

He was dead because of this asshole.



My gameface was back on. The Avellinos were going down.

"*Rose is in place,*" Eric informed us. "*I need you two to move toward the GranCabrio, guys.*"

Finally.

Showtime.

## **36 – ROME IN JANUARY**

### **BPOV**

"Just keep walking," Emmett told me quietly as we left Avellino and... Renee. "You okay?"

I nodded, but no, I wasn't okay.

Not even a little.

She was... my *mom*. And she was here. With Aro.

"Are you sure you can pull this off?" he whispered against my temple. "We can-"

I shook my head, cutting him off. "We're doing this," I said sweetly, patting him on the cheek. And then I reached up as I pulled him down. It looked intimate as I let my lips ghost over his neck. But it so wasn't, and I ignored Whistler's growl. "By the way, Emmett *dearest*?" I fisted his suit jacket. "You're gonna pay for calling me bratty. I swear on all the fucking leprechauns in Ireland, I will make you pay."

I released him with another sugary smile before leading the way toward the GranCabrio.

I heard him gulp behind me.

"Told ya, bro," Edward chuckled in my ear.

Oh, he'd pay, too. Whistler, that is.

"Okay, enough. Rose is on her way, and Adam just spotted her," Eric told us.

At the same time, Emmett and I reached the concept car we'd steal later.



We were far from alone around the exclusive vehicle, and as I glanced over my shoulder, I saw Aro and Renee approaching, too.

"It's so gorgeous," I gushed, linking my arm with Emmett's. "I want one, Emmett." I gave him a pout.

He pulled me close, chuckling, and I reached into his pant pocket to retrieve the tracking device. "I know you do, baby," he told me. "But it's a concept car."

"So what?" I asked, acting like... well, a brat. "I still want one."

"Aro's listening in, keep going," Whistler said.

"But there's only one of them, Isabella," Emmett replied, now looking impatient. "Look, I don't need this. If I want whining, I have a wife."

"You're so paying for that later, Emmiekins," we heard Rose hiss in our earpieces.

Oh, this was fun.

Apart from Emmett swallowing hard, you'd never know he was terrified.

But this was still a job, so we kept acting.

"Are you calling me a whiner?" I asked way too loudly.

*"Good. You're attracting a crowd. Keep it up,"* Eric chuckled.

"I didn't say that," Em growled quietly. He glared at me. "But don't embarrass me, are we clear?"

I huffed, turning away slightly. "Whatever." I folded my arms over my chest, a sign for Edward and Eric. They knew I was ready and that I had the device in my hand. "I thought you'd be better than Edward. Turns out, you're just as cheap."

*"Easy on the insults, princess."*

I rolled my eyes.

Eric was next. *"Don't listen to Edward. You're doing great, Bella. And Rose? You have a go."*

Emmett grabbed my arm then, and forcefully pulled me to him. This wasn't supposed to look intimate. Every American around us knew that Emmett was pissed at his mistress, and it was the law, after all. Emmett could treat me how he wished.

"Behave, Isabella," he spat out.

With huge eyes, I looked up at him, showing nothing but fear.

"I'm sorry," I whimpered. My lip trembled. "I just want a new car."

*"Rose is coming, bro. James, are you in place?"*

Emmett sighed heavily, loudly, and scrubbed his face before hugging me.

And this was how Rose found us.

*"Yes, boss. I'm right behind Rose."*

"You whore!" Rose shouted, and immediately, I pushed myself away from Emmett.

"Rose!" I choked out.

"Rosalie, don't!" Emmett barked out.

"I fucking knew it!" she spat. When she was in my space, she pushed me, making me fall over the velvet rope. And I was officially on the right side. She followed, of course, and I could see James closing in. "Screwing your own husband isn't enough?" she shouted. I was still on my back, pretending to cringe in pain. "You had to screw mine, too!"

"Oh, shut the fuck up!" I shouted back as I got up. She took a step forward, and I took a step backward... It brought us closer and closer to the car. "It's not my fault you can't satisfy him!"

*"Hurry up, girls. James is close, and real security is following."*

Rose charged.

With a scream she threw herself at me, and we landed right next to the car. Pretending to fight wasn't the easiest when I had to make sure that no one saw what I held in my hand. And it got even harder as we rolled closer to where I needed to be, because Eric informed us of several Avellinos paying attention.

"Are you there?" Rose said breathlessly as she clawed at me.

"Further up," I gritted out, and she responded by pushing me, along the floor. That fucking hurt, 'cause we were rolling around on a red carpet, and that was bound to leave burns. But I couldn't complain, because I was suddenly there, and as Rose pretended to pull my hair, I slammed up the device behind the back tire, attaching it on the inside.

"Got it," I grunted, pushing her off me.

And then James reached us.

*"Rose's hair was in the way," Eric said. "Did you get it? Curse if it's a yes, Bella."*

James pulled us off the floor by grabbing our arms, and we dutifully cried out in pain.

"Fuck!" I gasped into my mouthpiece, covering it by palming my cheek.

"You bitch!" I shrieked to Rose. "Your fucking claws are gonna leave a mark!"

"That is enough!" James yelled in an Italian accent. Which was followed by some real Italian as he told the Maserati security that Rose and I were to be escorted off the premises. He'd do it himself if Aro wasn't watching, but he knew who James was. So, we were already prepared for this.

Soon, two Italians grabbed me and Rose.

### **Whistler's POV**

"Damn, those girls can do this," Eric chuckles.

And I'm chewing on my fucking lip. I swear... it's all Bella's fault.

But yeah, they're both good. Really goddamn good.

"All right, zero in on Adam and Kellan," I mutter, lighting up the umpteenth smoke. Fuck, I hate this. I wanna get in on the fucking action. Motherfucking leg. Naw, I aint bitter or anything.

"Both are in place," Eric informs, eyes glued to the screen as he also lights up a smoke. "Want me to tell them to begin?"

"Wait 'til Emmett's out of the building," I mumble, zooming in on Aro and Renee. *Jaysus*. Can't fucking believe it's my wife's mother. Cocksucking bitch. But seriously, there's a fucking story behind that one, and we need it. I mean... she's on that fucking list. I figured they were all victims. But she sure as shit doesn't look like a victim.

"*I'm out, bro,*" I hear Emmett tell me in my headset. "*Where are the girls?*"

I check the screens... "Closing in on their mark. James' helping them back inside," I answer, exhaling some smoke. "Be ready in five."

"*Got it. I'm gonna change now.*"

Then it's back to just watching for a while.

Kellan and Adam are doing a checkup to make sure Bella and Rose's fight didn't raise suspicion, and James is continuing working undercover as Maserati security. Good thing he knows Italian.

"Ford, anything?" I ask, watching as he stands close to two Avellinos.

Kellan drags a hand over his face, making sure he can talk quietly into his mouthpiece. "*My Italian ain't all that good, but they're talking about something going down tonight.*"

"Location?" I wonder. We think Aro's plan is to steal the GranCabrio tonight, after the car has been driven to its safehouse. But, since we

haven't had the same amount of time to plan this stint, we don't have that information. Hence, getting a tracker on the car.

*"Someplace outside of Rome,"* he reports back.

I nod thoughtfully, running a hand through my hair- "Fucking piece of shit," I mutter, adjusting my headset. Christ. "All right, Kellan. Any info on the higher ups? Interpol, FBI?"

*"Both,"* he answers right away, making both me and Eric curse. FBI is the last thing we need, 'cause they're here for us. Unless there are other American criminals here, of course, but I doubt that. *"Three agents with an American accent, and they were all keeping their eyes on Emmett earlier. I got some looks, too."*

Understandable since Kellan's been with us since November of last year.

He's a known face now.

*"By the way, Cullen..."*

At the sound of his tone, I switch us to a secure line.

"Speak," I tell him, taking a pull from my cigarette.

On my screen I watch Adam closing in on another couple of Avellinos, and I hope he can get some info, too.

*"Um, that was a show earlier, yes?"* Kellan sighs, and I chuckle quietly. *"I mean, there's nothing wrong between you and Bella...?"*

Yeah, I figured he'd be the one calling us out. Like I said, he's been with us since November. If anyone knows how solid Bella and I are, not to mention Emmett and Rose, it's Kellan. It doesn't matter anyway. My gut is telling me that Kellan can be trusted. I'm still careful, but I wanna narrow it down to James and Adam.

"Yeah, just a show," I confirm quietly. "We need to make Aro believe that we're amateurs," I explain. "We don't want Aro to take us seriously, so Emmett and I figured a love triangle would set shit in motion. He'll be able to relax soon."

*"All right... You know I won't tell anyone, right?"*

I exchange a look with Eric.

I scrub at my face.

And I wanna say yes.

But this is business.

"I'm getting there," I chuckle wryly.

He knows it's the best answer I can give him.

"Okay, back to work," I say.

## **BPOV**

"I have an idea," I said quietly into the darkness.

It was boring to just sit here and wait for the show to be over, but it was what it was. So, Rose and I sat here, in a backroom at the show. Security had led us out, but we were quick to get back inside with help from James.

"And what's that?" Rose asked.

"Adam," I sighed. "He was the one handing us the guest list."

"Yeah?"



"Well... Renee wasn't on it. It didn't even say Aro Avellino plus one or anything. Just his name. Isn't that weird?"

She hummed, obviously in thought.

*"Princess, are you there?"*

I smiled and brought my mouthpiece closer. "Yep. I've changed into my jeans and hoodie, too. We're ready."

*"Okay. It's gonna be a while, though. You're all right there?"*

A while. Yeah, we figured. And I guessed that would be a few hours.

"Lovely." I snicker. "But yeah, we're fine."

*"Good. Emmett will join you soon."*

"Okay, and you guys?" I asked.

*"Eric and I are taking the kids to the apartment outside the city. I'll meet you there later tonight."*

I grinned. "You're pissed, aren't ya? Jealous, 'cause I'm here and you're not?"

*"Don't push it, baby girl."*

Watch me, dude. "Don't threaten me, Whistler. You're still gonna pay for almost blowing our cover earlier."

*"I didn't do shit, princess!"* he exclaimed.

Rose laughed.

"You cursed so fucking loudly that Emmett and I could barely stand still," I hissed quietly. "Seriously, that shit hurt like a motherfucker."

True story.

*"Shite. I'm sorry, okay?"*

And I stifled a giggle. "I'm just fucking with you, baby."

He growled, huffed, and grumbled more curses.

But then I remembered... "Hey, Whistler? I wanted to bring something up."

*"Sure thing,"* he said, and I knew I had his attention, even though I could hear the clicking on keyboards in the background.

"Renee. Her name wasn't on the guest list."

*"Uh-huh... go on."*

"Shouldn't she have been?"

*"Hmm..."*

Yeah, he had his thinking cap on.

*"Adam got you the list, right?"*

"Yes."

Silence.

.

.

*"All right. I'll look it up. Thanks, baby, and be safe."*

**Whistler's POV**

"Anything?" I ask Eric.

I groan as I get in the SUV.

Time to move.

I'm driving since I need Eric's eyes on the most important laptop, and it's hurting like a bitch to use my leg, but... whatever. I'll smoke fucking joint soon enough.

"Nothing so far," Eric mutters, placing the laptop in his lap.

"We're buckled in," Alec announces quietly from the back.

I give him a smile in the rearview mirror. He's worried. I fucking hate it.

Hopefully, though, we'll have his dad back soon.

As I drive through the busy streets of Rome, I make sure to keep an eye on the laptop every once in a while. We have four screens pulled up, but we're on the move, meaning static. The footage isn't very clear anymore, which sucks ass, 'cause we need to keep an eye on James and Adam.

I trust Kellan.

I have to.

He's a good guy.

But James and Adam aren't safe.

"Tell Kellan to return to Sam," I order quietly. "I want them both on their way before nightfall."

"On it," Eric mumbles, and then my phone rings. "By car?"

"Yeah, Kellan's too out there now," I reply, smirking when I see my motherfucking cousin's name on the display. "He's off limits when it comes to airports. Same as me, Emmett, Bella, and Rose."

He nods in understanding, and I answer the phone.

"Liam, you pisshead." I grin, cradling the phone between my cheek and shoulder. I watch as Alec and Nessa smile. Obviously, they miss their brother. "How the feck are ya?"

After the next turn, we're officially on our way out of Rome.

*"That's how ye greet me, cousin?"* Liam chuckles. *"Where are yer manners, eh?"*

"Manners," I huff, pulling out my smokes. "I was shot in the fucking leg and my wife is currently doing my job. No manners for me."

He laughs, of course. *"Aye, I heard of yer little spitfire from Emmett. His is the same, I hear."*

"I guess you'll meet them in London," I reply, letting my smoke dangle between my lips as I hit the freeway. "Speaking of; where are ya? You in Europe yet?"

*"Yeah, landed in Denmark this mornin'."*

Good. Fucking excellent.

"You taking out Aro's garage there?" I ask.

*"Sure am. In the mornin'."*

Great. We'll be outta Italy by then.

*"Any word from me old man? Or that feckin' snitch?"*

I sigh, flicking ash out the window.

"Not yet," I mutter, and I catch Alec's look in the rearview mirror. "Hey, your brother wants to talk to ya."

*"Alec and Nessa there?"*

"Yeah, we're on our way to our last stop before we head to England."

*"Great, put him on. I'll see ye for a pint soon, eh?"*

"Yep, the day after tomorrow, I reckon. Have a good one, Liam."

## **BPOV**

"Okay, we can take 'em out now," Emmett said.

"Easier said than done," I mumbled, trying to get the earpiece out.

We were still in the darkness.

Hours had passed.

But it was almost time. Whistler, Eric, and the kids had arrived at the location outside of Rome, and the car show was over, which meant we didn't need to stay in contact anymore. It was simple now; just get the car. Yeah. Or something. But we had Emmett and he was confident. He'd done this before, after all.

What we knew now was that Kellan and Sam were heading toward France where Sam was gonna check himself into a hospital in Paris to get proper care for his shoulder. There was only so much Emmett could do. Kellan was going to stay with him for a day before continuing his journey toward London, with or without Sam. It all depended on his hospital visit.

Then we had James and Adam. They were ordered to drive separately, also toward London, but not on the same route as Kellan. Apparently they

weren't allowed to enter France until they reached Strasbourg – northern France – and from there they would go straight to Calais for the ferry or train over to England.

Eric's job was to keep track on them.

Their phones were bugged, same went for their cars, and any stop would be registered.

That left me, Rose, and Emmett in Rome.

It took time but after I finally got the tiny fucking earpiece outta my ear, I smashed it with my foot. The mouthpiece followed.

We had our phones now.

"Everything good?" Em asked.

I nodded before realizing that he couldn't see me. "Yep."

"Yes," Rose said. "And you have your dress packed and all that, B?"

"Yeah," I replied, blindly searching for the bag on the floor. There. Found it. "I have it."

"All right. Let's go get that feckin' car."

Oh, Irish boy 2 was giddy.

Then we were quiet as we left the supply room.

Through the empty halls.

Every now and then, we paused when we saw maintenance and security.

It was... thrilling.

I felt adrenaline rushing through my system.

"Bella, make the call," Emmett whispered, and I brought out my phone as Emmett and Rose started working the lock on a door. It would take us back to the massive showroom, which had now been locked down.

Whistler answered right away. "*You in place, princess?*" he asked quietly.

"Yes," I whispered, looking around myself.

*"Okay, Eric's working on the alarm, and the sensors."*

I tapped Emmett on the shoulder. "Don't open it yet."

He nodded in understanding, returning to the lock.

A few seconds later, Edward told us that we had thirty seconds to run across the showroom before the sensors were back.

The door was open and we were ready.

Thank fucking God I wasn't in heels anymore.

"Stay low," Em ordered quietly, urging Rose to go first. "I'll follow."

Deep breaths.

"When you reach the door across the room, start on the lock right away."

Rose nodded.

This was another thing she had picked up in Chicago. It wasn't just cars. She was learning tech-stuff, too.

"Okay, run."

We did.

It was dark but emergency exits made it possible for us to see at least a little. So, we kept running between the cars, and I smirked a little when

we passed the GranCabrio. We could take it right now, but then we would have an army of police after us. Plus, we only had thirty seconds in the showroom before the sensors came back on.

"Christ," I breathed heavily as we finally reached the other side.

"Hold this for me," Rose whispered breathlessly, handing me a flashlight. I did, and she kneeled by the door before starting her shit. Yeah, that wasn't my game.

Remembering that I still had Whistler on the phone, I brought it back to my ear. "How long?" I asked quietly.

Emmett reached us then, kneeling right away to help Rose.

"*Fourteen seconds,*" Whistler replied, and I could picture him pulling at his hair. "*Twelve... eleven... Shite... is it working?*"

I swallowed. Um, how the hell would I know if it was working?

"Come on," Emmett snarled, working fast as hell with some tool. Looked like a damn stick to me. "Come on, come on."

"*Bella,*" Edward growled. "*You have five seconds!*"

Fuck!

"There!" Rose exhaled.

Oh, thank God...

"Get out, get out," Emmett hissed, all but pushing us out the door.

I whimpered in relief when the door clicked behind us. "We're through, Edward," I breathed out.

"*Jaysus, you scared the fuck outta me,*" he groaned.



There was no time for a celebration now, though, 'cause we had to find a new spot to hide before people came, and it would be any minute now. Problem was, we were flying blind. Eric didn't have this area on his laptop.

The only thing we knew was that we were in some garage-bay-area-thing... Yeah, I know. I'm still so fucking savvy when it comes to this.

Anyway, this was where they were gonna load up the Maseratis in big ass trucks.

"Over there," Emmett said, pointing at a door. "It's probably a supply room. We'll hide there." We walked quickly, knowing that this place was gonna fill up with people soon. "Bella, give me your bag."

I did, as I filled Edward in about how the room-bay-garage... what-the-fuck-ever, looked.

Sorta like an engine bay at a fire station, I told him.

Soon, we were inside the tiny supply room- Um, no. Closet. Really damn tiny. Didn't deserve to be titled as a room.

It didn't take long before we could hear the trucks rolling in.

"Hurry," Rose whispered to Emmett.

That dude was drilling. Literally, he was drilling a small hole in the door.

After all, we needed to know in which truck they'd use for the GranCabrio.

That was our reason for being here.

And we would follow it.

Rose had parked my Gallardo right outside.

It wasn't the best car for this, 'cause there were only two seats, so yeah, Rose and I were gonna be crammed for a while.

"Let Edward know that three trucks have departed already," Em whispered, still drilling. Good thing it was a small drill making almost no sound.

"How do you know?" I whispered back, again bringing my Vertu to my ear.

"Because I listen," he chuckled.

Smartass.

"Three trucks are off," I told Edward, and then I turned back to Emmett. "What if the Gran is one of them?"

"There," he replied, lowering the drill. "It isn't." He was checking through the hole now. "That car is too far in. It'll be a while and these trucks only take two cars."

Well, alrighty.

"They're loading the Kabang now," he informed quietly.

And I repeated the information to Whistler.

Yeah, I was getting bored with all the waiting.

### **Whistler's POV**

That's... Fuck, I'm missing something.

I frown, scanning through the notes...

*"They're loading the other concept car now,"* Bella whispers, and I hum in acknowledgement.

"What's wrong?" Eric asks.

I don't know. Yet.

"I feel like I'm missing something," I sigh quietly, rubbing my chin.

"About..." Goddamnit. "Something Kellan said bothers me," I tell Eric.

"Look here." I slide my notes across the kitchen table. "I've downloaded the recorded shit from the car show," I explain. "And this," I point at one of mine and Kellan's conversation, "nags at me. He mentioned that there were both FBI and Interpol agents, yeah?" Eric nods. "Right. Well, shouldn't we have known about the FBI being there?" I adjust my phone so that I can use both hands but still have Bella on the line. "Even if Siobhan isn't in charge of our case anymore, she should know, right?"

*"They're loading the Gran now, baby."*

I give Eric a pointed look as I turn back to Bella. "That's great. Everything ready?"

*"Yes, we have the license plate, and I just activated the tracker."*

I grin, unable to help myself. But it's a fucking turn-on to hear Bella talk shop.

"Good, and have you decided who's gonna drive the Gran later?"

*Please don't let it be Bella, please don't let it be Bella.*

I'm still a competitive fucker, and the thought of Bella driving that beauty... Yeah, that would sting, I admit. But then again, to have my brother drive it... Shit, talk about being caught between a rock and a hard place.

"I am," she declares, and I can just fucking hear the smugness in her sexy voice. *"Emmett and I flipped a coin."*

Of course.

Of fucking course.

*"And Rose called dibs to drive my car."*

Well, of course she did. 'Cause we don't stand a chance against our wives.

"I reckon he's bitter then, eh?" I ask dryly, running a hand through my hair. Fuck, I need a shower. Preferably one with my wife.

*"You bet your sexy ass he is,"* she giggles quietly, making me smile just 'cause. *"Anyway, we gotta go. I'll call again when we reach our go-point."*

And now I'm nervous.

This is the moment I've dreaded.

'Cause Bella's gonna use a gun.

"Be safe, princess." I pinch the bridge of my nose. Fuck, the last thing I wanna be is stuck in this old apartment. "I'm serious," I add. I know I've told her a million times to be safe but... fuck.

*"I promise,"* she murmurs. *"I love you."*

I swallow. "Love you, too."

And then she ends the call.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.

"She'll be fine, Cullen," Eric tells me.

Yeah...

"Distract me," I say, turning back to the notes. "What do you think?"

He nods with reluctance flashing across his features. "You're right. We should've known about the FBI being here. There's no excuse. The very *least*... she would've known about a team being sent to Europe."

Exactly.

So...

Yeah.

We exchange a look, both thinking the same thing.

We can't trust the McKennas.

Which means...

I'm gonna put a fucking bullet in Adam.

## **37 – ROME IN JANUARY**

### **Whistler's POV**

I hear Dad sigh over the phone, and I know he's torn between fury and resignation. Just like I am. But it's pretty clear that we've found the rotten seeds in our organization.

"There's nothing going on in their favor now, is there?" I say, running a hand through my hair.

"Emmett and the girls are closing in on the target," Eric informs quietly, fiddling with his phone.

I give him a nod in acknowledgement as Dad replies. "*Doesn't look that way, son. I'll take in Siobhan right away for interrogation.*"

It's business. "I'll deal with Adam when we reach London."

*"You don't have to be the one, Edward. I'm sure Liam would love to-"*

Yes, I do, so I cut Dad off. "It was *my* crew he thought he could fuck with," I respond, not hiding the rage building inside of me. "I wanna be the last thing he sees in life."

End of discussion.

## **BPOV**

"You ladies ready?" Emmett asked, switching lanes.

We nodded.

Ahead of us we had the truck.

We wanted what was inside it.

"And you know what to do?" he pressed.

"Yes," we replied in unison.

Guns ready.

Sweatshirts with the hood hiding our faces.

Emmett and I had black bandanas covering everything below the eyes, too.

"Okay, I'm gonna cut him off at the next exit," he said, stepping on the gas.

I was on Rose's lap, looking as she texted reports to Eric.

Apparently, Whistler was on the phone with Carlisle.

About the McKennas.

Yeah.

That sucked.

Adam thought he could fuck with my husband's crew.

Cocksucking motherfucker was gonna die now.

"Here we go," Emmett informed quietly a few moments later.

Rose and I watched as several trucks too their exit off the freeway.

And we watched as Emmett slid up alongside the truck we were after. On the right side of the lane, he drove close to the truck, making sure that the truck couldn't make his exit.

It was exhilarating to watch as the truck swerved to stay in the lane.

Emmett was a goddamn pro as he maneuvered the car.

And soon it was just us and the truck left on the freeway.

Time to work.

We knew we had seven minutes to get this done – we assumed the driver would alert the authorities before we could fully approach the vehicle. And seven minutes was what it was gonna take for the police to arrive from the nearest suburb.

Emmett slowed down as he switched lanes again.

This positioned us right in front of the truck.

That driver was most likely on edge now.

When Emmett slowed down more and more, I savored the calm I felt. It was like... It was like there was a current of calm surging through me.

Instead of being jittery and nervous, I felt centered and prepared. I was confident, and as we came to a stop, I was ready. So fucking ready.

"Let's go," Emmett said, immediately opening his door.

Rose opened the door on our side, and I made my way out before I caught up with my brother-in-law. The trucker knew now. We saw him as we raised our guns. And I hoped he wouldn't see how completely useless I was with mine.

"Stay behind me," Em instructed quietly as we approached the truck.

We were literally in the middle of nowhere.

In the middle of the night.

The only light came from the truck's headlights.

With the gun still raised, he aimed for the driver who sat wide eyed in his seat.

And with the gun, I watched as Emmett motioned for the driver to open the door.

In my periphery, I saw Rose sneaking on the other side of the truck.

Italian shouting brought my gaze back to Emmett and the driver, and fuck, I had no idea that Emmett knew Italian. Did they all know the fucking language? Shit. I needed to catch up, that was for sure. 'Cause I wanted to be skilled, too.

"Finally," Emmett spat out as the door opened.

More shouting followed, and Emmett instructed the driver to lie down on the ground. Face down, arms behind his head.



I felt sorry for the driver. I did. He was innocent, after all. But at least he wasn't going to get hurt. We were only after the car.

After exchanging a nod, Emmett left me there.

I kept my gun aimed.

I listened to the mumblings, the pleas, the whimpers. I didn't need to know Italian to hear that the driver was scared shitless. And I'd reassure him, but like I said, I didn't know the fucking language yet. Only a few phrases, none of which were gonna help me here.

So, I kept quiet and hoped Emmett and Rose wouldn't be long.

"I'm gonna get this shit up now!" Emmett barked, alerting me of the fact that he was gonna use his gun.

"I'm sure your wife can help you with getting shit up!" I called back, unable to help myself.

Rose laughed.

Two shots rang out.

Emmett was really in the damn zone if he didn't recognize a good joke.

Tough crowd.

A few moments of silence followed, and I kept my eyes on the driver, as well as the road. We didn't want cars passing us now, but it was definitely a possibility, and... fuck, it also became reality as Emmett lowered the ramp in order to get the car out.

"Incoming!" I shouted.

Rose soon joined me, and I knew what I had to do, so I walked up to the driver and put the gun against his back.

"Get up," I said, pulling on his shirt.

The driver obeyed and shakily walked toward the other side of the truck while I kept the gun pressing against him. In the meantime, Rose was watching from behind us, all to keep her face out of view. She was just backup, but it was reassuring.

"Down on the ground," I ordered, digging the gun a little deeper. There was more Italian but I didn't understand shit. At least he understood, and soon he was back on the ground again, this time out of sight for passing cars.

"Where did you put the tank of gas, babe?!" Emmett shouted from inside the truck.

"I already filled it up!" Rose returned.

A couple of cars flew by us, luckily not stopping.

The driver and I were fortunately hidden in the darkness behind the truck.

Then... all I heard was this roar...

Followed by Emmett's victorious cheer.

But damn, all I focused on was the purr of that engine.

And it hit me.

Whistler.

Fuck. My poor husband. He was missing out on this.

I sighed, returning my focus on the driver who was still pleading.

"What a lovely fucking baby!" Emmett shouted as he backed out the car.

I presumed the windows were rolled down, 'cause I heard music then.

*Only Emmett.* I shook my head and snickered.

### **Whistler's POV**

"Everything's going well," Eric tells me, in contact with Rose via text messages. "Bella's getting ready."

I nod slowly, keeping my eyes on my laptop.

So far, Adam hasn't stopped on his way to England. Not that I expected him to – he's only been on the road for a few hours, but... I don't know. I'm just keeping an eye on him now.

"What the fuck?" Eric mumbles. Then he dials a number. "Rose?"

I look up.

"Wait, repeat that," he says before putting her on speaker. "You're on speaker."

"*Bella took off,*" Rose laughs, and I'm fucking confused.

"Yeah, that's the plan," I say, frowning.

"*Oh hey, Edward,*" she giggles. "*No, what I mean is... She took off without Emmett.*"

The fuck?

"Are you telling me that my wife is currently driving the concept car alone? And toward Aro's villa?" Anger and fear flash through me, and I hope to God Rose is fucking with me. "You better not be serious, Rosalie!"

She fucking laughs again, and in the background I can hear my brother grumbling up a storm.

*"Oh, I doubt she's heading for Cerveteri. I'm pretty sure she's heading for you."*

I'm not in the goddamn mood for riddles. "Speak English or put my brother on!" I bark out.

And Emmett comes on. "Rose and I are in the Gallardo, on our way to you guys," he mumbles like a kid who's been robbed of his candy. "Your wife is on my shit list."

"Emmett," I warn.

*"Fine! You wanna know what's going on? I'll tell ya! The three of us did a kick-ass job, and everything went off without a motherfucking hitch! Then Bella gets in the car, but before I can join her, she takes off with a fucking roar! She even left skid marks on the middle of the fucking road!"*

I clench my jaw.

And my fists.

I inhale deeply through my nose.

"Why would she do that?" I grit out quietly, silently motioning for Eric to get my girl on the fucking phone.

What the hell is she up to?

There's no fucking way I'd let her take on Aro all by her fucking self!

Has she completely lost her fucking mind?

*"Don't you fecking get it, Edward?" Emmett growls. "She's dropping me like yesterday's trash! She's coming for you instead! You, you fucking ass, is going with her to Cerveteri!"*

Umm...

"Bella, Bella, Bella," I hear Eric chuckle then. "I have Cullen on the phone for ya, sweetheart."

I snap my fingers, reaching out for his phone. In exchange, I toss him mine. He can deal with Emmett. I'm much more interested in hearing what Bella's planning.

"Isabella?" I say, watching as Eric slides over his own laptop. I see that he's pulled up the feed we still have on Aro's villa. The bugs we planted had all been detected, most likely thanks to Adam's mouth, but we have the cameras James put up on the outside. "You have some serious explaining to do," I tell the wife.

*"Mmm... Hey, baby," she fucking purrs. "You might wanna get ready."*

Shit.

I lick my lips before lighting up a smoke. "Oh, yeah? And why's that?"

She chuckles softly, and I hear her stepping on the gas.

*"Because you and I should be the ones to finish the job."*

Just when I thought I couldn't love this girl more.

I take a drag. "So, you're coming for me, princess? Is that it?"

*"I sure hope I'll be coming," she replies seductively, making my cock wake up.*

Fuck me. "Oh, you'll come, baby girl. I assure you. Now, get your sweet ass out here so we get on the road."

\*O\*O\*O\*

"You're gonna need this unless Bella snatched Emmett's set," Eric says, handing me a car key.

Ah. The spare key to our getaway car in Cerveteri.

"Cheers, man," I chuckle as I pocket it. I also pack my laptop. I'm in a hurry now, 'cause my delectable wife is waiting for me. "I'll see you in London, yeah?"

"Yep." He grins. "And I'll keep an eye on Adam."

"Good." I nod firmly. "I'll call you when we're in Cerveteri."

A few moments later, I'm standing outside the modest building, and I hear her before I see her. Or more correctly, I hear the engine of a sweet motherfucking car. And when she comes into view, I all but jizz my fucking jeans. The thought of my wife driving that beauty is enough to get hard, but to actually see it...

"Jaysus," I mutter, approaching the car.

Then she gets out of it... grinning devilishly. "I assume you wanna drive her."

Goddamn, she's just... "I love you." I just had to say it. "Now, get in."

Once we're both inside the car, I pull her to me.

Our mouths pretty much crash together, and it's suddenly so fucking easy to ignore the pain in my leg. 'Cause this... Shit, this has got to be the hottest thing ever. A sexy wife, a sexy car, and a very erect cock.

"We need to get going, Whistler," she breathes, tugging harshly on my hair as we devour each other's mouths. "Ungh... Em and Rose will... be here soon..."

Fuck.

"Gimme a fucking minute," I hiss when she bites my lip. Kinky little girl. In return, I reach up to pinch her already constricted nipples. "Shite..." I slide my tongue along hers, moaning as her right hand finds my cock. "Damn, you want me to fuck you in this car, don't you?"

She moans. "Actually... on the hood."

Okay, that's it.

Abruptly, I pull away from her before I fucking attack the woman.

More than I already have, that is.

We need to put some distance between us and this little suburb before I do anything.

I rev the engine before placing my hand on the back of her seat as I put the car in reverse. It's time to get outta here.

My breathing is labored, and the way Bella looks ain't helping.

She's all high on adrenaline. Pupils dilated, cheeks slightly flushed... And, fuck... Judging by the way she's rubbing her thighs together, I'd say she's more than a little turned on.

Soon, we're on the road.

I can feel her eyes on me.

I clutch the wheel tighter.

I floor it as soon we reach the freeway again.

The car is... a fucking treat to drive.

But nothing beats the girl sitting next to me. Fucking sin.

"You're looking a little hungry, sweetheart," I murmur, eyes still on the road.

"You have no idea."

Fuck me. Seriously. Fuck me.

My cock is throbbing in my jeans.

When I adjust myself, Bella whimpers.

Enough is enough.

We need more distance, but...

"Fuck it," I mutter, dragging a hand over my face. "Suck me off, princess."

Her hands are on me in a second, and she unzips my jeans in a fucking flash. I lift up my hips, unable to stop the moan from escaping as my cock bobs against my abdomen. With jeans and boxers pushed down, she immediately lowers her mouth on me. It's... hot, wet... wrapped around me.

"Ffffuck," I snarl as I hit the back of her throat.

Threading my fingers through her hair, I guide her movements. She has a thing for oral sex, there's no denying that, and she tends to go for speed. Like she can't fucking wait to have me coming in her mouth. Which is... a heavenly motherfucking feeling, I gotta say. But if she doesn't slow down, I'm gonna come too fast, and this shit is meant to be savored. So, I control her.

"Bloody hell, baby," I moan loudly.

She hums around me.



I fight to keep my eyes on the road.

Don't ask me when I last got a proper night's sleep.

And what she's doing right now just makes me wanna close my eyes in pleasure.

The way she swirls her tongue around the head of me, the way she fucking suckles me, the way she cups my balls, the way she licks me...

"Close," I grunt, instinctively bucking my hips. I slide deeper down her throat, and she... Oh, hell, she fucking moans... The vibrations, the suction, the wetness...

Yeah, I come.

In several streams, I shoot my release down her throat.

And I deserve a fucking medal for being able to keep my eyes on the road.

"Holy fuck," I pant, wiping my brow. She releases me with a pop, and my eyes pretty much bug out when she hums and slowly licks her lips. She just never stops. She's always sex. Seriously, whatever she does, it's sexy. Even when she's not trying. So... when does try for sexy, it's... it's goddamn lethal.

And I quickly decide that we deserve a break from driving.

I take the next exit off the freeway.

I hear her whimpering quietly in her seat.

I know what she needs right now, and I can't fucking wait to give it to her.

*My fat cock.*

Don't ask me what little town we've just entered, 'cause I don't know, nor do I care. All I care about is that it's in the middle of the night, leaving the town deserted and dark. That's all that matters. I find an alley big enough to fit the car, and that'll work.

As soon as I've turned the ignition, I tell her, "Get out, baby."

Then I'm out.

I'm tucked into my boxers but my jeans are still unzipped.

It'd be useless to zip them up seeing as I'm soon gonna impale her on my cock.

With a hand on the hood, I make sure it's not too hot for her to get up on it. But it's all good, and once my horny wife joins me, I slide her up on the shiny metal.

It's time for dinner.

There are no words exchanged.

I act like a possessed savage with the way I push her jeans off her.

Her panties follow, and I tuck them into my back pocket.

Then I'm there, grabbing her calves to pull her closer to me, closer to my waiting mouth.

Her legs are thrown over my shoulders.

I dig in. Quite literally. My mouth is on her bare pussy... her very wet, bare pussy. It's heaven, for fuck's sake. My tongue slides along her sex, not stopping until I can wrap my lips around her clit. She moans loudly, arching into me, and when she starts writhing under me, I place a hand on her stomach.

"Stay still, baby," I mutter, very busy with what I'm doing.

"Oh fuck, Whistler!" she moans when my tongue enters her. Damn, she's fucking soaked for me. Good, because I'm starving for her. My cock's waking up, too, always wanting more. Greedy little fucker. Okay, not little.

"Edward... *ungh...*"

That's right, princess. Give it to me.

Fuck, I'm just everywhere. Moaning and humming, I savor her taste as I play with her. My tongue fucks her, my fingers rub her clit...

Adding pressure and speed, I bring her closer and closer.

She fists my hair, making me groan.

I push three fingers inside of her, my tongue swirls around her clit, I curl my fingers, and-

"Shit, baby!" she all but screams.

Quivering, thrashing, shaking...

Like a starved motherfucker, I lick her pretty pussy until she's come down from her orgasm.

I gently put her legs down again.

We're both panting as I straighten up, but there's no waiting. My cock is aching to be inside of her, so I push down my boxers and spread my legs slightly to align myself with her.

"Ready for me, Isabella?" I ask gruffly, not really waiting for a response.

Her legs go back on my shoulders, and I thank God for my bendy wife, 'cause I lean over her, pretty much folding her at the middle.

*Holyfuckingshit.* I'm there. My cock does a little twitch when I'm met with

her hot and wet pussy. Bella feels it, too, and responds by pulling my face down for a rough kiss. We both groan at the impact, and I grab my cock, wanting it soaked in her juices. She moans and whimpers as I drag it along the length of her sex. Hot, wet, coating...

"Now, Edward," she moans in my mouth. "Fuck me."

"Beg me, princess," I whisper huskily. "I wanna hear you beg for my cock."

She bites my fucking lip again.

Hard.

I growl.

Before I slam into her waiting pussy.

"Goddamnit, Bella!" I grit out. Fucking shit. I'm panting against her shoulder, staying still inside of her. She's pulsing around me, and... that little fucker, she broke skin. "You drew blood, you little-"

"Shut up and fuck your wife," she whimpers. "And c'mere, let me kiss it better."

I groan loudly, capturing her mouth with mine again. True to her word, she kisses me passionately and soundly as I start fucking her. She licks and lap; I can fucking taste the copper. Weird thing is, it only makes me harder. She's out of this goddamn world when it comes to sex. I need to stop being so surprised.

It's Bella motherfucking Cullen we're talking about, after all.

She's proven over and over that she's hardcore.

"Shite," I breathe out harshly as I push my cock inside of her.

Lord, I'm fucking addicted to her.

"You feel so good, Whistler," she cries out. "Yesss..."

Wrapping her legs around my waist instead, I'm able to pound deeper.

And with one hand on the hood and one gripping her hip, I set a fast pace. My cock slides in and out of her. She squeezes the shit out of me, making me moan embarrassingly loud, but I don't give a flying fuck. Not even when a couple of people pass the alley. We're surrounded by darkness and there's no way they can see us, but by the noises we make, it doesn't take long for the people to know what's going on here. Fuckers even pause.

"Looks like we have an audience, wifey," I grunt, pulling out before I thrust in again.

"Don't stop, don't stop, don't stop," she chants breathlessly, and I know that she's close again. I can fucking feel it. Her pussy clamps down on me, and I groan as shivers and fucking tingles erupts in my body. "Oh, God... close... so good... Love you... your cock..." Incoherent mumbling. She's not the only one. I do the same, 'cause... Can't help it. Closer... So goddamn heavenly. Even closer. I fuck her harder. She starts trembling. Sweat beads on my forehead, my chest heaves, my leg is fucking throbbing from the workout. I know it's gonna piss me off later, but right now I just don't care. Too good... Tight... Contracting...

"Come, princess," I moan breathlessly. "Can't feckin' hold it..." I squeeze my eyes shut, thanking God when I hear her breathing hitch. There's no breathing as our orgasms assault us. It's all but impossible. So much releasing from the inside... For her it's a shitload of adrenaline. The events of the night, the feeling of having it all done, the feeling of being together again. Same goes for me. My climax surges through me, along with the

relief of having her safe with me again. It's always a constant motherfucking worry, but my girl did good.

"Oh, God," she whimpers.

I know it's coming. I'm already prepared for it.

As I try to control my breathing after that intense orgasm, I let go of her legs and lean over her again. Through harsh breathing, I kiss her softly and whisper shit to her. Silent tears roll down her cheeks, and I know it can be too much when you let go of a night like the one we've had. Problem is, our night isn't over. We still have Cerveteri.

"I love you, baby," I whisper against her lips. "You did so fucking good today, you know that?"

She sniffles, nodding slightly. "God, I hate this," she breathes, furiously wiping away her tears. "I don't understand why I gotta cry like a little bitch."

I chuckle softly, still dropping kisses on her gorgeous face.

"It's still new to you," I murmur quietly. "It's just your body's way of releasing all the tension from being so worked up."

She nods again, smiling timidly. She already knows this, but I will repeat it for as long as she needs it. I don't want her to feel like she has to put on a brave face for everything. She's not exactly dealing with schoolyard bullies. This is... yeah, a bit more dangerous.

"I love you," she whispers thickly.

I kiss her again. "Love you too, Bella. You're my life."

As much as I wanna stay and take it easy, we have a job to finish. So... with a grimace, I pull out of her and tuck myself back in my boxers and jeans. Then I help her with her own jeans.

"My panties," she says, holding her hand out.

I smirk. "No can do, love. Those are the property of a very happy husband now."

I add a wink, 'cause she fucking loves those.

My lopsided grin, too.

It's the only weapon I have when it comes to Isabella.

"Fucking Irish boy," she mutters, pulling her jeans on... sans panties. "You owe me new panties, I swear..." More muttering follows but I just keep my happy grin in place, and soon we're back in the car, speeding toward Cerveteri.

"Rest for a while," I suggest, patting my shoulder as we reach the freeway. "We have a good hour before we reach his villa."

She obliges and rests her head on my shoulder.

It doesn't take long before she falls asleep.

I swear, when we reach London, I'm gonna sleep for a week.

No, I'm gonna spend a week in bed, but there will be more than sleeping.

Sleeping, eating, fucking.

A big ass bed. Pillows and covers... Bella's naked body... Hamburgers and fries... Motherfucking fish and chips... More of her naked body... A nice pint or four; Murphy's, of course... Couple packs of smokes... Candy. Shit yeah, candy. Pizza. Cuddling with my wife's tits. Holy fuck, take me to London.

Sounds fucking stellar to me.

\*O\*O\*O\*

I pass the SUV, only seeing it 'cause I know it's there. It's well hidden.

Which means it's only a couple of minutes until we reach Aro's villa.

"Bella," I murmur, turning to kiss her on the forehead. She's oddly still when she's sleeping. I, on the other hand, am all over the place. While she goes to sleep and wakes up in the same position, I go to sleep with her in my arms, only to wake up with my feet on the pillow or something. Sometimes I wake up with my head buried between her titties. I smile at that thought. Those are particular good mornings.

Anyway...

"Princess, it's time to wake up."

I make the last turn, leading up to the villa.

"I don't wanna..." she mumbles.

I smile again, knowing just what to do... or say. "We're in Cerveteri."

Yeah, that did it.

"I hope he cries," she yawns as she straightens in her seat. "After everything we've gone through to get this car..."

A sigh slips through my lips, 'cause... Yeah, it sucks that we're gonna blow up this baby. Truth be told, it's not really my style, this car. It's a bit on the tiny side, but it's still sleek and fucking hot. Bella, though. She could drive this. It would leave me with a perpetual hard-on, but it's a sacrifice I'd be willing to make. Alas, it's a concept car, and rather useless for the likes of us Cullens. 'Cause we're drivers, not collectors.



"Want me to get Eric on the phone?" she asks, pulling up the bag I packed for us earlier. I nod and give her thigh a squeeze, then I slow down. We're almost there. "He's on his way to England now, right? With the kids."

"Yep, with Emmett and Rose following," I answer. "But I reckon Rose is in the Gallardo with Alec or Nessa right now." I scratch my chin. "Eric is probably on his laptop with Emmett driving the SUV."

And I sure hope the kids get some sleep. They may be more rested than we are, but still...

"Eric? Edward and I are in Cerveteri now... Yeah, he wants to talk to ya." She hands me the phone. "Eric doesn't sound happy."

Huh?

I cradle the phone between my cheek and shoulder.

"Talk to me, Bell," I order quietly.

*"Just find solid proof on Adam, boss,"* he spits out.

I hear him typing away on the laptop in the background.

*"I'm going through the surveillance from the hotel where Adam picked up Emmett, Bella and Rose before the car show. Only he knew the location, and it wasn't the hotel you guys were staying at. Yet, I found Avellinos entering the building before your brother and the girls were even there."*

I inhale slowly.

Bella says I have issues with my temper, and I don't wanna lose my shit right now.

I think she's wrong, but she's boss lady over my nuts.

"Which means Adam told the Avellinos," I conclude. "Well, that settles it. He's a dead man. Now, give me the rundown over at Aro's villa. I fucking hope he's home."

Eric chuckles darkly.

*"Oh, he's home alright. They're currently getting pissed after having a barbecue on the patio. It looks like a celebration, and I'm guessing they're getting ahead of themselves."*

I smirk.

Of course he's celebrating. He most likely thinks his goons are on the way to pick up a certain car right about now. And being the arrogant prick that he is, he thinks everything will go just swell.

Not happening, motherfucker.

"Well, let me and Bella provide them with one helluva fire then," I tell him, still smirking. "Hell, the sun will go up soon. Maybe they want a breakfast barbecue, too."

Time to deliver our message.

After ending the call, I drop off Bella at the edge of the little forest that surrounds Aro's villa. Then I drive up to the front gate.

I know we don't have much time, 'cause there are cameras everywhere, and I'm bound to be seen at any moment.

So, yeah, I hurry my Irish ass.

Bella does like it, after all. My ass, that is.

I quickly grab the tank of gas that Emmett used to fill up this baby before, and I pour what's left of it all over the car. After popping the hood, as well

as opening the gas lid, I pour some gas there, too. 'Cause it's the gas that's inside the car that will make this beauty go up in flames. Once that's done, I light up a smoke, 'cause I will need it very soon.

Then with my bag thrown over my shoulder, I back away to appreciate my work.

"Come on, you Italian scum," I mutter, exhaling some smoke through my nose. "You want your car. Come get it."

It takes a moment, but the spotlights finally come on, making me stand out like... Well, like an Irishman in the middle of Italy. The alarm quickly follows, and I take my cue.

I salute the surveillance cameras with my middle finger.

Oh, I give them my best smirk, too.

Walking backwards again, I take a final drag of my smoke.

Then I throw the cigarette.

It lands on the roof of the car.

"Here's to your bloody barbecue," I mumble before turning around.

Bella tends to worry, so I break off in a run, even if my leg hurts like a son of a bitch. I'm not too worried, 'cause by the time I hear shouting coming from the villa, I'm already in the forest.

Bella breathes out in relief as I join her, and I position her in front of me, resting my chin on the top of her head. We need to get outta here, and quick, but we gotta see the show first.

"Why hasn't it blown up yet?" she asks.

I watch as the front gate opens.

"I only left a few drops as a trail to the gas tank in the car," I respond quietly. "Don't worry. It will catch soon."

And as soon as the words leave my mouth, we watch as exactly that happens.

The explosion is massive, and Bella jumps in my embrace before relaxing again.

If we're lucky, the fire caught a few of the guards that were approaching the car earlier, but I'm not betting on it. What I am betting on, however, is that we'll be dead if we don't leave now, so...

"Let's go, princess."

Then we run.

I'm already prepared for the dogs I hear barking, so I pull out my gun from the waistband of my jeans.

"You're gonna shoot the dogs?" Bella asks breathlessly as we run through the woods. Fucking trees... everywhere.

"Unless you want them to bite you in the ass," I grunt. Now, I'm in a decent fucking shape, but the pain in my leg is goddamn taxing. "And I'm rather fond of yours," I add. It's the truth, after all. Okay, "fond" is an understatement.

"Fuck, do you hear that?" she gasps, and yeah, I hear it.

Dogs running and barking.

More than a few.

"Get that gun up," I pant. "Time for target practice."

I breathe out in relief when I see the SUV ahead, but I know we won't be able to reach it before the dogs reach us, so... Yep, time to waste bullets on fucking pets.

"Okay, but please don't kill them, Whistler," she pleads through heavy breathing. We slow down and turn around, and I give her a look that asks if she's lost her fucking mind. Seriously. "They're animals!" she says defensively. "Who have they hurt?"

Did I really fuck the smarts outta her earlier?

But she gives me the pout. The fucking pout.

And I'm so fucking pussy whipped, so I obey the woman.

With the dogs closing in, we walk backwards, toward the car.

Guns aimed.

Then, when I see three... four... five dogs – Rottweilers – I shake my head at myself before I aim at their goddamn legs.

"Holy shit, there's more!" Bella cries out as she fires her gun.

She's right. More dogs are coming.

At this rate, the guards will catch up to us if we don't get a move on.

I take down a few dogs as they charge, but Bella... Oh, shit. Okay, she's missed a few but the last one... Yeah, she got him between the eyes. I'm torn, feeling both proud and concerned. If she really doesn't wanna off the mutts, then I guess she's feeling the sting now, but... Damn, that was a good shot.

"I hate this," she snarls, firing over and over.

"Just keep going," I reply as another dog whines on his way to the ground. "And don't slow down. Walk."

When only two dogs are left, I can hear Italians coming closer.

"Run, Isabella," I command. "I'll deal with the rest, but you run. Get the car started."

"Key," she says, thankfully obeying for once.

"Back pocket."

After taking the key, she's off running again.

I keep walking backwards.

Another shot rings out, and I sorta forgot to aim for a leg.

Hey, in my opinion, I'm more humane. At least it won't suffer. I doubt Aro's bringing them to the damn vet.

Soon, the last mutt goes down with a thud.

"My poor leg," I sigh, turning around to run yet again.

By the time I reach the car, I'm a panting mess, and I can feel my temper flaring. Maybe my wife is right. Perhaps I do have issues. Ah, well. It is what it is.

"You okay, Whistler?" she asks as I get in on the passenger's side. "How's your leg?"

I give her a tight lipped smile.

That's all I can muster, 'cause if I open my mouth, I'm gonna scream.

Luckily, Bella knows me well, so she says nothing. Instead, she turns the ignition, and soon we're on our way out of Cerveteri.

"Motherfucker," I whisper under my breath.

The pain is searing.

"Anything I can do?" she asks softly.

I shake my head before letting it fall back against the headrest.

"Wait," she says abruptly, "there are two joints in the bag. Won't one of them work?"

Um. Yes!

"Eric must've packed them," I chuckle drowsily.

It doesn't take long to find them.

Thank heavens.

I take a deep pull, holding the smoke in my lungs.

"I want you to see a real doctor when we get to England," she tells me, quietly but firmly. "I hate seeing you in pain, baby, and as much as I trust Emmett, he doesn't have a MD to his name."

I exhale the smoke slowly.

"I promise," I sigh softly, leaning back in my seat. I love it when she goes Mama Bear on my ass. "Love you, Bella."

Stepping on the gas, she threads our fingers together. "Love you, too, Irish boy." Beautiful motherfucking woman. "Now, smoke that shit," she grimaces, "and roll down the window, 'cause I don't wanna get high when

I'm driving." I chuckle tiredly and push the button to roll down the window. "Then, get some sleep. I'll wake you in a few hours."

She must really love my sorry ass.

"Yes, ma'am."

## **38 – LONDON IN JANUARY**

### **Whistler's POV**

"Baby, can you reach into the duffle where the passports are?" I ask before shoving three or twenty fries into my mouth. Gotta love McDonalds.

It's all I've been doing since we left Italy; eating. What, I'm a growing boy. I need sustenance.

"Um, there are eight passports here," she tells me, duffle bag in her lap.

She's wearing pajamas in the SUV, by the way. Light pink... barely there... shorts, and one of my hoodies. Weird girl. Don't even get me started on the fluffy bunny slippers on her feet. Each time we've stopped at a rest stop to stretch our legs, she's been walking around in her slippers. Too fucking cute, I tell ya.

"I know," I swallow the fries, "and now I need you to find one that says Marie McCarty and one that says Anthony McCarty. We're almost in Calais and they're gonna wanna see papers." Then I take a big bite outta my Quarter Pounder. "The Eff-U-V if regiferred on Anfony."

"Chew, swallow, talk."

Right. I always forget that.



"All right, I found the passports," she says before snuggling to my side again. I kiss the top of her head. "Wake me when we get there."

I chuckle. "To Calais, Dover, or London?"

"Calais," she yawns. "It's my turn to drive after that."

Stubborn.

She's so fucking insistent that I get some sleep.

It's not like I've been awake a lot. Hell, after I fell asleep outside Cerveteri, I went out like a fucking light and didn't wake up until we were halfway across France. Bella had driven the entire way, only stopping for gas and a couple of smokes. Oh, and some disgusting salad. My wife isn't one to turn down a good fucking burger, but she says she's sick of fast food. I know, she's a weirdo. How can one get tired of fast food? I mean... *seriously*. Right? Yeah. But then she said that she's gonna start cooking real food for me, and... I have no idea when I last had a home cooked meal, so I sorta kept my mouth shut. 'Cause I know – from my early days in Forks when I stalked my girl – that she has skills in the kitchen.

I digress.

I've slept a lot.

But she wants me to sleep more.

\*O\*O\*O\*

When we finally reach England, there's no way I can sleep.

I'm excited to be back, I gotta say, and I haven't been here in a while. Hell, last year I was in prison... so were Emmett and Liam, which meant our annual UK trip was cancelled. But now we're back, and I can't fucking wait to catch up with my cousin again. Sure, we don't see eye-to-eye

when it comes to the organization, and he's a fuck-up in my opinion for getting involved in some shit, but... we're still family, and we did grow up together, after all.

"Okay, this is getting way too fucking crowded for my liking," Bella mutters as she makes the next exit. I know she's eager to get out of the car. See, I told her they drive on the other side of the road here, but she was stubborn, stating that she could handle it. Turns out, she can't. The freeway between Dover and London was fine, but now she's freaking out. Not that I blame her. I've driven here many times and I know how they drive in London. You need skills, patience, and quick reflexes. Bella got her driver's license just months ago. There's no way I want her driving in central London, hence driving off now before there's no opportunity to back out.

"There's a gas station right there," I say, pointing to our left. "Just relax and look both ways before you turn."

"Both ways, both ways," she mumbles, making me chuckle as her eyes are all over the place, checking for traffic.

"You can turn now, princess. It's clear." Luckily, it's passed midnight, which means the traffic won't be heavy until we reach the more central parts. 'Cause in London, there's always traffic. "Good, and- no. Not that exit. We gotta go around, 'cause that's for oncoming-"

"Okay, I get it, Edward!" she snaps.

Don't worry, I won't laugh. I'm rather protective of the family jewels, 'cause I want kids one day.

So... Bella in a roundabout in England... Yeah, good times.

She circles it twice before taking the right exit for the gas station.

"Not a word," she warns.

Nope. Not a word.

Eventually, we end up at the gas station... and Bella parks on the wrong side of the pumps.

"Just switch with me," she growls before leaving the car.

After slamming the door shut, she barges toward the store, most likely to buy smokes, 'cause we're out. And I guess she needs them to calm down now. Poor girl.

"Bella!" I call after her as I walk around the car. She stops right before entering the store, looking at me over her shoulder. God, she's hot when she's pissed. "Buy me a Murphy's, will ya? Oh, and chips. Salt and vinegar."

She glares. "Kinda hard for me to buy beer, don't you think?"

I frown in confusion... before remembering that she hasn't really experienced anything like this in Europe yet. I've always been the one to buy stuff, at least now that we're on the road. And before, we always had shit sent to us.

"You don't have to be twenty-one here," I tell her, reaching the driver's side. "Most countries in Europe have eighteen as the limit."

"Huh. All right, so... Murphy's and...?"

I grin. "Salt and vinegar chips."

\*O\*O\*O\*

"Edward speaking," I answer, cradling the phone between my cheek and shoulder.

*"Welcome to London, cousin,"* I hear Liam greet me.

I smirk. "Cheers, man. Where are you?" I make the turn at Marble Arch, smiling at Bella whose eyes are glued to the sights. Thank God we're not heading right, 'cause that's where Oxford Street is. No shopping for me, thanks. Instead, I take left, and we end up on Bayswater Road.

*"Well, ye told Em that we were meeting up at yer flat, so that's where we are. Guess what, door's locked."*

I chuckle. "Ten minutes. We're at Speaker's Corner. How many are you, by the way?"

"What park is that, baby?" Bella whispers, looking out my window.

"Hyde Park," I murmur.

I make a mental note to take my wife sightseeing while we're here. She never really had the chance to see Rome, but we're gonna be in London for months, so hopefully we'll have time now. Plus, I wanna take the missus out on dates and shit.

*"Me, Alec, Ness, Em, Rosalie – spitfire, that one – Ford, James, Adam, Eric, little Autumn, and my own detail; Chris, Joseph, and Mac."*

I nod pensively. "And Sam?"

*"Still at the hospital in France for another few days."*

Figured.

*"We have a doctor coming for ye in the morning, so ye know."*

Good.

I fucking need it.

"How are we with cars? I want an English car when I'm here," I add, checking the rearview mirror.

*"Seven bulletproof Rovers are waiting for us at me garage in Camden."*

"Tinted windows?" I inquire.

With the CCTV in London, we wanna remain as invisible as we can for as long as possible.

*"What do ye take me for, cuz?"* he chuckles.

I snicker. "All right. We'll see ya in five."

\*O\*O\*O\*

I gotta laugh when we finally reach my flat in Bayswater. It's still in the middle of the night, and we have ten-something people waiting on the steps outside the building. Most of them, wanted for various crimes all around the world.

"How's the leg, bro?" Em asks as I walk around the SUV to open Bella's door. "I hope you took care of it."

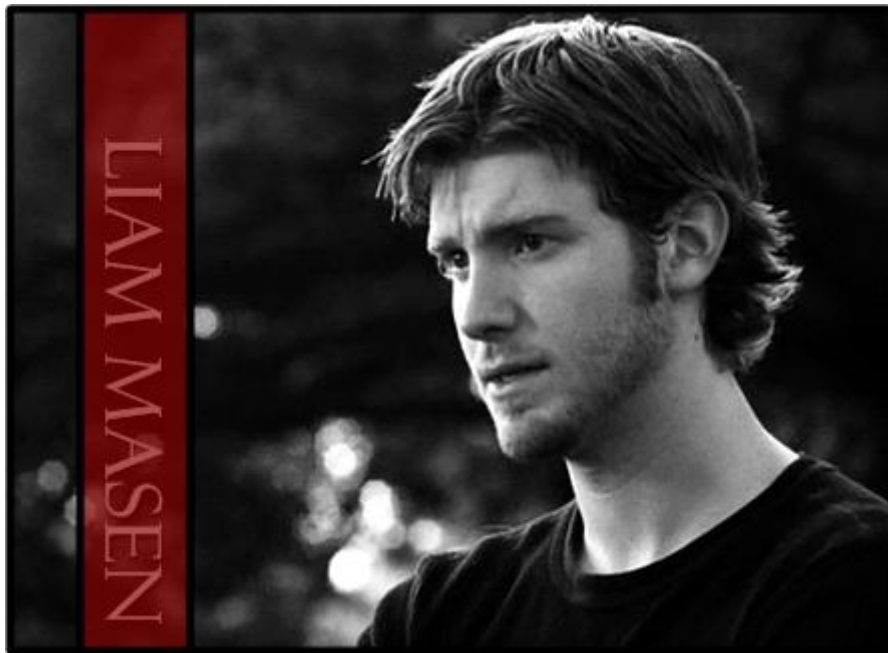
I smirk. "Bella did. She made sure it didn't get infected. Nice to see you, too, by the way." Turning to face my wife, I say, "Let's get you introduced, shall we?"

She chuckles, both tired and happy. The last one is what I live for. The fact that I can make her happy with the only life I can give her is everything to me.

"All right, where are the other Irish bastards?" She smirks.

My hellcat.

“Oi! Another sexy spitfire, eh?” I hear Liam laugh from behind me, and I wink at Bella. With a hand around her waist, I turn back around to greet the “Irish bastards”. The biggest bastard of us all – Liam – lets out a low whistle, at which I level him with a warning glare. Mine, asshat. “Another jackpot for another Cullen.”



“Liam, good to see ya,” I chuckle, wrapping one arm around him as he hugs me. “Adam doesn’t suspect anything?” I whisper in his ear.

He gives a small shake of his head. Good. Then he releases me to greet Bella.

With a hug, of course.

“Darlin’ Bella, honor to meet ye,” he says, the sly fucker. “I’m sure me cousins have told ye all about me, eh?”

“You shouldn’t be too happy about that, you know,” Bella quips, making me laugh.

“Ooh, feisty. I like that,” Liam replies with a wink.

I give him a smack at the back of his head. "Watch it, Casanova. Where's your own wife?"

He shrugs and lets Bella go... finally. "I'm divorcing that cunt. While I was in lock-up, she found another poor bastard to spoil her."

Ah, yeah. Gold diggers. Our business is full of the skanks.

"Okay, let's get inside, yeah?" Em suggests. "We can all greet each other in your flat, bro. Plus, I'm feckin' starving."

Who isn't?

"You're always hungry," Bella and Rose chuckle.

Emmett gives Rose an apologetic shrug, but he gives Bella a glare.

And yeah, I laugh at that.

He's still pissed at my Bella.

"Oh, get over it, Em." She snickers, obviously noticing his expression, as well. "It was supposed to be me and Edward."

Emmett just shakes his head. "Still can't believe it. You just fucking left."

"You deserved it," Bella shoots back.

"Excuse me?" he exclaims in disbelief.

I'm having fun, 'cause I know what's next.

"You just stole the goddamn car, Bella!"

The irony is not lost on me.

"You called me bratty at the car show, Em!"

And there it is.

\*O\*O\*O\*



After we're done with all the greetings, Bella and Rose turn us all into saps when they cook for us, and I'm damn glad I made sure to have groceries ordered to the flat.

"Ah, the way into a man's heart," Liam sighs happily before digging in.

Since it's closer to breakfast than dinner, we're all fucking stoked about the feast on the dining room table. Eggs, muffins, pancakes, sausages, beans in tomato sauce, waffles, toast, juice, coffee... you name it. And the girls don't do shit half assed.

Throughout the meal, we mostly catch up. Partly because it's been a long time since we saw each other, partly because we're too hungry to talk shop, and partly because we don't want Adam to know about our future plans. Actually, this is his last meal.

"Fuck, this is good," I moan, forking another waffle. Under the table, I give Bella's thigh a squeeze. "You're gonna make me loathe take-out, baby girl."



She smiles. "That's the plan, Whistler."

Woman knows how to take care of me.

"Whistler?" Liam asks, brows furrowed.

"Bella's nickname for me," I reply before sipping my coffee.

"Cause boss plays the whistle," Alec clarifies, grinning.

I love that his spirit is still high.

Unfortunately, we only have two bedrooms in our place, and I want Eric and Autumn close. So, I suppose Alec and Nessa will live with Liam in his flat in Camden. Emmett and Rose will of course stay at their place in Paddington. As for the rest of the guys; we have hotel rooms booked for them. We're all scattered across the central parts of the city – just the way we like it.

"Have ye told Bella about March then, cuz?" Liam grins.

No, I haven't. Yet.

I guess this is a good time.

"We'll be in Dublin for Alec and Nessa's birthday," I tell her, watching her smile widens. She sure likes to travel. "And then we'll stay for St. Patrick's Day."

"And you're gonna play?" she asks, looking around the table. Emmett nods, as do Alec and I. Even Liam. He plays the fiddle much like his younger brother, and the bodhran.

"We always get together for ten days in Dublin," Emmett adds, and then proceeds to fill in the girls about the many traditions we have in our family. But the biggest and most important one is definitely the ten days

we have in Ireland each year. That's when we all get together, starting with the twins' birthday, ending with St. Patrick's Day. Ten days of partying, playing music, and just spending time with family.

"We missed last year, of course," Nessa chimes.

Then we receive pointed looks from the ladies. Well, Liam, Emmett and I do.

You know, prison and all.

"Idiots," Bella and Rose sigh in unison.

Liam starts guffawing. "Man, you picked yerselves good women!"

He's being truthful, too.

And Emmett and I are very aware of our blessings.

The very early breakfast continues; me, my girl, Emmett and his, Alec and Nessa, Liam, Eric and Autumn – we're all at the dining room table. The rest are in the adjoined living room, also eating the divine food Bella and Rose prepared.

But all good things must come to end...

Nah, kidding. We're Cullens and Masens. We make sure the fun doesn't end.

However, it's time to deal with Adam.

We also have plans to make.

"We can help, princess," I say, wiping my mouth with a napkin as Bella and Rose start clearing the table. But they just shake their heads. "Are you sure?"

We do have a lot to do, but we're all gentlemen here.

"You know what I want you to do, baby," Bella replies, dropping a kiss on my forehead before she leaves.

And yeah, I do know. She's probably just as pissed with Adam as I am.

So, I give Liam a pointed look.

With a nod in understanding he stands up. "Oi, Chris and Adam!" he yells at the guys in the living room. "Mac, you too!"

"Cub, why don't you take your sister and Autumn into mine and Bella's room," I suggest. "You can watch a movie or something."

Pretty sure Autumn's gonna fall asleep, though. But that's just good.

I can always pick her up and carry her to her and Eric's room later.

"Sure thing," he replies.

Soon it's just me, Emmett, and Liam in the dining room, though the guys in the living room can hear. And when Chris, Mac, and dear old Adam join us, Liam sits down again. It's time for the first step in our plan. Which Chris and Mac already know about.

"I need you three to handle a few deliveries for me," Liam tells them.

"Adam, ye're good with locks and getting around security, I hear?" Adam nods. "Brilliant." I study Adam closely, quietly drumming my fingers on the table. "Then ye shouldn't have any problems getting in."

"Details, boss?" Mac asks, according to the plan.

"A safehouse near Canary Wharf," Liam answers, and I stifle my amusement. It's the finance district, which means tight security. Adam

obviously thinks he's gonna be needed. But what he doesn't know is that he *is* the job. "I have the file in me bag."

Bella returns to the dining room to take more plates to the kitchen, but not before handing me a pack of cigarettes and a glass of Coke with ice. Seriously, is my wife the best or what? She just fucking knows.

"The sodas aren't chilled yet, so I took ice instead," she whispers, and I grab her wrist to pull her closer. She knows what I want, of course, and obliges. The kiss is chaste, but even those ones matter. "Let me know if you need anything," she adds quietly before heading back to the kitchen.

After lighting one up, I toss the pack to Emmett who in turn tosses it to Liam after grabbing a smoke. In the meantime, Liam fills the boys in about the fake stunt they're about to pull.

Once all is done, they leave.

Mac and Chris are under strict orders, and Adam isn't allowed to be left alone for even a second.

"Know how hard it was not to just blow his feckin' brains out?" Liam sighs, leaning back in his chair. "Jaysus, what a goddamn bastard."

I knew exactly what he was talking about. Hell, it was my fucking wife he'd endangered. Not to mention Autumn and my crew.

"Want me to deal with him tomorrow, Edward?" Em asks, being the big brother and all.

"No," I say flatly, exhaling smoke through my nose. "I want to be the last one he sees in life."

Emmett hasn't killed anyone. Yet. It's only a matter of time, because we know what we all want. But... Adam is mine.

"Uncle C killed Siobhan, I heard," Liam mentions.

Yeah, I heard the same. A shot in the head after she'd confessed to Dad about selling information about us. Problem is, she refused to give up any information. She probably knew it wouldn't do her any good, but I hope Adam's not as smart. I hope he'll believe my lies tomorrow. Though, a part of me doubts he will.

Christ.

I can barely believe how quickly things have changed for us.

We set out for luxury and adrenaline, my brother and I. Not this.

So, it's time we put an end to the fuckery.

At least the heavier shit.

As the good lord is my witness, I won't ever take on an honorable job. It's just not in my fucking blood. But killing people isn't either.

"Let's get this over with, eh?" I stub out my smoke. "Liam, what do you have for us?"

He's been working hard on this over the past few weeks, and even though I won't be his hired help or anything, I still know when to listen. 'Cause the fact remains, he knows this better than I do. Fuck, it's been his life since he was a kid.

Aro's garage in Copenhagen, for instance. That's kid's play for him. He blew up that building without any issue whatsoever.

"Aye," he says. "We wanna bring down the Avellino inner circle and destroy their work, yeah?" Emmett and I nod. "Right. Well, we have four directions to go in, and we need to do it all at once. The fourth issue being me old man."

This much Emmett and I knew already.

The Avellino family, who controls their organization called Volturi, has their dirty hands in everything.

So, we have the club scene that goes hand-in-hand with trafficking. Drugs, too.

We have transportation that goes with smuggling – usually firearms and drugs when it comes to Aro.

We have the inner circle. Aro's closest. The ones with power, the ones with answers, the ones who controls the hitmen with trigger-pulling fingers.

And last but not least, we have Uncle Ed. We need to find him.

Four directions.

"I assume you and your crew is going for the inner circle," I guess. He nods firmly. "And you think Dad should get his ass to Italy?" He nods again, and I smirk. We're on the same page, then. "Okay, so Dad will have a team, and they will look for Uncle Ed, starting in Italy. They should also take over the lists Bella found in Cerveteri. I'm sure they go together with Uncle Ed's whereabouts."

"Then there were two," Emmett muses.

Yep. It's two directions of shit.

"Take your pick," I say with a shrug. "But I will pick my team first."

There's no way my boys are working under Emmett or Liam. They're mine.

"I'll go with vehicles and smuggling," he decides.

Which leaves me with Avellino's underground crap. Sex slaves, drugs, gambling, and lowlife bullshit.

Doesn't matter. We have to deal with all of it.

When Liam's phone rings, he excuses himself to take it, and Emmett and I start talking business. Smokes are lit up, and our wives enter with beers for us before letting us know that they'll be with the kids for a while.

"We're all gonna need training," I point out, rubbing my jaw. "But you most of all. You're gonna work with dealers."

He nods pensively. "I reckon we'll be spending a shitload of time in the Middle East, too."

True.

I don't even wanna think about the people Aro deals with to get his hands on the guns, or the drugs...

"You're bringing Rose?" I ask, hoping he won't. Not to those countries, at least, and not when dealing with the men we're about to fuck with.

"No," he answers, shaking his head and he looks down. "At least not to the more dangerous countries."

Good.

"But we have a lot of work to do before you hop on a plane," I say. Can't say that I enjoy the fact that my brother's going in for smuggling, but I'm not sure I would be able to do it, either. Dangerous is a word to describe puppies in this situation. "Back to training." I twirl a finger. "What will you need?"

He's quiet for a moment, and I start thinking about what *I* will need.

Finding the clubs that are owned by Aro won't be too hard. A few calls made to the right people will give me plenty of addresses to visit. And once I'm inside, it won't be too hard to figure out where to go next, either. There's usually a VIP room, and if you get in there, you'll find the people you're after. Then you basically follow the links, the leads, the proverbial ladder of goons.

It would be easy to just kill Aro.

But someone would take his place.

Which is why we wanna get bosses, underbosses, and what they call capos. In other words; every man that is responsible for a crew in the Avellino family. Every man that is responsible for something more than just himself.

To stop trafficking is a mission doomed for failure, but it's at least my goal to stop the Avellinos part of the horrific business.

"I will need more combat training," Em chuckles humorlessly, bringing me back to now. I frown and take a drag from my smoke. "Christ, just the work to find the suppliers..."

"Maybe that's too far," I ponder. Number one priority in the Masen organization is to keep people alive. We don't take on too dangerous gigs simply because it's too risky. That doesn't make us cowards. That makes us smart. We value life. No job is more important than that. "I think it is. At least in your case." He cocks an eyebrow in question, so I continue. "I'm just saying that when it comes to firearms and drugs, we should leave the suppliers alone. They won't hesitate to kill, not to mention torture, Em. It's just too fucking brutal, and it's not our game." I release a breath. "Take out the middle man, but stop there. It will cut off the connection between supplier and buyer – in this case, Aro. And," I smirk, "we're taking the buyer out already as it is."



Thankfully, Emmett agrees right away.

"What about you?" he asks, lighting up another cigarette. "Where will you start?"

As I take a sip from my beer, I think about my answer. And it's pretty easy. "Right here in London," I tell him, nodding to myself as I see my own plan settle in my mind. "I'm sure he has clubs here."

"And you'll do the same about... um, suppliers?" He grimaces, no doubt at his wording. Can't blame him. We're talking about human lives, usually young girls, and they're being sold off like cattle.

"Yeah." I smile bitterly. "Most girls are from eastern Europe, right?" He nods. "Well, I have no desire to go there. It's tempting, I admit, but it's not something I can survive. That whole business is too damn established. However, I will gladly pass on any tip that I get my hands on."

"To authorities?"

"Fuck, yeah. Anonymously, of course, but yes. The whole thing makes me sick to my stomach, and if I gain some insider info, I'll be the first to give it up to Interpol or whatever."

He chuckles. "Look at you, being all noble."

I flip him off. "You have no idea how fucking noble I can be."

And that's when Liam returns to the table.

"That was Mac," he informs with a grin. "Adam is now safely locked up in Canary Wharf."

Sweet.

"I'll deal with him tomorrow," I say with a firm nod. "Shall we divide up teams before we call it quits? I'm fucking tired."

Understatement.

I don't even remember the last time I slept in a bed.

"I have me boys flying in from Chicago and Boston tomorrow," Liam says. "Then I have Chris, Joseph, and Mac as me closest."

"So, how many will that give you?" Emmett wonders.

Liam sighs, silently counting. "About fifteen, I reckon."

"Where will you start?" I ask.

"Oh, I'm going straight for his main villa in Italy." He takes a sip from his beer before continuing. "If that bastard's still in Cerveteri, I assume that his security isn't as tight while he's away from Tuscany."

"A bastard that you're related to." I wink at him.

"Shut the feck up, you arse," he growls.

I snicker. He's fun to rile up.

"All right, all right," Em chuckles, facing me. "Moving on. I'm tired, too, and I gotta get my ass to Paddington. Your crew, Eddie?"

I don't miss a beat. "Eric, Kellan, Sam, James, and Bella." That's right. I'm counting my wife. "And Kellan's own team, too," I add. "He had three men with us in Italy, but we never used them." If only we knew Aro knew were our villa was. Maybe we wouldn't have lost Seth. "I'll have Kellan call them back in tomorrow."

"Okay, and Em?" Liam continues.

"I'll fly out my crew from Chicago. They were good as hell when we dealt with Caius and his seedy goons."

"Who's your tech-guy?" I ask him.

"Ben."

Yeah, that's what I thought. Not optimal. Ben Cheney's almost as good as Eric is, but Ben's got a wife and kids hiding in Arizona for as long as we're in Code Red, and Black for that matter. Actually, I'm not sure where we stand at the moment, but I believe it's still Black for wives and children.

"Have Irina and Kate offer help to Angela and the kids then," I tell him.

He nods in understanding, and then we slowly but surely end our meeting or whatever we can call it. Our beds are screaming our names, that's for damn sure.

"How about we meet up here for dinner tomorrow, eh?" Liam suggests.

Emmett and I agree. This will give Em time to make his calls tomorrow, and it will give me time to sleep.

Oh, and to off Adam McKenna.

"Ye fellas can head to yer hotels," Liam tells the guys in the living room.

"We'll call when we need ye."

"Kellan, you're coming with me tomorrow," I tell him.

After saying goodbye to Joseph, James, and Ford, Liam hands me a small bottle with...

"What the fuck is this?" I ask, automatically scowling.

Three... no, four pills in a fucking bottle.

With my noticeable limp, it doesn't take a genius to figure out why Liam gave it to me, but I don't fucking do drugs. Not counting a good joint every now and then.

"Morphine," he chuckles, heading for mine and Bella's bedroom. To get Alec and Nessa, no doubt. "Don't worry, cuz," he calls over his shoulder. "Uncle C told me to give it to ye for that feckin' leg."

Oh.

All right, then.

Probably shouldn't finish my beer then, right?

I'd say no.

Soon, Liam reappears. With two sleepy almost-teenagers.

"See ye tomorrow, boss," Alec yawns as I give him a hug.

"Get some sleep, cub," I chuckle quietly before turning to his sister. "You too, sweetheart." I kiss the top of her head. "And piss of your big brother for me, yeah?"

She giggles sleepily. "Aye, sir."

Liam flips me off... all in the name of love.

"See ye tomorrow, lads." With a two-finger wave they're out the door.

Emmett soon follows with Rose.

Which leaves just me, my wife, Eric, and Autumn in our flat.

And when I reach the master suite, I see that Eric's already carried his niece to their room.

"Tired, baby?" Bella murmurs, walking toward me.

I feel like whining like a little bitch.

"Like you wouldn't believe," I... okay, I whine. And I let her remove my clothes for me. "What a goddamn week we've had."

"To say the least," she sighs, giving me a small smile. "So, how about I give my husband a massage before he drops?"

Um, yes. Oh, yes. Please. Yes.

"You're too good to be true," I tell her, cradling her face. "Seriously, you are."

I kiss her soundly, passionately... until my leg is ready to give out.

So, I force myself to go through my business. You know, take a piss, a quick shower, and brush my teeth. Shit like that. And then I pop one of the pills that Dad ordered me to take.

A few moments later, she's straddling my ass on the soft, soft, so soft bed, and... oh... my... God, her fingers. Her hands. Pressing, kneading, scratching, massaging...

"Have mercy, woman," I moan into my pillow.

Shivers rip through me as she works the kinks, the knots, the fucking tension.

My dick, the insatiable fucker, wakes up of course. But only on half mast, 'cause... I'm *really* fucking exhausted.

Tomorrow, I promise my cock.

"Does it feel good?" she asks softly, working my shoulder blades.

I shudder violently. "Understatement. I'll return tenfold tomorrow, princess," I mumble sleepily. "I promise."

She laughs quietly. "Not necessary. Just want you to feel better."

I moan, shiver, hum, and shudder.

Someone really blessed my Irish ass.

"Oh, shite, how I love you," I groan, feeling her hands along my spine. "Jaysus, right there."

"You love shit?" she chuckles.

*Funny, funny you.*

That's the last I remember before sleep takes me.

## **39 – LONDON IN FEBRUARY**

**Beta'd by HollettLA.**

### **BPOV**

When I woke up the next morning – or the same morning we'd gone to bed, really – I had only gotten three hours of z's. But it didn't matter, because I had important things to do. Sleep could come later.

First, I fired off a text to James and Kellan about breakfast. Then I took a shower, I shaved my legs and... other places... brushed my teeth, and lastly got dressed in a pair of Edward's boxers and a t-shirt – sans bra.

This was one of the things I had to take care of immediately; Edward and I didn't have any clothes apart from the few items we'd bought on the way to England.

On my way to the kitchen, I was a little surprised when I ran into a sleepy Autumn.

“Good morning, baby girl,” I murmured, dipping down to kiss the top of her head. “What are you doing up this early?”

It was almost ten AM, but we got to bed after six this morning, so it was definitely too early for her to be up.

“Can’t sleep when Eric’s snoring,” she mumbled, burying her face against my stomach.

I chuckled softly. “Poor girl.” Problem was, Eric really did snore. Loudly. That was his thing. Whistler’s thing was to turn and twist until his feet ended up on the pillows. “Wanna help me make breakfast for the boys?”

That earned me an eager nod, and twenty minutes later, we had delicious smells escaping the kitchen. Pancakes, eggs, muffins, toast, fruits, bacon, and yogurts, coffee, juice...

“Could you do me a favor and grab my phone from Whistler and my room?” I ask, opening the fridge. “It’s on my nightstand.”

“Kay,” she replied, jumping down from the kitchen island. “Want me to wake up Edward?”

I shook my head. “No, let him sleep. You can wake up Eric, though.”

She giggled at that, and then she ran off while I tended to the food. After all, it was only a matter of minutes before the apartment – sorry, flat – would fill up with hungry boys. Probably not Emmett and Rose, but I knew that Kellan and James were coming over.

Then there was Liam. I checked the clock on the oven, realizing that he and the doctor would be here in an hour. One hour. Whistler needed more sleep than that, but it would have to do for now.

"Mornin'," I heard Eric say behind me. In a very sleepy voice. Looking over my shoulder, I saw him standing in the doorway, rubbing his eyes. Autumn skipped over with my phone in hand. "Oh, food. Feck, yeah."

Men and food.

"Thank you," I said, smiling at Autumn as she gave me my white Vertu. I turned and grabbed a coffee mug for Eric. "Coffee?"

"Yes, please," he replied, grinning boyishly. Feckin' Irish boys, eh?

A few moments later, Eric left the kitchen with a plate of food and a mug of coffee. Autumn trailed after him with a few pancakes on a plate, and she was suddenly chirpy and very awake. Kids. I, on the other hand, was still a bit tired, but I was slowly coming around.

A Coke Zero was helping me.

"Okay," I sighed, scrolling through the numbers on my phone.

Until I found Liam's number.

I pressed the call button just as there was a knock on the door.

"Eric, get that, will ya?" I yelled, knowing that he was watching the news in the living room. "It's probably Kellan or James."

Or both.

"*Liam Masen speakin'*," Liam greeted me gruffly.

I snickered quietly. "Sorry, did I wake you up?"



There was some rustling in the background before he spoke again.

"*Bella?*" Ah, yes. He was surprised to hear me. I mean... why would I have a reason for calling him? "*Something wrong, darlin'?*"

"Nope," I responded, waving at Kellan and James, both entering the kitchen at that moment. "But I need your help with credit cards. Whistler only has cash for now." Kellan and James each kissed my cheek before giving the food their undivided attention. "I figured you'd know what to do."

"*Aye, of course,*" Liam told me, and he sounded more awake now. My guess was that I had woken him up, which was good. He was bringing the doc over for my husband soon, anyway. "*Is it for something special? We'll be over soon, so just lemme know how much ye need.*"

Reaching for two more coffee mugs, I poured some for Kellan and James.

"Clothes," I sighed. "We have nothing here."

"Thanks, hon," James said as he took the mug from me. "I'll be in the living room."

"*We have a family account at Harvey Nichols, though it's under a fake name,*" Liam told me. "*I can text ye the details, and then ye can shop 'til ye drop.*"

Sounds fuckin' fine to me.

"Thank you, Liam," I replied, grabbing James' arm before he could leave the kitchen. "Do Alec and Nessa have clothes?" And Liam chuckled out a yes. "All right, just a sec, Liam." Facing James, I asked, "How are you when it comes to clothes? You too, Kellan; do you have clothes?"

James grinned sheepishly. "I suppose I could use a few essentials."

"Same here," Kellan said.

So, I let James go. Quickly locating a pen and notepad, I asked for their heights.

"6'1"," James told me.

"6'4," Kellan supplied and I wrote it all down before dismissing them with a wave. With Edward being 6'3" and built, I could easily figure out the rest of the boys' measurements judging by my own husband's size. Emmett was also 6'3", though a bit bulkier than Edward, Kellan, Eric, and James. He would probably wear the same size as Sam, I guessed, and James and Eric probably shared the same size.

"And do you need anything, Liam?" I wondered, returning to my conversation with him. I kept writing down what we'd need. Jeans, hoodies, t-shirts, suits, underwear, toiletries, socks...

*"Nah, we're all good, darlin'," Liam responded. "Though, I s'pose Ness would like some girly shite."*

"Noted," I chuckled. "All right, thanks for the help. See ya soon. Oh, and we have breakfast here, just so you know."

*"Feckin' splendid. Bye, Bella."*

After he had texted me the details about Harvey Nichols, I spent a solid forty minutes on the phone with a personal shopper from the fancy department store. I covered it all, and when it came to clothes for myself, Nessa, Rose, and Autumn, I was happy to hear that I could check out some stuff online before I decided. That was much better, 'cause I didn't like shopping blindly. For dudes, it was okay. But for women? Not so much.

In the meantime, Kellan, James, and Eric were devouring food in the living room while they worked on the media coverage. Autumn was watching a movie on one of Eric's laptops – which reminded me to buy a new one for Autumn, since hers was left in Italy – and the boys were searching the news, either on TV, in the newspapers, or online.

Then, about ten minutes before Liam was due, I heard my husband whining from our bedroom.

*"Beellaaa! Fuckin' hate waking up alone! Beellaaa!"*

I snickered and rolled my eyes as I left the kitchen.

*"Princess! C'mere and sit on my-"*

*"Edward!"* I shouted, eyes wide as I passed the living room. "We're not alone, remember?"

Poor Autumn. Seriously, living with all these guys. Hell, poor *me*.

*"Oh, shit,"* was Whistler's muttered response. *"I forgot."*

Yeah, no shit.

Ignoring the laughs coming from Kellan and James, I hurried to the bedroom. Once I was there, I was greeted by a pouting Irish boy who was having trouble sitting up straight. His leg was really killing him but, luckily, it would get better as soon as the doc arrived. Which would be in about ten minutes.

"Why aren't you asleep, baby?" I asked softly, making my way toward him. He grunted and gave up, settling down on his back again. "You haven't slept for more than a few hours," I reminded him as I sat down on the edge of the bed. He was still pouting and added a scowl when I chuckled. "What's with the bitch face?"

He took on an incredulous look and threw the sheets to the side, effectively putting his prominent erection out for the world to see. Okay, just me.

*Ungh.*

My mouth watered.

"I was dreaming, and when I woke up, hoping you could, ya know, continue what you were doing in the dream, you weren't here!" he exclaimed. I pursed my lips to stifle a laugh, and he continued, all while giving me a look that asked, "Well, I'm hard and it's your fault. What are you going to do about it?" But verbally, he said, "I need you!" And it came out in a whine.

I tsked and crawled up his body, much to his joy. "You're being awfully whiny this morning, Whistler."

I nipped at his jaw, earning myself a moan from him as he palmed my ass.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm so fucking whiny," he agreed, his breathing speeding up. "I still need you, though, so..." He cocked a brow. "You gonna fuck me or what?"

"You're so romantic," I deadpanned.

At least he had the decency to look sheepish and apologetic.

"I'm so sorry, princess, but, but, but..." His eyes pleaded with me.

And he really was hard.

So hard.

I made a mental note to ask him what the hell I'd been doing in his dream.

But first, it was time to take care of my husband's cock.

"How do you want me?" I whispered against his neck. He shivered and pushed my boxers down, quickly slipping two fingers between the bare lips of my pussy. "Oh, fuck..." I dropped my forehead to his collarbone.

Squirming around a little, I managed to get out of the boxers completely.

"I want you riding me, princess," he mumbled, kissing my temple. His fingers... magic fucking fingers... slid inside of me, making me wet and needy for more. "I need your tight pussy wrapped around my cock."

I moaned and started moving against his fingers. My breathing picked up and our mouths met in a hungry kiss. At the same time, I wrapped my fingers around his dick, giving it a few hard strokes which always made him lose control.

"Please, oh... shit," he grunted, bucking his hips. "Fuck me, princess. Seriously, now... Need..."

He withdrew his fingers from me, but before he could bring them to his mouth, I beat him to it.

I hummed around his fingers, watching as his eyes grew darker.

His jaw tensed.

And then, while I kept my eyes locked with his, I gripped his fat cock and sank down on it.

Oh, God...

My eyes fluttered. I shivered. He filled me...

So good.

"Bella," he exhaled, and I sat up. I pushed the t-shirt off me. "Oh, motherfuckin'..." I moaned when he reached up to cup my breasts, and with my hands placed on his thighs, I started moving on him. Slowly and deeply, I fucked him. But when he started meeting my movements, I sped up. He needed to be careful with his leg, and I knew fucking and making love was more important to him than a leg – go figure – so, I paid attention to what he wanted.

And gave it to him.

"Fuck, baby," he moaned when I swiveled my hips.

*Grinding, clenching, sliding.*

In...

Swiveling, taking more, taking him deeper, taking all of him.

"Yeah..."

"Ah... yesss... Edward..."

Out...

And that was when we heard Edward's damn cousin announcing his arrival.

*"Eddie! The doc's here for ye!"*

We paused for a second, eyes on each other.

Well...?

"Don't you fuckin' dare, Bella," he huffed, pulling me down for a hard kiss.

"Now, continue... Jaysus... Liam can wait."

I chuckled breathlessly, rolling my hips over his stiff cock.

"Yes, sir," I replied seductively into his mouth. "God, I love your cock, Whistler."

"Fuck," he muttered, out of breath. "And I love your dirty mouth."

I knew he did.

*"Eddie! Get out here!"*

"For the love of..." Edward shot the door a glare. "Not now, ye cockblocking piece of shite!" he shouted... just as I clenched my muscles around him, but I couldn't help it. It wasn't often his Irish accent came through. Just in a few curses, so this was... *uuungh*.

*"Edward,"* I moaned, letting my head fall back.

"That's it," he groaned back, gripping my hips. "Holy fuckin'... so good... wet..."

Knowing that it would drive him crazy, I slid one hand down to my pussy.

Two fingers circling my clit.

He groaned and gasped, and I watched as his abs tensed fiercely.

"Goddamn, beautiful..."

I sucked in a sharp breath, feeling everything stirring inside of me. I felt hot and flushed; my breathing was erratic, my movements were instinctual, and my sounds came out all needy, breathless, and loud.

"Close," he whimpered, making me whimper, too. His eyes were suddenly squeezed shut, and I felt how he tensed under me. The sight was so incredibly sexy. I did that to him. And it was his face, the one he had when he came, that made me fall apart, too.

The orgasm washed over me, pleasure coursing in both waves and sharp bolts. I shivered, though I only felt hotter and hotter. I couldn't even breathe. My walls fluttered around his throbbing cock, taking everything he spilled into me.

*Shit, shit, shit.*

*Breathe, breathe, breathe.*

Tall order.

"God, Bella," he groaned hoarsely, finally relaxing. I collapsed on top of him, burying my face where his neck met his shoulder. I was panting. He was, too. "Ever tell you that I love you?" he wheezed out through labored breaths. "Damn, I think I need to hit the fucking gym."

The chuckle I let out sounded all wrong. Strained and shit.

"And now you have to get up," I yawned through pants. Yep, that's right.

"I feel like an eighty year old who just ran a marathon." He shuddered and tightened his arms around me. "But give me twenty minutes, and I'll be ready again."

Bullshit.

He needed forty minutes, but that wasn't what I meant. "I mean you need to get outta bed, Whistler."

"Nuh-uh." I felt him shaking his head. "No way. I'm staying here with you."

I smiled and kissed his neck. How I loved my man.

"I made breakfast," I whispered.

Yeah, that woke him up. "Oh, yeah? What'd you make?"



I chuckled drowsily, placing my hands on his chest as I sat up. "Lots of stuff."

Not good enough for Irish boy. "Clarify, Isabella."

So, I ticked them off on my hands. "Pancakes, muffins, eggs, toast, coffee, juice--"

"Baby? You had me at 'breakfast', really."

Pshh. Like I didn't know that already.

\*O\*O\*O\*

Twenty minutes later, Whistler walked out of the bedroom – fresh from the shower – wearing the only pair of jeans he owned... and nothing else. Just a towel around his shoulders. *Yum*. And while he'd been in the shower, I had greeted Liam and the doc. I had also prepared a big plate of food for my limping husband. Pancakes were his favorite. That, I knew. But I had also plated a few pieces of bacon and some fruit. The man needed protein and vitamins. Honestly, I was glad that we were planning on staying in one place for a long time now, 'cause it was about time the boys enjoyed home-cooked meals.

"Well, well, if it ain't the loud feckin' cousin of mine," Liam laughed.

Edward smirked and flipped him off.

"Take a seat, baby," I told him as he approached me, and I got up from the couch. "I'll bring you your breakfast."

"What would I do without you?" he murmured, dropping a kiss on my forehead.

"Die," I replied flatly... before I winked.

The boys, even the doc, laughed.

But Whistler's eyes, they told me that he wouldn't make it without me.

I'd call him a drama queen if I didn't feel the same about him.

"Enough with the sappy shite, for the love of God," Liam groaned, and Edward gave me a last kiss before joining the guys.

On my way to the kitchen, I texted Rose, asking her what their plans were for today. I knew they would be here at some point, but I had no idea when. Then I grabbed the plate and a cup of coffee I had prepared for Edward before returning to the living room.

I wasn't all that surprised to see the doctor already working on Edward's leg. I had made sure it never got infected, but it still needed attention, and quickly.

"You okay, sweetie?" I asked, frowning when he cringed and cursed. He was taking up plenty of space on the couch, and the doc was squatting down on the floor. Currently, he was removing the bandage I had put on this morning after Whistler had fallen asleep.

He nodded, face adorably scrunched together in discomfort and pain, and I sat down on the edge of the couch with his food. Cutie pie could fend off Italians with guns – he could handle getting shot – but this... Now he was my whiny Irish boy. But I loved taking care of him, so I wasn't complaining.

"Maybe you should wait to eat until-"

"Fuck that," he mumbled, cutting me off. "Gimme food."

Right. How stupid of me to even try suggesting otherwise.

So, I handed him the plate, and he gave me a boyish grin upon seeing the mountain of pancakes. I seriously doubted he had eyes for the fruit.

"Can I have syrup, please?" he asked sweetly. "And powdered sugar? And raspberry jam? And chocolate sauce-"

"Okay, okay," I laughed, kissing him on the forehead. "I'll go get you sugar, sugar, sugar, and sugar."

I began to question myself about the whole healthy food thing. Would I ever be able to get a damn vegetable or fruit into his system?

With a sigh, I got up from the couch again and walked back to the kitchen.

When I once again returned, Whistler was about to thank me for the sugary goodness, but the doorbell interrupted, and I knew what it was.

"Your clothes are here," I sang, all but skipping to the door.

Talk about service. Then again, I did just spend nine thousand pounds on clothes for a small army. Fast delivery was to be expected, and the saleslady had told me as much.

"Clothes?" I heard Whistler mumble around a mouthful of food, but I was already out of the living room. "Aaargh, cocksuckin' fuck, that hurts, doc!"

I snickered and checked the peephole in the door – just to be sure.

Sure enough, three men and one woman stood there with loads of shopping bags and garment bags from Harvey Nichols. Just about to unlock the door, I was surprised to see a hand covering mine. I jumped back a little and saw Eric giving me a pointed look. Shit, I hadn't even heard him behind me.

"Sorry, Bella, but you're a known face," he reminded me and I sighed. "I will deal with deliveries."

Hmph.

Taking a step back – behind the door – I let Eric deal with it all.

It wasn't that I was a known face, really, at least not publicly, but we *were* taking precautions when it came to all the Cullens, the Masens, and Kellan. In other words, we weren't gonna show our faces unless it was necessary. For a while. No one knew we were in England, but that was what we wanted, and it would stay that way as long as we were careful.

"Holy fuck," Eric muttered, opening the door wider. "That's a lot of crap."

I resisted the urge to smack him silly.

That would totally give me away, so... yeah.

"Delivery for O'Reilly," a woman said.

I saw Eric rubbing the back of his neck. "Um, yeah. Just leave it all right there." He signed something and called out to James. "Cheers, we'll take it from here."

And fifteen minutes later, Eric and James had hauled everything from the hallway into the living room.

I stood there, in the middle of it all, grinning like a fool.

"So, princess..." Whistler cleared his throat, grimacing at something the doc did. Or maybe it was because of all the bags and stuff that filled a large part of the living room. "You've been shopping, I take it?"

"Oh, there's so much, Bella!" Autumn gasped, smiling widely.

She was excited. My kinda girl.

"It's for all of us, Edward," I chided. "I may enjoy some shopping, but I'm not insane."

He just shrugged and said, "Rose."

Which was all very true. Rose *was* insane in that department. Apparently, she had shopped a whole lot in Chicago.

"I'm not Rose," I pointed out.

And he huffed a chuckle. "Thank fuck for that." I cocked the bitch-brow, and he held up his hands in defense. "Don't give me that look, baby. I'm just saying that I married a fucking freak, and that's the girl I love." Uh... What? Was he complimenting me or dissing me? "You know what I mean, Bella," he groaned, frustrated. "You're cool, okay? You're a woman, but you're not some china doll. Rose is all..." He shrugged awkwardly. "She's all about shopping and... stuff."

That was rich. 'Cause up until my little trip to Aro's villa with Kellan, Edward treated me like a doll made out of glass. It wasn't until after that that I made him realize that I was fucking able.

And... stuff? Rose was all about shopping and "stuff".

Oh, Irish boy.

"I think ye should do yerself a favor and shut up, cuz," Liam advised wisely, solemnly.

"Irish boy number six is right," I agreed, stifling my amusement. Whistler was so cute when he was frustrated, and where I was concerned, he sometimes started rambling to get out the mess he was making. Not very successfully. "You're just digging yourself deeper and deeper. But I love you, too." I winked at him.

And he harrumphed and returned to devouring his pancakes.

"Yeah, uh, Irish boy number six, ye say?" Liam arched a brow at me.

I smiled cheekily. "Well, Edward's number one, of course."

"Oh course," Liam said sarcastically, though he was grinning. "And who's number two?"

"Emmett. Ya know, number two: shit. I think it fits him."

Edward, Liam, and Kellan cracked up at that.

*I know; I'm so fucking funny.*

"Fine, and who's number three, four, and five?" he continued.

"Eric, Kellan and Alec," I said. Like Edward and Emmett, Eric and Kellan didn't really have accents. There were a few words that came out differently and, of course, the curses... Nevertheless, they were still Irish. "Actually, Sam would probably be number six," I thought out loud. "Which would make you number seven, Liam." The only one who wasn't Irish was James. Aaanyway... "The clothes," I sighed, getting back to the topic at hand. "Baby, I ordered you three suits." I left out that they were from Gucci, Armani, and Prada, 'cause my husband couldn't care less about that. "Jeans, t-shirts, sweatshirts, cargo pants, button-downs, socks, wife-beaters, pajama bottoms, a few ties, toiletries, shoes, underwear--"

"Oh-ho!" Liam started laughing. "Ye got the missus buying ye the delicates!"

Good lord. It was impossible to be around these boys.

My phone vibrated then, so I allowed the guys to get the laughs out of their systems while I opened Rose's text.

**Em's talking to his crew in Chicago. He's gonna get them on a plane today. And I'm just chillin. Think we'll come over around dinner. What about you? – R.L.C.**

Huh. For some reason, I wasn't jealous. They were all alone and probably had time to enjoy the piece and quiet for a while together, but... I sorta loved the rowdiness that came with this gigantic family. They were all mad and loud, but I felt right at home in this mess.

**I'm babysitting countless goofs, and I'm exhausted, but it's all good ;) See ya later, babe – I.M.C.**

"Who're you texting, princess?" Edward asked, reaching for my hand.

I settled down next to him, pushing a few strands of hair from his forehead. He needed a haircut.

He hummed and closed his eyes.

"My lover," I responded, chuckling when his eyes flew open again. Christ, the dude couldn't even take a joke. "Naw, you're the only one for me, Whistler. You know that." He actually stuck his tongue out at me. "Mature. And it was Rose."

"All right," he yawned, getting comfortable with the pillows. "Could you bring me my smokes?"

He gave me the pout – a look he had mastered by now.

"For feck's sake," Eric chuckled, tossing him a pack of Davidoff's. "She's not your slave, you know."

"Shit," Edward muttered. His eyes were full of apprehension as they met my amused ones. He had nothing to fear. First of all, I loved taking care of him. Second of all, a doctor was currently treating a bullet wound in his

leg; he deserved to be spoiled. And third of all, it wasn't like Whistler didn't reciprocate. He did everything for me.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart-"

I didn't let Edward finish. "Don't," I told him, softly but firmly. "You take care of me all the time. Let me do the same for you."

Fucker rolled his eyes. "Like you don't already."

I shrugged. "Then it is how it's supposed to be. Now, shut up and smoke... or whatever." I kissed his cheek. "I have clothes to sort out." Standing up, I addressed the rest of the guys. "Where do you want me to put the clothes I bought for you?"

"My bed is okay," Eric replied, eyes on his laptop. "And thank you, Bella."

"I can hang it in your wardrobe," I offered. He needed to understand that I didn't mind. Sure, I was only eighteen, but I had spent my entire life – so far – taking care of someone who didn't appreciate it. Charlie had faked it all. Now I was enjoying this immensely. "And I'm sure Autumn's willing to help me."

"Yes, I can help!" Autumn grinned. "I'm a big girl; I can help."

My chest constricted, almost painfully, and it was all about that girl.

I had this need to keep us all together as a family, and I wanted the part where I could mother everyone.

Edward squeezed my thigh, making me look at him, and it was clear that he could read my mind at that moment.

"I love you," he mouthed.

"I love you, too," I whispered...



...and then he shouted out an impressive line of profanities as the doc cleaned out his wound.

So, I grabbed Autumn and a few bags before we headed to Whistler and my room.

During one of my trips to get more bags, I asked Edward what he wanted to wear today. I realized that keeping myself occupied with clothes and food kept me from thinking too much about the fact that my husband was going to kill Adam today. I was nervous, but thankfully not sad or conflicted. As long as my Whistler was okay – so to speak – with his decision, then I was fine.

“A suit,” he answered, and I knew he was going to become Edward Cullen.

He always was, yes, but here – with me and his crew – he was also Whistler and my Irish boy.

Adam wasn't a part of the crew anymore, though.

So, I left one of his new suits on our bed.

\*O\*O\*O\*

I had nothing to say, so I just hugged him harder, pressing a kiss against his chest.

He was wearing his black Armani suit, complete with a white dress shirt underneath, cufflinks, a black tie, and fancy shoes.

He looked a lot like the man who sat in my father's kitchen and requested a date with me. That was in August last year. So much had changed.

“It will be okay, princess,” he murmured against the top of my head.

I swallowed hard and nodded, but I didn't let him go. Not yet.

"How's your leg?" I whispered thickly.

The doctor had left an hour ago. Edward was stitched up and put in a brace that went over his knee. It prevented him from bending his knee, and he could therefore heal faster. He bitched about it, of course, but I told him to shut the fuck up and follow doctor's orders. And the doc had told him to wear the brace for four weeks. The only times he was allowed to take it off was when he showered.

"I'm fine, baby," he chuckled quietly, gently gripping my chin. He tilted my face up, making me look him in the eye. "You have nothing to worry about, all right? I have Liam's guys over there already, and Kellan's going with me."

I knew he was right.

"You have your gun?" I asked reluctantly.

He smirked a little. "You bet."

With a sigh, I leaned into his touch, dropping a kiss over his wedding band.

"Be safe."

"I promise," he told me softly. "We'll be back in a few hours."

### **Whistler's POV**

Upon our arrival in Canary Wharf, I shrug out of my suit jacket. I roll up the sleeves on my button-down. I tuck my gun into the waistband of my pants. I spark up a smoke. I loosen my tie. A hand goes through my hair.

Adam put my wife in danger. My family.

End of.

"Ready, boss?" Kellan asks, killing the engine.

I give him a swift nod before leaving the Rover. In front of me, I have the safehouse. Liam's boys – Chris and Mac – are inside, waiting for us.

"Let's get this over with," I mutter, flicking some ash onto the ground.

I punch in the code, and the door unlocks with a beep.

Inside, Mac and Chris greet us. They fill me in on the events of the night. Apparently, Adam's been quiet. Deathly quiet. That's fine by me.

As Mac leads Kellan and me down a narrow hallway, I bring out my Vertu, quickly finding the photo Dad sent me just an hour ago. The grainy photo of a very dead Siobhan. The photo I'm going to show Adam. The photo that will make sure he knows we're not fucking around.

"Want me to go in with you?" Kellan asks when we reach the room where Adam's tied to a chair.

"No, I've got it," I reply, taking a pull from my smoke. I give Mac a nod.  
"Open the door."

"Aye, sir," he replies, and soon it's just Adam and me in the small room.

He sits in the middle of the room, ropes securing him, and a simple light bulb flickering above him.

"How are ya, Adam?" I ask, grabbing a chair in the corner. He startles awake from his slumber, eyes snapping to me. I smirk. "Did you have a nice night?" I take the chair, placing it in front of him. Then I straddle it, ignoring the dull throbbing from my leg.

"What the fuck is going on?" he mutters, trying to roll his shoulders.

"Shit."

"Like you don't know." I shake my head at him. "You really thought we wouldn't find out?"

He stays silent, but his eyes narrow, and I sincerely hope he won't insult me by pretending to be innocent.

"I'm gonna offer you a deal," I lie, exhaling smoke through my nose. I rub my chin. "Tell us what you know about Aro... and tell us what you've told him about us..." I shrug. "And we'll let you live."

He sneers at me. "You think I'm stupid, Cullen?"

"Yeah, but what does that have to do with anything?"

"I'm not telling you shit," he chuckles bitterly. "You're gonna kill me, regardless."

At least he doesn't deny betraying us.

He knows his game is up.

"Did you act alone?" I ask, tilting my head. Something flashes in his eyes, and I can practically read his mind. I see relief, I see smugness. He doesn't think we've already taken out his mother.

"I gotta say I'm a little surprised," I muse, bringing out my Glock. With my forearms resting on the back of the chair, I hold the gun loosely in front of him. "The McKennas have worked with the Masens for a long time." It's all true. They have been on our side for years. Can it really be just money? Is it that easy to be bought? "So, what changed?"

He takes on a bored expression, and *that* pisses me off.

In a swift movement, I have the gun aimed at his knee.

"Wipe off that look," I warn.

Does he think I'm kidding here?

When he doesn't obey me, I pull the trigger.

"Aaargh!" He screams out, head tilted back. Curses follow, and he starts fighting against his restraints. "You fecking *shot* me!"

I rise from my chair, quickly kicking it away from me. I tower over him as he cries out in pain, and I use the gun to break his jaw.

"FUCK!" he screams.

"Let's try this again, shall we?" I suggest, gripping his hair. With a tug backward, I make him look up at me. "How much did your loyalty cost? What did Aro give you?"

I keep firing off questions.

"Do you know where Ed is?"

"What do you know about Renee Swan?"

"When did you start working for Avellino?"

"When did you tell Aro about where we were?"

Because that's fucking clear. Adam was the one who told Avellino about our villa. It's his fault that Seth is dead – that we never even got the chance to give Seth a place for his final rest. It's his fault that my wife had to fight Italians with a set of *fucking* throwing knives. *His* fault that Autumn was left alone, crying, as Eric helped Bella. His fault that we had to run. His fault that I was shot. He was the one who gave up all that information.

"Tell me what you know, you son of a bitch!" I shout in his face.

I punch him.

Repeatedly.

"Stop!" he chokes out when I press the gun to his shoulder. "I... I..." He coughs up blood. "I don't *know!*"

I pull the trigger.

While he screams and cries, I pace the room.

I drag a hand over my face.

I try to reel in the rage, the consuming fury.

My hand trembles when I light up a smoke.

Deep drag.

I rub my temples.

Was it really just money?

I exhale.

Walking over to Adam again, I try once more.

"How much did he pay you?" I ask, enunciating each word.

He whimpers. "Ten mil."

Ten million.

Ed pays him six million per year in active duty.

Same goes for Eric, Kellan, Cheney, James... most of them, really.

But Adam wanted more. Evidently.

Three deep drags later, I put out the cigarette on his arm. It sizzles.

"Did your mom get the same amount?" I ask, and his eyes widen. "Aye, ye stupid, ignorant cocksucker. Of-fucking-course we caught her, too!" I pull out my phone, shoving the image in his face. "There. Fucking proof. That money-hungry whore is dead and gone. Dad put a bullet in her head."

In my fit of rage, I break his nose.

I return to pacing. He can't form a motherfucking word right now, anyway.

Adam screams until his voice can't carry.

He's not going to talk.

I know it.

Back in his face one last time, I stare at him as he whimpers and sobs.

"You put my wife in danger," I say flatly, now aiming the gun at his head. Right there. His forehead. "You risked her life for ten mil. *Autumn's* life." And I'm raging again. "She's a seven-year-old girl!" I scream.

I don't want this life.

This isn't what I want for my family.

No killings, no violence.

I will do everything in my power to put a stop to it.

Starting by getting rid of Adam McKenna.

"Any last words?"

He says nothing.

So, I pull the trigger.

And Adam's gone.

\*O\*O\*O\*

"You go in first," I say, rubbing the back of my neck. "Make sure Autumn doesn't see me."

Kellan gives me a nod, and Mac follows him inside the flat.

It's not like I'm covered in blood, but my knuckles are, and my shirt is a little stained.

While I wait for Kellan to give me the all clear, I call Chris for an update.

He's getting rid of Adam's body.

*"I just have cleanup left,"* he informs me.

Just as I hang up the phone, Kellan returns and lets me know that Eric has taken Autumn to their room. Then I enter, and I'm barely inside before Bella throws herself at me. I cringe, not wanting her to see me this way, especially not with the blood on me, but she shushes me before I can even get a word out.

She just takes my hand and leads me toward our room. Once there, she removes my clothes while I simply watch her. I hope she knows I won't ever want this life for us. This isn't permanent. I want the rush of adrenaline; I want the chase. But I don't want to kill people. I may not regret what I've done here. Adam had it coming. I feel like he deserved it. There's no remorse, but it's nothing I want to keep doing.

"Shower, baby," she whispers, again taking my hand.

She joins me in the shower.



She washes me.

Kisses me.

And I wonder what the fuck I've done to deserve her support.

"I love you," she tells me quietly, softly, kissing my chest. I wrap my arms around her waist, shivering, fucking savoring. "I'm always here, okay?"

I nod dumbly. "Love you, too."

She's my life.

When we're done in the shower, she towels me dry and help me put back on the fucking brace for my knee. Then she leaves before returning with a black wife-beater and a pair of pajama bottoms in blue. And boxers. The woman buys me clothes. I can't really believe it. She got up early this morning – when she really needed her sleep – just to buy us all clothes. She's motherly.

"I love you," I mumble, cupping her face. "I love you so much."

"It's mutual, Whistler," she replies with a wink. And just like that, she lightens the tension. "Now, get some rest while I start preparing dinner. I'm feeding an army." She finishes with a little laugh.

Yeah, I've got nothing to say. She's just... fucking perfect.

"I should probably talk to Liam before, though," I sigh, following her out to our bedroom again.

"He's not here," Bella responds, holding up the covers for me. "He's in Camden, picking up Alec and Nessa." Oh, all right. "So, get in. I'll wake you up in a couple of hours."

\*O\*O\*O\*

"Edward."

Uh, that would be a no.

A giggle. "Edward." Sing-song voice. It's Autumn. "Bella told me to wake you up."

"Well, that was silly of her, wasn't it?" I grumble as I stretch. I crack one eye open, spotting Autumn next to me. Fucking cutie. "Why would she do such a thing, eh?"

"Because it's dinner!" she says excitedly.

My stomach approves. "Fine," I yawn, dragging a hand over my face. "Do you know what time it is, baby girl?"

"Um... It's... it's..."

I smile at her, watching how she tries to read the digital clock on my nightstand.

"It's seven and ten."

"Okay," I chuckle drowsily. "But I'm so tired, you know. Maybe you oughta carry me."

"I can't do that!" she laughs, slapping my arm playfully. "Silly Edward. But you can carry me!"

Oh, yeah? "How's that fair, Blue Eyes?" I wink at her. "I'm the one who just woke up. I'm so, so tired."

"Cause I'm little, and you're big," she replies matter-of-factly. "Now, *c'mon*."

So, that's how I end up giving Autumn a piggyback ride toward the living room.

`Cause she's little, and I'm big.

"Hey, baby," Bella greets me. She's setting the table in the adjoining dining room. "Did you have a good nap?"

I yawn again. "Very. Want some help?"

She shakes her head. "Nope, just sit down." Then a pointed look. "With your leg, you probably shouldn't carry Autumn around, by the way."

Yeah, yeah.

Anyway, I obey the missus and sit down in the living room, where most of my family is already gathered.

Emmett, Liam, Alec, Kellan, Eric...

"I'm gonna go help Bella, Ness, and Rose in the kitchen," Autumn announces before skipping off.

I turn to Eric, chuckling. "She all hopped up on sugar or something?"

`Cause if she is, I want some sugar, too. Gotta love candy.

"She's bored and restless," he drawls, zapping between the channels on the flat screen. Much like me, Eric's also sporting new comfy clothes. "I ordered a bunch of toys and shit for her earlier, though. Arriving tomorrow."

I nod, facing the TV, and it's quiet for a while.

We all have a lot to talk about, but that's what we're gonna do after dinner.

Not now.

Sometimes, you just gotta revel in the silence.

Though, it wouldn't be as fun around here if the flat wasn't filled with close ones. I'm pretty sure Bella feels the same. We love having the guys here, and our place has definitely turned into "headquarters", so to speak.

I fucking love that.

"Dinner, boys!" my wife calls out.

I fucking love that, too.

## **40 – LONDON IN MARCH**

**Beta'd by HollettLA.**

### **Whistler's POV**

"Whistler, I need to go out for a while," Bella says, appearing in the doorway to our bedroom. I shoot Autumn a wink before giving my wife my attention. "There are things we need before your parents arrive tomorrow."

Putting my guitar to the side, I sit up straighter on the bed. "What kind of things?"

Over the past few weeks, we've talked, planned, talked, and planned. My folks are arriving tomorrow so that we can move on to the next step. A shitload needs to get done before we start taking out Avellinos – a shitload needs to be bought, fixed, and organized. Bella and Rose have been in charge of shopping, 'cause...well, they're women. Even when it comes to technology and gear, they've taken care of it. As long as they have lists. Eric, particularly, has presented the ladies with extensive lists of what he needs.

"Well, since Carlisle and Esme are staying at a hotel, I figured they might need some necessities to make themselves feel more at home," Bella replies.

Damn, she's really thinking about everyone. Seriously, she's always one step ahead. Considerate, helpful, and going out of her way to get things done.

But... "The crew is at the shooting range with Liam," I tell her, which is more of a reminder since she already knows. And Eric's busy in his room, setting up a work station. That's why I'm watching Autumn. That's why I'm suffering. Okay, not really, but her own little kiddie guitar is purple, for fuck's sake. And has Hello Kitty on it!

"I won't be gone for more than an hour, baby," she tries to reason. "I'll just go down to Whiteleys." Right, the shopping centre on Queensway, which is only about five minutes away. "I promise to hurry and be careful."

I'm already shaking my head. "Sorry, princess. Can't allow it."

She knows this.

We're keeping a watchful eye on the media, and so far no one knows we're here but, to be safe, we try not to venture out unless it's important. Plus, if the Avellinos or the authorities knew where we were, I doubt they'd broadcast it on national television.

We go out often, of course, but rarely during the day, and definitely not to malls. But most importantly, the girls don't go out without bodyguards.

Fuckin' final.

"You know it's only temporary," I sigh, hating the fact that I can't even let my wife come and go as she pleases. But we need to stay low. "Just for a few more weeks, I swear."

It's already been a few weeks, and shit is getting tedious, but there's no other option. And by tedious, I mean mostly for Bella and Autumn. They're usually holed up in the flat during the day while the rest of us work, either here or in Camden. That also means this isn't the first argument I've had with my hellcat. Boredom leads to frustration...and so on and so on.

"Edward..."

"No," I say firmly. She can grimace, she can fight me, she can fucking cockblock me for all I care. I won't give in on this. Same goes for Emmett with Rose. We don't let them go out alone. It's just that simple. "You can either shop online, or you can wait 'til Kellan or James return."

She sighs and runs a hand through her hair. "But, *please*."

I lean back against the headboard, bringing the guitar back to my lap again. "Forget it, Isabella." I rarely dictate. Yeah, I'm the fucking husband; my word is law. But I don't agree with it. I want my wife to have her freedom, and Emmett and I – as well as most men in our organization – are much more liberal than other men from America. However, these times are different. I won't put my Bella in more danger than she's already in. So, if I have to forbid her to leave the flat, then I goddamn will.

"Edward-"

"I said no!" I snap. "You'll fuckin' listen to me. Are we clear?"

I will pay for it. I know. Her glare is proof of that.

"Why?" she grits out.

Had Autumn not been sitting next to me on the bed – with her purple fucking Hello Kitty guitar – Bella would be shouting and cursing by now.

We're different in that aspect, 'cause I can't just quit with the foul language.

Fucking sue me.

"Why aren't you allowed to go out? You *know* why," I seethe. "Or why should you listen to me? 'Cause I'm your fucking husband!" I yell.

She flinches at my tone but soon recovers. "Fine! Then why can't *you* come with me!"

"Because I have a goddamn conference call with Chicago in twenty minutes!"

With that, she flips me off before leaving the room.

Oh yeah, my sigh is heavy.

"Eric, watch the door!" I bark out. You never know with Bella.

"*I'm not fucking running, you bastard!*" Bella screams. "*Give me some goddamn credit!*"

And Autumn giggles.

She's used to this, as sad as that is.

"She'll be happy again soon, Eddie," she says confidently.

My head lolls to the side, her side, and I smile wryly. "Sure about that, Blue Eyes?"

I should probably go right ahead and order another gift for Bella. She's definitely not one you can buy with presents, but it doesn't hurt, either. As long as I don't get her flowers, jewelry, or chocolate. If I do, I will end up with her foot on my balls. Her threat. Hasn't happened yet – thank God – but I'm not stupid enough to tempt fate...or rather, take her promise as a joke.

Thank fuck we're leaving London for a while soon. I know shit will get better as soon as Bella doesn't feel like a prisoner, but until then...

Anyway, we're going to Dublin in just a week, so I do see an end to this strain.

Autumn nods. "She's just mad for a little bit."

\*O\*O\*O\*

"What do you mean, Dad?" I frown and adjust the headset.

He sighs, and on the computer screen, I can see the deep crease between his brows. *"It's just not safe, son. The authorities are watching my every fucking move. They're dead set on Chicago still being HQ. And they have our location mapped out."*

Fuck.

One of Dad's advisors pipes in. *"Carlisle is the main target here in Chicago, and ever since Elizabeth and Conn returned, the security has only increased."*

Dad nods in confirmation.

With both elbows on the dining room table, I palm my face, thinking, always thinking. *Shit*. We need to get them to Europe, and without the fucking feds following. But...hmm...with Dad stateside, and...Aunt Liz



rejoining them in Chicago, maybe the authorities believe something is going down soon – which is true, but certainly not in the States. However, the fact that the feds believe it...should be enough to pull off a dummy trail stunt.

After reaching for my smokes, I spark one up and lean forward in my seat. "All right, listen," I say, taking a drag. "Dad, you should change the code. Fuck Code Black. We have people all over the country, right?"

He leans forward, too. "Yeah?"

"Good." I nod at the plan forming in my head. "Call everyone in. Get their asses to Chicago. It'll make the feds believe they're right by sticking to what's happening there. And..." I exhale, "...with so many recognizable faces in the city, it should be easier for you to get out." Over a hundred people are involved in the Masen business, and many of them have been convicted for various crimes. The feds will be all over that shit. "Make them believe something is about to happen," I continue, and Eric joins me at the table. "The ones that are following you, let them see you around the city, and...take guards with you at all times. We want them to think we're upping our security. We want them to keep thinking that it's all going down in Chicago, definitely not in Europe."

Dad's clearly on board. "*I could probably fly your mother out earlier. Tanya and your cousins, too.*" I grimace and Dad chuckles. "Fucking Kate and Irina. *And then I'll leave with Garrett as soon as possible.*"

I nod pensively. "Go straight to Dublin. We'll meet up there instead of here. Less travel."

He nods firmly, but then a look of hesitation takes over. "*Son...I ask you because you're the one seeing Liam on a daily basis...*"

And I know what he's about to ask. "Fuck that," I spit out. "Conn's fine 'cause his hands were tied, but I swear to God, Dad...don't fly Aunt Liz out here."

Liam's on the warpath about how Liz neglected Alec and Nessa after Emmett's wedding, but that's not all. Aunt Liz should thank all that is holy for the fact that I don't hit women. Cub is fucking mine, and Liz was a shit poor mother to him when we went into Code Black. Not to mention what Emmett wouldn't mind doing to Liz for making Nessa cry.

"*She made a big mistake,*" Dad concedes, and I'm glad I can hear his anger. He agrees with me. Then again, he's also getting ready to plead her case. I just fucking know it. That's my dad. "*But are you saying I should keep her away from her own children? We're going to Dublin to celebrate the twins' birthday, after all.*"

"Doesn't fucking matter," I tell him, taking a final pull from my smoke before stubbing it out. "She fucked up. And if she wants to see Alec and Ness, it'll be their call. And..." I chuckle humorlessly and exhale smoke. "Speaking of calls, she hasn't even contacted 'her own children' – as you put it. She's called Liam a few times, and it's always ended in fights, but she hasn't tried to call 'her' twins."

Dad sighs. He knows I'm right. Liz has a shitload to make up for, and I sure as hell won't help her. My loyalty is with Alec and Nessa, and they're both angry with Liz. But worse than that, they feel betrayed. And who can fucking blame them?

"*Noted. I'll talk to your mother,*" Dad mutters, running a hand through his hair. "*So, anything else?*"

I shrug and watch as he dismisses the four men in his office. "Nope. Training continues. Liam's helping Em, we go to the range a lot, we stay

low, and Bella and I are researching the clubs Aro has in Europe. Eric, too."

He smirks. "*And how's Bella doing?*"

Oh, he *knows*. "Fuck you," I chuckle dryly. "Bella's called Ma, I take it."

"*She sure has,*" he admits with a wry grin. "*So has Rose.*"

Figures. "They want more to do," I admit. "But there's only so much you can do when you're locked up in a flat all day."

Okay, not really *locked up*, but almost. She can't leave whenever she wants. I've taken her out on a few dates, I've taken her sightseeing, and I even went all out on Valentine's Day and took her to a small inn outside the city, but it's a lot more than that. Besides, romance was never our issue. We're fucking solid and we always show our appreciation for one another, but when you can't even go out to the store, or take a goddamn walk in the park, there's bound to be trouble. I mean, when I took her out, she had me, and I'm always armed. And the times I've allowed her to go out without me, Kellan or James have been there.

"*Well, things will be easier in Ireland,*" Dad consoles, and I fucking hope he's right. "*And you know they're not really mad at you and Em.*"

I know. They're just frustrated with the situation. Can't blame them.

"*How's the leg?*" he asks next, and I scowl.

If people could just quit asking, that'd be swell. "Good as new." Almost, anyway. There's just a dull ache when I stand on it for too long. Say, three hours at the shooting range. Yeah. Other than that...fuckin' peachy.

"*All right,*" he chuckles. "*I'll let you go now. Call me before you leave for Dublin, eh?*"

"You bet."

After ending the call with Dad, I turn to an impatient-looking Eric. "What's up?" I ask.

He slides a stack of papers across the table to me before lighting up a smoke. "I ran a check on the names you and Bella found." Photos. They're photos. Men, clubs, warehouses, meet-ups... "And I had a couple of guys from Chicago send me what they knew." Motherfucking shit. Trafficking. "This is heavy, Cullen, and so fucking organized."

"Yeah, no shit," I mutter, running the pad of my thumb across my bottom lip. "What about locations?" I hold up a photo where I can see a street name on a building in the background, and since it says "strasse", which is the word for road or street, I figure it's in Germany.

"That one's from Berlin," he answers, and I nod slowly, studying the photos. "Aro's club in Berlin works as the gateway," he continues. "Sorta like East meets West."

I chuckle quietly without humor. "How fucking poetic of him." The club is his own little Berlin wall. "So, I guess whatever Aro brings in from Eastern Europe comes through here before continuing?"

"Pretty much." He nods once. "The club is the cover, as you know." Yeah, I do know. It's used to let money circulate. Money laundering is something we have experience in as Masens. Even Emmett and I know a little about it, though we've never done it for ourselves. Dad has, on the other hand. "That club in particular is also a literal *cover* for their trafficking business." I cock a brow at him. "They run their shit in the basement," he clarifies, and by the look on his face, I understand that it's as illegal as it can get. "That's where the girls are first brought."

"Do you know where they come from?" I ask, looking at a photo of three beat-up girls. Skinny, marked, trashy, malnourished, drugged...*young*. Since the photos are so detailed, I assume Eric's been talking to Richard – a man who used to work with Eric's brother. They were both stationed in Europe to keep track on the Avellinos, especially when Ed was expecting a shipment from here.

"The girls?"

I nod.

"Mostly from Ukraine, Russia, and Romania. Some are from Lithuania, too."

Huh. "Not Poland?" He shakes his head. "All right, well..." I release a breath. "I'd say we have a trip to Berlin to plan."

"Yeah, I figured you'd say that, so I printed out some shit for you," he says, sliding another stack of papers to me. "This was all I could find within our organization. If we want more, we need to start bribing."

"Too soon for that," I respond distractedly as I read a list of names. The list isn't long, understandably, but it's a start. "I don't want Aro breathing down my neck just yet, and that's bound to happen if we go outside of our own people."

Money can get you information, but definitely not loyalty.

"The club in Berlin..." I trail off, reading a few names on the list – names I recognize. "Ztano." Aro's head of security. "He's involved with this, too?"

"Afraid so," he sighs. "He's a bad motherfucker, let me tell you." He shakes his head. "The shit Richard told me, man..."

How *lovely*. "Is Rick still here in Europe?"

Eric's face tells me what I need to know, but he still replies. "Um, no. After Joe died, everyone was called back."

The last thing I want right now is Eric getting upset about his brother – Autumn's dad – so, I change the subject.

"If we eliminate Aro's men-in-charge in Berlin...that would cut him off from his suppliers, right?" At least, that's what it seems like. The list of names tells me that Aro values three of his clubs the most, judging by the number of people he has working there. Three clubs that may be more important, so to speak, maybe due to whatever passes through there. The establishment in Berlin, for instance, is where Aro's dealings in human trafficking begin. This makes that club vital for him. Then there's the club he has here in London. I don't know yet what's so special about it, but I intend to find out, 'cause he has over forty people working there, so it's gotta be big. Lastly, there's a club in Barcelona. Given the thought that the port in Barcelona is one of the largest in Europe, I can only guess that the club's location has to do with smuggling.

"When it comes to trafficking, yeah," Eric responds. "The drugs don't seem to come through there."

No, I would think not. "Maybe Barcelona," I muse quietly.

"That's probable. He does own a shipping company there."

Exactly. "I'll talk to Emmett about it." I know Bella won't mind going to Barcelona, at least. That thought makes me smile a little, I gotta say. Taking her places is fun for me. "So, where would you start?"

"I'd probably try to find out why the club here is so important," he says, and I agree. "It's also easier for me to get inside their systems from here." True. "However..."

Yeah, I know. "The security is fucking tight."

"Precisely."

"And our faces are too familiar," I finish with a heavy sigh.

After grabbing a few beers from the kitchen, we return to the dining room table. Smokes are lit up, feet are kicked up, and laptops are brought out. Thinking caps are on.

How the fuck are Bella and I going to scope shit out if we can't even get by the doormen?

"I have an idea."

That would be my wife.

Eric and I both turn our heads in the direction of the living room.

I can see that she's still pissed at me, but right now I'm too tired to fucking bother.

"We could use makeup," she continues, walking over to us. Eric looks pensive, but I can only offer skepticism. *Makeup?* I think I let out a snort. "You know...um, to disguise." She suddenly looks a lot less confident, and I have to say the look doesn't become her. She's my fucking hellcat, but right now she's nowhere to be found. Sitting down at the table, she goes on quietly, almost fucking apprehensively. "I started practicing right after we left Chicago, and...um, there's a lot that could be...done." My eyebrows rise slowly. "I even bought a few things, or...uh, many things," she lets out a nervous chuckle, "and I could always...I dunno...show you what I can do?"

I just sit there, rather fucking dumbly, and stare at her.

Yeah, sure, I've seen the books she's talking about, and I swear that the *gigantic* hardcase in our bedroom is absolutely *packed* with makeup.

But so what?

Sorry, but I doubt some eyeliner and lipstick will get us far.

Now, I ain't fucking stupid. I know of disguising. Wigs, contacts, facial hair, stuff you put on your face to get a different skin tone...what-the-fuck-ever. I just don't think it's enough.

"I think you're on to something, Bella," Eric suddenly says, and I give him an incredulous look, at which he continues. "What? I'm just saying we shouldn't fuckin' dismiss it." He faces Bella again. "Do your thing, *Cullen*, and we'll talk more, all right?"

And my wife gives him a small, but still bright, smile and stands up. "Thank you for giving me a shot, Eric," she says quietly, refusing to look at me. Then she leaves the dining area and heads toward our bedroom.

*"Edward."*

"Huh?" I utter, turning back to Eric. He's glaring at me. "*What?*"

"Way to be supportive, man," he says dryly. "You looked at her as if she'd gone insane."

*Oh. Well... "Has she?"*

I'm honestly not trying to be a prick here, but...c'mon...*makeup?*

*Really?*

"Oh, man, if you weren't my boss..." He shakes his head and I give him a warning look. "Hey, I'm just speaking my mind here. Don't underestimate her."

"I don't!" I say defensively. "But this isn't some fashion show."



"Haven't you ever seen a goddamn movie?" he asks rhetorically, and I want to roll my eyes. Of course I've seen a fucking movie. "The shit they can do with makeup..."

"They're *professionals*," I point out.

He just shrugs. "You guys left Chicago in January. It's March now. And think about it. All those hours, *days*...of boredom, nothing to do... First in Rome, then here. Bella knows her shit."

Now I really do roll my eyes. "Whatever." I sure as hell have faith in my wife, and so far, there's nothing she hasn't excelled in. Well, apart from handling guns. But she's lethal with her blades, which more than makes up for it. This whole makeup thing, though... No matter how many hours or days she's practiced...the risk is too great. The two of us will literally be alone in the middle of Avellino territory as soon as we enter one of his clubs. We need more than fuckin' makeup.

Am I right or am I right?

Granted, I coulda been nicer about it, and I will apologize for it. I definitely don't want her to feel inferior, which I mistakenly did...probably. That shit's not right, 'cause I want her to voice her opinions and such. She's not just my wife – she's part of the crew. So, yeah, I fucked up a little there, but I'll fix it.

"You do realize you made her feel like crap, right?"

I sigh and scrub my hands over my face. "Yeah, I fucking know," I admit, groaning. God, we really need a change of scenery. And if I need it – the fucker who's actually spent eight months in *prison* – I can only imagine how desperate Bella's getting. "I'll make it up to her."

"Heh. Make...up."

I cast him an are-you-fucking-stupid look.

He laughs.

And then we return to planning for a while.

`Cause...*again*...I'm not stupid. Tracking Bella down now to apologize won't do me any good. She needs to calm down first.

A few hours or so later, we find ourselves in the kitchen, 'cause we're starving. Apparently, Bella's not going to cook tonight. That's fine, really, sorta, in a way, kinda, not really, no. She's a fucking chef, I'm telling ya, and she's been spoiling us every single day with home-cooked meals.

"This is your fault," Eric huffs, looking for takeout menus. "Instead of her food, we'll have a fucking pizza. How does that make you *feel*, Cullen?"

"Oh, lay on the guilt," I mutter sarcastically.

"I'm *trying*. Does it work?"

Yes. "Pshh. Never."

Honestly, I'm a bit worried. She's been locked up in our room for hours now.

I hate it when we argue. Makes me feel all...out of sorts...and shit. My chest's acting all weird, constricting and tugging. And I know my princess is the reason. After all, I don't call her my life for nothin'. *Man*.

All of that – absolutely every little thing – is pushed aside, though, when we hear a bloodcurdling scream coming from one of the bedrooms.

*Autumn*. Eric and I both look at each other before we act on autopilot.

With our guns drawn, we run out of the kitchen, past the living room, and down the hall. A terrified-looking Bella rushes out of our bedroom just as

Eric and I reach it, causing me to run smack into her. But I steady her quickly, and then we continue to Eric's and Autumn's room.

When I push the door open, I freeze in fear and shock.

Autumn's on the floor. She's crying...sobbing.

There's blood.

*Everywhere.*

## **41 – LONDON IN MARCH**

**Beta'd by HollettLA**

**Whistler's POV**

There's blood.

*Everywhere.*

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So, this is what a heart attack feels like.

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.

"I'm-I'm s-sorry!" Autumn sobs as Bella pushes past me in the doorway.

I see the cuts and scrapes all over her little body.

And the blood...pooling...

"Shh, shh, it's okay, baby girl," I hear Bella say soothingly. She kneels in front of Autumn, who is crying so hard, but I can't fucking move. "Don't cry...it's all right..."

How the *fuck* is this "all right"?

I suck in a sharp breath when I spot the gash along Autumn's neck, and that's when Eric unfreezes behind me to help Bella. It sorta wakes me up, too, and I rush forward, tucking my gun in the waistband of my jeans.

"Let me take her," Eric says quietly, picking Autumn up with ease. "The shower?"

The *what*?

How about a goddamn hospital?!

"Yeah, I'll follow," Bella responds, and then she continues comforting a sobbing Autumn. "Please, it's okay. You don't have to cry. You did nothing wrong."

"It just b-broke!" she wails. "S-sorry!"

I'm confused as hell, but I finally manage to get my mouth to work as they walk toward the bathroom. "What the fuck are you *doing*?"

Bella looks at me over her shoulder and frowns. "We need to wash away the blood, of course." She says it like it's obvious. "By the way, you look like you've seen a ghost." And with that said, she follows Eric into the ensuite bathroom.

"What the hell just happened?" I whisper to myself.

Still feeling adrenaline pumping, still feeling frantic, still worried as fuck...my eyes scan the room.

My brain starts working out the...wait.

All that fucking blood. Splattered, pooling...

It's too much. Literally, there's too much blood.

That's when my eyes land on a plastic bag on the floor.

I walk over to it, picking it up with two fingers. Blood drips from it as I read the label.

"500 ml... Stage FX... Blood: shade 3... Kryolan," I mutter under my breath, "...suited for abdominal wounds for its dark coloring..."

I can't fucking believe it.

It's Bella's makeup.

Again, my eyes scan the room, only this time to find more traces of Bella's work. Her fucking hardcase of makeup in right there on Eric's bed. I walk over to it, spotting two more bags of fake blood. One in a lighter shade...for "cuts, scrapes" and so on...as it says. And I'm still in disbelief. If it's all fake, then why the hell is Autumn crying?

Did she...oh, fuck. "*Bella!*" I shout.

Anger surges through me.

"Yeah?" she replies, appearing in the doorway to the bathroom. I sneer at the bloodied towel in her hands. "What is it?"

I grit my teeth and hold up the empty bag. "Did you set this up?"

Was it some goddamn revenge for my lack of support earlier?

"What?" She frowns. "Set what up?"

"This!" I wave a hand at the bloodstained floor. "Did you want me to have a fucking heart attack? Is that it?" I seethe. "Do you have any idea what the fuck you caused when I came in here to see Autumn in a pool of blood, screaming bloody motherfucking murder?"

She stares at me blankly, only fueling my rage.

"You don't fucking joke about this, Isabella!" I scream.

I get that she's pissed, I really do, 'cause I should've supported her earlier in the dining room. I should've given her a shot like Eric did. I should've trusted her. *But...*the pressure we live under, the conditions, the life we lead...seeing someone in a pool of blood is goddamn cruel. Family is *everything* to me. It's what I fucking live for, and my three closest ones are Bella, Cub, and Autumn. The mere thought of seeing *blood* on them...

"You're un-fucking-believable, you know that?" she says flatly. "And I gotta say, your lack of faith in me is more than a little insulting."

I glare at her. "You're actually denying setting this up as some sick fucking revenge? Then why the *fuck* is Autumn crying?!" I yell.

"Because she got scared, you bastard!" she yells back. "I was in our room to grab a few things, and she accidently broke the bag! It was a goddamn accident, Edward!" Yeah, Bella's mad. Like really fucking fuming. "Imagine being seven years old and having a bag of blood explode all over you!"

Oh...

"It gave her a fucking shock, that's all," she whispers harshly, glaring daggers at me. "And, Edward, if I wanted to set you up, I wouldn't leave my fucking makeup case on the bed. Or do you really think I'm *that*

stupid?" She scoffs and shakes her head. "Who am I kidding? Of *course* you think I'm that stupid. You *fucking* asshole."

I flinch.

"You can sleep on the fucking couch tonight," she adds in a dead voice before disappearing into the bathroom again.

Fuck.

Like I hadn't already earned my spot in the dog house before this.

"Christ, I really am a screw-up," I mutter to myself, walking out of the room.

\*O\*O\*O\*

Bella's good. Painfully good. I wonder if by marrying me, she became a Catholic or something, 'cause she's the master of laying on the guilt.

Three days go by. Three nights where I sleep on the couch. Three days where she keeps acting like the perfect hostess. She cooks and cleans, she takes care of everyone, she plans for our departure to Dublin, she...

I sigh.

She's just there.

Sweet smiles to everyone but me.

The day before yesterday when Liam, Emmett, and I sat in the dining room making plans and talking about our progress, Bella came in with freshly baked cookies and homemade lemonade. When James and I – a few hours later – went through what we need when it comes to weapons, Bella served us homemade potato chips and cold beers. Yesterday, when I

had another conference call with Dad, my wife provided us with snacks and sodas.

She makes sure the fridge is always stocked with our favorites. Everything is homemade, from mini-pizzas as snacks...to big dinners that cover the entire dining room table. I never have to look for my smokes, 'cause she appears out of nowhere whenever I pat my pockets for them.

She entertains the children. She makes them laugh and enjoy their time.

But the worst came this morning when my crew sat down to talk about our upcoming visit to Aro's club here in London. It was me, Bella, Eric, Kellan, James, and Sam. And...*Jesus fucking Christ*...her comments pretty much sliced through me.

*"Oh, I don't know, Eric. Maybe it's best you plan that, 'cause I don't know very much."*

*"Hmm, sounds good to me, Sam, but what do I know? I'm just me."*

*"I like that idea, but what do you think, Edward? You know best, after all."*

So, yeah...Bella Cullen is very aware of the concept of Catholic guilt.

Doesn't help that everyone has taken her side.

They're rightfully taking her side, of course, but still. Woulda been nice to have *someone* on my side. 'Cause as it is, Autumn is the only diplomat, but I can't exactly ask her how I can get back in Bella's good graces. Actually, that's bullshit, 'cause I already tried asking Autumn. Desperate times and all that.

Then my fucking brother, the traitor...he's also on Team Bella, but that's just 'cause he's a pussy for Rose. So, he's out. They all are. Hell, even Cub.



Bella hasn't called me Whistler or Irish boy in three days, and I'm ready to just off myself and be done with it.

But what the fuck can I do?

I've tried apologizing. I've fucking stalked her sexy ass through the flat for three days, begging for forgiveness.

Nothing works.

I think she's trying to kill me. And lemme tell ya, my friends, she's doing a fine fucking job at it.

\*O\*O\*O\*

"Hey, boss!" Eric calls from...somewhere. "Carlisle's on the phone for ya!"

All right. I sigh tiredly and drag my ass outta bed. It smells like my wife, and since I'm not allowed to sleep in it at night, I take the chance to nap in it while Bella's out with Kellan, which she is now. This time it's to buy birthday gifts for Alec and Nessa.

*God, I fucking miss her.*

Another sigh escapes me, and I pull on a pair of jeans and a black beater before trudging to the dining room where I take all business-related calls.

Eric gives me a half smirk when I emerge, and he doesn't have to say shit. I know I look like hell.

"Cheers," I mutter, taking the phone from him. I slump down in a seat, reaching for the smokes and greet Dad. "What's up, old man?" I spark up the smoke, taking a deep drag as I kick my bare feet up on the table. Eric just snickers and returns his gaze to his laptop. Fucker.

"Hello, son," Dad chuckles. "How's the groveling going?"

Oh, yeah. They all know of my fuck-up.

They all think it's so fucking funny. Most of all, Liam.

"Like shit," I reply bluntly. "She only talks to me about work."

I exhale smoke through my nose and rub a hand over my chest.

"I see," he responds, laughing quietly. "*Well, give her time, son.*"

"Aye," I mutter. "What choice do I have? Anyway, is that all?"

If there's one thing I know about Dad, it's that Mom is always nearby, and I really don't wanna talk to her. See, two days ago, Bella used Kellan and James to work her magic. Ya know, makeup. And fuckin' hell, she's got skill. She used something called, um...collodium? Collodion? Colidium? Whatever. It was *some* fucking chemical, and this huge fucking scar appeared on James' face. She worked with a bunch of shit and, in the end, I could barely recognize either of my men. Then, and this is laughable in that non-humorous way, she sent photos of them to Mom and Aunt T. Now everyone knows that Bella is more than able to disguise us well. Which Mom loves to point out to me.

*"...so, you need to leave now-"*

Shit, what did I miss? "Back up, Dad," I say, cutting him off. I sit up straighter and take a pull from my cigarette. "What did you say?"

"Yeah, I know it's a couple of days too early," he sighs. "But it was the only window of opportunity I had, so..."

"So...?" I prod.

*"So, your mom is already on her way to Dublin. Tanya and your cousins, too."*

Oh.

\*O\*O\*O\*

By the time Bella comes back with Kellan, Eric and I have already packed up all our computers and other gadgets. Well, except for one laptop, but that's it.

"We goin' somewhere, boss?" Kellan asks when I meet them in the hallway. "I noticed the SUVs on the street."

I crack a smile when I see all the bags from Bella's shopping trip. "Yeah," I respond quietly, clearing my throat. I look at Bella, who is apparently finding the floor very intriguing. "Dublin." At that, she looks up. "Change of plans. Mom, Aunt T, Kate, and Irina are already on their way, so we're leaving tomorrow morning." Bella nods and breaks our gaze again, and I slump my shoulders, turning to Kellan. "I spoke to Liam. He's taking the twins and his crew there tonight already."

"Emmett and his guys?" he inquires.

"They're leaving tomorrow night," I say, and I gotta stick my hands in my pockets before I reach out for my wife. Fuck, this is like a goddamn separation, I swear. Fucking killing me. "Anyway, James and Sam will take one car, and you will go with Eric and Autumn." Bella stiffens at that, which pains me. I really hurt her with the way I acted. Otherwise, she wouldn't do this now. So, I push down what I feel and add, "Um, you can go with them, princess...if you want..." I want to forbid her to go with anyone but me. I want to. But I won't. If she doesn't wanna be in the same car as me, I'm not gonna force her.

"All right, you two are killing me with this feckin' awkwardness," Kellan says gruffly. "I'll leave the bags in your room, Bella." And then he's gone, leaving the two awkward people behind.

I look at her.

I rub the back of my neck.

I hesitate, which...well, that's just not who I am. I'm not a fucking hesitator.

I huff. "This is ridiculous, baby." Her eyes snap to mine, and I see anger there. "Not what you're doing," I rush to add, though I *am* pretty goddamn sick of being ignored. But I get it. I deserve it. "I just..." I swallow. "I miss you," I admit quietly, and her eyes soften a little. "I'm so fucking sorry, princess. I know that I hurt you. I know that I've acted like a total ass."

She cracks a small smile. Very small. "*Total ass.*"

The left corner of my mouth quirks up a little, but I remain serious. "I'm sorry," I repeat.

"Yeah," she sighs. The tiny smile is still there. It's rueful. "I'm beginning to see that."

I breathe out.

"I need to start dinner," she murmurs. "And then I guess I have some packing to do."

I don't want her to leave now that she's actually talking to me, but I don't want to push my luck, either.

So, I give her a reluctant nod. "I'll be in the dining room with Eric."

She gives me a small "okay" before disappearing, and I drag my ass into the dining room. Eric is, of course, smirking when I get there.

"She's so fucking perfect for you, boss."

I throw him a frustrated look. "Eavesdropping isn't nice."

That's the best I could come up with?

Fuck me sideways and call me Santa.

Eric laughs. "I'm not even gonna dignify that with a response."

And I press my lips together, keeping the "you just did respond" bottled up inside of me. After all, I'm almost twenty-five. Not seven and three quarters. Yeah, I counted quarters when I was a kid. Fucking sue me. At least I didn't play "I'm not tooouuuching yooooou", like Emmett did. He really did. Annoyed the shit outta me.

"Let's just get this over with, shall we?" I grunt, taking a seat at the head of the table. "I'll go over each point, and you give me the run-down."

He nods, opening up the only laptop he has that isn't packed.

"Okay, we'll be back in London by April first, except for Liam," I say, and Eric nods again, confirming. "Go over his plan first."

"Got it," he replies, tapping away on the keys as he speaks. "Liam and his crew of fourteen will go straight from Dublin to Tuscany. They're going after the inner circle, but will start with any information they can get their hands on in Avellino's main residence."

"And they will work closely with Dad," I add, knowing that we're done with Liam's part now.

"Exactly." He nods with a dip of his chin. "Carlisle and his team are heading to Cerveteri first. Their first priority is trying to find out where Ed can be. I have faxed all the lists Bella found to your dad, so they will start there. Clues about the names – last-known whereabouts...shit like that. They will also try to figure out the link between Aro and Bella's mother.

Oh, and if it really is Sam's dad on that list. And with Aro's four villas around Rome, there's plenty to go through."

"Good. Emmett next."

More clicking. "After going back and forth," he pauses and chuckles, which I sorta do, too. There's been a *lot* of going back and forth. "Your brother and his crew are going to Barcelona to check out Aro's club there."

I'm still not convinced, but I trust my brother. He thinks Avellino uses the port in Barcelona as his gateway to Europe when it comes to firearms. He may be right, but my first guess would be Croatia. Why? Because a few days ago we discovered another Avellino-owned club there, and...it's just a gut instinct.

Anyway...

"That leaves us," Eric continues, and I nod for him to go on. "You and Bella are gonna visit the club here in London as soon as we get back, and then we're off to Berlin after that." He pauses to light up a smoke and then slides the pack across the table to me. I follow suit, sparking one up. "At both locations, you will have Kellan and Sam close by. And Kellan's team is on standby."

"Make reservations for them at the hotel across the street from the club here in London," I decide. "I want them close."

"Understood." He's quietly typing for a while before continuing. "All right, what else..." He rubs his jaw. "Right, James will be on the lookout for exits and escape routes." I nod slowly, always thinking. Even when everything is done, which it is now – the planning, at least – we're still thinking about alternatives and better options. "And I will be in a van, as decided, with my equipment. Which reminds me, we gotta talk to Garrett and Ben about

new earpieces in Dublin. Emmett, Rose, and Bella destroyed theirs after the Maserati gig.”

“Okay.” I exhale some smoke toward the ceiling. “That just leaves the kids and the women.”

Not counting Bella and Rose, of course. They’re in our crews. But Mom, Aunt T, Kate and Irina, Nessa, Alec, Autumn...even Ben’s wife and kids...they’re certainly not “working”.

“Angela and her sons are staying in Chicago, where Kate and Irina will return after Dublin,” Eric answers. “Esme and Tanya are heading to Seattle, I think. And I heard Liam saying that Nessa wants to go with them, too.”

“That’s good,” I say firmly and flick some ash into an empty soda can on the table. “That should give Ness the possibility of returning to school.” I figure Mom will homeschool her from Bainbridge, sorta like she homeschooled both Ness and Cub in Forks last year. “What about Alec and Autumn?”

“Both staying with us here.”

That’s what I wanted to hear.

Call me stupid and selfish for wanting them where shit will hit the fan, but I don’t trust many with their safety. Besides, there will be a lot more danger in Italy than here, so I’m glad Cub’s not going with his brother.

Bella enters the dining room then, asking if it’s okay to set the table or if we need more time, but we’re done. Eric packs up, and I go and give James and Sam a call about dinner being almost ready.

\*O\*O\*O\*

"Damn, you've outdone yourself, Bella," James groans, reaching for another steak. I follow suit, 'cause he's right. The food is fucking delicious.

I moan and add more potato wedges to my plate, too. Oh, and more béarnaise sauce. "Sweet mother of fucki-"

"*Ahem,*" Bella utters, cutting me off. I give her the I'm-innocent-so-what-the-hell-could-I-have-done-wrong look. Yeah, I have one of those looks. True story. "Little ears at the table," she reminds me with the mama-bear brow cocked.

My eyes move from Bella to Autumn, who is seated between the two of us, and then back at my wife.

"Eddie cusses all the time," Autumn says, too smart for her own good since she obviously picked up on what Bella was referring to. She's also very dismissive about my language, so I don't see what the problem is, either. "Jamie, Kellan, Sammie, and Uncle Eric cuss, too. *Aaall* the time." Exactly. I mean...yeah. *What?* "And you only sometimes, Bella."

"I know," Bella responds softly, "but I was sorta hoping we could watch our mouths at the dinner table, at least." She gives us men a pleading look – the look we all fucking melt to. "Please?"

Dammit, woman.

I fold first, being the pussy that I am. "You're right, princess."

Gotta get my ass back in her good graces.

Eric's next, looking just as bashful as the rest of us. "Sorry. I'll try."

And Sam. "I'll do better. I fu- I swear." Sheepish smile.

I swear, Bella has us all wrapped around her finger.



It's not funny.

It's *not*.

Then Kellan. "No more 'fuck' or 'goddamn' at the table." I groan, and Bella throws him an are-you-stupid look. She has a few of those looks, all equally effective. "Shit, sorry. I mean..." He sighs. I stifle my amusement, doing a piss-poor job at it. "Sorry."

Autumn giggles.

"God, you're fucking stupid, Ford," James chuckles at Kellan...before he realized what he just said. "Sorry!"

Bella bangs her head against the table. "I give up."

Autumn loses it and starts laughing so hard.

Without thinking about it, I reach over and place my hand over Bella's, but then I freeze. For all I know, she's still pissed at me. The tension has been a shitload lighter since she got back with Kellan, but she has by no means forgiven me.

"Sorry," I mutter, drawing back my hand.

"Oh, for fuck's sake!" she cries out.

"Language, Bella!" Kellan, Eric, and James bellow.

Autumn laughs harder.

I'm confused.

Admittedly, a bit scared, too.

"Ah, shut it," she huffs, and then she's off her seat. Sorta wide-eyed, I stare as she walks over to me, and...is she gonna whack me in the head or

something? Fuck, maybe I should cover my nuts. "Don't look so scared," she tells me, frustrated. "I forgive you, okay?" Shit, really? "Scoot back your chair." I fucking obey. And she plops down on my lap, arms going around my shoulders. I should probably breathe. "I forgive you," she repeats softly.

I swallow. "Yeah?"

She smiles. "Yeah. You've suffered enough."

"I'm really sorry for hurting you," I say quietly, ignoring the snickering assholes behind Bella.

"I know." She leans forward. "Now, tell me you love me."

I grin, so fucking relieved. "I love you." A few inches closer. "I love you."

Then I kiss her.

Home, my friends. Home, sweet fucking home.

In the background the guys chuckle and give out several shouts of "finally!" and "at last!"

And Autumn makes kissing noises through giggles.

"Maybe Edward won't act like he's on his period now," I hear Kellan say.

I flip them off behind Bella's back and deepen our kiss.

\*O\*O\*O\*

Hovering over her, I support myself on the bed with one hand.

One soft kiss on her lips.

"I love you," I whisper, feeling her lips curve into a smile. "I love you so much, princess."

She hums and weaves her fingers through my hair. "I love you, too, Whistler."

Finally. I'm Whistler again. Only took three days.

With a final kiss on her lips, I kiss my way down her chest, taking my time. My free hand caresses her side. Up her ribcage, slowly, slowly, slowly until I cup her breast. The kissing continues. Wetly, hotly. I pause at her tits, giving them plenty of attention before I move down again.

"Edward," she whimpers quietly. Her hands still in my hair, she tries to guide me to where she wants me.

The tip of my tongue darts out when I reach her hipbone. I smile. I inhale. "I can smell you, baby," I murmur, kissing further down. A husky chuckle escapes me when she squirms a little. "Don't worry. No more teasing." And I mean that. I reach her pussy and give her slit open-mouthed kisses, letting my tongue dip between her wet folds. "Mmm...fuck, Bella..."

"Oh, shit," she breathes out.

If I wasn't already hard as rock, the first taste of her pussy on my tongue would do the trick in a heartbeat.

"I've feckin' missed your sweet pussy," I mumble against her clit. My tongue swipes over it, which makes her moan and arch her back. Spectacular view, I gotta say. Her pussy is right here, and when I look up, I have a lovely fucking view of her pushed-out tits. I groan as she starts playing with her constricted nipples. "Tell me when you're close, princess," I command quietly. As much as I want her arousal down my throat, I'd much rather feel her coming on my cock. Twice.

"Fuck," she moans. "Yes, oh...yes, Edward..."

Pushing two fingers inside of her, I bring her closer. My tongue laps along the length of her sex, and my lips get coated in her juices. Another moan from me right there. Fuck, she's really goddamn wet. I hum and groan, licking her harder. I twist and curl my fingers inside of her, I suck on her clit, I kiss, I whisper dirty words.

"Oh!" she gasps, thighs tensing. That's my cue. "I'm...I'm..."

*Close.*

I stop, and she cries out in protest. But don't worry, love. "Get on all fours, princess," I tell her gruffly, dragging a hand over my chin. It's not about fucking, though her first orgasm won't come from sweet and tender. In one way or another, it's still lovemaking. And this is gonna be hard and fast. Only her first, but I know how much she loves it when I take her from behind. And what she wants...

You won't find me complaining.

"Please, baby," she mewls.

I smirk and grab her hips. "Elbows on the mattress."

She obliges with needy moan, and once she's in position, I guide my cock to her soaked entrance. Then, with both hands back on her hips, I push myself inside of her in one firm thrust.

"Fuck, Edward!"

"Oh, Jesus fucking Christ," I exhale harshly.

So slick, so warm, so soft, so tight.

My chest heaves as I force air into my lungs.

Somehow, I manage to get myself under control, and then I focus on bringing her back to the edge. My thrusts are deep and swift, and one hand moves to her clit while the other reaches farther to tease her nipples. Swiveling my hips when I'm buried to the hilt, I make her gasp. Mid-gasp, I pinch her nipple gently and rub her clit a little harder, and here comes the clenching.

*Jesus.*

The first orgasm takes over just as I slam in again.

I grit my teeth, holding back as she rides out her climax.

"Oh, God," she cries out breathlessly, dropping her forehead to the mattress. "Oh, God." Panting.

"We're not done," I say, a bit out of breath, and pull out of her. "Flip over, baby."

She lets out a breathless little whine, body trembling as she turns and falls back on the bed. "Killin' me, Whistler," she breathes out, and I lean forward and wrap her legs around me. I capture her mouth with mine, I push my cock back inside of her, I swallow her gasps, I set a steady pace.

"I love you," I moan quietly. I kiss her cheeks. "My wife." I kiss her on the forehead. "My princess." Her mouth. "My life."

"I love you," she cries. "Oh fuck, Whistler..."

Our kiss is greedy, wet and hot. Breaths exchanged, forehead against forehead. I move faster, feeling my insides coil in anticipation. I think she feels the same, as I feel her urgency. Her heels dig into my ass, spurring me on. She fists my hair, refusing to slow our kiss down. As if I'd want that. And she's wetter...God, she's so fucking wet. I can hear her whenever I slide my cock inside of her. Hips meeting hips. Grinding. We

start panting into each other's mouth, but it only triggers us to move faster, a bit harder. Lifting her hips with each thrust, she even takes me deeper.

"I'm there, Bella," I grit out, dropping my forehead to her shoulder. My lips touch her collarbone, and with every labored breath I exhale against her skin, she releases a small tremor. "Fuck, you're so stunning." Sliding a hand between our slick bodies, I start circling her clit again. "And I really need you to come on me, princess."

At last, I feel her tightening around me. Her breathing hitches, and she fucking claws my back. I let out a snarl, feeling the pleasure shoot through me as I allow my body to take over. I start pounding into her, encouraged by her moans and cries. And I feel her climaxing rather than hear it, 'cause my own orgasm takes over at the same time. The way her pussy clenches down on my cock...indescribable motherfucking feeling. I pulse in her, moving lazily and instinctively as I spill into her in several streams.

"Goddammit," I pant against her shoulder.

I can feel her heart beating rapidly.

The arm supporting my weight starts trembling, so I slip out of her and collapse onto my back.

"You okay?" I breathe out.

She hums in affirmative. "Understatement," she adds, still breathless.

"Now, come back to me." She reaches for me, and I force my spent body to cooperate. It's so worth it when I manage to lift my head and see her face. Fucking beautiful. "I love you, sweetie. So much."

I smile and kiss her on the lips. "Love you, too."

Reaching behind me, I grab the covers and pull them over our bodies. And I'm a happy fucking camper when she guides my head to her chest. Even more so when she starts dragging her fingernails along my scalp. That shit's just pure golden. I shiver and hum, getting comfortable on the best pillow in the world. I'm tellin' ya...her boobs... I mean tits. Breasts. Not boobs. I'm not a kid. Ah, what-the-fuck-ever.

I yawn and hold her tightly, feeling completely relaxed and at ease for the first time in three days.

"Mmm, feels amazin'," I mumble sleepily.

"Sleep, baby," she whispers.

Yeah, okay.

## **42 – DUBLIN IN MARCH**

### **Beta'd by HollettLA**

#### **BPOV**

Flying from London to Dublin wouldn't have taken long at all, but being a Cullen or Masen came with a few cons – no pun intended – and we were obviously staying away from airports. So, we drove. We even stayed over one night outside of Pembroke so that we could catch up with the others from Whistler's crew. Edward joked and called it the "scenic route". Funny man. But I didn't complain. England was beautiful, as was Wales, and the same went for Ireland once we drove off the ferry in Rosslare.

Gah, I was so excited.

So was Edward, which was easy to see. The closer we got to the city center, the more he tapped impatiently on the steering wheel. Actually,

he'd been happy – period – since I finally forgave him the day before yesterday.

He had really hurt my feelings by having so little faith in me, and it was for that reason I kept my distance for a while. His hotheadedness and idiotic approach was just how you'd sum up Edward Ryan Cullen when he was frustrated. The damn man didn't think before speaking, and with us all living so close – without a real chance of going out the way we wanted – shit was bound to happen.

It didn't matter anymore. I knew he felt bad, so there was really no reason to hold a grudge. I'd be singing a different tune if I hadn't seen the regret and remorse in him, of course, but I did see all that. Last but not least, punishing him by ignoring him was a punishment for me, too. I hated sleeping without him. Simply *trying* to fall asleep was painful and difficult if he wasn't next to me. So...it was over and done with. Would he fuck up again? Probably, but so would I...most likely. *Couples fight. It's that simple.* The only thing I could hope for was that he wouldn't doubt me again. Being apprehensive and worried...of course, that was different. But doubting my ability to contribute...*whole* other matter.

*Enough of that crap now. It's vacation time.*

"Are we there yet, are we there yet?" I asked, smiling cheekily. "Are we there yet?"

He chuckled. "We're almost there. Grab the map in the glove compartment and I'll show ya."

After grabbing the Dublin map, I unfolded it. "Okay, you said something about, um, Grafton...something."

"Grafton Street." He nodded. "Our family owns an apartment building right about..." Letting his eyes flick between the road and the map, he



slowly located a spot on the map, tracing a street with his finger. "Right about there. See the park there?" I nodded. "That's Stephen's Green – or *St. Stephen's Green* if you wanna be picky – and that right there is Grafton Street. Our place is a few blocks away."

"And you live there each time you come to Dublin?" I asked, zeroing in on the neighborhood, not that the map gave me a lot to go on.

Dublin. Funny, 'cause Liam and Alec tended to pronounce it "Dubbelin".

"Yep," he responded, returning his gaze to the road. "It's been two years now since last—"

"'Cause you and Em were in prison last year," I finished for him.

He rolled his eyes, but he was still amused. "Yeah, and it's been three years for Liam, 'cause he was arrested in February, and we always go in March."

Huh. "But he was only in prison for a year, wasn't he?"

"Yeah, but he was arrested way before that," he said, making a turn to get off the freeway. "The trial lasted forever. Anyway, we only went that year with Cub and Nessa to take them away from Chicago."

I could only imagine the media storm, and I was glad that the Cullens were so adamant about protecting Alec and Nessa from it all.

"But now you're back," I concluded quietly.

He sent me a sideways grin. "Now we're back. With our wives."

*Oh, yeah.*

I lolled my head to the side, smiling like a lovesick fool. Which I admittedly was. "Love you," I murmured, placing my hand on his thigh.

"I love you, too, princess," he sighed contentedly and covered my hand with his.

"Mmm, can you say it in Irish?" I asked dreamily.

He chuckled heartily. "You really have a thing for other languages, don't you?"

Definitely. Though it was almost always business-related, Edward sometimes spoke in other languages, usually Irish, and...hearing him speaking Irish, Spanish, Italian...

*Talk about wet season.*

I shifted in my seat.

"What was that saying you had in your family?" I asked, wanting to hear the words again. I would never remember the words, but hearing him repeating them was better, so why memorize them? Exactly.

"Saying?"

I nodded. "Yeah, something about running away and fighting."

"Ah." He snickered. "You mean, *'Is fearr rith maith ná drochsheasamh'*."

*Ungh.* "That's the one," I replied breathily. "And what did it mean, again?"

He shook his head in amusement. "He who runs away lives to fight another day."

I bit down on my lip. "Can you say something else?"

"No," he said, clearing his throat. "Horny fucking girl, driving me insane," he added under his breath. Another throat-clearing. "How about I tell you what we'll be doing in Dublin instead?"

"Are we gonna do each other?" I asked hopefully.

"Jaysus feckin' Christ, Bella!" he groaned.

"I can't help it!"

He muttered something else under his breath, this time too quiet for me to hear, and adjusted himself. And I knew it was time to cut him some slack. Besides, I really did want to know about our vacation here. So...

"Okay, tell me about what we'll be doing."

He sighed.

"Please?" I gave him a pout.

One more sigh.

"I'll behave," I promised.

A third sigh. "Fine." But with a quick glance at me, he added, "You don't have to behave for long, though. Just 'til we get to our flat." I grinned and nodded in "of course", and he breathed out in relief. Silly Irish boy. "All right. We have the twins' birthday on Tuesday, but before then, it's all about catching up with family." I squeezed his hand, seeing his wistful smile. "And then we have a few days to just kick back, maybe see some sights, and on Saturday, it's St. Patrick's Day." He grinned wickedly. "It's gonna be one hell of a fucking party, baby."

I believed him.

"And then...?" I smiled in anticipation, remembering what Liam had divulged about their traditions. It wasn't all about partying, and...I couldn't really explain it, but when Liam told me what they usually did after celebrating St. Patrick's Day...well, I found it hot. For some very weird reason.

He arched a brow. "You mean on Sunday?"

"Uh-huh."

"We go to mass."

*There it is.*

Again, I couldn't describe why I found that hot, but the idea of these men, these career criminals, dressing up and going to church...yeah, I definitely found that sexy.

"Was that what you meant?" he asked curiously, and I nodded with a sheepish smile. "That we're going to mass."

"Uh-huh."

"Okaaaay...?"

"Can't explain it, Whistler, but..." *Wet season.*

He laughed through his nose. "You're so fucking weird, love."

"But you love me anyway."

"Hmm. No, I love you because of it," he corrected me quietly. "I love that you're not like anyone else."

Damn, this man had a way with his words.

"Same goes for you, you know," I responded softly, and my words could not be any truer. "I love you because of who you are."

Looking back on that late summer last year, when Alice told Rose and me that the Cullens were moving into town... Shit, so much had changed. I went from hating everything about Edward to loving the life he gave me, not to mention that I fell so hard for the man himself.

\*O\*O\*O\*

"Here we are," Edward murmured, parking the SUV in an underground garage. It was located directly beneath the building our family owned, and my eyes had been glued to the mentioned building before we drove down here. The building was white, five stories tall, and housed thirty apartments. The first floor was occupied by a pub, which Edward explained would be our living room for the duration of our trip.

"Wait 'til you meet Father Callahan, baby," he'd said before launching into a story about the man who owned the pub. Apparently, Father Callahan's dad wanted his son to devote his life to the church, and Father Callahan wanted to own a pub. Whistler went on and drew parallels between priests and bartenders, stating, "They both listen to people's problems", and so Callahan became "Father" without actually being a man of God. "Just don't ask him to baptize you," he'd finished with a wink.

After that, he told me about the rest of the building. The top floor, for instance, was where the families lived. Ed and Elizabeth had a flat there, as did Carlisle and Esme, and Tanya and Garrett, though they didn't really *need* all that space now. Ben and Angela had a place there, too, which they shared with their two boys, but only Ben would be here this year. In other words, those places were family-sized. The fourth floor was where Edward and I would live. Each flat was big enough for two people; there was one bedroom, one living room, a kitchenette, and a bathroom. It was all very luxurious – something to take for granted when it came to Cullens and Masens – but still small.

The focus here was to get as many family members together as possible, hence smaller flats. Emmett and Rose would also have their place on the fourth floor, and same went for Eric and Autumn, Kate and Irina, and many others who were partnering up for the trip. When I asked where Liam and the twins would live, Edward told me that he didn't know, but

that he doubted Alec and Nessa wanted to live with Liz. Liam, on the other hand, also had a flat on the fourth like us. And, last but not least, the second and third floor...that was where "singles" lived in studios. Kellan had one, James had one, Sam...and so on and so on.

It was like a hotel.

"Where do we go first?" I asked, exiting the car. Whistler headed straight for the trunk where our bags were. "Here, lemme help."

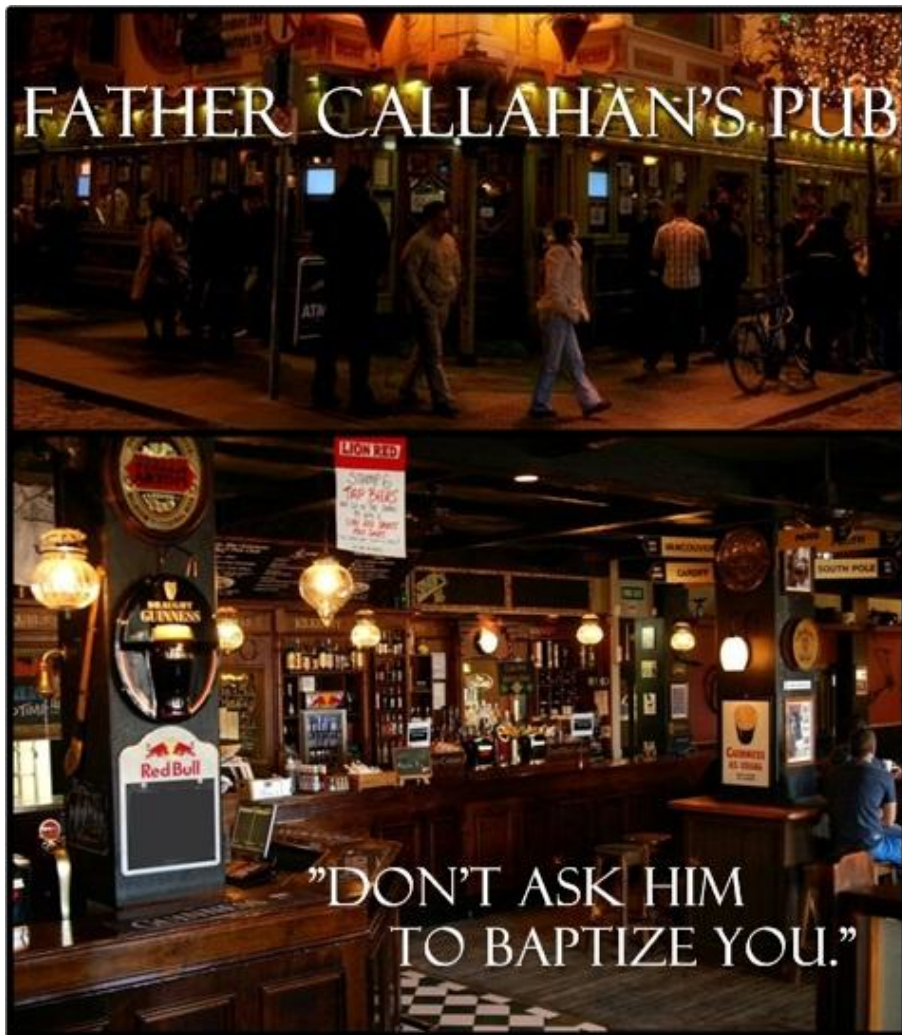
"Nah, I've got it." He smirked. "As for where we're going..." He made a bubble face before exhaling. "We're going to the pub. Settling in comes later, 'cause my phone's been buzzing in my pocket for an hour straight. Mom's impatient."

I chuckled. "All right, lead the way."

And lead the way he did. As soon as we reached ground level, we went through a couple of narrow hallways before he opened a door, which evidently led us to a back room of the pub.

"The bar's closed, so it's just family there for now," he told me as we walked. "Father Callahan is probably there, too, though. But he's pretty much family, so..."

Continuing through the back of the pub, we passed closets, the kitchen, a bathroom, and *then* we finally emerged behind the bar's counter. Holy shit, there were a lot of people. *Everywhere*.



"Look who decided to grace us with their presence!" Liam bellowed with a lopsided grin. His outburst obviously caused everyone to turn in our direction.

"Welcome to Dublin, *a stóirín*," Whistler whispered in my ear—before he jumped over the bar. Crazy man!

"Tush!" Alec cheered.

It felt like my cheeks were gonna burst from how wide my smile was, and it didn't take more than two seconds before we were engulfed in hugs. Esme reached me as soon as I was on their side of the bar.

"Oh, Bella, let me look at you!"

"Eddie!" Autumn cried out. "Catch me!"

"C'mere, Blue Eyes!" Whistler laughed, holding his arms out for her. She jumped; he caught her. "There's my girl. How the feck are ya?" Esme and I let out soft sighs as we watched, followed by matching grins. God, the way he made that girl giggle... Apparently, it didn't matter that it had only been a couple of hours since Edward and Autumn had seen each other at one of our "breaks for smoking and refilling the snack stash". Oh, yeah, Edward could empty a bag of chips and shove down three candy bars in no time at all.

"It's so good to see you again, Bella," Esme said, hugging me tightly again. "I've missed you so much." She sighed and cupped my face, giving me one of her motherly smiles. Her eyes glistened, and it was so easy to see how much these reunions meant to her. "My son couldn't have picked a better wife."

I offered a watery smile in return, a bit choked up myself. Instead of words, I hugged her again. It was all I could do.

"All right, all right. Enough hogging Bella, Es," I heard Tanya say behind me. "My turn. Come here, Allannah!"

Esme chuckled and released me. "We'll catch up at dinner. I'm gonna snatch up my son for a moment." She grinned. "If little Miss Autumn allows me."

"Okay," I laughed softly, turning to Tanya. And it was just... It was overwhelming. There were people literally everywhere. Esme, Tanya, Kate, Irina. Liam and his crew of...well, there were too many to count, but I guesstimated about fifteen people, not counting Alec and Nessa. Then there was my husband's crew: Kellan, Eric, Sam, James...and Kellan's three security guys. Emmett would be here tomorrow morning with Rose and their six guys. Carlisle wasn't here yet, but Tanya told me, as we



hugged, that he'd be here tomorrow – if all went well – and he was bringing an additional nine. Last but not least, Elizabeth and Conn were here, too, though they were currently in her apartment. That was probably a good thing, 'cause Liam, Edward, and Emmett didn't wanna see her.

"Bella!" Kate squealed, and then I was enveloped in more hugs.

It was crazy.

It was wonderful.

Hugging tightly, talking loudly and fast, more hugging, wide smiles, being sent from embrace to embrace, questions about how we were doing and where the missing members of the family were – mainly Emmett and Rose with their team. I was pretty sure I had hugged everyone at least twice by the time people calmed down. It was honestly fantastic to be here, to be a part of such a crazy and loving family.

"Bella, Bella, Bella!" Autumn called, and I could also hear Whistler's warm laughs. "Where are you, Bella? We're loooooking for yooouuu!"

Kate and Irina, who I was standing with, gave me knowing smiles before they left to greet others, and I made my way through the crowd, searching for Autumn and Edward. At last, I found them in a corner booth, sitting with Eric and Kellan. Beers had already been handed out, of course.

Edward grinned widely as he spotted me. "There you are, princess!" He looked so happy, a bouncing Autumn sitting on his lap.

"Talk about family reunion, eh?" Kellan smirked as I slid in next to Whistler.

"It's overwhelming," I chuckled, cupping my heated cheeks. It was so hot in here, and all the hugging hadn't helped. In fact, I was pretty sure my

cheeks were flaming red. But it was all so incredibly heartwarming. I loved it.

"Thirsty?" Edward asked, sliding a Magners' Pear toward me.

He knew how much I loved that cider.

Only, here it was called Bulmers.

"Thank you," I breathed out, relaxing in my seat.

The chilled cider tasted amazing, just as it did when he first introduced me to the drink back in Forks.

"Can I sit on your lap now, Bella?" Autumn asked sweetly.

"Ah, baby, let her breathe," Eric laughed quietly.

Autumn harrumphed.

"It's okay," I assured, quickly getting rid of my hoodie, leaving me in just a simple black t-shirt. "Come here, baby girl."

And Autumn bounced from Edward's lap to mine.

"Anyway, when did you guys arrive?" Edward asked Eric and Kellan. I leaned back against the arm he placed behind me and enjoyed my cider for a while. This was a time for savoring.

"Twenty minutes ago," Eric answered, tipping back his Murphy's.

"Sam and James arrived a few minutes later," Kellan supplied.

"Yeah, I didn't see them," Edward noted. "They're setting up a perimeter?"

Kellan nodded. "Liam sent them out with a couple of his own guys."

“Good.”

Yes, we still had to be careful, especially in such a big gathering. And it wasn't just the Italians we had to look out for. It was the media, too.

“Bella?” Autumn mumbled softly, resting her cheek on my shoulder.

“Uncle Eric said that we gonna live next to you and Eddie.”

I smiled into her hair. “Oh, he did, huh? Well, that's good.”

“I think so, too. We can eat breakfast together.”

“Definitely.”

An hour later, Edward and I went upstairs to shower and unpack. And Edward was right; the flat was pretty tiny, but it was still beautiful and perfect. We didn't need anymore than this. And the bed...jeesh, it was comfy. Which may or may not have led to some amazing lovemaking and glorious napping. Hey, it was needed.



\*O\*O\*O\*

The next day, when Emmett and Rose arrived, everything that happened when Edward and I had arrived went on repeat. There were plenty of hugs, leaving Rose flushed and grinning like a fool. And later, when she and Emmett were getting settled in, I spent some time with Esme, Tanya, Kate, and Irina. I could've joined Edward and a bunch of other guys, but they were heading out prepare for Carlisle's arrival, and I needed some time with the women. Hell, Rose and I had been surrounded by testosterone for two months now. Autumn and Nessa, too. So, most of the girls gathered for the reunion – not Elizabeth, 'cause she stayed out of the way for some reason – and had a spa day at Esme's place on the top floor. She had hired three women from some luxurious spa resort to give us manicures, pedicures, massages, face masks...you name it. It was...refreshing.

Actually, that was basically how we spent our time until the twins' birthday – the women in one group and the men in another one. Carlisle's arrival had apparently meant "work" for the men, 'cause they had meetings and shit like that. Apart from a few shared showers, our nights, breakfasts, and dinners, I didn't see much of Edward. And at first I feared that this was their way of vacationing, but luckily I was wrong. Everything work-related stopped before the birthday party began. And by the time they emerged from Carlisle and Esme's flat, we – the women – had transformed the pub into a massive celebration for two special kids who turned thirteen today. Well, to be fair, most of the men joined us down here at the pub around six, but Whistler didn't come down until...now. And it was almost seven. But I knew he was getting Alec's and Nessa's gifts ready.

I was beaming as I watched my husband walk through the crowd of people, looking so sexy in dress pants, a white button-down, and a skinny tie, which had already been loosened.

"No more meetings?" I asked when he reached me. He smiled and dipped down to kiss me. "Mmm..."

Since I was a part of the crew, I obviously wanted to know about the meetings, but not today. Not now.

"No more meetings," he confirmed softly. "Christ, you look amazing, princess." He took a step back, letting his eyes roam over me. My outfit wasn't all that special. Just a simple dress in royal blue with spaghetti straps that I found on sale when I was out with Rose and Esme earlier. I had bought matching shoes, too. "I saw the bags upstairs...you went shopping?"



I nodded. "Don't worry; your mother's security guard went with us. But yes, we went shopping, and I bought an outfit for you, too. For Saturday, I mean." Wearing green for St. Patrick's Day was *not* optional. It was mandatory, and after going through our clothes, Edward and I realized that we didn't own anything green here in Dublin. "I even found a green Hello Kitty t-shirt for Autumn." I snickered, and Edward grinned. "It says 'This Is My Lucky Shirt' on it. Fitting, huh?"

"Very fitting," he chuckled, and then he brought my hand to his mouth and kissed my claddagh ring, which I wore on my pinky finger. And while

he was there, he also kissed my engagement ring and wedding band. "And thank you for buying me something to wear." He smiled sheepishly, and I laughed quietly. I knew how much he hated shopping, but that was okay. I loved doing it for him.

"You're welcome," I replied simply, pulling him down for another kiss. We both hummed, kissing tenderly and softly, without hurry. It didn't matter that there were people all around us, most of them extremely loud, as was the music. "By the way, you need a haircut, baby," I mumbled against his lips. My fingers gave a little tug on his hair for emphasis, and he groaned quietly in my mouth.

"You better stop before I haul you back to the kitchen or something," he murmured huskily. "And *not* for a haircut, although you can definitely give me one of those later." He winked. "Maybe a little shorter this time?"

*Yeah, I don't think so, honey.*

That was why I loved cutting his hair; I was in charge. I made sure no one cut off too much of it.

"We'll see," I said, patting his cheek.

I amused him so.

And that was when Emmett showed up, already approaching Topsyville, and threw one arm around his brother and the other around me. "Hey, little brother and little sister-in-law!" he boomed out, making me cringe at the volume. Edward grimaced. Uh-huh, Topsyville for sure. Jesus, it was only seven. We hadn't even had dinner yet! "Have either of you seen my wife somewhere?" he asked. "I wanna give Alec and Ness our gifts now, but I can't find Rose!"

"For fuck's sake, bro. You don't have to scream," Edward muttered. "And no, I haven't seen Rose."

I pursed my lips, wondering if she was still feeling unwell...and if she was still in denial. "I'll go look for her," I volunteered. "Edward, can you find Esme and tell her that the food will be delivered at any moment?"

"Food!" Emmett cheered.

Whistler shook his head in amusement at him. "Yeah, I'll tell her. Come on, Em. Let's get you even more shitfaced."

"Did someone say food?!" I heard Liam shout.

Oy.

I bowed out, starting my search for Rose.

I found her ten minutes later. In the flat she shared with Em.

*"Don't come in here, Emmett!"* she croaked when I tried to open the bathroom door. I could hear her vomiting. *"I'll be right out."*

"Ro, it's Bella," I said, concerned. "Can you please let me in?"

Her response was another round of retching.

*If she keeps this up, she doesn't have to bother with green clothes on Saturday. Her skin will take care of all things green.*

I wasn't stupid. Esme wasn't, either. Or Tanya. We had all exchanged knowing looks throughout the week. Not that it was certain, but...come on. I was pretty sure, anyway. My best friend and sister-in-law was most likely knocked up.

With a sigh, I said, "I'm coming in."

It was time to be blunt with her.

Like me and Whistler, I knew Rose and Emmett weren't planning on starting a family just yet. We all wanted to wait a couple years, but plans were changed all the time, especially in our world. I didn't know how many times we had to make an effort to alter our plans, whether it was something as simple as a date or something bigger, like going to a new country to spy on Italians. It was what it was, and you just had to deal with it.

"This sucks, Bella," she cried as I joined her next to the toilet. I stroked her hair, making sure it was kept away from her face. "I hate being sick." I gave her a small smile, because this was more than being sick, and she knew it. "Can you feel my forehead?" she whimpered. "Do I have a fever?"

"Rose," I said pointedly, both worried and amused. I couldn't help it. The smile just wouldn't go away. No, this was so far from planned, and with the current situation we found ourselves in – the danger that surrounded us – the timing was horrible, but...it was a *baby*. No matter what, a baby was a blessing. And, like the family we were, we would deal with it together. "I think it's time to face facts, honey," I said softly.

She gave me a pained look and was about to say something, but she got sick again.

I withheld my grimace and stayed silent by her side.

Getting married and having children had always been my future. It had always been something I wanted someday, even from a young age, despite the world we lived in where men ruled completely. I remembered when I was a little girl and saw mothers taking their children to the playground near where I lived, and I knew I wanted that. Rose, however, was different. She fought everything that had to do with boys and inevitable futures. If she couldn't have love, she didn't want *anything*, and love wasn't something girls could take for granted. So, now when we



actually had love – real, strong, true love – it was hard for her to reconcile with her old self. I knew, though, that she was going to make a great mother. Deep down, she knew it, too. She just needed time to let this settle.

“God, you look fucking giddy,” she groaned.

I gave her a sheepish smile. “I can’t help it. I’m gonna be a kick-ass aunt, and don’t get me started on Emmett and Whistler.”

Jesus, Emmett was going to be *ecstatic!*

And Edward would be the best uncle ever. I was sure of it.

“You don’t get it, though,” she argued weakly. “Do you really think Em’s gonna let me go to Barcelona if I’m carrying his child?”

*Oh.*

Hadn’t thought of that.

Rose was right. If our husbands were overprotective when it was just *us...*

Holy shit. “Let’s hope he doesn’t lock you up,” I offered with a lame shrug. It was a possibility, though. I could see Emmett taking shit too far. Just like Edward would the day I announced *I* was pregnant. I shuddered at the mere thought of it. “Fuck, I think I’m gonna keep my legs crossed from now on,” I mumbled to myself, not really believing a word I uttered. Staying away from Edward? Yeah, not likely. But shit, this was really bad advertising. Rose and I were on the same fucking pill, which Carlisle prescribed to us and sent regularly. *Wait.* My head snapped up. “Did you forget to take your pill, perhaps?”

And there was the guilt. “I...I don’t know...maybe?”

*Thank God!*

I knew I looked way too relieved, but I couldn't help it. I took my pill religiously, so I found myself relaxing.

Honestly, if I was the one with my head down the toilet now, I would be excited. Terrified, but excited, and I knew Edward would be the same. However, with a choice beforehand, we were definitely waiting. Edward was only turning twenty-five, and I was months away from nineteen. There was no rush.

"Things will work out, you'll see," I said, squeezing her hand. "Now you just gotta tell Emmett."

"No way!" she cried out, seemingly horrified. I furrowed my brow. "I don't even know that I'm pregnant!"

Oh, please. "Right." She *so* had a bun in the oven. "Let me ask you this, then...how late are you?"

She opened her mouth, only to close it again. I could practically see the wheels turning as she did her period math.

Then she got pale. "Shit," she whimpered. "A week."

I was beaming. "Congratulations, Mommy!"

Apparently, Rose didn't find this funny at all. "Fuck you."

I patted her hand. "I love you, too, Ro. I love you, too."

"Ugh."

"Yeah, yeah. Now, go tell your husband."

She shook her head, turning to me with a pleading look. "Not yet, Bella. Please. Don't tell him. And don't tell Edward."

*Is she serious?*

"You're *kidding*," I stated, hoping she was, in fact, yanking my fucking chain. "You can't keep this to yourself."

Plus, I refused to lie to Whistler.

"Just 'til I have it confirmed," she said, backpedaling. "I'll take a test, and..." She released a breath. "God, I just need some time, okay? A few days. That's all. *Please*."

I sighed.

I rubbed my temples.

I blew out a heavy breath.

*Decision's been made. Fuck.*

"You have 'til Sunday," I told her. "I will be here for you. So will Esme and Tanya." She gaped at me, and I smiled. "Of course they already know, silly. They *have* children of their own, remember? They know the signs."

"Fine," she grumbled. "I'll tell him on Sunday."

I grinned cheekily. "Don't forget to lay off the booze!"

## **43 – DUBLIN IN MARCH**

**Beta'd by HollettLA.**

**Two songs for this chapter! There are countless versions of each, but here are the ones I prefer...**

The Rocky Road to Dublin: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=BSvebaFybLg&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BSvebaFybLg&feature=related)  
(I kinda see Paddy Reilly as Father Callahan)

Cooley's Reel: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=njgAjaAGebw&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=njgAjaAGebw&feature=related)

**BPOV**

"PRINCEEEESS!" was what I heard when Rose and I returned to the pub after her barf-fest. He couldn't see me yet, but I could sure see him...since he had Autumn on his shoulders. "It's time to give Cub and Nessa their presents, Bella!" he yelled over all the other yelling.

Apparently, the Irish didn't know the meaning of "indoor voices".

"You have 'til Sunday," I reminded Rose, and she nodded begrudgingly before I aimed for the crowd. "Whistler!" I let out a sharp whistle...ironically enough. "Over here!"

"I can see her, Eddie!" Autumn squealed, waving like crazy.

I grinned and managed to close the distance between us without too many elbows to my ribs. Jeesh, most of the men were pretty plastered already. Hopefully, the food would sober them up soon.

"There you are," Edward exclaimed with a wide grin as he spotted me. I reached up and planted a kiss on his cheek, and then he grabbed my hand to lead me over to the makeshift stage in the corner. Emmett, Liam, Carlisle, and Esme were there waiting with Alec and Nessa. I noticed that Liz *wasn't* there. She was, however, seated at the end of the bar, looking awfully sullen. I could only imagine that Edward and Liam had told her to keep her distance from them. "I grabbed the bag from London," he said in my ear, to which I nodded in understanding. Before we had left London, I had bought two extra gifts for Alec and Nessa since they couldn't enjoy their "real" gifts until we were stateside again. At first I had balked at what Edward wanted to give them, but then I reminded myself that this wasn't an ordinary family.

Once we were all gathered on the little stage, Liam switched on the mic.

I sent Rose a sideways grin as she tried to look casual next to a jovial Emmett.

"Oi!" Liam shouted. All of us who were up on the tiny stage cringed. "Shut yer traps, everyone!" Cringe. Slowly but surely, the family and friends at the pub stopped talking. Read: yelling. "As ye're well aware of, it's me little brother and sister's birthday today." Everyone cheered for Alec and Nessa before Liam told them to pipe down. With a grin on his face, of course. "And I think it's time to give them their presents!" With that said, he turned to his little brother and sister. "When ye were little, ye tended to annoy the ever-loving shite outta me," he chuckled. Alec grinned proudly, and Nessa curtsied. "But God knows I love ye, and once this is all over, I'm moving to Seattle." Oh, my God. My eyes found Whistler, and he smiled down at me, nodding subtly in confirmation. "I bought us an estate on Edward and Emmett's street, and ye'll both move in with me."

My eyes filled with tears. I couldn't help it, but this was so wonderful. It meant no more Chicago for Alec and Nessa. Plus, Whistler and I would have them on our street!

Safe to say, Alec and Ness were thrilled. They hugged their big brother fiercely, and while Emmett grabbed the mic, I watched as Liam showed pictures to the twins – pictures of their new rooms.

Still, I was worried. "Edward," I said, tugging on his arm to get his attention. The people had gotten loud again, so it wasn't the easiest. It worked after a moment, thankfully. After letting Autumn off his shoulders, he leaned down, and I spoke in his ear. "How is this going to work? Liam escaped prison, for chrissakes."

Would the authorities find him?

Edward didn't seem too bothered, though. "Don't worry, princess. He's a crafty fucker."

Right. *Crafty*.

I had to take his word for it.

Besides, tonight wasn't a night for worries.

"All right!" And that was Emmett, bellowing into the microphone. "Our turn!" He grinned and pulled Rose closer before they both focused on Alec and Nessa. "Shit, I remember when you were born," he told them, which made Whistler laugh next to me. "I was fourteen, and Eddie was the same age as you." He grinned. "We knew we would be your godfathers one day, but as you know, our folks stepped in until we were eighteen. And..." He exchanged a look with Edward before turning back to Alec and Nessa.

"Yeah, we flipped a coin."

*What?*

Alec laughed. "So, that's how ye ended up with me, boss?"

"Pretty much, cub," Whistler chuckled and ruffled his hair. Then he leaned down and whispered something in his ear—something that made Alec blush a little. He also nodded at whatever my husband told him.

"Anyway," Emmett continued. "After we had settled that, we snuck into Uncle Ed's office and drank on it." With a snap of his fingers, he gathered Father Callahan's attention and he stepped forward with two pints of stout. "Kiddos, you're teenagers now, and in our family, that's when the trouble begins!" *Everyone* cheered at that.

Crazy fucking family, letting two thirteen year olds drink beer. Or stout.

"As for your presents..." He snickered as Alec took his beer like a man and Nessa grimaced. Though, her smile was still there. "Rose and I decided to give you something that the four of us could enjoy together. So, as soon as possible, we're going away. Alec, you've always wanted to see the Great Barrier Reef; we'll have two weeks there. Nessa, you've talked about Paris; we have two weeks there, too."

While more cheers filled the pub and hugs were exchanged, Rose and I exchanged a knowing look. She would *really* need to tell Emmett about the pregnancy.

I had no idea how long it would be before we were out of this mess with the Italians and we had found Ed, but I sincerely hoped it wouldn't be nine months. Or eight, depending on how far along Rose was.

"It's us now, baby," Edward said in my ear, so I nodded at him before he grabbed the mic from Em. I was prepared, already covering my ears as he shouted out, "QUIET!" And people quieted. "Cub, Nessa, this is from Bella and me."

I took the cue to hand them their new iPads, and I hugged them both and told them I loved them. Then they started to unwrap their gifts while Edward continued speaking.

"Like Liam and Em, Bella and I can't give our real gifts right now, 'cause, let's face it, the timing sucks," he chuckled, and a low murmur of agreement came from the crowd. "So, we hope you can enjoy those two," he pointed at the gifts, "for a while until you get home." That was when he pulled out two photos. "And when you do get home, you'll have these waiting for ya."

Yeah, they were cars. Their first cars. On their thirteenth birthday. As I said, I had balked at the idea first, but Edward just laughed and said that that was when he and Emmett started driving. It wasn't like they could actually get their driver's licenses, but they could practice. Edward's words. Not mine.



They weren't expensive cars; no Porsches or Lexus', but still. Brand new. Both the same, except for color. Fiat 500. A midnight blue to Alec, and a pink one to Nessa. "They're piece of shit cars, but I don't want them crashing in something luxurious," Edward had explained with a shrug. First of all, there was nothing "shitty" about their new cars; they were cute as hell. Second of all, if crashing is to be expected, shouldn't they wait until...*oh, I don't know...*'til they were of age?

"Holy shite!" Alec said, examining the photo of his car. "We're getting cars?"

Edward smiled and nodded, draping his arm around my shoulders. "Aye. You're gonna have to live with Nessa learning before you, though." He winked at Alec, and I remembered. Nessa was going home to Bainbridge after Dublin, which meant that she would gain access to her car before Alec did.

"I can live with that," Alec chuckled, and then he hugged us. "Thank you, boss. You too, Tush."



"You're welcome, kiddo," I said, dropping a kiss on his cheek. It was a bit weird that he was almost at the same height as me. "We love you. You know that, right?"

He blushed again. "I love you, too."

While we hugged and said the same words to Nessa, Carlisle grabbed the microphone.

Nessa told us that she couldn't wait to get behind the wheel of her car, and it was a bit surreal to hear that from a new teenager, but eh. It was this family. No other explanation.

Tuning in to what Carlisle was talking about, I learned that since Uncle Ed and Liz had given Emmett and Edward each a white gold necklaces with a cross on it for their thirteenth birthdays—just as Carlisle and Esme had done for Liam's thirteenth—it was now time for Alec and Nessa to get theirs. And the necklaces were simple, yet very beautiful. Then, at last, Carlisle raised his glass, which caused everyone else to do the same. Well, I did it when Edward handed me a glass of cider.

"To Alec and Nessa!" Carlisle declared. "Sláinte!"

"SLÁINTE!"

Food followed. While we had given our gifts, the food had arrived and our hired servers had filled several tables with Alec's and Nessa's favorite foods. It was insane. And delicious. I ended up in a booth with Edward, Liam, Alec, Eric, Tanya, Garrett, and Autumn. We ate, laughed, drank. The pub seemed to be alive. And there was music, of course. Several family members took turns on the stage, entertaining us all. Then, after dinner, it was time for more gifts. There were two tables loaded with gifts from everyone, and Alec and Nessa sure received a lot.

My favorite moment, though, was definitely when Edward, Emmett, Liam, Alec, and Carlisle took the stage. They sang, they played. And my husband's damn winks...ungh. He was so fucking happy here. I loved watching him.

It was a perfect night.

Well, Rose probably didn't share that sentiment, 'cause she darted off more than once to empty her stomach.

Even in my drunken haze, as Whistler twirled me around on the floor, I could see Emmett's thoughtful expression.

He was obviously wondering what was wrong with his wife.

The Cullens and Masens were sharp people. It didn't matter how much they drank, dammit, their eyes still took everything in.

Sunday couldn't come soon enough.

\*O\*O\*O\*

The following three days weren't easy.

I had to sacrifice my pussy a lot. Not that I complained about that, but my husband wasn't exactly little in the cock department, and when his questions about Rose began, I could only think of one thing to distract him with.

Loads of sex.

On Wednesday, after some sightseeing in Dublin, Edward asked, "Hey, Emmett told me that something's up with Rose. You wouldn't happen to know what, would you?"

I lied by omission, and then I gave him my best fuck-me eyes, which resulted in Edward bending me over the couch.

He took me hard from behind, pulling, pushing, twisting.

One hand fisting my hair, another one on my hip.

He pounded in to me. Deeply.

Moans, skin slapping, harsh breathing, curses, dirty fucking words.

It didn't take long before we came.

Later the same night, when we were in bed, he told me again that Emmett was starting to get worried about Rose. So, I slid down his body and licked, kissed, and nibbled until he was hard as rock.

"Jesus, what's gotten into you, princess?" he moaned as I sucked him in.

My tongue swirled around him, making him wet and even harder.

His hand found my hair, and he guided me gently, which I understood what his way of saying that he didn't want me to rush it.

I sucked him slowly and hard, taking him as deeply as I could.

The salty taste of him seeped out of him when I hollowed out my cheeks.

"Oh fuck, baby!" he groaned.

Instinctively, he thrust his cock into my mouth, and I took the opportunity to slide a hand under him. With one hand on his ass, I encouraged him to do what he wanted. He moaned loudly, head thrown back, and began to fuck my mouth. Still slowly, but harder now.

"Mmm... Christ..."

Gently tugging and cupping his balls, I suckled the tip of him.

Then down, all of him.

He cursed in Irish.

I loved seeing him like this.

Through pants and moans, he warned me that he was close.

I felt his thighs tremble and tense.

He went rigid.

I swallowed his hot release.

And Edward went out like a light.

*Blowjob well done, Bella.*

I fell asleep with a smile on my face.

But my work was far from done. After breakfast the morning after, Emmett told us that Rose refused to leave the bathroom.

At the same time, Edward wanted to give something back since he fell asleep after I had sucked him off the night before. So, I took him upstairs to our flat again, and before he went down on me, he said that he wanted to know what I knew. About Rose, of course. I nodded and hummed noncommittally, focusing on his tongue. His fingers.

Until I exploded.

Then I decided it was best to make him come, too.

“Motherfuck,” he gritted out as I sank down on him.

I kissed him passionately, pouring myself into each touch and kiss.

My hips swiveled.

“Edward,” I whimpered, needing, needing, needing.

He sat up. He lavished my tits with open-mouthed kisses. He pushed me down on him.

After a while, we were a panting mess of tangled limbs as we climaxed, me a few seconds before him.

The pleasure shot through me. I flushed all over. And once we collapsed on the mattress, I fell asleep, thank God.

I was already spent.

This happened three times on Thursday.

I was going for a fourth when Edward told me that Emmett was thinking about taking Rose to the hospital, but when I straddled my husband in the darkness, he said, “Um. Sorry, princess, but my cock is currently out of order, which, for the fucking record, you can blame yourself for. Fuckin’ insatiable.” So, I claimed that I needed a shower, and when I returned, Edward had already fallen asleep.

*The things I do for Rose.*

Friday was much the same.

Before breakfast, Rose and I caught Emmett and Edward by the elevator, talking about us. We stayed hidden behind a corner.

“Bro, Bella and Rose are hiding something,” we heard Emmett say.

“Don’t I fucking know it,” Edward muttered, scratching his balls. “And it’s not just them. It’s Mom and Aunt T, too.”

Emmett huffed. "I don't get it. I'm fucking worried, but they refuse to tell me, and in the meantime I have Rose throwing up all over Dublin."

"I do not," Rose hissed quietly. "Not *all* over Dublin."

"You think you have it bad?" Edward asked incredulously. "Bella won't stop fucking me! I swear, man, my dick is chafing. And that's just not right. Saying no to sex is like saying, 'Air? No, who needs to breathe?' But I can't fucking keep up with that chick!"

I stifled girly giggles.

After that, Rose and I distanced ourselves from Emmett and Whistler. We figured if we weren't too close, they couldn't ask anything.

Yeah, that lasted a few hours.

Esme, Rose, Tanya, and I were having lunch at the pub when our husbands came down with stern expressions on their faces.

Let it be known that I wasn't the only one distracting my husband with sex. Esme was sporting the mother of bed hair, and Tanya couldn't stop squirming in her seat. Apparently, both Carlisle and Garrett had tried to talk to their wives, as well. Without luck, so far.

The only one who wasn't getting any was Emmett, ironically enough, since sex was what got him in this mess. Okay, maybe "mess" was the wrong word, but whatever. Anyway, Rose was too busy puking. Oh, and drowning in denial.

"Hey, baby," I said sweetly, forking a piece of chicken off my plate. I held it up for my serious-looking man. "Want a taste?"

"Don't fall for it, son," Carlisle said sternly. "We're here for answers."

Carlisle, Garrett, Whistler, and Emmett all stood there with their arms crossed over their chests.

Scowls.

They were so cute.

"Answers about what, darlin'?" Esme asked innocently, twirling pasta around her fork. She brought it to her mouth, moaning softly, at which Carlisle's scowl became a forced one.

He swallowed hard.

Esme was wicked.

"For feck's sake, Ma," Edward said with a grimace.

Emmett shuddered.

Standing up, I closed the distance between Edward and me. My hand was on his chest, and I pulled him down so that I could whisper in his ear. "I want you, Whistler-" He cut me off, saying my name with warning in his tone, but I wasn't done. "In the elevator. I want you to fuck me in the elevator."

I knew it was a fantasy of his.

He actually whined. "*Bella...*"

It didn't matter. I had him, and that was that. He could whine all he wanted to, as long as he got hard.

"Sorry, Em," Edward mumbled, admitting defeat. Before I dragged him away, I sent Rose a death glare. And at least she had the decency to look guilty.

"Edward!" Emmett complained as I ushered Edward out of the pub. "I can't believe you!"

"The elevator, bro!" Edward hissed in response. "The *elevator!*"

That's where we ended up. In the elevator.

We rode in silence until I pushed the stop button, halting the elevator between the third and fourth floor.

I attacked. I peppered him with kisses as my hands went for his jeans.

"Jaysus," he panted, his back against the mirrored wall. "Baby, slow down." No way. I was actually getting horny here. I didn't think that was possible, and my pussy was so...fucking...sore. But whatever. "Bella..." He grunted as I pushed down his jeans and boxers. "It's...oh, shit..." I dropped to my knees. "It's going to take a while..." Yeah, he wasn't even semi-hard, but it was okay. I had time. "Oh, God." I kissed and licked, only pausing to pull off my shirt and unclasp my bra. He liked that.

I was getting wetter and wetter as I sucked on his cock.

"Mmm, baby," he moaned. "Yeah..."

When he was a little harder, I let him go and looked up at him. I gave him an innocent look. "Want to fuck my tits, Mr. Cullen?"

His eyes flashed with desire, darkening as heat spread to his cheeks.

He nodded slowly, jaw clenching, and then he bent slightly at his knees so that his cock was aligned with my breasts. I smiled and pushed them together, and he gripped his cock, lining it up before pushing in. He moaned quietly. We stopped for a brief moment so that I could make his cock wetter, which I did by gathering arousal from my pussy and coating his dick with it. *That* sure made him harder.



"Fuck me," he whispered, thrusting slowly. "So sexy..."

I couldn't stop myself. I needed more.

So, I started touching myself.

I could smell us in the elevator.

Soon, he was hard as steel in between my breasts.

"I need to fuck you," he groaned.

A shiver ripped through me, setting off a wave of arousal to my pussy.

He helped me up then spun me around to face the mirrored wall.

My skirt was bunched up, my thong was pushed aside. His grip on my hips was firm. His expression in the mirror was lethal. He was sex personified to me.

"Ready, baby?"

I nodded. Once. Just a quick dip of my chin.

And then he slammed in.

"*Fuck!*" I cried out.

Fast pace.

We watched each other.

He fucked me hard.

Both pain and pleasure. So much pleasure...

Each time I exhaled, fog appeared on the mirror, and I could hear how wet I was as he slid in and out of me.

Hotter. So much hotter. Perspiration followed.

All air left me as I watched him behind me. How his hips slammed against my ass, how his head was tipped back, how his lips parted, how his muscles strained against his black t-shirt...

The fire surged.

My breaths became shallow and choppy.

I whimpered.

"Fuckin' minx," he breathed out, meeting my gaze in the mirror. He leaned forward, grinding into me, and buried his face in the crook of my neck. More grinding. God, so deep. Then his fingers joined. Circling, rubbing, stroking my clit. "You'll be the death of me, Mrs. Cullen," he muttered breathlessly in my ear.

I was done for.

I choked on a breath.

Trembling, shaking, shivering, tensing, clenching, coming.

Edward followed with a guttural groan, spilling into me while thrusting lazily.

I could barely stand afterward. My knees kept buckling under me, much to Whistler's amusement, but that stopped when he actually swayed on his feet. Through pants and chuckles, I gave him a pointed look. *Yeah, I'm not the only one who is properly fucked, honey.*

"Not a word outta you, love," he warned, also panting. "*Christ.*" He pulled out of me, both of us grimacing, and I knew exactly what we needed now.

A hot bath.

So, that's what we did. We went upstairs and took a bath. It was tiny, our tub, but it worked if I straddled him.

In the hot water, we kissed softly, caressed, and washed each other.

When he uttered Emmett's name, I stopped him and asked, "Want me to seduce you again?"

He blinked, opening his mouth before closing it again.

Realization dawned on him. "Wait. You're saying that you've used sex to..." He trailed off, looking both accusing and thoughtful. I only smiled at him. "You little *shit*," he finally said, throwing me a playful glare.

I laughed.

"So, you admit that you know what's wrong with Rose?"

"Yeah." I smiled sheepishly and kissed his cheek. "But we're not telling."

"We, as in...?"

"Your mother, Tanya, Rose, and I."

He harrumphed.

"It's nothing serious," I added softly, gently massaging his scalp. He closed his eyes, humming quietly. "Well, it *is* serious, but it's a good thing. I promise."

He opened one eye. "A hint, then?"

*Hmm.*

"No, not yet," I finally decided. "You're going to find out on Sunday, anyway. It's Rose's secret to tell."

However, Edward was a relentless fucker.

Throughout the rest of Friday, he was on my ass constantly for clues.

Admittedly, I was a little surprised they hadn't figured it out yet. But I held firm. Okay, I *tried* to hold firm. I managed to keep everything to myself until it was time to get ready on Saturday. We were both in our bedroom, having spent the morning with everyone downstairs in the pub, and it was Edward's threat that finally cracked me.

"One...tiny...hint," he whispered in between kisses along my collarbone.

"No," I said weakly.

He looked too hot for his own good. Dark wash jeans in dark blue, a green t-shirt with the print, "Lucky Me—St. Patrick's Day", which I had bought for him. Same went for the green knitted beanie on his head and the green Converse on his feet. The only thing missing now were the suspenders I'd gotten for him, too.



"Stop doing that," I huffed, backing away. I had to stand my ground, dammit. Rose wanted me to keep a secret, so I was going to keep the fucking secret! "I'm busy here," I told him and ignored his smug grin.

With that said, I left him in the bedroom and headed to the bathroom to apply my makeup.

"Oh, come on, princess!" he laughed as I closed the door behind me. "I want to know!"

I shook my head to myself. *Nope. I'm keeping quiet.*

The next ten minutes were just that: quiet. I kept my makeup light and minimal, only applying eyeliner, mascara, and some transparent lip gloss. It was about my clothes tonight, not my makeup. And my clothes were certainly green. Well, a lot of it was. My skinny jeans were green, and I put on a scarf that was also green. Same went for the emerald studs in my ears and the rhinestones on my black-painted nails. Then I had my strapless top, which was black, and my five-inch heels that were black, too.



After pulling my hair back into a ponytail, I finished with a green headband—just a thin one, but it sparkled—and then it was time to face the music again. Or rather, the broken record that was Edward Ryan Cullen.

He was holding up his suspenders as I entered the bedroom.

But he didn't put them on. Instead, he made a move to return them to the bag they came in.

"Wear the suspenders," I said.

He looked up at me and shook his head. "But I don't need them. There's nothing to hold up. By the way, you look fucking hot, sweetheart."

"Thanks." I smiled. "Now, wear them."

He had to wear them. They were so sexy.

"Why? It doesn't make any sense."

"Yeah, well..." I huffed. "Things don't always have to make sense to be very, very, very, *very*...sexy."

He tilted his head. "You mean sorta like you at the moment?"

Irish boy had skill. I had to give him that. "I'm both insulted and flattered, baby." I smiled sweetly. "But flattery won't get you out of this. Wear the suspenders."

He sighed. "Fine, but I still don't see the point."

"That's okay. You don't have to see the point," I said dismissively.

"Hmm," he hummed pensively. "How about this... I'll wear the fuckin' suspenders if you give me a clue."

*Damn him!*

He looked so proud of himself.

I chewed on my lip.

*Okay, one tiny, tiny clue should be all right, yeah? Just a tiny one.*

I sighed.

"There are shades of green everywhere," I said vaguely. It was true, after all. Rose was still all green in the face at times.

The pride quickly morphed into confusion. "Say *what?*"

I shrugged and walked over to my nightstand. Edward had given me this really cute necklace this morning, and I was definitely wearing it today.

"Why are you being cryptic, princess?" he complained. "Just *tell* me!"

"Noo-oo," I sang.

And Edward let out this weird little noise. A little grunt, a little growl, a little whine.

He *really* despised being kept in the dark.

"Wait! I've got it! If you don't tell me what's wrong with Rose, I will shave my head!"

I gasped in horror.

Eyes widened.

"You *wouldn't*," I whispered fiercely.

He grinned smugly and nodded. "Oh, but I would, baby."

"She's pregnant!" I blurted out.

*Facepalm.*

Oh, no.

*What have I done?*

"She's *what?!?*" he bellowed.

Pretty sure the walls were shaking.

"Are you *kidding* me?"

I sighed, shaking my head. "No. She's pregnant. Knocked up. With child. Bun in the—"

He put his hands up. "I think I get it!"

"Right."

I didn't know what to think of his expression, but I did know that he wasn't pissed. In fact, he just looked shocked—astonished. There was disbelief, which I didn't really understand. He knew birth control wasn't fool proof, yet he appeared to be completely stunned.

"Holy fuck, that's something," he mumbled, rubbing his jaw. His eyes were downcast, focused on the floor. "Oh, man, she's gonna kill my brother." He met my gaze, my very confused one. "He's gonna send her back to the States, you know." Fuck. That was what Rose feared. "And in turn, she's going to kill him."

I nodded. "I can see that happening, yes."

"She's telling him tomorrow, by the way," I added. "She didn't want to ruin this week, so she asked us to keep quiet."



"What do you mean by *ruin*?" he asked, frowning deeply. "Doesn't she want children? 'Cause my brother sure does."

I was quick to reassure. "She definitely wants kids, I promise." I smiled, slowly walking toward him. "But you see, she and I are married to these Irish boys, and...well, they're *very* protective."

The corners of his mouth turned up. "You don't say."

"I say." I nodded solemnly. "And we couldn't love them more, but sometimes it can get a bit tedious. So, she just wanted a few days to get used to the idea before Emmett found out."

"But she told you, Mom, and Aunt T?"

I shook my head. "We noticed it and drew our own conclusions. I swear, she hasn't told anyone."

He seemed happy to hear that. "All right, well..." He laughed a little. "Wow, I can't believe they're having a kid." With his arms around my waist, he dipped down and nuzzled my cheek. "That'll be you and me someday, right?"

Without a doubt. "I want nothing more, Whistler," I murmured, and then we kissed softly. "One day, you'll be the best dad ever."

He swallowed and pressed our foreheads together. "When?"

Uh...

"What do you mean?"

If I didn't know any better, I'd say he wanted to have little ones soon, and...I wasn't ready for that. No way. Not when we were in the middle of a goddamn war. Not with so many dangers around. Not when we were practically hiding. Not when we couldn't even go home.

"I mean, I know we've talked about it," he said quietly and led us over to the bed. We both sat down on the foot of it. "We said a couple years from now..."

"Yes?" I nudged him gently, urging him to go on. "You want kids later? Sooner?"

He stared at me for a moment, reading me. He looked hesitant over asking me. Then he let out a breath. "Sooner?"

My turn to swallow hard. "Um, how much sooner?"

"Feck, I don't know." He gave a one-shouldered shrug. "When all this blows over?"

*Sweet relief!*

I was so afraid he was going for something much sooner than that. Not that I knew how long we'd be in Europe, or how long it would take to bring down the Avellinos... Hell, I barely knew where I would be two weeks from now. But to hear that he wanted to wait 'til everyone was safe...yeah, that felt nice.

I refused to be left behind just because I was pregnant, and I knew Rose wasn't gonna go down without a fight, either.

"I think that sounds wonderful," I admitted quietly.

He smiled nervously. "Yeah? You're sure?"

"I'm sure," I vowed, reaching up to kiss him. "As long as you don't want it right now."

"Ah, hell no," he chuckled. "I'm not suicidal. You happen to own my sorry ass, and I don't envy what Emmett has ahead of him. I honestly don't know who's gonna win between the two."

"My money's on Rose," I said, though I wasn't completely sure. "I really hope Em won't try to send her home."

"Oh, he'll definitely try, princess. But I won't get involved. Like I said, I don't envy him, 'cause if it were us..."

Yeah, I'd win.

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"How long do you think this is going to take?" I asked.

He knew what I meant.

"I don't know," he sighed and kissed me on the forehead. "Hopefully, less than a year."

*A year?*

A year!

Holy shit.

"We have no idea where Ed can be, or if he's even alive," he muttered, and I squeezed his hand. "And then there's Aro and his inner circle..."

Yeah. A lot to do.

But not now.

"Hey, let's forget about this for now," I suggested. "It's St. Patrick's Day."

He gave me his lopsided grin. "You're right. We're gonna have fun 'til April first, and then we're gonna take down the fuckin' Italians, and then..." He

waggled his eyebrows. "I'm gonna throw away your birth control." I couldn't help but crack up at that. "What? It goes against our religion, you know."

"Oh, my God, that's the lamest excuse ever, Edward," I laughed and stood up. "There are a lot of things we do that go against Catholicism."

He shrugged, smiling boyishly.

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As soon as we got downstairs, we found out that it was time to leave. All of us—and that was a shitload of people—filed into about ten cars. Alec, Nessa, Liam, Kellan, Whistler, and I crammed into one, with Nessa ending up in Kellan's lap. Then we made our way toward Lord Edward Street—no, not kidding—and it was insane. It had been insane all week, actually, and the Dubliners sure knew how to celebrate.

"I think we better park here, cuz," Edward told Liam, who was driving. "I doubt we'll get closer."

So, that's what we did. We located a spot near a park, and then we were walking. There were people everywhere, so I told Kellan to make sure the twins didn't walk off. I'd tell Edward or Liam, but they were already drinking. Okay, they could probably have handled it, but I thought Kellan was a safe choice.

"Here ye go, luv," Liam said, thrusting a Guinness in my hand. "Today we drink black stuff, ye hear? None of that cider."

"It's the law," Edward agreed with a solemn nod.

Funny Irish boys.

But I sucked it up and drank the bitter stout.

Slowly.

It was more sipping than drinking, really.

“Shit, there are a *lot* of people here,” I commented as we walked.

So much green. Everyone seemed to be going in the same direction we were going, and pretty much everyone was wearing green.

“Ah, this is nothing,” Whistler chuckled and draped his arm around me. His smile was so wide. “Just wait ‘til we reach the parade.”

About twenty minutes later, we did reach the parade, and it was like nothing I’d ever seen. Shouting, drinking, music. By now, Edward had a tight grip of the hood on Alec’s jacket—which positioned Alec in front of Edward—and his free arm still around me. His beer was long gone. And Liam had hoisted Nessa up to sit on his shoulders. It made me laugh that I had asked earlier if we were to meet up with the others once we reached Lord Edward Street, because there was no way that was happening. We were packed like cattle, waiting for the parade to pass by.

When the crowd got even louder, I quickly understood that the parade was close.

“Can you see anything, Bella?!” Edward shouted over the yelling.

I stood on my tiptoes and answered with a shrug. I couldn’t see *very* well, but that was the price you had to pay when you were 5’3”. Edward had a foot on me, so yeah...fun for him. Eh, it was okay. I could see a little, and truth be told, just being here was an amazing experience itself.

“Ford!” Edward shouted again. “Keep track of Alec!” Kellan nodded, and then I found myself airborne. I let out a squeal, at which Edward laughed. Soon, though, he realized that he couldn’t just throw me over his shoulder and be done with it. So, I ended up back on the ground again, and I tried

to glare at my husband, but it was damn hard when he looked that happy. "Let's try again!" he laughed. He crouched down, gesturing for me to straddle his shoulders. "Come on, honey! You're gonna want to see the fucking parade!" Fine! With a sigh, I hitched one leg over his shoulder, and then the other leg followed. Holy shit! I let out yet another squeal as he stood up. And I could certainly see now!

"Better?"

"Much!" I yelled back. "Thank you, baby!" I added, patting him on the head.

I felt his shoulders shake with laughter.

When the parade finally came into view, I sat—completely mesmerized—and just soaked it all in. There were floats, marching bands, so many colors, more music, confetti, honking horns, and I was so, so, so glad that Esme had a camera.

*Unfortunately, all good things must come to an end.*

Once the parade had passed, Whistler lowered me onto the ground again, and as quickly as possible, we all made our way through the crowd again, this time away from the festivities. Only, that wasn't really correct, because we were now on our way to our own festivities. Back at the pub.

"Did you like it?" Edward asked me, squeezing my hand. I smiled up at him, nodding furiously. I was still in a daze, I had to admit. "We'll be back next year." He flashed me his crooked smile, and all was well in the world.

\*O\*O\*O\*

Everyone was on a high when we reunited at the pub. We had all seen the parade, but from different locations. Rose was probably the only one who

only had a small smile playing on her lips, and I felt so bad for her. Then again, I knew it was worth it. And she would see it herself soon enough.

Food and drinks were first on the agenda, so we all found a place to sit while Father Callahan's waiters served a massive amount of food. We were talking pizza, sandwiches, fish and chips, bacon burgers, hot dogs, onion rings, ribs, soda bread, cheeses, salads, sausages, baked potatoes, fried fish... Then drinks: beer, and lots of beer. Sorry, stout.

This time I ended up sitting with Edward, Autumn—who was on his lap, of course—Eric, James, and Sam. We had a blast, we all did, and it was so loud. But I was beginning to really like it.



"Who's playin' tonight?" Kellan asked around his burger.

Edward took a sip from his Guinness before responding...with something that looked like a milk mustache. "Well, Liam, Emmett, and I are playing with Father Callahan later. And I think Dad, Alec, and Garrett had something planned, too."

"Edward," I said quietly, handing him a napkin.

He smiled widely. "Cheers." After wiping his mouth, he just drank again and then he had another mustache. Why bother, I should ask myself.

"Do you have a big set?" Eric asked. "Callahan ain't exactly known for performing for long."

"Which is a goddamn shame." Edward nodded, and I remembered that he had told me how amazing Father Callahan was on the guitar. Apparently, no one could do a "slip jig" like Callahan...or whatever it was he had said. Something about a jig. "I think we're gonna do one or two songs. But it's okay," he sent me a wink, "I have a wife to twirl around, so I'll leave the playing to the others."

I was beaming.

As much as I loved hearing Edward play, being with him on the dance floor was such an experience that I had to admit I preferred that. But I was lucky, 'cause I got both.

And about an hour later, it was time.

Father Callahan took the stage with his guitar, sitting down on a barstool behind the microphone, and Edward jumped up on the small stage with one of his gazillion tin whistles. Emmett followed with a banjo, and Liam with something called bodhrán. Some sort of drum. Very Irish, of course.

"Oi! Shut the fuck up, people!" Whistler shouted into Callahan's mic.

People obeyed, and while the men on the stage tuned their instruments, the rest of us walked closer to the stage.

"Have ye lads decided on the song yet?" Father Callahan asked the guys behind him. His voice was gruff, but still warm. "I'll only be playin' one, ye'll remember that."

"Aye, 'The Rocky Road to Dublin'," Liam announced, to which the small crowd erupted in cheers. "And then Eddie and I gonna play 'Cooley's Reel', which means we need me brother, too. Where are ye, Alec?"



A few seconds later, Alec appeared and jumped onto the stage. "Fiddle or whistle?" he asked Liam, carrying both.

"I'll be on the fiddle—ye'll battle it out with Eddie on the whistle," Liam chuckled.

"Enough of this!" Emmett barked out. "Let's fuckin' play!"

And play they did.

Father Callahan began, quickly followed by Liam and the crowd's clapping.

*...In the merry month of June, from me home I started*

*Left the girls in Tuam, so sad and broken hearted*

*Saluted father dear, kissed me darlin' mother and*

*Drank a pint of beer, me grief tears to smother*

*Then off to reap the corn, and leave where I was born...*

Sweet Jesus, I doubted Callahan was breathing. It was crazy fast.

By now, Emmett had joined in with the banjo, too.

Edward was the only one who wasn't playing yet, which meant he just stood there and drank his beer, looking so damn cheery.

*...One, two, three, four, five*

*Hunt the hare and turn her*

*Down the rocky road to Dublin...*

As the second verse began, Edward finally did, too, and shivers ran through me as I watched his fingers flit over the whistle.

He was amazing as always.

*...In Mullingar that night, I rested limbs so weary*

*Started by daylight, next mornin' light and airy*

*Took a drop of the pure, to keep me heart from sinkin'*

*That's the Paddy's cure, whene'er he's on for drinkin'*

*To see the lasses smile, laughin' all the while*

*At me curious style, t'would set yer heart a-bubblin'...*

I laughed as Eric swooped me up, drunkenly trying to teach me the damn jig. Impossible feat! But everyone was trying, so it wasn't just the two of us who looked like idiots. And it was so fun that it made my eyes well up.

"Don't think, Bella!" he laughed. "Just go with it!"

The song continued for another few minutes, and Eric and I danced and goofed around—Autumn and Alec joined us, too—and I was definitely feeling the effects of all the drinking. It wasn't just beer or cider, either. There was plenty of whisky and Bailey's, as well, and since I absolutely loved Bailey's, it was safe to say that I had had more than one...or four.

When the song ended, we clapped and cheered for Father Callahan and the others, and Eric informed me that Callahan rarely performed, but that Edward and Emmett usually managed to convince him whenever they were here. Well, mission completed, and Callahan gave a nod to the patrons before returning to the bar.

Emmett also left the stage, and with a big cheesy grin, he picked up Rose and spun her around.

I was a little surprised that she didn't dart off to the bathroom.

Next up were Edward, Liam, and Alec, and Liam had now traded his little drum for a fiddle.

“Shite, we need a guitar, too!” Whistler cursed into the mic. “Dad, get your arse up here!”

I chuckled.

“Always so organized, Cullen!” Kellan shouted.

Edward grinned and flipped him off. “You know, just because you said that, you can come up here and handle the drummin’ like you did at Emmett and Rose’s wedding, ye little fuck.”

Oh, boy. My husband was drunk.

Funny how the Irish shone through when alcohol was involved.

After some hustling and bustling, both Carlisle and Kellan joined the other three on stage, and a few moments later, more shivers ripped through me as the song began with Carlisle and Edward.

They played off of each other, triggering and challenging, but it never got out of hand. When Liam and Kellan started, Edward accidentally played wrong, at which he spat out a loud, “Feck!” before he filed in again. That made Alec laugh right before he began with his own whistle. Hey, they were drunk. I’d be shocked if they *didn’t* make any mistakes. And they all made mistakes, though it was just funny to see them so flustered. Alec was the exception, of course. Aside from the couple of beers he drank on his birthday, his vacation came without alcohol. Thank *God*. The boy was only thirteen, after all.

“You go, Edward!” I laughed.

Oops, that caused another slip.

“Dammit, princess! Tryin’ to focus here!”

More laughter.

It was hilarious.

Carlisle was loosening his tie, Kellan was rolling up the sleeves on his button-down, Edward was using his t-shirt to wipe off sweat from his forehead—in the end he just pulled off his t-shirt, leaving him bare chested and showing off his sexy tattoo on his shoulder blades—and Alec was laughing so hard at the me.

Liam was playing in his own little world.

“How about letting the pros play for a bit?” Garrett guffawed.

“I’m a feckin’ pro, asswipe!” Carlisle bellowed.

“You tell ‘em, old man!” Emmett boomed out.

It was a crazy night.

\*O\*O\*O\*

The morning after was hideous. It seemed like I was the only one with a hangover. Fucking Irish... Why didn’t they feel like there were little midgets stomping on their brains? Or leprechauns. Not fair.

As soon as the oh, so cheery breakfast was over, I went upstairs and changed out of my pajamas and into a black skirt, a dark green button-down—snug as hell—and opted for a pair of ballet flats in silver. It was time to head off to church, and I wasn’t feeling it at all. Damn headache.

“You okay?” Edward asked, looking at me in the mirror as he fixed his tie. He looked so hot in a suit. Though, he was way too amused for my liking. The man had even had a beer with breakfast, which made me wanna hurl.

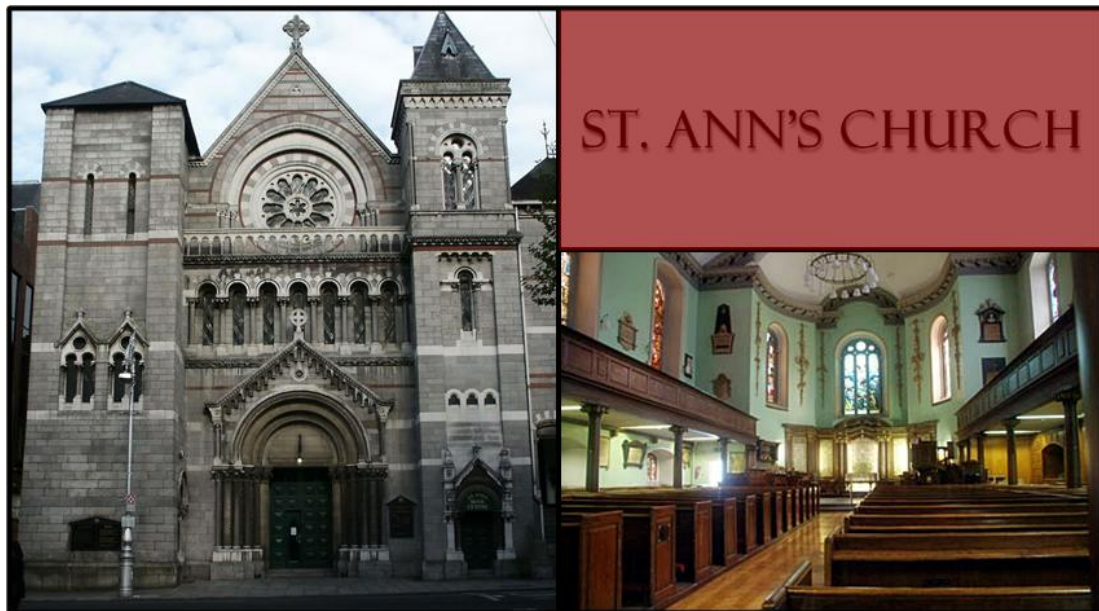
How these guys could drink and drink and then wake up in the morning feeling like a million bucks...ugh. I hated them all. Cursed them, too.

"I'm not talking to you," I told him and grabbed my bag. "Now, let's go. We don't wanna keep God waiting...or whatever."

He snickered at me.

Bastard.

\*O\*O\*O\*



As grumpy and tired as I was, I still appreciated my surroundings when we reached St. Ann's Church. It was beautiful, inside and out, and tastefully decorated. It didn't seem too much or too extravagant. And as soon as Edward and I sat down in a pew, I breathed out, feeling calm and slightly better. The Tylenol was kicking in.

"It's beautiful here," I whispered to Edward.

He smiled and threaded our fingers together. "Emmett and I were baptized here." He spoke low in my ear, and we watched as family

members as well as strangers filled the pews in front of us. "Same goes for Liam, Alec, Nessa, and Mom and Aunt Liz."

At that, I couldn't help but wonder about our future. Would our children be baptized here, too? Would we be here in a year or so for Emmett and Rose's child?

*I hope so.*

"Speaking of," he muttered, making me look up. And there was Liz, taking her seat with Carlisle, Esme, Tanya, and Garrett. Conn was also there.

Liz and Conn had remained in the background so far, heeding Liam's warning to stay away from him.

I hoped she was aware how much she had fucked up last year when we went into Code Black after Rose and Emmett's wedding. It still infuriated me that she left Alec and Nessa alone in Portland with just one guard, while she went to Utah or Arizona...or wherever it was.

I shook my head, clearing it of bad thoughts. I was on vacation, and after today, Edward and I were going away together. He wanted to show me Cork—where his family was originally from—and he also wanted to show me Galway and some other places in Ireland. It was just the two of us for a whole week, and I couldn't wait. It was just what we needed before we returned to London on April first.

\*O\*O\*O\*

When mass was over, Rose and I watched as Edward and the other men in our organization lingered. They spoke quietly amongst themselves, waiting for the strangers to leave. And once they did, I was completely stunned as they all found a spot where they had some privacy. They were kneeling, heads bowed, and praying. I had never viewed Edward as a religious man—not really—so this was definitely different. It was new.

“What are they doing?” I whispered to Esme.

Okay, it was obvious that they were praying, but I couldn’t quite understand it.

It wasn’t like they followed the Ten Commandments.

*If you know what I mean.*

Esme smiled warmly, eyes on Carlisle a few rows in front of us. “They’re praying for their families. For us.” I gave her a curious look, and she just smiled wider. “They’re smart enough to not ask for blessings for themselves. With their so-called jobs, they don’t believe they have the right. So, they ask God to protect their wives and children. They also give thanks for their blessings.”

Huh.

My eyes found Edward, and...

I chewed on my lip, thinking, pondering.

He was a good man in my opinion. Maybe he was a jackass for stealing cars and...well, there was a *lot* he did that was stupid. Illegal. Wrong. But...no, what he was doing now wasn’t wrong. He, along with the rest of the men, wanted to take out one of the most vicious crime lords in Europe, if not the world. They wanted to stop him. They wanted to stop the smuggling, the trafficking...

In the end, I was pretty sure they’d end up saving more lives.

Perhaps another man—a man like Aro Avellino—would take over, but that didn’t erase the fact that we had tried, so to speak. Evil was always going to exist, and while Edward and Emmett lived for the thrill of stealing cars

and making money, they were still big-hearted, family oriented, and genuine. They weren't monsters.

I felt kinda silly, because I wasn't very religious. Charlie never cared, and my priority back in Forks was to make sure his paycheck lasted an entire month. We didn't go to church. Still, I left Esme and found an empty pew where I sat down. I gathered my thoughts and pushed away the side of me that was screaming at how ridiculous this was.

Then I thanked God for bringing Edward into my life. I thanked him for what I had today, and I prayed for continued love and welfare. I asked for protection and faith. I asked for strength and success for my husband. I asked for a lifetime of his smiles, and I promised to always be there for him. I promised to keep cherishing my close ones.

I blew out a breath.

A smile tugged at the corners of my mouth when I saw Rose next to me.

I hadn't even noticed her.

As quietly as I could, I returned to Esme and Tanya. A few men had gathered there, too, and Edward and Emmett were two of them.

His smile was there.

Those green eyes of his were curious, and I assumed he had seen me.

"Hi, beautiful," he murmured, pulling me into his arms. "What were you doing?"

I just shrugged and mirrored his smile.

"Okay, I'm afraid, guys," I heard Emmett say. "If my wife is praying, it can't be good."



I chuckled. "What do you mean?"

He jerked his chin in Rose's direction. "Well, look at her. She's strong as it is. If she has God on her side, I might as well hand over my balls right now."

"Pshh." Edward waved him off. "Like me, you handed over your balls the second you got married. Don't even try to deny it."

"Boys," Esme sighed. "Must you speak about balls in church?"

"Sorry, Ma." Edward Ryan Cullen.

"Sorry, Ma." Emmett Patrick Cullen.

With that said, Emmett started walking toward Rose, and Edward and I followed. We quietly approached her, and I noticed that she had her hands clasped. She was even on her knees now, which she wasn't before.

I chuckled silently as I heard her muttering, and I could totally tell her that we were now standing right behind her, but where was the fun in that?

Whistler smiled down at me, eyebrows rising slowly. "This is it, isn't it?" he mouthed.

"Probably," I whispered.

If Edward could hear her, then Emmett could, too.

"So...like I said," Rose muttered quietly...to God. "Please make Emmett take the news about my pregnancy well. Please? Um, fuck, amen."

I withheld a guffaw.

Whistler pursed his lips in an attempt to keep quiet.

Emmett...well, he... "You're WHAT?"

*Wow, it really echoes in here.*

Rose looked at us over her shoulder, sighed, then turned back to her, um, praying position. "Gee, thanks, big guy. I guess that's a no, then." With another sigh, she stood up and faced the three of us.

She smiled sheepishly. "Congratulations, Daddy?"

That was Edward's downfall. He cracked up. Loudly.

## **44 – LONDON IN APRIL**

### **Beta'd by HollettLA**

#### **BPOV**

"Sit still," I told James, taking a drag from Whistler's smoke. After giving it back to him, I returned my focus to the palette on the dining room table. I didn't really like oil-based foundation because it tended to look fake, but it was what lasted the longest, and I would just have to be careful and cover it as best I could. With a sponge in one hand and James' chin in the other, I started applying a shade of foundation slightly darker than his own skin.

I could hear Eric and Sam chuckling somewhere behind me, which I knew was about the contact lenses Kellan and Edward were struggling with. Right now it was Kellan who was poking his eyes out. Earlier it had been Edward, whose eyes were now blue. The man was blinking profusely, and it sure as hell didn't help that he was smoking. That only irritated his eyes further, but would he relent? Of course not.

"Eric, can you put out Whistler's tattoos?" I asked, narrowing my eyes at the spot between James' eyebrows. If there was something that looked

fake it was concealer and foundation mixed with hair, so I made sure to be careful. Same went for his hairline. "And, Edward...if there's something you wanna eat, do it now. Once you have makeup on, there will be no more snacking."

"Well, shit," my husband muttered. "That's a bit harsh, don't you think?"

Men and food.

"Do as I say," I responded dismissively and moved on to James' neck.

"Couldn't you have told me the same, Bella?" James asked. "I'm hungry."

Impossible. "You just ate two foot-long subs. *Two*."

"Ooh, Subway sounds good right now," Edward said. "Eric, since you're not being *beautified*, could you go out?"

"I want one, too," Kellan added. "Steak and cheese. And a fuckin' cookie."

Again: men and food.

By the time Eric returned from Subway, I was almost done with James. His skin was darker—face, neck, behind his fucking ears, and collarbones—and his eyebrows and stubble had been brushed over with a dark brown color. His hair matched, which wasn't even long anymore. I had buzzed it off this morning after dyeing it. And his eyes weren't blue, but golden brown.

Last but not least, he had a scar that went from his eyebrow to his jaw on the left side of his face.

"And you're done," I said, studying his face. With the pad of my thumb, I brushed away some residual powder along his hairline. "Don't touch your face, all right? It won't come off too easily, but still."

He chuckled quietly. "Yes, ma'am."

"Holy shit, that's really good," Edward said, and at first I thought he was talking about his damn sub, but then I noticed that his eyes were trained on James. I felt a bit proud. "Seriously, princess." His eyes moved to me. "Amazing."

I smiled, feeling my cheeks heat up. "Thanks."

"I don't understand the scar, though," Sam said thoughtfully.

That was easy. "It'll draw attention," I explained, putting James' makeup aside on the table. "If someone sees James, all they will focus on is that scar. That's what they will say first if someone asks for a description."

Which was why I had bought fake tattoos for Edward and fake facial hair for Kellan.

Edward and I were the only ones who were entering the club, but if we needed help, James and Kellan were ready to pitch in.

"So, what're you gonna wear?" Eric asked me, smirking.

I chuckled. "You'll see." Then I faced Edward. "You're up, baby."

With a nod, he shoveled the last of his sub into his mouth then walked around the table and took a seat in the chair James had just vacated.

I sighed wistfully, already missing his real hair color. Like James, Whistler's hair was now dyed—dark brown—and since we'd left Dublin five days ago, he hadn't shaved his face, as per my request.

I started with his hair, gathering an obscene amount of wax in my hands. His hair was going to be slicked back, which I wasn't too happy about, but whatever.

Edward just closed his eyes and hummed, 'cause he had a thing for my fingers in his hair.

"I'm not gonna do anything about your skin," I murmured pensively, brows knitted as I focused on my task. He had too much scruff, and I wasn't talented enough to make it look perfect with foundation under that. I was good, but not that good. Besides, his skin tone wasn't significant. His jaw was, however, and his eyes and hair. But we had fixed that with contacts, scruff, hair dye, and wax.

"Does that mean I can eat whenever I want?"

I chuckled at him and shook my head. "Sorry, but I still gotta color this," I said, giving his scruff a little tug. "And your eyebrows-"

"Food has *nothing* to do with eyebrows," he responded like he was taking a vow. He was all solemn and passionate about the words that left him, but then again, food was divine for Whistler.

Too bad I didn't fall for it.

"I once found Doritos in your hair." I grinned wryly.

"Accident," he said quickly. I cocked a brow. "I mean...Eric did it!"

"It was before Rose and Emmett's wedding. Eric wasn't there. You gotta do better than that."

He opened his mouth, only to close it again.

Then he smiled smugly. "That's what *you* think. He was lurking in the shadows."

I stared at him.

"Okay, that was *really* bad." I snickered, shaking my head in amusement. The guys behind me were laughing at my poor, poor husband. "Anyway, the answer is no, because I have to color your facial hair, and then I need to do something about your lips, too."

He frowned and touched his mouth. "The fuck you say? What's wrong with my lips?" He wagged his eyebrows. "In fact, I'm pretty sure you like my lips. Especially when they go dow-"

*Time to cut him off.* Waving a hand at Eric, I said, "He told me that eyes, noses, and mouths were registered in facial scans." We didn't know if the Avellinos used scans like that—in fact, both Liam and Eric really doubted it—but we wanted to be on the safe side. Therefore, we were altering as much as possible. At least on Edward and me. Sure, contacts wouldn't fool iris scans, but that was about it.

"Fuck, all right," he muttered, still touching his mouth. "But no goddamn injections."

*Please, give me some credit.*

"I'm not making your lips fuller," I told him and took a step back to appraise my work. His hair was definitely done. "The other way around. Now, I'm done with your hair, so I'm just gonna go wash my hands. In the meantime...behave." I gave him a sweet smile before I left.

"What do you mean by the other way around?" he called after me.

*You'll figure it out. The opposite of making them fuller. Come on.*

\*O\*O\*O\*

Two hours before we were going to be leaving the flat, everyone was off on their own to prepare mentally or whatever. Edward was listening to classical music of all things, Kellan was talking to his three men, Eric was

doing tech shit, James was on the same page as Edward, and Sam found it relaxing to clean his guns. That wasn't my thing. I worked best under pressure—when I didn't have time to question everything—so I found myself in the kitchen, talking to Rose on the phone. Autumn was sitting next to me, making pretty pictures with glitter glue.

"Are you bored?" I asked Rose, snickering. I knew she was bored. Instead of getting ready for the gig in Barcelona with Emmett and his guys, she was stuck at their estate on Bainbridge with Esme, Tanya, Kate, Irina, and Nessa. Alec was also there, 'cause after Whistler and I had given him his car for his birthday, he wanted to test it out, so the plan was for him to return to us when we came back to London from Berlin.

It could've been worse, though, for Rose. Emmett wanted her to stay in Seattle until the baby was born, but Rose wasn't a quitter, so they ended up compromising. She'd be back when she had entered the second trimester.

I smiled to myself, remembering...

*As soon as the shock had worn off, Whistler and I watched Emmett as he scooped Rose up, swinging her around before he let out an, "oh, shit!" and put her back down. Questions followed in a rapid succession. "You okay, baby? You're really pregnant? We're havin' a kid? Are you sick? Holy fuck! That's why you've been off all week! Oh, fuck me, we're having a baby, Rose!"*

*I smiled up at Edward as he smiled down at me and pulled me close.*

*Somewhere behind us, Emmett was starting to tell everyone that he was gonna be a father. Rose was chuckling, probably relieved.*

*"That'll be us one day," Whistler murmured, resting his forehead against mine. My insides almost melted when he placed one hand on my stomach. "Right?"*

*Definitely.*

*"Soon," I promised, and he smiled brighter. "A little Mini Whistler?"*

*He chuckled quietly and nuzzled my cheek. "Or a Mini Princess."*

*We were in our own little bubble, kissing and smiling stupidly when Emmett and Rose were suddenly shouting at each other.*

*"You're going home to Bainbridge, Rosalie!"*

*"The fuck I am, Emmett! I'm pregnant, not dying!"*

*"I know that, and I refuse to put you and our baby in danger!"*

*"Shit," Edward muttered. "It really echoes in here."*

*Rosalie's voice brought me back to the present. "So damn bored, Bella. We're going to Forks tomorrow; I need to tell my folks about the baby, and... Shit, while I do that, you get to go undercover! Man, I can't wait to go back to Europe."*

Safe to say, Rose wasn't having fun. But she'd return soon enough.

After my talk with her, I went to the bedroom to get changed, and since I wasn't doing anything about my skin, it didn't really take long. The only thing that took some time was dyeing the hair along my hairline red, but I was a multitasker. While I waited for the dye to set in, I got dressed in skin-tight jeans, a top that made my tits look bigger, and put on the highest pair of heels I could find in my closet. They happened to be red, which matched my lipstick. And while I had thinned out Edward's lips, drawing a new contour approximately two millimeters closer to his mouth,



I was making my own lips fuller. That's why I added red lip gloss over my lipstick. It helped hide the lip liner and made my lips look plump and bigger. Lastly, right before I went to wash out my hair dye, I put the light green contacts in my eyes and applied mascara. And then, when I returned from the bathroom, I tucked in my hair and put on the red wig I had ordered.

To make it look real, I combed my real hair—the pieces I had dyed to match—over the fake hair. Okay, it was actually real hair, but...it wasn't mine.

My new hair was short and straight, only reaching my jaw, which meant that I had to cut off a few inches of my real hair to even the length. But it was okay. It was going to work, and that was what mattered.

Before I left the room, I tucked a small butterfly knife in between my breasts, strapped another mini-sized knife around my wrist—that I covered with a thick leather cuff—and pushed my earpiece into my ear. Two black satin gloves were slid onto my hands—we didn't want to worry about fingerprints—and I also put on the mink coat I had reluctantly bought for the occasion.

I was done.

I had practiced for *weeks*. Before we'd gone to Dublin, this was what we worked for.

I could do this.

With a few deep breaths, I was ready to go.

My heels making their clicking sounds against the hardwood floor alerted the men to my presence, and they were all gathered in the living room as I appeared. Oh yeah, I flushed bright red when their eyes bugged out. And there was no way I was speaking with my practiced accent right now.

I knew I had it, and there wasn't really a lot I had to say, but it was still embarrassing!

"Holy..." Kellan.

"Mother of..." Eric.

"Fucking." James.

"*Jaysus.*" Sam.

Whistler was silent.

For a while.

And then he spoke quietly, while walking toward me slowly, his blue eyes narrowed. "Well..." He cleared his throat. "You make one sexy..." I smirked, 'cause I knew what he was going to say. "Whore." Yeah. I laughed, and he chuckled and kissed my cheek. "Drop dead gorgeous," he whispered in my ear. "But my wife is hotter."

*Definitely the correct answer!*

\*O\*O\*O\*

A few blocks away from Avellino's club, Whistler, James, Kellan, and I said goodbye to Eric and Autumn, who were both staying back in a van, and we also wished Sam good luck, who had been ordered to stick with Kellan's men.

We jumped into the sports car that waited for us—James and Kellan were in a car behind us—and while Edward drove, he made sure I had everything.

"Butterfly knife."

"Between my tits."

He looked at my cleavage, even though my coat was in the way. "Christ." Then back at the road. "Make sure it doesn't unfold." Well...duh. "Um. Earpiece?"

"In my ear."

"Mouthpiece."

"Attached to my wrist cuff."

"The blow?"

I grimaced. "Back pocket." As agreed upon, I had a small bag of cocaine on me, and it was going to be my weapon of sorts later. It was the real stuff, too, which made me a little uncomfortable, not to mention Whistler. I had lost count of all the times he'd told me not to actually snort it by accident. But I couldn't exactly come in there with baking soda or something. It needed to be real.

Liam was, of course, the provider.

"You ready, princess?"

I gave him a small smirk, eyeing the new ink on his neck. "I'm ready, Whistler."

"Good girl," he chuckled.

And I shook my head in amusement. "Good Irish boy."

That made him laugh...and counter with, "Irish *girl*."

What? "I'm not Irish, baby. Nothing Irish in me."

When I caught his expression, I knew I had walked right into that one.

"Oh, I beg to differ." He winked right before pulling the car over. We had arrived. "There's Irish in you quite often. Enough to change your nationality, I'd say."

*Incorrigible.*

I quirked an eyebrow at him. "Yeah, maybe we should fuck less."

"Hell no!"

*Too easy.*

"Let's do this." I snickered and watched as he got out of the car. When he came around and opened my door, though, all the humor was gone. It was business now.

Helping me out of the car, he leaned down and spoke quietly in my ear. "For the love of God, baby...be careful. Okay?" I nodded subtly. "I love you."

"I love you, too," I whispered. "Be safe."

He nodded firmly, just once, and I linked my arm with his. 'Cause it was show time. We walked over to the entrance, bypassing the line since Eric has managed to get us in, and I played my part as the money-hungry bimbo on Edward's arm. Edward, in return, pretended to be some rich kid turned thug. He was also gonna put on a New York accent.

I had a feeling I was going to be calling him Brooklyn Boy after this.

Emmett and Whistler, they completed each other; Emmett knew medical stuff, he knew how to fly a goddamn plane, and he knew all there was to know about cars and firearms, but Edward's game was deceit. His skills covered languages, hi-tech gear, speed, precision—like this brother: cars and firearms—accents, and forgery.

Maybe they didn't go to college, but that mattered little.

Upon reaching the door, a massive guy stepped in front of us. "Codes," he grunted. "Or you can step in line."

Edward smirked and whispered something to Muscles then leaned back again. "We cool?" And Muscles nodded and let us through.

The club was packed with people. Rich people. Edward and I fit in with all the other men and women. Leather jackets and fur coats—that we left in the coat check, of course. Flashy jewelry and cash flowing. Women were attached to the men like leeches—I acted just like them—and the finest alcohol was served all 'round.

"Let's get a drink first," he said in my ear.

I just giggled and pawed at him. Well, that's what it looked like. As I clung to Edward's arm, I brought my wrist cuff close to my mouth and spoke into the mouthpiece. "We're in. Report back."

"*Standing by,*" Eric replied.

James was next, letting us know that he was parked on the other side of the building, as Edward and I made our way to the bar. And Sam told us that he was in the hotel across the street—Kellan's boys: Jared, Colin, and Paul were with him—and Kellan himself was close to the entrance.

Over the next two hours, we observed the guests at the club, and whenever we had something to say to each other, we just made it look like we were fooling around. I never really stopped touching him anyway, so it wasn't hard to play innocent...so to speak. I'd just lean in and kiss and nibble and touch...and whisper. And it didn't take long before we noticed a few things that stood out. Edward—who was keeping an eye on a stairway—was the first who noticed a pattern that would become my job to keep track of. It was scantily dressed women, all of whom were coming

down from said stairs...and all of them heading to the dance floor first, where they'd dance for a while before walking to the bathrooms. This wasn't surprising, because Edward had told me earlier that this was how things were, hence the drugs I carried; they were my ticket to conversation.

I was next; I paid attention to a group of men seated in a corner booth, and it didn't look like they were here for just a night out. First of all, they were all dressed in suits. Second, there were briefcases exchanged between them. Third, that particular booth was a bit secluded. So, I alerted Whistler to it, and he looked pensive for a moment, slowly sipping his first and only drink. Then he spoke to Eric...while nuzzling my neck.

"How are we on feed, Eric?"

I could hear Eric's quick typing in the background as he responded. *"I have visuals from downstairs. Easy enough to tap into, and it'll go unnoticed. CCTV outside is impossible unless I plant a virus, but I don't think outside shots will give us a lot."* Whistler agreed on that right away, and Eric continued. *"That's pretty much it. No feed upstairs, and no audio...which is why you're there."*

True. That was the whole purpose of our evening here. Eric had no problems getting us video from inside the club, but not where it mattered. And we needed audio to find out what this club was here for.

Edward spoke again. "We're gonna get started on audio for a corner booth. I doubt it's serious business since they're down here and not upstairs, but it's a start."

*"All right, and Bella?"*

Edward and I exchanged a quick glance, after which I nodded in confirmation and told Eric, "I'm going for the women in the bathroom."

However, before we could part ways, Kellan reported from his post outside. *"German chick incoming. I recognize her from the photos with Ztano."* Stefan Ztano—one of Aro's closest. Whistler and I looked at each other. *"Name: Heidi Kreutz, lives in Berlin—close to the Avellino club there—and frequently travels to Tuscany. Florence, to be exact."*

Florence. Right. Where Avellino's main residence was. Fuck.

"Keep an eye on her?" I asked Edward. He nodded, frowning. "Good. I'll go to the bathroom and see what I can do. I need a few bugs."

Another nod as he retrieved three bugs from his chest pocket. They didn't function until Eric switched on the transmitter, so that was good. It meant that we could stop gathering information at certain times, such as the hours leading up to opening when we believed it was most probable that Avellino swept the club for these kinds of devices.

"You gonna go with the drugs?" he asked in my ear.

"Yeah." It was my best shot.

"Be careful. I'll try to get closer to the booth. And..." He eyed my gloves. "Never mind, you have them on."

Right. We didn't want to leave fingerprints behind.

With a final kiss, we split up, and I headed toward the bathrooms while Edward took off for the booth. I pretended to be tipsy, and it was also now that I had to put on my fake accent. In my mind, I chanted Edward's words. *"Pronounce the 'r' as you would in Spanish, replace th-sounds with 'z', 'w' becomes 'v', 'v' becomes 'f', and turn 'd' into 't'."* Oh yeah, I had practiced, but that didn't mean I wasn't nervous. Whistler had repeatedly told me that many failed when they tried to fake a Russian accent, and that bad TV was to blame...or some shit. I was just hoping these women

didn't know better. Or that they were high enough to make me sound genuine.

As my hand pushed open the door to the bathroom, I took a deep breath and hoped for the best.

Like predicted, a few women were standing by the sinks, snorting cocaine and fixing their makeup.

They didn't bat an eyelash as I entered and walked into a stall.

*"Are you in, Bella?"* Eric asked in my earpiece. *"Cough if you are."*

I coughed as I retrieved the bag of coke and a small mirror from my back pocket.

First things first, though. I started with lifting off the lid on the back of the toilet, quickly attaching the bug on the underside of the lid. If you knew where to look, you would undoubtedly find it, but we hoped they didn't lift that lid off each time they cleaned in here.

*"Remember, don't speak in that accent if the ladies are doing it."*

Of course. That would surely give me away, which was why I listened to the women outside. But they seemed to be British, though I wasn't sure I had heard all three of them speak yet.

Next up were the drugs. After removing one glove, I dipped my pinky inside the bag, only coating the tip with some of the powder, and then I brushed that finger under my nose.

*"Cough if you've planted the bug."*

I coughed and cleared my throat.

*"Good. Clear your throat again if you're applying the cocaine."*



I cleared my throat. In the small mirror, I made sure it wasn't too much, and then I took out a fifty-pound note and rolled it up before dusting some powder on that, too. God, this was creeping me out.

*"Moan out a word or something in satisfaction if you're done. You need to make sure you sound legit."*

Oh, this was so far from *legit*, Eric.

But I did as told after I had returned the mirror to my pocket and put on my glove again.

"Fuck," I moaned then held a finger under my nose as I sniffed.

*"Shit, Bella! Did you just snort it?"*

No. And I couldn't really tell him that, 'cause the women would hear it.

*"Cough if you did!"*

I didn't cough.

A small smile played on my lips as I stumbled out of the bathroom stall. Like I said, I worked best under pressure—when I had much to lose—and that was certainly now.

In my ear, Eric told me what to do next, but I was already doing it.

The three women looked up as I came out, eyeing me for a while, but when they saw the rolled-up money and the coke under my nose, they definitely relaxed.

And now for my very own plan, one that I hoped Whistler would be proud of. I pushed down the money into my pocket, pulling out another bug at the same time. Then I took my place in front of a mirror and brushed my

finger under my nose, "to clean up", and after washing my hands, I not-so-accidentally tripped, taking one of the women down with me in my fall.

"*Something wrong, Bella?*"

No.

"The fuck?" the woman I brought down cursed.

The other two—too slow to react since they were fucking high—only giggled. And once I was on the disgusting floor, I scrambled to my knees and pretended to fumble with my coat as I managed to attach the bug to the inside of the heel on the woman's shoe. *There ya go.* Maybe Edward and I didn't have access to the second floor of the club, but this stoned bitch sure did.

"I am so sorry," I said quickly, trilling the "r". "I help you." I grabbed her hand and stood up, and while I expected her to glare at me, she just...didn't react at all. She just let me help her up, and that was that.

"Stupid shoes," I chuckled. "So, ah...how you say...*cheap?*"

"Yes, cheap," she muttered.

I went on. "Not like your shoes...or that one." I pointed at her purse. "Real Gucci, *da?*"

She smirked. "Yeah, it's real Gucci. My boyfriend bought it for me."

And finally, her friends were in on it. "Didn't I see you out there with that man that had all those tattoos on his neck?" one of them asked, wiping her nose.

I nodded and beamed, discreetly retrieving the third bug from my pocket. "He is my man; fery rich, but..." I scrunched my nose. "I not get many gifts." Their faces fell. Stupid tramps. "May I, uh, look?" Again, I pointed

at the woman's Gucci purse. She nodded and handed me the purse. "Fery nice," I gushed, and while their attention was on the Gucci, I stepped closer to one of the woman's friends and attached the last bug to the hem of her short leather jacket—the inside of it. It was black, as was the shoe I'd previously bugged, so they shouldn't be spotted too soon.

"I vish I also know a nice man, viz so many gifts," I finished wistfully as I returned the bag. "You lucky ladies."

They smiled.

And I left.

In my ear, I heard Eric chuckling.

Upon reaching the bar, I found that Edward was waiting for me with a smirk on his face.

I grinned.

"Don't I give you enough gifts, princess?" he murmured in my ear. I laughed and swatted his chest. "Kidding aside, you're gonna have to explain what you did in there."

I knew that. "Later. How did it go?"

He smirked again, which translated into...*What do you take me for?*

Of course he nailed it.

"So, we ready to go?" I asked.

"Yep. Unless you have a plan for how to get audio upstairs."

*Oh, you have no idea, Irish boy.*

## 45 – AMSTERDAM IN APRIL

**Beta'd by HollettLA.**

### **Whistler's POV**

"Fuckin'..." I trail off, still in disbelief, still in awe of my wife. That stunt she pulled on the bitches in the bathroom... *Man*. That's golden. Kinda makes my cock all hard. "Any feed?" I ask Eric. He's currently working his laptop—we're in the van, on our way back to Bayswater—and we're all gathered again. Except for Kellan's three guys. He ordered them to lay low until we need them, so they're on their way to their hotel up in Archway or Golders Green or wherever it was.

"Oh, yeah." Eric grins and removes his headphones. "I'll record everything."

Good.

"My hellcat criminal," I tell Bella with a kiss on her cheek. I'm itching to remove my motherfucking contacts, but it'll have to wait 'til we get back to the flat. Car's moving too much. Anyway... "How'd you come up with that shit?"

I'm a little pissed at myself, to be honest, 'cause I should've thought of that.

Bella just shrugs, a smug smile playing on her lips, which she's trying to hide. "Just came to me."

Ha! Look at her. The little wifey being all cool. *Eh, it just came to me*. Gotta fucking love this girl.

"Well, you were brilliant back there," I compliment her and throw my arm around her shoulders. She's already removed that fucking wig of hers, and

I'm glad to see the real Bella again, aside for the contacts and her dyed bangs. "And I'm pretty damn sure your work is gonna pay-" I'm cut off there by my work phone, so I quickly put a finger up, giving her the universal sign for "just a moment", and then I pull out my phone. It's Liam, who is in Tuscany with his crew. While he's going for Aro's inner circle, Dad is also in Italy with his team, but they're looking for Uncle Ed. "Talk to me," I tell him.

*"Ye gotta leave the country, cuz. Right now."*

Fuck me. My shoulders tense up. "Elaborate," I demand, and when I get Kellan's attention in the rearview, I motion for him to speed up the van.

*"Uncle C gave us the green light to enter the main estate,"* he explains. In the background, I hear an engine revving. *"Aro was in Sicily, but he's back in Cerveteri, and Carlisle told me he'd keep an eye on the villa there while I sent me boys into the estate."* I nod to myself, guessing they ran into trouble. Even if the main man isn't there, estates are rarely empty. Hell, Bella and my estate on Bainbridge is never empty. The maid service is there, not to mention the security guys Emmett and I hired for the neighborhood. *"Turns out, Aro's right-hand man was there."* Fuck. Stefan Ztano. *"We managed to get a few bugs in there..."* He sighs. *"Cuz, they're watching the border. Some German chick is screwing whoever-the-fuck and knows that a Marie Swan entered the country from Ireland last week."*

Just like I feared, then. When we got to England from France a few months ago, I wasn't ready to use that passport of Bella's. Since it's her maiden name, I suspected that the Avellinos kept tabs on it, but when we left Dublin and took the ferry over to Wales, we got pulled over for a random search, and I decided that it was time for Bella to use "Marie Swan". I wanted to see. And now I know.

"We're off to Berlin tomorrow," I say, running a hand through my greasy hair. Fuck, I need a shower. "We'll be there for about a week-"

*"Ye don't get it. Think further than that. Have ye lost the feckin' car since Dublin?"*

I frown. "No. It's parked in Camden."

*"Exactly. In me garage in Camden. Me building. Which leads to me flat. Ye gettin' this?"* I groan. Fuuuuck. Yeah, I get it. If they find Liam's flat—a flat that isn't all that empty of intel—they might be able to find us, or at least our neighborhood. *"All they need to do is tap into CCTV, follow the goddamn car, and there ye go."*

Okay, it's a shitload more complicated than "there ye go", but I get what he's saying. With Avellino's resources, they can get far...and fast. Yep, we need to haul ass, and we can't exit through Dover. We need to drive north and cross over to Amsterdam. Jesus fuck.

"And we can't come back," I conclude quietly. I already have the others' attention, of course, but if I didn't, I'd have it now. And then I start thinking about that bitch Ford saw outside of Aro's club tonight—Heidi. A German chick. That could be the one who Liam's talking about. Dammit. "All right, we're on the move. We'll get out of London tonight," I say firmly. "Hopefully, we'll be in Berlin by tomorrow night."

*"But wait for me call. We need to execute this perfectly.."*

I know that. "Anything else?"

*"Aye. Call yer old man; he's got Garrett working the media. Press update. And...get away from England faster than a virgin lad shoots his load. Me boys and I are gonna lay low for a few days. In the meantime, I'll try to keep an eye on Ztano."*

"Got it. I'll call as soon as we're outta London."

\*O\*O\*O\*

By the time we reach the flat in Bayswater, I've filled in everyone about what's going down. On our way up the stairs, I give out orders, 'cause when someone—someone close, in this case, Liam—tells you it's time to move, you don't sit around and waste time. James and Sam are to check out of their hotel rooms in Lancaster Gate, and I tell Kellan to do the same after I've handed him about twenty credit cards that I keep in a jacket in the hallway—all for a quick escape. I order him to hit the ATMs on Queensway—I know there are at least five from Halifax, Barclays, and HSBC—and take out as much cash as possible. The cards all lead to nowhere—fake names, but very real accounts. And with those three gone, I tell Eric to pack his shit, I tell Bella to pack our shit, and Autumn goes with her uncle. And I make my way to the bathroom to get the sodding contacts out.

Then I call Dad.

Where's that fucking saline solution? I cradle my phone between my cheek and shoulder as I rummage through the shit on the counter, which is packed with Bella's makeup. And my eyes fucking sting. *Fuck it.* I splash some water on my face, making sure to keep the phone away, and then I sit down on the toilet lid, waiting for Dad to pick up his goddamn phone.

Finally, he does. *"Son. Did you speak to Liam?"*

"Aye," I respond, wiping a towel over my face. "He told me about the border. We're on our way."

*"Well, they haven't found you yet, but getting out now is a good idea."*

I frown. "How do you know they haven't gotten our location?"

*"Because the Avellinos issued a hit two hours ago, and they wouldn't have done that if they knew where you were. They sent it to Chicago."*

Huh. "Who?"

He pauses.

I grow impatient. There aren't many in our organization who can be found at this point, and the women in Seattle are all heavily guarded. Shit, I think we have fifteen men on them.

*"Charlie Swan."*

I suck my teeth.

Followed by a glance at the closed door.

*"They obviously want us outta hiding."*

Yeah, I got that. Which means Dad's right: they don't know where we are right now, otherwise they wouldn't threaten to kill Bella's dad. And Rose's parents—no matter how no-good they are in Rose's eyes—are still family. They're under protection, as well. Emmett's order. So...yeah, that would leave Charlie.

With a sigh, I pull out my smokes and light one up. "What about the press?" I mutter, still processing the hit on Charlie. It wouldn't be too hard to send someone and give the old fucker protection. The question is if I want that. After that shit he spewed out about never really wanting Bella—words she fucking heard—I'm not sure the rat bastard deserves to live. Think about it. He used her for eighteen years to act as his cook and maid, and then he fucking sold her.

*"What about Isabella's father? The message says we have twenty-four hours."*

I blow out some smoke and look up at the ceiling—as if I'll find answers there.



"I'm thinking about it," I tell him. "Now, what was it about the media?"

He sighs. "*They're speculating about Europe, and they're pretty sure we're out of Chicago. The authorities don't say much.*" That's 'cause there's nothing to say. "*They do know that several wives are in Seattle, though, but that's it. However—and this is why I wanted to talk to you—the Italian authorities, with Interpol's help, are tying Sam to the spot where you intercepted Emmett's tail in January.*" Oh, fuck. The site where we gunned down several of Aro's goons...while Aro himself tried to take out Bella, Eric, and Autumn. "*They found his blood, and I really fucking hope they never found yours, Edward. 'Cause you got shot there, too, didn't you?*"

Rhetorical question.

He doesn't have to worry, though. Well, not about my blood, 'cause I got hit closer to the burning cars, and we blew up that shit properly before we left. Okay, James did, but he knows what he's doing. Sam was shot farther away—away from the fire. Still, it's my fault. My crew = my responsibility. And I was too worried about Bella dying. Proper cleanup was the last thing on my mind.

"Why are they going public with this now?" I ask. "This shit went down in January, so it's not like the blood could've been a recent find."

*"It's not public. Garrett pulled some strings, and we have a new man on the inside now."*

About time. "Interpol?" I guess. Garrett's worked with them before. Not for years, 'cause he's too connected with Masens and Cullens, but back when he was green. That fuck is fierce behind a computer. I'd say even better than Eric, but he does have twenty-five or so years on my buddy, so...

"Aye."

I clear my throat and take a final pull from the smoke then lift my ass to toss it in the toilet. "So, they're just sitting on that information? I don't get it."

*"Going public won't help them. After pulling out dental records, they know that the grilled goons are associates of Avellino's. No one will talk."*

Got it.

"But they'll take Sam if they find him," I conclude, now pacing in the bathroom.

*"Exactly. Our guess is that they're waiting until we get sloppy or whatever."*

I laugh. We don't fucking get sloppy.

*Unless wives are in danger.*

Fuck.

"I'll be careful," I say, clearing my throat. "Anything else on media or authorities?"

*"Since the prison break, they're obviously still looking for Liam, but that's about it."*

I nod, letting everything sink in.

Another glance at the door.

I light up another smoke.

*"Have you made your decision about Charlie?"*

Yeah.

"Um. I think so." No, I know so. "Yeah, I have."

Deep drag.

Exhale.

"And?"

I stand in front of the mirror, watching myself. I don't *look* different—hair dye and fake tattoos aside—but I *feel* different.

"He's nothing," I say, taking a drag. "Ignore it."

Exhale.

"*You've changed, son,*" he notes quietly.

I flick some ash in the sink, eyes still on my reflection. "Haven't we all?"

After finishing my call with Dad, I walk out of the bathroom, only run smack into Bella.

"Oomph!"

"*Shite,*" I curse, quickly steadying her. "You okay, princess?"

"Yeah," she chuckles and palms her forehead. I grin, 'cause my pecs are apparently hard enough for her to get hurt. Then I frown, 'cause she got hurt. "You said you needed to work out more. I say you don't."

I ignore that and touch her cheek. "Sorry. You sure you're okay?"

"Positive." She nods then scrunches her nose. "Did you smoke in the bathroom?"

Motherfuck.

"No?" I smile and dip down to kiss her. Maybe I can distract her.

"Liar."

Maybe not.

Thankfully, she's grinning. That's better than glaring. "Outta my way, you fool," she laughs and shakes her head. "I'm gonna pack my makeup."

"Yes, ma'am." I step aside and she enters. "Want any help?"

She smiles at me in the mirror. Another shake of her head. "Get something to eat. We're almost ready to go; Eric sweeping the living room."

I nod. "Maybe I should pack the food?" It's not like we're coming back here anytime soon, and it'd be such a travesty to let all that food go to waste.

"You do that, baby." She finds me amusing. "While you're at it, make sure all the appliances are switched off. Oh, and could you make Autumn a snack? She just fell asleep, but she didn't eat a lot for dinner earlier, so when she wakes up..."

Snack. Right. I'm sure there's a bunch of cookies and sodas and candy left.

"Got it," I say, turning around.

But Bella's voice makes me stop mid-step. "Something healthy?"

I frown deeply and rub the back of my neck as I turn around and face her slowly. "How healthy are we talking? Like yogurt and shit?"

Again, I'm amusing her. For some unknown reason. "One," she holds up a finger, still watching me in the mirror, "yogurt is loaded with sugar. It's not healthy. Two," a second finger comes up, "I bought fruit packs from

Tesco; pack those. She likes pineapple and grapes." Fruit. Yuck. "I also bought healthy-

"Fruit is plenty healthy," I huff.

That gives me the bitch-brow. "Fruit is also packed with sugar."

Whatever. "You girls need to put on a few pounds anyway." I fold my arms across my chest. And it's the truth. With the constant stress and pressure we're under, I've seen Bella drop a few pounds, and I don't like it. I want her to feel good. "I'm gonna pack edible stuff, all right?"

She stares at me.

I fight the urge to squirm.

The wife has her ways, I'm telling ya.

"Pack everything and keep make sure I have easy access to it," she decides, and that's how I know that she will just make Autumn's snack herself. Probably in the car.

Speaking of the car... "You're the boss lady." I humor her, and maybe it's the truth. Fucking balls. "I'm gonna call James and have him pick up the SUVs we used when we came from Italy." Evidently, nothing went wrong when we entered the country as Anthony and Marie McCarty, so I sincerely doubt anyone knows about our cars.

"Don't forget to pack the food."

She's nuts. I'm a growing boy. I don't ever forget food.

Preposterous. Insane. Fuckin' bonkers.

I snort and leave her there.

\*O\*O\*O\*

A couple of hours later, we're officially out of London. On the way out, we hit several more ATMs, and I'd say we have enough cash now to last for a few weeks.

We also have a shitload of food.

"Can you gimme another bag of Doritos, baby?" I ask Bella as I pull on the A12 toward Lowestoft. I see Kellan following in the car behind us. We only took two—more would've been redundant. So, we have Kellan, James, and Sam in one. Then Bella, Eric, Autumn, and myself in this one.

"You don't wanna try this?" Autumn asks, holding up a fucking carrot stick for me to see in the rearview. "It's really delicious with ranch dip."

"And you're weird, baby girl. Cute. But fucking weird," I tell her. "That's not food."

*Unless you're a fucking horse.*

Eric snickers next to me, though his eyes are still focused on the laptop in his lap.

"You're an idiot, Whistler," Bella mutters, smacking my shoulder with a bag of Doritos. Man, I could hear several crushing and dying. "Don't listen to him, baby girl."

"I don't," Autumn replies simply and pops a carrot stick in her mouth. "I remember you said I shouldn't listen to what boys say. Esme and Rose said the same in Dublin."

I scoff. "Eat those sticks and you'll become one."

"Does that mean you'll become grease?" Bella retorts.

I throw a Dorito at her.

I missed, 'cause...well, she's sitting behind me.

Whatever.

I have an excellent metabolism.

"And before you start bitching about metabolism, just don't," Bella says, causing me to choke on a few chips. Fuck me, can she read my mind?

"You can still eat sugar and fat, but some vegetables wouldn't kill you."

"What is this, health class?" I ask and give her the "come on" look in the mirror. "I'm twenty-fucking-five years old, I'm fit, I'm--"

"Almost twenty-six," Bella sings.

I give her a frustrated look. "*Isabella.*"

Then I shove a handful of Doritos into my mouth.

*There.*

Fuck, her glare is sexy.

"Right, if you two are done with your foreplay, I'd like to know what Carlisle told you," Eric says, acting all high and mighty. "You did talk to him, didn't you?"

Foreplay? *Please.*

I roll my eyes, but then I catch Bella's in the rearview, and she's biting that fucking lip of hers.

Fine. I guess it's what we do. We bitch. Then we fuck hard. Love even harder. Or some poetic shit like that.

Amused, I shake my head at her. I throw in a wink for good measure, and she grins. Then I proceed to tell them about what Dad said. But I leave out the stuff about Charlie. He's a dead man.

\*O\*O\*O\*

I exhale some smoke through my nose and stare out at the black water, and I fucking hope we won't run into too much trouble in Berlin. We should reach it by tomorrow night. Or tonight, I suppose, technically.

"Shouldn't here be some huge terminal or whatever?" Bella yawns, stretching a little in front of the car. It'll be light in a few hours, and we haven't slept yet. Except for Autumn. She's passed out in the car. Bella shivers, looking sinful in one of my hoodies, and I position myself behind her, the cigarette dangling between my lips, and lean back against the car.

"There is one," I tell her, pulling her close to me, her back to my chest. I sniff her a little, humming contentedly into her neck. She always smells so good, and she's always warm and cuddly. "But not here. We're waiting for a guy we know. He'll take us to Amsterdam in his boat."

She hums and nods, at the same time turning around to bury her face against my chest. Her arms follow, snaking around me in a tight grip. I smile and squeeze her to me, taking a last pull from the smoke before flicking it away. Then I kiss the top of her head, more than once, sorta just reveling in the silence. 'Cause I know it won't last. Kellan and the rest will be here any minute, and then we're off to Holland.

"Tired?" I whisper, swaying us a little. She nods, and I can hear another yawn. "Did you take the pill for motion sickness?" Another nod. More silence. "Do you love me?" That gets me a chuckle. She looks up at me, sleepy-eyed, and nods once more. "Do you know that you're my life—



despite talk about carrot sticks?" She laughs. And nods. "Good." I kiss her nose, shivering—not from the wind. "You're beautiful. Had to say it."

"You're the best," she returns, puckering her lips.

I smile and kiss them.

"Hey, guys?" I hear Eric call from the passenger seat. I break the kiss and look over my shoulder to see him getting out of the car. "Just got a text from Kirk. He'll be here in five, so we should probably unload."

Right. 'Cause we're not bringing the cars. And we have a *shitload* of luggage this time. That's what happens when you have time to pack. I don't wanna *think* about all the stuff we had to leave behind in our villa outside of Rome.

"Be right there," I reply.

\*O\*O\*O\*

Several hours later, we're all sitting in a hotel room in Amsterdam. It's been swept for bugs, but we still have music and a couple of faucets running in the background. Because it's time to talk to Dad, Emmett, and Liam now. We have them all on the phone.

"Can't we just kidnap Aro?" James asks, getting comfortable in his chair. I'm mighty comfortable, too, with a girl on either side of me on the couch. A sleeping Autumn on my right, and an exhausted Bella on the other. "We'll go in and take him, and then we trade him for Ed."

I shake my head, about to tell him why we can't, but Liam beats me to it. "*We're outnumbered. Even if we gather all of us, they have more. Not to mention they're ruthless. Tradeoffs usually result in bloodshed, and we don't wanna lose more people.*"

Exactly.

*"Plus, we'd be easier for the authorities to find,"* Dad adds.

I nod. "What we have now is the element of surprise. No one knows where we are or where we're gonna hit next. We need that."

Emmett's next. *"I suggest we take out their major spots before we announce ourselves—like we planned from get-go. Barcelona's easy enough to destroy, and Avellino has a few big shipments coming in here tomorrow. If we strike then, we could probably eliminate a few middlemen, too."*

I light up a smoke, thinking about other possibilities. It sounds good and all, but it's gonna be hard for us to strike in Berlin at the same time. My guys need sleep and food, and then we need to plan... Shit. 'Cause if we wait on Aro's club in Berlin, they may up their security once Emmett's done in Barcelona.

*"We can blow up Avellino's four villas around Rome,"* Dad supplies.

And then Liam. *"We can take out Ztano if we move fast. He's still in the main residence, but ye never know when he's leavin'."*

Fuck.

I look around me, studying, thinking, planning, wondering. Kellan, Sam, and James are always eager to go. Fuck sleep, they'd say. And same goes for Eric, but he has Autumn to think about, too. Much like I have Bella to worry about.

"The club in Berlin," Eric says thoughtfully, "it's a strip club." I cock a brow. He shrugs. "Just saying that getting in won't be hard, and we know where the guests' attention will be. And it's probably easy to get lost in

there, too." He gives me a pointed look that I understand. He means that it shouldn't be too hard to enter restricted areas once we're in.

*"Bella could dress up like a stripper and gain access to the back of the club,"* my cousin chuckles, joking, but I could kill him for it. Judging by the look on my wife's face, Liam's suggestion was a good one.

"I can do it," she replies, nodding. "Seriously, there's not much I need to do to pull that off."

"Fuck that," I tell her. "You're not a goddamn stripper. And I refuse to have you alone back there."

"No, listen," she goes on and sits up straighter. "All I have to do is put on some skanky outfit, a wig, and apply a shitload of makeup—done." She's actually all for this. Un-fucking-believable. "And, Eric, do you think you could get your hands on the list of employees or whatever? 'Cause then I could use a name, you know. I could pretend to be someone who already works there."

Time to stop the stupid. "First of all, you don't fucking speak German," I say. "Second, you probably don't look like any of the ones working there—"

"I bet they all look the same with too much makeup and wigs," she argues. "And be real, they don't give a shit about faces. They see bodies."

"Customers, yes, but not their fucking bosses," I respond impatiently.

"Thirdly, what will you do *when* you get caught back there without backup?"

*"I'm with Edward. It's too dangerous,"* Dad says firmly. *"Bella, we need you alive, all right?"*

And my wife huffs. "You don't give me enough credit, I swear. I can do this."

"Whatever," I mutter, taking a drag from my smoke. "The ring on your finger is there for a fucking reason. You're my wife—not a stripper."

Like Dad said: it's too dangerous. And she'd be there without backup. No fucking way.

"I'm with Bella," Kellan says quietly, rubbing his jaw. I could break it. "I believe she can do it, and I'm willing to bet there's a back door or a fire escape near the dressing rooms." He looks at Eric. "Don't you have the blueprints of the club?" And Eric taps away on his laptop. "We could put Sam or James there. If Bella needs help, we'd get in there fast. All we need to do before is make sure the entrance or whatever isn't locked."

I shake my head. "I'm saying no on this. That ring stays on your finger—"

"Jesus Christ, Edward, you're talking like I'm ending our fucking marriage," Bella snaps. "What's the deal with you and the ring? And seriously, that's your first thought—that I'm taking off the ring to play a part?"

I shrug. The rock on her finger says that she's fucking taken—that's *my* goddamn rock. She's not taking it off. No douche has the right to stare at her, and I'd kill a bastard for touching her. Okay, so maybe I've become even more hotheaded than I used to be, but I can't fucking help it. We're always surrounded by danger, and while most of me is itching to put this goddamn fuckery behind us, a small part has embraced the new lifestyle and calls it "adjusting". Whatever. My wife ain't sliding down stripper poles, unless I'm the only motherfucker there.

"You're not dancing for others," I grit out. "End of discussion, Isabella."

"Who says I am? It's just so that I get in the back!" she shouts. "And don't you 'Isabella' me. You're not my fucking father."

"No, but I *am* your husband!" I shout back. It's a wonder Autumn doesn't wake up. "What I say goes."

"Whoa." She looks taken aback. "When did you turn into one of those guys, Edward? Now you're gonna dictate?"

I shrug again and spark up another smoke. "If that's what it takes to keep you away from danger."

She chuckles humorlessly. "News flash, *honey*; I married danger."

"Guys," Emmett sighs. "*Quit fighting. We need to look at this without seeing who wives and husbands are-*"

I bark out a laugh. "'Cause that's what you'd do if it was Rose?" Silence. "Yeah, I didn't think so, bro."

"*She's pregnant, and from what I've heard and seen, Bella has a shitload of experience that Rose doesn't have yet.*" Doesn't fucking matter. I'm not putting Bella in more danger. "And, Eddie? Didn't Bella pull through in Rome? She was alone with Eric and Autumn..."

I squeeze my eyes shut.

"*And then there was the car show, too,*" Liam adds, and that's his way of saying that he's on Bella's side, too. "*Yer lass can handle her own, cuz. She's got the balls.*"

"I'm with Mrs. C," Sam says.

"Me, too." That'd be James.

"No way," Eric mutters. "Sorry, Bella, but no. I'm with Edward."

Regardless of what they believe Bella can handle, I make the decisions. It's my crew. I have final say.

"Please, Whistler," Bella murmurs. I crack one eye open, only to be met by her pout. "Have faith in me."

Slumping back against the couch, I stare at her as I take a deep pull of the cigarette.

It's not about faith. Not at all. But I can't do what Emmett says—to distance myself and see her as one in my crew. Well, I do see her that way, but she's also my life. My everything.

"I want you safe, princess," I whisper, reaching up to tug on a piece of her hair.

"You'll have my back," she says quickly.

I grin ruefully. "I'm good, but I'm not a superhero."

"I beg to differ." She smiles cheekily and bats her lashes. "You're *my* superhero."

"Stop." I shake my head. "This is serious."

She sobers, thankfully. "I know. But how about this: we go over the options. Maybe that'll make you change your mind—if we hash it all out."

"Good idea," Eric says, gaining our attention. "And this is what I have." He turns the laptop around, showing us the screen. "This is the club. And this," he points at a small space located next to what I assume is the club area, "is the girls' dressing room. At least that's what I think since there are shower stalls right here. And in that case, here's a fire escape. It leads to a back alley—easily accessible."

"I thought you were on my side," I mutter and put out my smoke.

"I am," he chuckles. "But if Bella's doing this, I figure we should start planning now in order to make shit work."

I wave a hand at him, suddenly too tired to argue. "Go on."

He does. "See this corridor?" He points at a spot that runs parallel to the club area and the dressing room. We nod. "I think it's a stairwell leading to the basement. Which is where we believe Avellino runs his human trafficking. So, if we have Bella in the dressing room, she might be able to scope out ways to reach those stairs. And then we can have a couple of us on standby in the back alley. Bella, you will make sure the door is unlocked." My wife nods. "And I will be outside, keeping track of you all through audio." He will also have Autumn there. Fuck, I wish she wanted to go with Mom and the others to Seattle. But after losing her dad back in December, being without Eric would send her into hysterics. "Then we have the rest of us inside the club."

"All right. But what about actually getting Bella back there?" I ask, still angry. "I refuse to have her going in blind, only to be caught when nobody believes she's a stripper."

"Well, I doubt these guys keep a list of their employees online," Eric laughs quietly, and I don't think so, either. "My guess is that there's an office, which is where they keep the official records."

"I can break in," James offers with a shrug. "I've done things far more complicated than that." True, but...I don't know. "And I *can* speak German, so it shouldn't be too hard to improvise if I run into someone."

"Look," I say, taking a breath. "I don't wanna sound like your fucking mothers here, but what about *sleep*? Neither of us has slept since the day before yesterday, and with all this going on, there won't be much rest until everything is done tomorrow night. Say what you want, but I can't let you guys go in and not be at the top of your game."

That's three days without proper sleep. And then we're supposed to kill a bunch of motherfuckers *and* release a shitload of sex slaves?

Riiight.

"We'll sleep now for a few hours, and then we go," Sam says. "And as soon as we reach Germany, we hit up the Autobahn and floor it." He grins. "We'll be there in no time."

"We can take turns on sleeping on the way, too," James adds. "And, Bella, I can ride in your car. That way, we can go over some German stuff. 'Cause the way I see it, if we're all hooked up with earpieces running on the same frequency, I'll be able to help you if someone asks you something in German."

"And you can tell me whether to nod, shake my head, or say something that isn't too hard to pronounce," Bella finishes. "I mean, I'll try to stay to myself, of course, but just in case."

Yeah, 'cause shit is that easy.

Sarcasm.

I'm not fluent in German—far from it—but I do know some, and it's not the easiest language to learn, or mimic for that matter. Granted, James can help her understand, but copying words and sounding like she's fluent? Forget about it.

"*So, is this a yes on tomorrow?*" Dad asks.

My guys look to me, waiting for my reply.

I sigh.

Bella squeezes my hand.

"We have a fuckload more to talk about," I tell them seriously. "And don't expect to be well-rested, because I will drill information into your skulls on the way to Germany."



They say nothing, still waiting.

I sigh again. "Whatthefuckever. Yes. Tomorrow night."

## **46 – BERLIN IN APRIL**

**Beta'd by HollettLA.**

### **Whistler's POV**

Seeing as the shit will hit the fan tonight, I ordered Sam to stay back earlier. Instead of being at the club, he's with Autumn, preparing our quick escape. 'Cause we're definitely not lingering in Germany after tonight. Sam bitched a little, of course, but he sure shut up the second I told him that Interpol knows about his involvement with the explosions in Italy back in January.

So, we have Kellan, James, me, and Bella for tonight's gig.

Eric will be right outside, keeping us posted.

Speeding through Berlin toward Aro's club, I listen as Bella and James talk in the back—it's all about German. On top of that, my wife looks like a cheap whore. Um, I mean that in the best way- Ah, fuck it. It's not a look I love on her, but it's the part she's playing tonight. Though, as soon as humanly possible, I will rip off her black wig, command her to take out the blue contacts, clean off that makeup, and...actually, she can keep the corset and those frilly panties. The rest can burn.

"Liam's team is ready in Tuscany," Eric mutters, sitting next to me, laptop—as always—on his lap. "And Carlisle's crew is waiting in the woods outside Aro's villa in Cerveteri."

I nod slowly, stopping at a red light. "And my brother?"

If only we knew where Aro was. Well, we knew, but we don't anymore. He took off with a small entourage this morning, and since he left by helicopter, Dad couldn't really follow. So, the only thing he can do there now is take out what's left.

What's left is a smaller crew—that German bitch, Heidi, included. She arrived after Aro had left.

"Hmm, hang on." He taps away on the laptop for a while. "Ben tells me they'll be ready in fifteen—they're on their way to the marina."

"Good. Tell the guys we're ready in twenty-five."

Since we left Amsterdam early this morning, plans have changed a little, as they tend to do in our business. While our plan has been to take out Avellino for a long time now, we've still been wary to strike so big as to actually eliminate more than Aro's closest. His inner circle was always the plan, but now...

It's true, as Liam said; we're severely outnumbered, and the Avellinos always go for the kill, but...isn't that what we're gonna do now, too? Exactly. Tonight we hope to destroy so much that belongs to Aro that it will take him a long time to recover. And after Liam and Dad called me around noon today, we decided to take that final step: we're not just taking out Aro's businesses and his inner circle. We're hitting them all. If you're an Avellino associate, you're going down.

This little addition to our plan means that Bella's not gaining access to the back of the strip club for basic information about who's back there; she's simply there to open the door to the fire escape to let Kellan and James inside. Then the three will take out anyone standing in their way as they head to the basement. And in the meantime, I will be in the actual club and kill any motherfucker who works there. Not counting the strippers, waitresses, and bartenders, obviously. But the rest.

*Anyone with a gun, to be precise.*

I don't have backup, much to Bella's fury, but I don't give a shit. She got her wish; she's in the crew. That means she takes my orders, and I refuse to let her go down to the basement with only just Kellan or James. She needs both of them, 'cause we have no clue how many are down there.

"What's Bella's name for tonight?" I ask, rolling down my window. I need a fucking smoke.

James speaks up since he's the one who broke into the club a few hours ago. He was in the main office and took pictures of all the files he could get his hands on. "Tatiana. All the strippers are Eastern European. There are only a handful Germans working there, actually. Mainly waitresses."

Fuck, this is still hard for me to accept—to have my wife go in there without backup. Sure, she'll have backup as soon as she lets in Kellan and James, but there's still a window of ten minutes or so where everything can go south.

Glancing at Bella in the rearview, I see that she's preparing her second wig. It's a blond one—one that will help her get inside the club. I mean, she can't exactly look like a stripper when we enter. That's for later. Hence the second wig and a fancy coat to cover her attire.

She's not the only one looking out of character.

I look like a fucking sleaze ball. My dark hair is slicked back, I have a fucking goatee, I'm wearing a big leather jacket that some poor fucker from the 70s is missing, and I have two gold chains around my neck.

Last but not least, there's a scar that stretches from my jawline up to my eye.

Another diversionary tactic of Bella's. It's in case the doormen have our pictures or something and know what we look like.

She's good—more than good—there's no denying that. And this is shit she applied to my face while we were *driving*.

*Trust. Faith.*

I sigh and then take a pull from my smoke.

She'll be fine.

"Boss," Eric says quietly. I give him a sideways glance. "I just intercepted a message from your mother to your father. Don't fucking ask me why they're not using their Vertus." Right, because our Vertus are untraceable. But I know my parents; they bought two phones, only for them to use, and everything they say over those phones, or the names they use, can't harm us. However, I wonder why Dad would be so stupid to use a phone like that when we're in the middle of this mindfuck-and-a-half. Doesn't he know that if, by some chance, the authorities knew his number, they'd be able to track his location?

I peer down at the laptop to read the message.

*Carlisle, Bella's father was killed in his home a few hours ago. What should we do? -Esme*

My smile is sinister, and just as I reach the street where Aro's club is, another message pops up, this time from Dad.

*Who knows about his death? Has it reached Rose or her parents? -Carlisle*

As I slow down the car, my phone dings in my pocket; I already know it's Dad.

**Hit went through -C.R.C**

"Another one," Eric says, and I check the screen. The message is from Mom.

*Only Tanya and I know. –Esme*

"Is this it?" Bella asks from the backseat. "The club looks so fancy."

"Just a charade," Kellan mutters.

I reply to Dad.

**Tell Ma and the others to go to the house I own in Texas. I don't want the news to reach Bella, and therefore not Rose –E.R.C**

I can imagine that Charlie's death is big news in Forks, and that's where Rose's parents live. Rose, she would tell Bella in a heartbeat if she knew about Charlie.

Pops' response is instant.

**You have Eric tapping our phones, don't you? Criminal! –C.R.C**

I chuckle.

"All right, are we ready?" I ask, killing the engine.

\*O\*O\*O\*

Entering the club is a piece of cake. It's just Bella and me, but Kellan and James are close by. So is Eric if things really go to shit, though we hope it won't come to that. We still have the element of surprise, and it's not like I intend to stand in the middle of the club with my guns drawn. I'm a bit more subtle than that.

I reckon it's a good thing we're all wearing bulletproof vests, though, 'cause it's only a matter of time before our cover is blown, regardless of silencers.

*And makeup.*

If I used drugs, I'd probably be coked up by now since I'm so fucking drained.

I wouldn't be surprised if Liam's taken a bump or two at this point.

"Be safe," I whisper to Bella as we hide out by the bathrooms. It's so that she can get rid of the blond wig and the coat. "Seriously, princess..."

My stomach is tied in knots over this.

"I promise," she whispers in return, handing me the blond wig. I toss it in the trash can just inside the men's room. "Same goes for you."

I nod. "I swear."

Dipping down, I kiss her fiercely and passionately.

*This is it.*

My hands slide up her thighs, needing to feel the holster she has there. The strap for her knives, too. Five throwing knives, one Glock. Then her butterfly knife hidden between those luscious titties of hers.

Had our lives not been in danger, I would've had a stiff cock right about now. She's literally my sexiest dream come true.

"Love you, Whistler," she breathes out, taking a step back.

"Love you," I reply, my heart pounding away.

To be honest, I'm not a very religious man, but as I watch Bella walk away—toward the stage area—I do the Sign of the Cross.

I clench my fists, ready for the radio silence. Aside from Bella and James, we're all to shut the fuck up while my wife tries to make her way backstage.

"*All in position?*" Eric asks in my earpiece. Correction: *our* earpieces.

"Cullen clear," I respond.

"*Ford clear.*"

"*James clear.*"

"*Mrs. C clear,*" Bella says cheekily.

I can't help but grin.

With adrenaline pumping through my veins, I stand stock still and just pay close attention to my surroundings.

Since I can't see the actual club area right now, I get my information from my other senses. The men's hollering tells me that at least one stripper's on the stage. The waitresses rapidly yelling orders at the bartenders tells me that it's a busy night. The barely-there line to the ladies' room—right next to me—divulges that there aren't many women in the establishment. Only three chicks stand outside the bathroom, which is the next thing. When the door opens, I see that it's just a simple toilet. Nothing elaborate, no stalls, no line of sinks and mirrors where they check their fucking makeup.

"*Approaching back door,*" Bella informs. "*Only one guard.*"

My back stiffens.

James begins to quickly remind her of a few phrases she can use—with a heavy Eastern Europe accent—and he tells her to relax. If she forgets, she

can always giggle and slur—since many of the strippers are either high or drunk.

I hold my breath as I hear the guard halt Bella, asking about her name. She drawls it, impressing me with her accent. She also sounds lazy and numb, which is good. They don't exactly give the poor chicks here the finest coke or happy pills. They're all downers, here to ensure the girls don't escape. My guess is heroin or other opiates. Those drugs suck the life right outta ya.

In my earpiece, I hear James say a phrase in German, which Bella repeats, and I have no idea what it means, but the guard seems to get it. The sound of a door opening resounds, and then the music quiets; she's obviously backstage.

*"I told her to say that she was on in ten," James explains quietly, and then he says, "There she is. Kellan and I have visual from the back alley. Bella, don't speak. There's a guy in the corner, by the shower stalls—he's watching you."*

I hold my breath again, forcing myself to walk forward. Since Bella's inside, it's time for me to start scanning the club area for a prospective body count. I already estimate there'll be about ten people to clip.

*"Sit down on the chair nearest the fire escape," Kellan directs Bella as I reach the bar. "Pretend to fix your makeup in the mirror, but keep an eye out for anyone behind you."*

*"How many are in there?" Eric asks. "By the way, Liam and his crew just stormed Aro's main estate."*

That's good. I hope we get Ztano.

Craning my neck, I try to look beyond the little hallway and into the club area. My back is against the wall, and the bar is closest to me—on my left.



But to cover my bases, I need to go with the guards at the entrance first. Plus, if security storms out of the dressing room, I gotta be there to clip those, too.

*"That fucking guy won't move," Kellan grunts, frustrated. "He's still watching you, Bella."*

I grind my teeth together.

Bringing my mouthpiece close, I speak as calmly as I can muster. "Ford, Hunter, can either of you get him? From outside, I mean." It will cause panic, but we need this to fucking happen. If that means we'll have a few screaming strippers, then so be it.

*"I can—I have a clear shot," James replies in a hushed tone.*

"Good." I take a breath. "Is that the only guard back there?"

*"Yeah," Kellan affirms.*

Just as Eric informs me that my dad and his crew are entering the villa in Cerveteri, I tell James to take the fucking shot.

*"Bella," James say, "as soon as he drops, you block the door—lock it and pull out your gun. We don't want those women running out before Edward has even begun."*

I nod, thinking that's clever. The music will drown out their screams anyway, and I will get my work done without distraction.

*"Now!" James shouts, and everything is set in motion. While listening to Bella telling all the girls to get back from the door, I swiftly make my way across the floor and return to the entrance. Glock and Sig in hands, I approach two big guys by the coat check and pop two in their heads.*

*"The port in Barcelona is catching on fire," Eric tells us.*

I don't pay attention to that.

Next are the two men by the door. One goes down with a thump, and the other manages to shout out in pain before I get him once in the neck, too. Then I quickly slam the exterior door to the club shut, vaguely hearing sounds of protests from outside.

"We don't have long," I grit out into my mouthpiece.

The entrance is dark as fuck, but I still shove the dead guys out of the way, just in case someone comes here.

*"I can't hold these girls much longer,"* Bella hisses.

That makes me wonder if Kellan and James have gone to the basement without her.

I hope so.

*"Fuck."* That's Kellan. *"We're gonna need backup in the basement. We're counting eight goons."*

*Goddammit.*

I make my way across the floor again, checking for more security. Heart pounding, breaths shallow, and eyes narrowed, I'm on high alert—exhaustion temporarily forgotten.

*"I gotta let the girls go, Edward—I need to help downstairs,"* Bella says urgently.

I spit out a curse and spot a door that leads to a back room behind the fucking bar. "Eric, pull up the goddamn blueprints," I snarl. "I wanna know what's behind the bar." The girl on the stage keeps dancing, but I have a feeling her routine is almost over. She's been on since we arrived. "Bella, can you give me two minutes?" As I catch the sight of a seedy-looking

dude at the bar, I "accidentally" walk into him with the purpose of checking his waist. I apologize in German, pretending to be drunk, and definitely feel a gun near his hip. *Cocksucking motherfuck*. Taking him out won't be easy when I'm surrounded by people everywhere.

*"We're standing by," James whispers. "No—fuck! Guards approaching. We gotta fire. Only one way up."*

My mind swims. The flashing lights are giving me a headache. The music keeps pounding. The crowd keeps cheering.

Sending a quick prayer for this to work, I shoot the guy next to me in the neck, letting him slump against my supporting body. *So far, so good*.

"Bella, let them go," I say quickly, scanning the area. I catch another guard on the other side of the floor just as a spotlight flashes past him, and I raise my gun, not giving a fuck about subtle anymore. "Eric, we need you," I say as I fire the gun. *Thank fuck for silencers*.

As the dead guy next to me falls to the floor, the door to the dressing room is ripped open, and six strippers run out screaming.

The jig is up, so I don't bother hiding my guns.

When a bartender leaves the back room behind the bar, carrying a shotgun, I put a bullet between his eyes.

It only takes two seconds to create hysteria.

*"Back room; storage, personnel, nothing serious, I think," Eric says, words jumbled and rushed. "I'm on my way in, and Sam is ten minutes away."*

Moving with the crowd, I try to make myself invisible as I check for more goons.

But when I spot Eric running in, my priority is to get downstairs. We exchange a quick look, and I order him to stay up here. Then I'm running toward the dressing room, listening as Kellan and James take on more men than they can handle. Knowing that Bella's there, or very close, makes me run faster. Through the dressing room, down a hallway, and then the steps leading to the basement.

"I'm hit," Kellan groans, which I both hear from him and through my earpiece. My breath hitches in my throat as I spot Bella ahead of me, aiming a knife. "Fuck—I can't..."

"Step back," I snap, pushing her behind me. Taking a breath, I peer around the corner; it's a dimly lit hallway, and I can see Kellan on the floor, in the middle, but I can't fucking see Hunter. "James!"

"Fuck that," Bella growls. I give her a quick glance, seeing that she's bringing out her Glock. "We can't exactly leave them here, Edward."

*She's part of the crew. Part of the crew, part of the crew, part of the crew.*

Faith. Trust.

I nod, swallowing my fears, and rasp out, "You have my back."

She nods, too, looking more determined than I've ever seen her. It calms me down, if only a little, to see her so focused, so fierce, so brilliant.

With a final breath, I crouch down and slowly make my way toward Kellan. I can hear shouting in both German and Ukrainian around another corner, and I hope to God James hasn't been caught or something.

Keeping low and guns aimed, Bella and I finally reach Kellan. He's barely conscious. Two gunshot wounds; one in his bicep and one in his upper thigh. Fuck me. As I check for his pulse, I scan the hall, counting three other hallways.

"Pulse is strong," I whisper, bringing my mouthpiece close. "Eric, get down here when Sam comes."

I don't even wanna know where he's left Autumn.

"*Copy that,*" Eric replies, and I motion for Bella to follow me. We pass two empty hallways before we hear more gunfire and throw ourselves into one of the empty passages. "*All guests are out—I'm gonna check the back rooms and offices.*"

I nod to myself and peer around the wall we're pushed up against. Girls are screaming behind closed doors and more guns are fired.

"Let's go," I breathe out, quickly moving toward the chaos, Bella silently following me. Seconds later, I carefully round the last corner, and that's where I see several bodies on the ground. I don't know whether to be relieved or scared shitless. They counted eight goons earlier; there are at least six here.

The blueprints we're in possession of aren't correct, I note bitterly, because it's like a motherfucking maze down here. Countless doors, hallways everywhere...

Just as I'm about to check the six bodies, a door opens at the end of the hall, and I'm standing up, both guns raised, before I can even register my own movement.

As soon as I see that it's not anyone on our side—or a girl—I fire.

There's too much shouting to even begin to try to understand.

"*Fuck,*" I spit out, three more men following. "Now, Bella!"

Three shots ring out, echoing loudly, and I fire off a fourth one as soon as I can.

"Edward," Bella chokes out, lowering her piece.

She got a guy in the neck—a guy that's now dead.

It's eerily quiet, all of a sudden.

I try to breathe.

The bodies on the ground lie silent. Dead. And I see...

"James." I swallow hard. He was one of the six already lying there when we got here.

He's been shot in the head.

"No!" Bella cries out, running forward. I stand frozen, rigid, though I still keep an eye on the doors around us. "Wake up. Wake up!" Kneeling before him, she shakes his, slaps him, squeezes him. "No, no, no, no! Wake up, James!"

Then I can feel someone running up behind me, and I quickly spin around, not really thinking, and shove my Sig against whoever's throat.

I have him pushed up against a wall.

"Edward!"

I blink.

My chest heaves.

My vision clears.

*Eric.*

"*Fuck,*" I gasp, backing away. I almost collapse.

"We can't stick around," Eric says, rushing over to Bella. "Honey, we gotta go. Oh, fuck." He just spotted James. "Is he...?"

"Yeah," Bella whimpers. "James..." She tries to shake him again, as Eric checks for a pulse, but then she's dragged away.

"The police will be here any minute," Eric explains quickly, and I automatically pull a crying Bella to me. "They'll release the girls; we can't fucking worry about that." In a daze, we walk back the way we came, only stopping when we reach Kellan. He's still in and out of consciousness, and he moans and groans in pain when Eric and I lift him up.

Bella walks ahead of us, her Glock raised. Each whimper and cry slipping through her lips stab at me.

The club has been emptied; only Sam stands guard.

"Where's Hunter?" he asks, walking toward us.

I shake my head at him, slipping Kellan's arm around Sam's shoulders instead. Then I take the lead, Bella in my embrace again.

"It's like Seth," she sobs. When her knees buckle, I pick her up and carry her out the door. Surprisingly few people are here, but we keep our heads lowered as we make our way to the car. "Can't we take him with us?" she cries as I buckle her seat belt. "Can't we give him a funeral?"

I swallow down my own emotions, and the sound of sirens gives Bella the answer.

*There's no time, princess.*

While Sam drives the car, Eric returns to his laptop, and I give Kellan a shot of morphine—something I wish I had when I got shot back in January.

Bella cries silently, eyes full of pain looking out the window.

We hurry through the streets of Berlin.

Exhaustion kicks in again, now accompanied by sadness and more fury.

When Kellan's asleep, breaths steady and easy, I scoot forward in my seat—the middle seat—and speak quietly with Eric. "We can't take him to a German hospital."

He nods, eyes remaining on the screen in front of him. "I know," he whispers. "How is he?"

"Stable," I sigh quietly. I'm no doctor; that's Dad and Em's game. But I've stopped the bleeding, and his breaths are regular. His pulse is still strong. That's gotta count for something.

"As soon as we reach the Autobahn..." Sam clears his throat. "We hurry. We'll get him to Denmark." I nod slowly, pensive. "It shouldn't be too hard to get our hands on a Danish car." He makes a sharp turn when we reach the hotel on the outskirts of the city; it's where Autumn is. Well, I assume she's here since she's not in the fucking car with us. "Do we take the ferry or do we drive?"

"I'll go get her," Eric says, quickly leaving the car. "You stay here."

I nod at him, and then I tell Sam, "We take the ferry to Rødby. It'll be easier for us to steal a Danish car—I mean...there's a long-term parking lot or something, right?" Reaching forward, I open the glove compartment and bring out a pack of smokes. "Anyway—" I light one up and take a drag—"I think that's the easiest way to find a Danish car in Germany. We don't wanna wait—in case they want papers after the ferry."

My hands shake, remnants of the night lingering in my body. Surging, pulsing.



A huge part of me is aching to hold Bella, but I know her; I gotta wait for a while. Eric told me she was just like this after Seth died. She, like, recoils from touch? I don't know. But I have to let her come to me when she's ready for it. The only thing I can do now is let her know I'm here for her, which my hand, *barely* touching her thigh, is doing.

"And what about the mess we left behind?" Sam asks quietly.

"I don't know." I blow out a breath, ignoring the nervousness I feel. 'Cause the truth is, we did leave a mess behind. We were sloppy, maybe even leaving DNA behind. *Fuck*. I shake my head, pulling out my Vertu. Cigarette dangling between my lips, I fire off a text to Garrett.

**We need cleanup. Any suggestions? 1 lost, left behind, we can't go back. -E.R.C.**

"I texted Garrett," I mutter, exhaling some smoke. As soon as the words have left my mouth, Eric returns with Autumn and two bags. The trunk is already full, so when he opens the door, I accept the two bags and push them down on the floor between Bella and me.

"Let me take her," Bella croaks, holding out her hands for the sleeping girl in Eric's arms.

"You sure, hon?" Eric asks hesitantly.

She nods, placing a hand on my thigh. It tells me she's almost ready for more, which relieves me.

Gently, without rousing Autumn, Eric places his niece in my wife's arms.

"What're we gonna do about the second car?" He points to where it's parked outside the hotel.

"Leave it," I say just as my phone dings.

**Liam's already leaving the country. He and his guys can be there tomorrow morning. What are we looking at—what's your status? – G.S.D.**

"Yeah, leave it," I repeat, relieved. "Liam's on his way out of Italy already." They're more rested than my crew is, so I can't say I feel too guilty about giving my cousin more work. My guys and I, on the other hand, are looking at three days without sleep. "Eric, inform Garrett and the others about our status."

He nods and gets into the car, and I add, "Tell Liam's tech guy that we need cleanup at the club—an explosion or whatever...when the place has been emptied, obviously—and additional cleanup out here. The car has to be removed, and I want the hotel room taken care of, too. No traces."

"Got it." Wasting no time, he taps away on his laptop. "The authorities are already there, though. Same goes for forensics. What if they find something tonight—and before Liam gets here?"

"I wore gloves," Bella mentions quietly, and when I look at her, I see the satin gloves on her hands. I guess they're part of her get-up. "And my hair's been secured." She points to the black wig she's still wearing.

I nod, thinking. "That's good." Facing Eric again, I say, "I don't think I left my fingerprints in there, either." Unfortunately, it's nothing I can be one hundred percent sure of, but there's little I can do about it. "We just have to wait for Liam."

Sam pulls out of the hotel parking space, and Eric asks, "What about Kellan? He left blood behind."

True.

Fuck, shit, fuck, shit.

There's really only one thing that can be done, then. "Money talks," I say, leaning back in my seat. "Who's up for it?"

"I am," Sam says and slows down the car.

"I'll give you fifty grand for the job," I tell him, thankful as hell. "Grab a bag from the back—I don't care if you spend it all. Buy one of those fuckers who enters the club. I want that floor clean; no blood." We have two large bags in back. Full of cash—the cash we took out from several accounts before we left England. "There's nothing you can do about Hunter, but that blood..."

He nods and stops the car altogether. "Understood. Where do I meet up with you guys later?"

"Denmark," I answer. "But leave the second car behind before you take the ferry, and set it on fire, all right?" He nods again, and I maneuver my way over Bella and Autumn. In the middle of the road, I take Sam's spot behind the wheel and roll down the window. "You have your fake papers?"

"Yep, got 'em. Phone, too."

"Good." I start the engine. "I'll call you when we've found a hospital for Ford."

Five minutes later, I watch as Sam walks back toward the hotel to get the car, and I leave Berlin behind.

It's quiet for a while.

I try to relax but find it impossible. The only thing working, though not enough, is when I catch Bella staring at me in the rearview mirror.

"I love you," she mouths.

So yeah, that works a little. But I gotta fucking hold her. I also need to get us to safety.

"I love you, too," I mouth back.

Silence taking over again, I think ahead. While we did a sloppy fucking job tonight—one that I'm goddamn ashamed of—we still got the job done. I was the one who fucked up—sending my boys in there practically blind. And my wife... Jesus Christ. She did good—understatement—but I was a shitty motherfucking leader.

*Thinking ahead...* Our plan is to hide out now. Liam's sending most of his boys back to the States—some to South America—and Dad's doing the same with his crew. Only a few of our closest are lingering in Europe. My crew and I, we're heading to Sweden. We're gonna lay low and see what Aro's next move is. Wherever he is right now, he'll be the recipient of some fucked-up news soon. His business in Berlin is gone. His business in Barcelona...

*Shit.*

"How did it go for the others?" I ask Eric, taking a peek in the rearview mirror. Bella's close to falling asleep, and both Kellan and Autumn are sleeping, too. For once, Kellan's light snores aren't annoying. They're just telling me he's still alive.

"Still waiting on word from Emmett," Eric mumbles, concentrating on something on the screen. "Uh, well, Carlisle took out the German cunt. The villa is completely burned to the ground. And..." He taps on a few keys as I process the good news. "Yeah, he—Garrett—says that Carlisle is done. Four villas. Your pops' crew's pretty big, so they spread out." I nod, listening, and switch lanes to pass a few slow fuckers. This is the Autobahn, people. No speed limit. "Ztano's dead, too. Liam clipped him."

"Thank fuck," I whisper under my breath.

Being the head of Aro's security, Ztano's death has to sting.

"Liam says they raided the estate before they left," Eric goes on. "His boys are going through documents on their way to Germany. From here, half of them will travel to the States again. They're flying out from Frankfurt as soon as cleanup is done in Berlin."

To say my cousin knows what he's doing would be the understatement of the year. "How many dead in total?" I swallow. "Have we lost anyone on our side?" *Other than James...*

Fuck, that's killing me a little.

He was a good man—a friend. Loyal, nice, sharp...

Young. He was only twenty-eight.

*He chose this life. He knew the risks.*

Yeah, not very comforting at the moment.

"Liam lost two guys," he whispers. I clench my jaw and tighten my hold on the wheel. "Carlisle didn't lose anyone. But they didn't meet resistance."

I clear my throat. "How many casualties on the other side?" Doing a mental calculation, I think I recall us getting fifteen fuckers or something...

"Um...Garrett's uploading the numbers right now." He hums. "And, like I said, we're still waiting for Emmett—or Ben—to contact us. Liam's number is eighteen."

That's...yeah, that's good. Eighteen Avellinos.

Shit, what if Uncle Ed knew about our fucking war? Maybe he *does* know.

If he's alive...

He's been missing for so long. Five months, nearly...

I don't even know if I believe he's alive anymore.

Seriously, why would Avellino keep him alive for months?

It doesn't make any sense.

"Okay, Garrett just messaged me," Eric says, "and Carlisle's number is fourteen. That's great—oh! Ben's back online." I pay more attention now, hoping everything went well for my brother. "They're leaving Barcelona right now—says they're gonna hide out in Nice for a few days." That's good. It doesn't take many hours to drive from Barcelona to southern France. Just over the mountains, across the border—where they hardly ever check for passports, honestly. "Shite, they lost two men, too. Oliver and Laurent."

I groan quietly and slam my right fist down on the wheel.

"But they got sixteen Avellinos, boss," he adds. "Aro's gonna blow when he finds out."

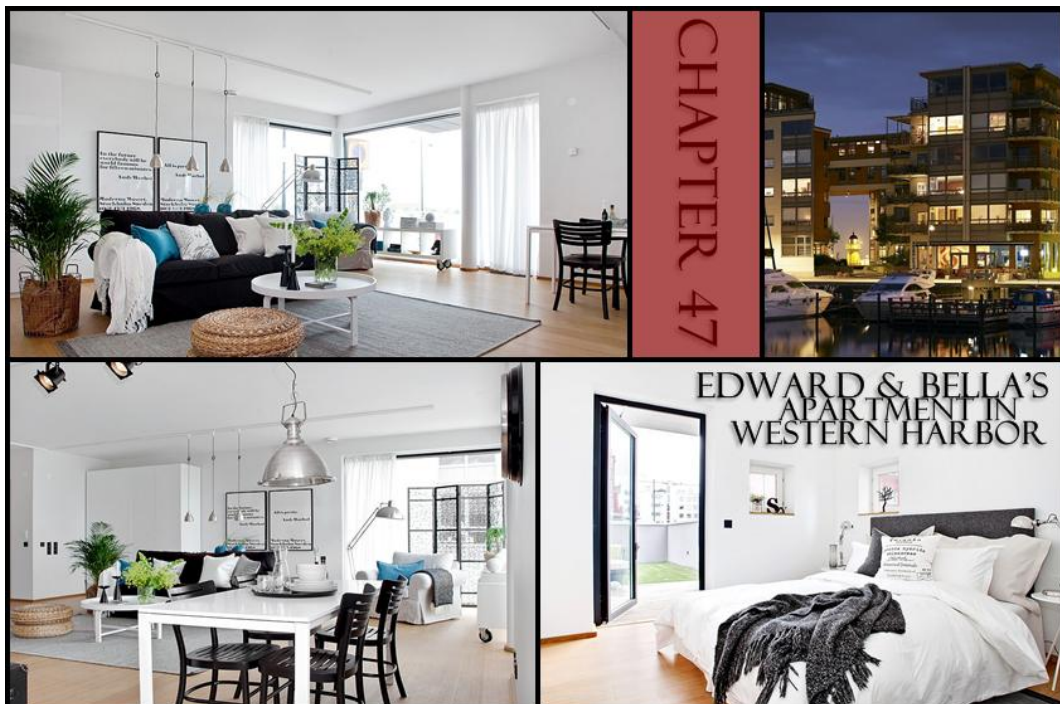
Shaking my head, I mutter, "Whatever—let's just get to Denmark, make sure Kellan's okay, and then head to Sweden. I'm fuckin' sick and tired of this."

These past few days...I just wanna go to sleep and wake up without remembering them.

# 47 – MALMÖ IN JULY

Beta'd by Lisa and pre-read by Kitty.

BPOV



"God, I'm so fucking fat!" Rose cried out and sat down by the kitchen table.

The living room and kitchen was basically one large open space, so Edward and I could see her from our spots on the living room couch.

We could also see Emmett taking out ice cream from our freezer.

Whistler laughed, never taking his eyes off the flat screen. "Yeah—you are, Rose."

*Jerk.*

I punched his bicep. "Be nice." Looking over at Rose, I added, "And you should grow up. You're five months pregnant—barely showing." Okay, she was actually showing a *lot*, but I wasn't going to tell her that. She still looked gorgeous.

"Why are you lying to her?" Whistler whispered in my ear. "She's huge—I bet she's carrying twins."

I gave him a look. "Says the shit that was born as a twelve-fucking-pounder."

*Poor Esme. Seriously.*

I hoped with all my heart that wasn't going to be me one day. Could you imagine? Twelve pounds! That was like two babies.

Edward and Emmett were both fatties when they were born, and after looking through their baby books, I also knew they didn't slim down until junior high. My husband was a chubby kid, cute as fuck.

"And here comes the feeder," Edward muttered, and we both watched as Emmett barreled toward the kitchen table with a bowl of ice cream for Rose. Actually, Rose wasn't the only one putting on weight. Emmett had



gained a few, too. Maybe sitting still for almost three months did that to you. Well, that and food. "Anyway, I'm gonna go take a shit." He kissed me on the lips and then jumped up. "Em, where's the newspaper?"

"The hallway table," Emmett replied, plopping down next to Rose. She was staring longingly at the ice cream. "Here you go, baby. Time to eat."

I grimaced and turned my head to the flat screen, where *The Boondock Saints* was playing.

When Rose joined us here in Malmö a few weeks ago, everything was suddenly about food. Emmett and Rose lived in the apartment right next to Whistler and me—we both had rooftop apartments—so whenever they ran outta food, they stomped in here to raid our fridge.

Edward may think they were having twins, but that wasn't true. They found out a while ago they were expecting a baby girl. And we were all over the moon, eager for the baby to join us. Okay, maybe not right now—with everything up in the air—but still. *We're excited.*

"Bro!" Edward shouted from the hall. "*This is the Swedish paper! I want the one Liam brought yesterday!*" Oh, right. Liam also lived here, but a floor down in his own apartment. "*Never mind—I found it!*"

"Why do we even have a Swedish newspaper?" I asked curiously. Whistler only knew a few phrases in Swedish, but that was hardly enough to understand a paper. After living in Sweden for almost three months now, I actually knew a few words, too.

*Weird fucking language, lemme tell ya.*

"I like that Elvis comic that comes every Sunday," Rose said around her spoon. "I use Google Translate to get it."

I snorted softly, amused...and still a little disgusted by her new behavior around food. Then again, I kinda expected I'd be the same when I got pregnant. However, right now, I couldn't really stand it. I had just been down with the flu for like three weeks straight, and it wasn't until now I'd recovered. These last few days had been great; Whistler and I were just chilling, taking it easy, sightseeing some, spending time with our family. Still, food made me a little queasy, so watching Rose scarf down meal after meal like it was her last day on earth...not awesome.

"What's for dinner?" Rose set down her ice cream bowl before sitting back and rubbing her belly. Emmett was also rubbing it, all while staring adoringly at his wife. "And who's coming?"

Making a bubble face, I did a mental head count of the people showing up at our apartment later. It wasn't a special day—a regular Monday—but a few family members arrived in Sweden last night. That included Carlisle, Esme, Tanya, and Garrett, all of who'd been laying low all over Europe in the past few months. At first, Esme and Tanya, as well as Rose, Nessa, Kate, Irina, and Alec...they'd all been in Seattle and then Texas. But as soon as Rose entered her second trimester, they all pretty much scattered, and at that point, Carlisle and Garrett were waiting for their wives in Spain.

"You, me, Whistler, Emmett... Liam, Eric, Autumn, Kellan, Sam..." I scrunched my nose, thinking. "Carlisle, Esme, Tanya, Garrett... Ben, Chris, Mac..." The last two were Liam's closest guys—both funny as hell.

I wished Alec and Nessa could be here, but they were at Whistler and my house in Bainbridge. Kate and Rina were with them, along with security. It'd been Liam's call. Since we were just a week or two from returning to London—where we expected a lot to go down—he decided he didn't want the kiddos close. Whistler and I agreed wholeheartedly, though we were

still relieved to hear that Eric wanted to keep Autumn close. She wasn't comfortable with many, mainly only our closest, and we were all here.

"You better make plenty of food," Rose muttered, chewing on her lip. She looked afraid—like there wouldn't be enough food for her.

"You're insane," I told her flatly.

"Hey." Emmett got a little defensive.

I cocked a brow just as Edward emerged from the bathroom down the hall.

"Whew!" He sat down next to me, grinning. "Someone should light a match in there." I shook my head at him, chuckling wryly. "So, what have I missed?"

I pointed at Rose and Em. "They're afraid I won't make enough food for dinner."

"Fuckin' freeloaders." He hugged me to him, both arms around me, but he spoke to his brother and sister-in-law. "Every day—every single fucking day—you come here, and my wife cooks for you. Show some appreciation or get the fuck outta my face."

He laid down the law, and I had to admit I was relieved. I loved Emmett and Rose more than words could describe, but it was getting a bit tedious tending to their every need. Like in previous locations, Edward and my place had turned into headquarters of some sort. We had people coming and going all the time. Now, since Kellan, Sam, Eric, and Autumn lived in a hotel about fifteen minutes from here, I preferred that they came here for dinner every day. It made them feel more like home, I hoped—some semblance of it, anyway. But Emmett and Rose had their own apartment, just as stocked and equipped as this one. Same went for Liam—who was

rooming with Chris and Mac—but even those three, all clichéd bachelors, knew how to work the fucking stove. Em and Rose? Not so much.

"I'm sorry." Rose's bottom lip quivered. "You're right—I just come here and expect you to serve me. I'm *so* sorry, Bella."

I waved her off, taking her pregnancy as an excuse. As long as they stopped demanding things, it was all good for me.

"She's pregnant," was what Emmett said, still a little defensive. "Is it so weird that she's not standing in the kitchen all day?"

*Whoa.*

"When has she *ever* slaved away in a fucking kitchen?" Whistler totally called him out. Even in London, I was the chef. Granted, Rose was helpful, but I was still the one who made sure there was food for everyone. "If neither of you can cook, then by all fucking means, go out—there are plenty of restaurants."

"Dude," Emmett huffed. "Are you not getting any? Is that why you're being all bitchy?"

"What the fuck?!" Edward shouted. "Who the hell do you think you are?"

"Emmett!" I was in disbelief, and this was starting to get out of hand. I got it; we were all bored, and we tended to take out our frustrations on each other. It had been three months since we saw real action, but what Emmett just implied was absolutely uncalled for. "First of all, how is that any of your goddamn business?" I asked, and Edward glared at his brother. "And second of all, consider my kitchen closed."

"Emmett," Rose said quietly, "maybe we should leave."

Edward nodded. "Yeah, I think that's best. Get the fuck out, bro."

Squeezing my eyes shut, I buried my face in Whistler's armpit. I kinda sniffed it—just to be safe, ya know?

"You're both overreacting," Emmett grunted, and I looked up. He was helping Rose out of the chair.

My husband just snapped his fingers and pointed toward the hallway.

With an internal sigh, I stayed quiet until they had left.

"Thank Christ," he mumbled once we were alone. At the same time, he tightened his hold on me and nuzzled my neck. "Ungrateful people—"

"Hey," I said softly and kissed his shoulder. It made me wish there wasn't a t-shirt in the way. Or those pajama bottoms, for that matter. We were both dressed for comfort. "That went too far—all of it."

He hummed, not saying anything more on the topic, and pulled a blanket over us.

I giggled a little when he blew a raspberry against my cheek. His stubble tickled, too.

"We're not alone enough," he whined as he dropped kisses on my face. I could barely see him; the blanket was too thick to let any light shine through. "I'm so sick of all this, you know?"

I nodded, knowing all about it. While we'd been staying in one place for months now, all we had accomplished was talking. God, we had talked, speculated, and planned so much. All of us. Crews gathered, either in the same place or over secure lines on the phone, we had gone through options and situations, but nothing had been *really* hammered out.

Neither of us expected us to lie low for so long. On the contrary, we had been sure that Aro was going to make his move quickly. Alas, that shit

didn't happen. So much of his "empire" had crumbled, yet he remained silent. Not only that, but we had no clue where he was hiding.

Eric, Ben, and Garrett kept working, kept looking, and both Liam and Carlisle had sent out a few of their guys at times, in an attempt to track down what was left of Avellino. But no luck. It wasn't until last week when Garrett told us that Aro's wife had been spotted at Heathrow, London's biggest airport. And it was all thanks to Garrett's "friend" who was working at Interpol that we found out about this.

It was a very public move made by Aro, or at least that was what Edward and the other guys were speculating about. And it was why we were all heading back to London soon. We needed to take the chance—simple as that. But that was all we knew for sure—that we were leaving.

Meanwhile, the American authorities wanted to bring us all in for questioning.

They just couldn't find us.

We weren't worried about that, though, 'cause they didn't have anything on us. At least nothing that could stick and lead to actual arrests. Probable cause, Carlisle and Garrett told us. That was it, but no solid proof. We had covered our tracks too well for that.

*Even if they did have evidence... I'll be damned if I'm going to stop now.*

Too much had been lost for us to call it quits at this point. We had lost Seth...James...and that was only from Edward's crew—not counting Adam, that goddamn rat. Liam and Emmett had lost men, too. It was all devastating; we couldn't even give them proper burials. The only thing we could do was honor their memory. Which we did. When we arrived here in Malmö those months ago, we sat down and talked a lot. We spoke of Seth, we spoke of James, we toasted to them...we remembered them.

That had been a night full of both laughter and tears.

Maybe the men didn't cry, but I sure did. However, even they got misty-eyed and emotional. It was heartbreaking, and it didn't matter that James and Seth had chosen this life.

It also made us more determined to see this through. It wasn't so much about finding Ed anymore. Truth be told, I was pretty sure my husband doubted he was even alive. Too much time had passed. But, regardless, there was no way we'd give up now. We wanted Aro Avellino's head.

I didn't know about the other men, but both Whistler and I had hardened over the past six months.

With each other, we were still Whistler—my Irish boy—and Princess; I was his little hellcat, but with the rest... Business was business, no place for the weak and faint-hearted.

It had been so long since it was only about stealing cars—chasing that rush. Now, for months, it had all been about revenge and retribution.

"You're frowning," Edward whispered, which brought me back to the present. His lips were ghosting over the spot between my eyebrows. "I don't like it." He Eskimoed me.

That made me smile.

"Better." He kissed me softly. "What were you thinking about?"

I sighed softly and hitched my leg over him. "That I love you?" I straddled him under the blanket and kissed his nose.

"Liar." He chuckled quietly and squeezed my hips. Meanwhile, it was getting awfully hot under here. "Tell me, baby." With a quick movement, he had the blanket pooling around us, by my lower back and his sides. "Is

everything okay?" He looked so concerned all of a sudden that I kinda fell more in love with him. If such a thing was possible.

"Under the circumstances, things are great." I nipped at his bottom lip. "I promise."

He nipped right back and mumbled against my lips, "I don't like 'under the circumstances'. I want you to be happy, period."

"We'll get there, Whistler." I was feeling emotional—pretty suddenly, just like that, and I didn't understand it. "But no matter what, I wouldn't change a thing if it meant I couldn't be with you." That was sappy but very true. "I love you—you're my man."

He sorta giggled, actually. And then he poked my tit. "I love you, too, princess. My woman." He sighed contentedly, hugging me tightly. "Know what I wanna do now—before our family gets here and shit gets crazy again?"

I shook my head.

He hummed and pecked my lips quickly. "I wanna fuck you slowly."

Jesus. "*Jesus*," I breathed out, an unexpected shiver coursing through me. With the tension shifting, the bad in my life disappeared. No sad thoughts or worries. We were in, like, some bubble, and I fucking loved it. "Right here?" He was already going for my tank top. And all he did was nod, lust clouding his eyes.

Lifting my arms above my head, he pushed the top off, only to go for my pajama bottoms next. I squirmed around over him, helping him, and myself, to get these cockblocking bottoms off me. And he was next. Between kisses and slow touches—fiery roaming—we got naked on the couch.



"Christ—these..." He hovered over me on the couch, his thick cock hard, heavy, and aligned with my pussy, and his lips brushing over my left nipple. "I fucking love your new body." With a low, lust-filled groan, he pushed himself inside of me.

I knew he loved my "new" body. Admittedly, I did, too.

December in Costa Rica, Seattle, Chicago... January and February in Rome, March and April in London, Dublin, Berlin... Our lives were hectic, and I had lost too much weight. I never really noticed it until I got here. But once I did, I saw what Edward had already seen—I'd gotten fucking skinny. So, I put myself on a strict diet, slowly but surely gaining ten pounds...and then another five.

I had filled out. Our location had also given me an even and pretty tan. It was summer, and I often took advantage of our rooftop terrace. Also, behind our building, we had this beautiful boardwalk overlooking the sound between Sweden and Denmark—Copenhagen was so close, you could actually see it. I loved sitting there, reading books or just talking shit with Edward...sometimes I took Autumn there, sometimes Rose and I were there...

"Spectacular fuckin' tits," he mumbled around a constricted nipple.

I chuckled, a little outta breath, and threaded my fingers through his hair.

Then I hissed in pleasure, all but overcome by the sensational feeling of his mouth sucking on my tits.

His thrusts were slow, deep, and purposeful.

His defined muscles flexed when I dragged my fingernails across his back.

"God, so good," I whimpered, pushing into his touch.

I could practically picture the arch of my spine.

"How long..." He released a breath then swallowed. Slow kisses up my chest brought his lips to mine. They ghosted over as he went on. "When do you need to start dinner?"

I grinned. "Hungry?"

"For once? No." He let out a breathy laugh and ground into my pussy. "I was just...*fuck*." I bit his upper lip. "Just wondering if I can keep this up for a couple hours—if we have time."

"Couple hours?" I giggled breathlessly and snuck a hand between us. As he pulled out, I slipped my hand down to grip the base of his fat cock. "Keep *this* up?" I squeezed.

He smirked and nodded, pushing my hand away before he thrust in again.

This morning, he'd surprised me in the shower. Maybe that was why this was so unhurried. We were content to just...*fuck* slowly. There was no chase.

"We have time," I moaned. "Do you want..." I laughed a little, something that made Whistler groan. "If you want, I can get you an energy bar or somethin'."

That was a joke. Last month when we celebrated his twenty-fifth birthday, I teased him about now officially being closer to thirty than twenty. It was all in good fun, obviously, since he was still fucking young.

"Oh, baby girl." His chuckle was full of promise, husky and dark. "Trust. I don't need a fucking..." He didn't even finish his sentence. Instead he pulled out of me, sat back against the couch, and pointed to his cock. "Sit on it."

I smirked...slowly, seductively, gracefully, making my way to him. Only, I didn't sit on him. I kneeled between his legs, on the floor, and licked the underside of his glistening erection.

"Fuck me," he whispered, brushing the pad of his thumb across his bottom lip. "So hot, princess." I sucked him in completely, making his hips buck into me. "Jesus!" Deep-throating wasn't my specialty, but, for once, I relaxed my throat instinctively to bring him deeper. "Amazing," he moaned. Looking up, I saw that he had his head tilted back. His Adam's apple bobbed as I slid my hands up his muscular thighs. Curses followed in Irish when I cupped his balls.

I tasted us both on him.

His hips thrust slowly upward, fluid motions, and his right hand found the back of my head.

"Bella...oh, shite..."

I hummed around him as he caressed my hollowed-out cheek. By now, he was staring at me intently.

"Okay, stop." He scrubbed his hands over his face. "It's my turn—get up here."

After giving the tip of his cock a wet kiss, I crawled up his body, my tits rubbing against his chest. He blew out a breath, right before he claimed my mouth in a hungry kiss.

"I could just fucking eat you up," he moaned, hands roaming my upper body.

"You could," I agreed as I sank down on him. I grinned and pecked his nose. "But not now—later." I had amused him. His eyes, though dark and feral, twinkled with laughter that he kept bottled up inside of him. He was

so fucking sexy, but at the same time—as he was all man, rugged and undoubtedly manly—my Whistler had something boyish about him. "I love you."

He touched my cheek and leaned his forehead to mine. "It's mutual." Those were my words—words I used to say when he still wasn't sure about my feelings. It was always mutuality he wanted, and he definitely had it now. He'd had it for longer than he believed.

"Fuck." I swiveled my hips, taking him as deep as I could. "You feel..." so *fucking good*.

I felt so aware—almost too aware—of everything he did. Like, I was over-sensitive or something.

I closed my eyes.

"So do you," he whispered and kissed my jaw. When his strong hands moved up my sides, and then slid further up to push my tits together, I could swear I felt it deep inside of me. "God, you're so fucking beautiful." He said it like it was a bad thing, like he was complaining, but when I opened my eyes again, I saw it wasn't like that at all. It was more...um, like he was getting ravenous, or...*I don't know*...like he couldn't help himself around me, like what-are-you-doing-to-me. It was hard to explain.

For a while, with his hands gripping my hips, he guided our movements.

Our pace changed.

At times, we grew too excited and demanding for slow and steady. That was when he pushed me back against the couch and slammed his cock deep inside my pussy. It was a heavy pounding that'd leave bruises on both of us. His grip was firm, a little painful, and more than a little arousing. And while he pounded, pounded, pounded, I cried out and dug

my nails into his shoulder blades. In return, he hissed and fucked me like it was a punishment. Though, it never was. I was just as insatiable and voracious. But then it changed again. We got too close to climaxing, so we changed positions again. Straddling him once more, my back to his chest, we were back to slow and deep. He focused solely on me—my tits and pussy. I moaned and let my head loll back onto his shoulder, all while he rubbed my clit in persistent circles.

I felt feverish, flushed, and like I was about to explode—like I needed to scream.

Which triggered another round of forceful fucking.

"Fuck!" he groaned, shoving his cock inside of me. He was kneeling on the floor, hands under my ass—an ass that was barely touching the couch—and I had my legs wrapped around his hips. Said hips were moving quickly in rapid thrusts. "Too good, too fucking good."

I didn't know how much time had passed, but I did know that we probably weren't returning to unhurried again. A light sheen of sweat covered our moving bodies. We were basically a panting mess, and now we were definitely chasing. I could see it in my husband's eyes. The urgency, the sheer need, the raw hunger, it was all there.

I definitely mirrored him.

I was right there, on that edge, aching for my orgasm. Insides coiled, blood rushing, pulse quickening, breaths shallow, I prepared myself for the assault of pleasure he was about to deliver. After all, he always fucking did. He always got me there.

"Oh, *God*," I cried, screwing my eyes shut. I threw my head back, my back arched, my heels dug into his ass, and then I was gone. I was so

gone. The orgasm surged through me, like blazing fucking fire, and I couldn't function to save my life.

Though the wet sounds of our fucking, through the ringing in my ears, and over my heartbeat I swore I could hear, Edward came a few seconds after I started to. I recognized his erratic and hard thrusts, his grunts that slipped out through gritted teeth, the curses he spat out, and the pressure he applied on my clit—no rubbing, just a downward push that prolonged my state of orgasmic bliss.

"My fucking God," I gasped, blinking.

Whistler, who was panting, collapsed on the floor between the couch and the coffee table.

Pulling the blanket over me, I dropped back on the couch and peered down at the hubby. "You alive?" I giggled.

He laughed through heavy breathing, said nothing, but gave me two thumbs up.

\*O\*O\*O\*

"Jesus Christ, you two!" I threw up my hands in frustration, and I really was frustrated. *But...*it was also fucking amusing. Whistler and Liam had grown very close over the past few months, and now I had them both in my kitchen, being too fucking goofy. See, I was cooking. *They* were being their criminal selves and trying to steal the side dishes I was preparing.

Our living room was packed with people by now, and Liam and Edward had helped me a lot with setting the tables, bringing drinks for everyone, and carrying in whatever I had finished. Earlier, they had also—along with Kellan and Eric—set up tables. Our apartment wasn't really big—just two bedrooms—and since the living room was sorta adjoined with the rather small kitchen, we made do with eating in there. Liam's kitchen table was

here, as was Emmett and Rose's. And we had bought two extra tables that we kept in the basement of the building. Well, now they were here, obviously.

"We're hungry," Whistler said, playfully nibbling on my cheek. He was standing behind me, trying to sneak his hand around me to steal pieces of mozzarella that I was slicing. "Anything we can do to help?"

"No." I giggle-snorted when he tickled my side. "I don't trust you with this anymore—you're just gonna take the food for yourself."

"Oi!" Liam exclaimed. "Yer lack of trust in us is insulting, ye little heartbreaker."

I stuck out my tongue at him.

He winked.

I shook my head, amused, and Edward opened the fridge to take out two Murphy's.

"Cheers." Liam accepted his, opened the bottle with a lighter, and then clinked his bottle with Edward's. "So, Eddie..." His smirk told me what was next, and I wanted to whine and bitch. "When did ye put on yer corduroy britches?"

I facepalmed and returned to slicing the mozzarella.

*Just to be clear, my husband is certainly not wearing anything made of corduroy.*

He was wearing army green cargo shorts and a white t-shirt. Oh, and a Red Sox baseball cap—backward.

As for the "corduroy britches"...it was from a song that they were currently singing to pieces. Seriously, it was like the song had gotten stuck in their

heads or something. Every day, almost, they sang it. Eric, too. It was those three—thick as, well, thieves.

"In 1841!" Whistler answered, and then he began singing. "In 1841, I put my corduroy britches on, I put my corduroy britches on, to work upon the railway." Liam joined in. "Fe-le-me-oh-re-oh-re-ay, fe-le-me-oh-re-oh-re-ay, fe-le-me-oh-re-oh-re-ay, to work upon the railway."

Liam's verse was next, and that was when Tanya and Esme joined me, both chuckling at the singing boys. Edward was drumming his fingers against the kitchen island, and Liam was tapping his foot and clapping his hands.

"In 1842, I left the old world for the new—Eric! Get yer arse to the kitchen!" Liam stopped his singing to shout out for Eric. Both Edward and Liam sang the chorus. "Fe-le-me-oh-re-oh-re-ay, fe-le-me-oh-re-oh-re-ay, fe-le-me-oh-re-oh-re-ay, to work upon the railway."

"You need any help, Allannah?" Tanya snickered.

I shook my head, unable to hide my grin.

"I'm here!" Eric bellowed, joining us in the kitchen to take the next verse. "In 1843, 'twas then I met sweet biddy McGee, an elegant wife she made for me, while working on the railway." While they all sang together, I brought two bowls of salad and bread rolls to the living room...where I noticed everyone had pretty much ceased all talk to listen to the three Irish boys in the kitchen. "Fe-le-me-oh-re-oh-re-ay, fe-le-me-oh-re-oh-re-ay, fe-le-me-oh-re-oh-re-ay, to work upon the railway."

Autumn and I laughed as she followed me out to the kitchen again. This time, Carlisle tagged along, too, and he did the following verse with Liam.

"In 1846, they pelted me with stones and bricks. I was in an awful fix from working on the railway." Christ, they were loud! And even more so



when we now had four men on the chorus. "Fe-le-me-oh-re-oh-re-ay, fe-le-me-oh-re-oh-re-ay, fe-le-me-oh-re-oh-re-ay, to work upon the railway."

Eric wore a sad face for his lyrics, one that they all mirrored. "In 1847, sweet biddy McGee, she went to heaven..."

I tuned out as I announced dinner was ready.

For some reason, that made the guys sing louder, all while laughing now.

My husband looked so happy. "In 1848, I learned to drink my whisky straight, an elegant drink that can't be beat, for working on the railway-"

"Enough, baby!" I was in stitches as I pulled out his chair at the head of the table, ready to just push him down. "Sit down!"

"Buzzkill! We were almost done." He kissed me sloppily, soundly, and plopped down in his seat, rubbing his hands together at the sight of all the food. "Fuck me, this is a feast!"

"We have all night, cuz," Liam declared, sitting down. I threw him a playful scowl, at which he raised his beer to me. For the umpteenth time, I shook my head in amusement. "There'll be more singin'."

"That's what we're afraid of, dear nephew of mine," Esme laughed. She was sitting at the table Liam had brought, which was right next to ours. Garrett, Carlisle, and Tanya sat there, too. At my table, we had Edward at the head, then Liam and me on either side of Whistler, Eric next to Liam, and Autumn next to me. After the next table came Ben, Emmett, Rose, Chris, Mac, Kellan, and Sam.

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Dinner was a loud affair, full of catching up with those who just arrived here, and just like Liam promised, more singing followed. Especially a couple hours later when we left our neighborhood and walked toward a British pub we often visited. I wouldn't have minded going to an Irish pub...if Malmö had had one.

Our part of the city—*don't ask me what the Swedish name for it is*—was called Western Harbor, and it was kinda like an island. See, there was this channel that circled the city, so there were a few small bridges to cross. Anyway, we walked there—Whistler had his arm draped over my shoulders, a beer in his free hand—and the men sang and acted like kids. And in the meantime, I spoke to Esme and Tanya, who were walking next to us.

"It's a beautiful city," Tanya commented.

"It is," I agreed. "Not much to do, but..." I chuckled. Truth was, Malmö was nice but pretty boring. Whistler and I had been around some; we'd seen a few parks, walked along the shopping street, gone to a few malls, visited a few museums... One day the two of us took Autumn out; we went shopping, ate at McDonald's, and visited a water park. That was kinda fun, and next weekend we were planning to take her to an amusement park, too.

"That's because you and my son need constant action," Esme said with a wry grin.

By now, we had reached Central Station, and we only had one more bridge to walk over before we reached Bishop's Arms—the pub we liked to go to.

"You talkin' shit about me, Ma?" Edward asked, a cigarette dangling between his lips. He was definitely tipsy. "That's not nice, I'll have you know."

"Okay, baby," I laughed. "Go back to singing with your pop." I even reached up and tilted his face in the other direction, but hey, it worked. A second later, a new song began, belted by Whistler, Carlisle, Garrett, Liam, and Eric. Kellan and Sam were walking a few feet ahead of us, laughing at their buddies, and I was happy to see that Kellan wasn't limping anymore. He still complained about his shoulder being sore at times, but his leg was back to perfect.

When we reached Bishop's Arms, we all knew what to do. Over time, the two bartenders, who were actually English, just grinned and waved hello as we stomped in and yelled out our orders. They knew us.

Then we walked upstairs, scaring away the patrons occupying the small second floor with how loud we were.

"My lap, princess!" Edward sat down and pointed to his lap, and I ended up there, as usual. "I wish you wore a skirt—easy access." Those words weren't whispered. Even Emmett and Rose, who sat down in a booth several feet away, heard him. So did Tanya and Garrett who sat down next to them. "But these shorts are hot, too—those fuckin' legs of yours!" He squeezed them.

"Jesus!" I hissed; meanwhile, I was laughing on the inside. But come on, his parents were seated right across from us. Eric, Autumn, and Liam were here, too.

And our night continued.

I drank my beloved Briska pear cider—that I cursed because it didn't exist outside of Sweden, and I was going to fucking miss it—and did a few double shots of Baileys with Esme. The men drank beer, stout, whatever, and it was so nice to have most of us gathered again. If only Alec and Nessa could be here...

"I gotta piss!" Whistler bellowed a while later, causing me to cringe at the volume. "And then I need a smoke." I stood up so that he could slide out of the booth, and I wasn't surprised to see Carlisle, Ben, Liam, and Eric following him. People say women go to the bathroom in groups, but...

As several guys vacated the seats around us, Tanya and Rose walked over and sat down with Esme and me. Autumn was currently a few feet away, sitting on Kellan's lap. She was too fucking cute. Hell, they both were.

"I wish I could drink alcohol, too." Rose pouted and sipped her Fanta.

I grinned and raised a shot glass of Baileys. "I'll drink this one for you, Ro." I blew her a kiss before I threw back the drink. "Phew! *Delicious.*" I smacked my lips.

She gave me a fuck-you smile, and then we cracked up.

"All right, all right," Esme said, interrupting. Leaning over the table, she went on in a hushed tone. "Now that the boys aren't here, can you tell us anything, Bella?"

I knew she was talking about our plans, and since I was the only woman active in a crew, they probably figured I had deets to share. Not that Carlisle and Garrett kept a lot secret, but I probably did know more. However, I wasn't sure a pub was the place to divulge information.

Though, there was one little thing I could say. "You know the bugs Edward and I planted at the club in London back in April?" I inquired, also keeping my voice low. They nodded. "They're paying off." Eric was keeping tabs, and though we never managed to plant bugs on the second floor, where we assumed major business was taken care of, the few we had planted were still giving us little tidbits of intel. The corner booth in that club, where Edward had attached one device, was giving us the most. We figured it was Avellino low-men who conducted business there since it was

so public, but we had found out that a man named Luca was coming to London soon. We would've dismissed this if it weren't for the way they spoke about this man—like he was some big shot.

The bug I had left in the ladies' room had also paid off, if only a little. Many of the Avellino associates brought girlfriends to the club, and more often than not, these girls ended up in the ladies' room at one point during the night. A few words here and there—gossip to the girls—meant a lot. For instance, one coked-up girl had giggled about how hot a man had been—a man she'd met when her boyfriend took her to Tuscany. And this was Aro's main estate's location.

Maybe we were grasping at straws, but we had to do *something*.

So...someone named Luca was arriving in London soon, and Aro's wife had been seen at Heathrow. It made us hope something was going on, and that it would give us a window to act.

"I'll tell you more later," I told them. "I think I'm gonna grab a smoke, too."

When I got downstairs, I saw several of our people by the bar, Liam being one of them, and he hugged me to him and said that Edward and Carlisle were still outside smoking.

"Can I get ye anythin', me darlin'?"

I smiled. "Yes, please. A pear cider and—"

He laughed, cutting me off. "And a double shot—a six of Baileys." He winked.

"You just *know* me!" I squealed, a bit tipsy myself. I mock-punched his chest when he hugged me again, and then I jumped up and kissed his cheek before I headed out. I needed me some sexy Whistler now.

Both Edward and Carlisle had their backs to me as I walked out.

It was obvious that they hadn't noticed me.

"You should tell her," Carlisle was saying.

My husband shook his head no. "I'm takin' that to the grave." He exhaled some smoke, tilting his head back a little. "Change the subject—I'm done talking about motherfucker, Pop. He's dead—gone."

My brows furrowed at that, and I stopped my approach.

"You don't think she's gonna find out?" Carlisle was incredulous. "Son..." He sighed. "It's only a matter of time. I'm actually surprised she hasn't found out yet."

*Found out what?*

*Are they referring to me?*

"When she finds out..." Edward shrugged a little. "I'll come up with something—I don't know. But..." He chuckled humorlessly. "She'd hate me, Dad. If she found out I was the prick who had her father clipped..."

I choked on a gasp, my hands flying to my mouth.

My sound didn't go unnoticed, and two sets of wide eyes found me.

I wasn't breathing as my mind spun—as I tried to puzzle shit together.

"Princess..." Edward didn't look drunk anymore. Instead he looked nervous as hell. "What—what did you hear?"

I shook my head quickly, trying to clear it. "You..." All the air left my lungs in a whoosh. "You had my dad killed?"

He couldn't look guiltier if he tried.

## 48 – LONDON IN AUGUST

**Beta'd by Lisa and pre-read by Kitty.**

### **BPOV**

"I don't understand how cops do this," I muttered, looking through the lens of my camera. "All day...just scoping, casing—so boring."

Liam laughed quietly.

"No, seriously." I shook my head and slumped back in my seat. "We've been here for ten hours now." And "here" was outside Aro's club in London. It was just Liam and me, sitting in this fucking car...getting fat on greasy food and snacks. Not only had we been here for ten hours today, but this was actually day five. Day seven in all—here in London—but day five outside this goddamn club. "I'm tired." Admittedly, our constant watching had paid off. We knew who Luca was now—one of Aro's closest, but that was about it, and we hadn't seen him today. That was, like, three days ago.

"Well, it's time to head back anyway," Liam said, then made a bubble face, thinking. He pointed to the camera. "Can I have the SD card, sweetheart?" I nodded and took it out for him. After sticking it into the chest pocket of his black button-down, he started the car and pulled away. "You can text yer husband and tell'im we're on our way."

I scowled and brought out my phone.

**Liam and I are on our way back, boss. –I.M.C.**

I'd made it clear to him—*him*, that goddamn husband of mine—that this was all work, business. Regarding everything else, we weren't on speaking terms—we hadn't been for over a week.

Our last week in Sweden...we screamed a lot. We argued, fought...he tried different approaches to get me to forgive him. Alas, that wasn't happening. No way. He was such a fucking asshole. He had admitted that it was never his intention to tell me the truth about Charlie's death; he confessed he was going to make up some bullshit story for me.

That hurt the most. Kinda. Okay, it was one of the two things that hurt the most. The second being the fact that he made a too-major decision without even giving a shit about what I thought. I mean...killing my own dad?

I knew it hadn't been Edward who had pulled that trigger, but after the hit on Charlie had been issued—*months* ago, mind you—Edward had the choice to save him or let him go. Once again, Edward had been brutally honest; he'd said that it wouldn't have been hard to save Charlie, to send out security to keep him safe in Forks, but in the end, Edward didn't want it. So...he'd played God, a fucking executioner, and stood by while Avellinos murdered Charlie in the house I grew up in.

Truthfully, I wasn't sad about Charlie's death. I'd come to terms with the fact that he'd turned into a man I wanted nothing to do with, but... The man had still been my father—a good one, or so I thought, for approximately seventeen years and eleven months. 'Cause the fact remained: I'd never been aware of his deceitful ways until Edward had entered my life, and therefore...I had plenty of good memories of my father. Despite poverty and difficult times, he was a good dad in my eyes...*before I knew better, that is.*

He had no right to kill Charlie, but he did, knowing full well that it was a decision of his that I'd never agree with.

Throughout that final week of ours in Sweden, I'd tried to make him understand. I'd tried to make him see, but it was fucking impossible.



Edward couldn't understand why I cared, which just pissed me off further. He wasn't even sorry. Edward, he wasn't sorry, and he had no regrets.

So, when we were getting ready to leave Sweden...

*"You know what?" I spun around to face him. "Fuck it. Don't even talk to me. You clearly don't get it, and I'm sick of trying. Just don't..." I waved him off and carried my bags to the hallway. "Don't talk to me."*

*"Bella!" He was incredulous. "Don't walk away from me—we're gonna settle this!"*

*"Don't walk away from you?!" I shouted. "Who the fuck do you think you are-"*

*"Your husband!" he yelled angrily, cutting me off. "I'm your goddamn husband, and you're not walking away from me!"*

*I stared at him, astonished, appalled, furious... "You've changed," I stated flatly. "This new version..." I was disgusted. This wasn't the man I'd married, and honestly, I refused to believe he'd actually changed this much. Something must've happened or something... I had no idea, but talking to Edward now, when he was being this way, there was no use.*

*With a shake of my head, I left him there and continued packing my stuff.*

*Edward didn't follow.*

Since then, we only spoke when it was about work. I was on his crew and he was my boss. That was not to say he hadn't tried talking to me, but I always shut him down. He'd yelled, pleaded, begged...once he tried to hug me and kiss me... I just couldn't.

Eventually, we'd move on from this, but I was far from ready. Like I said, I wasn't really mourning Charlie's death, but that didn't mean I'd wanted

him dead. And I definitely didn't want my own husband to believe he could kill anyone who'd "wronged" me. Because that was his one and only argument; he claimed over and over again that Charlie didn't deserve me.

When I got a text from the man in question, I was brought back to the present where I was in a car with Liam, on our way back to Bayswater. Not that we were living in our old flat; that was too risky, in case the Avellinos had found our address while we were gone. But we were still in that neighborhood, only now we lived in a hotel a few streets away.

### **Understood. –E.R.C.**

Just as I was about to pocket my phone, another text came through.

### **I love you. –E.R.C.**

I shook my head and tucked away my phone.

Love wasn't our problem. His idiocy was. Before I was able to even begin to forgive him, he needed to understand that he'd hurt my fucking feelings when he discarded them. Because that was what he'd done. When he made the decision to have that hit on Charlie go through, he didn't give two shits about what I'd think—how I'd feel.

Oh, and before I forgave him, it would be nice if he actually apologized and knew what he was apologizing *for*.

I knew our world. As a man, Edward had the right to make all decisions. There was nothing I could do. He could lie, cheat, steal, kill, and I, personally, wouldn't be able to do anything in return. *But...*if that was what he wanted to do, then he shouldn't have promised me to be honest—at all times. No one made him promise me all that, but he did, and he took a huge shit on all those vows.

Before our world was turned upside down, Edward had told me he didn't agree with the American laws; he wanted a husband and wife to be equals. So, why did he now act as if he believed the opposite?

"What's with the sad face, darlin'?" Liam asked, first giving me a sideways glance and then checking the rearview mirror. "Missin' me cousin, eh?" He flashed me a quick smirk. "Ye could just talk to him."

Liam was Switzerland.

He actually punched Edward in the face after he learned the truth, but that pretty much settled things for him. Now he was with us both. Meanwhile...Edward's bruise had healed, whereas mine hadn't. I was still hurt and pissed over what my husband had done.

"Or not," I said wryly. "What's with your own face—you're frowning."

His frown deepened when he glanced in the rearview mirror again. "I think we're bein' followed. Call Eddie for me and request a tail. Know what that means?"

Nodding quickly, I pulled out my phone again and hit dial on Edward's number.

I expected to be nervous, but...

*"Something wrong, princess?"*

"We're being followed," I said, peering around my seat. It was close to midnight, so I couldn't really tell what I was supposed to be looking at. Central London at night was pretty much as heavily trafficked as it was during rush hour. "Liam, is it just one?" He nodded. "Yeah, one car. We need a tail."

I heard Edward cursing up a storm in the background as he told Eric to locate us on the GPS. "Where do you want the tail?" he asked in a rush. I knew he was worried about me; I could hear it. "Kellan and Sam are ready to go."

"Where, Liam?" I looked to him.

"I'm going through Hyde Park," he told me, keeping an eye on the rearview mirror. "Tell whoever to intercept around Albert Hall, and then I'll try to shake this one in Knightsbridge."

After repeating Liam's words to Edward, I added, "Tell Kellan to call me when he's close. We won't try to disappear until Kellan and Sam are tailing the other one." Okay, this went without saying, really. "Oh, make sure they bring bugs." Liam nodded in approval at that.

*"Good call, baby,"* Edward chuckled. *"Ask Liam if he's following, too."*

"Are we on the tail once we're free?" I asked Liam.

He nodded and made a turn for the park. "Aye. I wanna track this. You're strapped, eh?"

"Yeah," I responded, tapping the glove compartment where I had my Glock and two knives. I also had my butterfly knife strapped to my bicep. "Edward, we're on this, too."

I could head the heavy breath he released. *"Um, all right. Just..."*

"We'll be careful," I assured him. To be honest, I wasn't worried. We were just going to find out where the car headed without taking action. "Gotta go. Tell Sam and Kellan to hurry."

About ten minutes later, we were passing Royal Albert Hall, and it was at that exact time Kellan called me.

"Where are you?" was my greeting. By now, I could see the black convertible that was following us. Its tinted windows made it impossible to see into it, though, and the top was up, too.

*"We were stuck in traffic in the park," he grunted. "We're on the other side now. Where're you at?"*

"We just passed Albert Hall," I told him.

"Tell—is it Ford?" Liam asked, and I nodded. "Right, well, tell him we're driving down Queen's Gate. I want him behind us before we reach Cromwell Road."

Once I'd relayed the info to Kellan, he told us they were taking a shortcut. If everything went according to plan, they'd intercept at Museum Lane, the small street behind the Natural History Museum.

"This has to work," I muttered and ran a hand through my hair. Liam had slowed down a little to allow our guys a chance to catch up. "It's only a matter of time before they start thinking we know they're there." A few more turns would make them believe we were running in circles on purpose. Checking to my left, I scanned the streets for any sign of Kellan and Sam. Just when I was about to call him again, I saw the familiar SUV and told Liam, "Okay, there they are." I pointed. Kellan and Sam saw us and nodded subtly as we drove past.

Now I was kinda glad they drove on the wrong side of the road here in England, 'cause it was easy for Sam—who was driving—to just sweep in after the black convertible that was following us a few cars back.

I typed out a quick text to Kellan with the details on the car—color, make, and license plate number included.

"All right, here we go," Liam said, revving the engine of our own SUV.

He was quick to maneuver us through the heavy traffic, taking sharp turns onto side streets. There was nothing subtle about it, and whoever was in the convertible knew we were trying to shake him now, of course. It took a while, but we finally lost him somewhere in South Kensington; meanwhile, Kellan and Sam had managed to follow expertly and were now tailing the convertible.

*What goes around comes around, motherfucker.*

"Want me to call Kellan again?" I asked as I lit up a smoke and rolled down my window.

"Please." He lit one up, too, as I dialed. "I'll call Eddie and report back. Bet he's going nuts." He laughed a little and took out his phone.

I did the same, sans laughing.

*"Whaddup, Mrs. C?"*

I chuckled at Kellan. "You're so gangsta', Mr. Ford." He laughed. "Where are you?"

*"We're following him along the river. I think he's gonna cross."*

"Toward the Thames," I whispered to Liam; he was on the phone with Edward but still heard me. "We'll catch up, Kellan." I exhaled some smoke. "Text or call if anything happens."

*"Got it."*

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Twenty minutes later, we were still following the convertible, and Kellan's guess had proved to be correct. The car crossed Tower Bridge before Liam and I had caught up, and now...now we were in Bermondsey.

"Finally," Liam muttered as the convertible seemed to slow down. "Can ye look up this neighborhood, luv?" He handed me his Vertu, which was more advanced than mine. His looked just like Edward's; it was more like a miniature computer. "I need to know there's no back street or something, 'cause we can't exactly follow with the cars."

"You gotta unlock it, though." I grinned and held out the Vertu again. Just like all our phones, Liam was the only one who could use his. The menu button only reacted to the print of his thumb. Otherwise, it shut down. Anyway, Liam pressed the button, and I quickly looked up Jamaica Road and Bevington Street.

In my periphery, I could see the convertible taking a right, but Liam didn't follow. Kellan and Sam, who were now behind us, didn't follow either. Feeling a sense of urgency, I quickly glanced up at the street sign and then compared it to the map I had on the Google app.

"Waterside Close," I mumbled, zooming in on the map. A sigh of relief slipped through my lips. "One-way street, and there's no exit on the other side." I looked out my window, seeing a big school. In fact, we'd passed several schools. Family-sized row houses, too.

"Looks like we're on foot, then," Liam said, looking pleased. "Ye wanna stay back?"

I shook my head no and unbuckled my seat belt. There was no way I was missing out.

Kellan and Sam were getting out of their car, too.

"We're going into this blind," Liam whispered to all of us as he attached the clip to his gun. "We have no idea what we'll face, so—it's just in and out. We'll get a device on that car unless it's in a garage, and we'll try to

look through the feckin' windows. That's it. We just gotta know what we're up against, all right?"

We nodded in understanding, and then we were moving. The street was narrow and dark—quiet as hell. We walked silently, Liam leading the way. Sam was next, then me, and lastly, Kellan. Guns were drawn and kept to our sides.

We came to an abrupt halt when we heard shouting in Italian.

Liam motioned for us to be quiet, and we also crept a bit closer to the brick wall we were walking next to.

At last, when we reached the end of the street, we could see two men arguing in front of a house. We were squatting behind some thick bushes, but we could clearly see the dimly lit driveway, the brick house, the black convertible, and the two men.

"That's Luca," I breathed out. The man closest to the door was definitely Luca, and he was fighting—well, it looked like a heated argument, for sure—with whom I presumed was the driver of the convertible.

In front of Sam, Liam nodded slightly.

Both Kellan and Liam were fluent in Italian, so while they probably listened to whatever was said, I let my eyes roam the house. It was a two story row house. Dark red brick. The houses were attached so that each house had privacy; one house's backyard was positioned next to the other house's garage. Even numbers had their entrances on this street, and uneven numbers had their entrance on the next street.

It was easy to see that this house wasn't built to keep secrets, and I was willing to bet that it was only a temporary residence for them. The windows weren't barred or even covered, but there were no lights on inside, so I couldn't really see anything.



"Okay, get ready," Liam whispered. Tensing, I kept my eyes focused on the two Italians again. Shortly after, they both went inside the house, not switching on the lights, which I found odd. "Sam, yer with me." He pointed forward, and Sam nodded in understanding.

"What did they say?" I asked under my breath. My focus remained on Liam and Sam, who were sneaking up behind the convertible, but I was dying to find out what the Italians had been talking about.

It also struck me as odd that they talked out here instead of inside the house.

Then again...maybe someone else was in the house and they wanted to keep their argument or whatever private? I had no idea.

"The driver—Carmine—was basically apologizing for losing you and Liam," Kellan replied in a hushed tone. "Luca isn't pleased—he spoke of an underboss coming to London tomorrow, and that he wouldn't be pleased, either. 'Cause the big boss is expecting progress."

*Big boss.* "Aro?" I almost squeaked.

"I don't know who else it could be." He paused as we both watched Liam attached a tracking device to the convertible, all while Sam kept guard. Since we weren't able to get into the house, it was obvious we wouldn't be able to use any of the bugs. "August 17<sup>th</sup> was mentioned, too, but I missed the last part of the sentence."

There was no more time for chit-chat, 'cause Liam and Sam returned, only pausing to motion for us to head back to the cars.

Later, on our way back to Bayswater, I asked Liam about August 17<sup>th</sup>, and he told me it might be the date Aro arrived in London. He wasn't sure, but like Kellan said, a "big boss" was mentioned, and it was in the same sentence as that August date.

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Edward nodded pensively, sitting at the head of the dining table in our suite. "August 17<sup>th</sup>... That gives us ten days." He pointed to Liam and Sam. "We gotta stick to our routine—in case they're monitoring us from there."

My brows furrowed as I sat down across from Edward, between Kellan and Liam. "You mean so they don't suspect we're on to them?"

"Exactly." He gave me a tight-lipped smile, eyes flicking between Liam and me.

I shook my head, not really disagreeing, but not agreeing, either. "It's pretty obvious to both sides that we crossed paths tonight, though. I mean, it would be easily explained that we wanna lay low since they followed us."

"That *is* true." Liam nodded. "I don't think Aro or whoever-the-fuck would think *we're* on to *them*...just because we lay low. It'd probably be the other way around. Still, I agree with ye, Eddie. It's our only chance to gain more intel." He took a sip from his beer. "I'll call Chris and Mac. We should have two cars down at the club—one invisible."

"Wouldn't *that* be rather stupid?" Kellan frowned. "That'd be like inviting them to follow us, and while I get the concept—we follow them in return—what Bella said is still true. Tonight, what happened, them following us...it's out in the open. We know they followed us, and they know we know, too. That jig was up the second Liam escaped them." I nodded, agreeing here. "Returning to the scene with the same car is basically like telling the Avellinos we *want* them to locate us again. Which will raise suspicion."

I had an idea. "If we wanna be bait, if we want them to think they've got the upper hand, I say we switch cars but show ourselves." Eric, who'd been silent, nodded in approval. "For instance, Liam and Sam, you two could drive down there in a new car—physical proof of us trying to *hide*—but you can 'accidentally' show yourselves, or one of you, by going outside for a quick smoke or whatever. Or just roll down your window...something." I shrugged, at a loss.

"That's a brilliant idea." Edward snapped his fingers. "We'll go with that." Turning to Eric, he asked, "How are we on the feed from inside the club?"

"Nothing new," Eric responded. As usual, there was a laptop in front of him. Back in his suite, two floors down, there were an additional four laptops. Garrett was worse, though. As Carlisle's tech guy, he had a room full of equipment in his suite. Right now, Carlisle and his crew were monitoring the passage between Dover and Calais. "We do have something on the documents Liam and his boys found in Italy back in April, though." That caught my attention and sorta surprised me, 'cause the first few hundred times we went through them, there was nothing. It frustrated all of us, to say the least. "There's one document that matches one of the photos Mrs. C took in Cerveteri back in January."

At that, I grinned cheekily at Edward, who shot me a playful scowl.

He still hated the stunt Kellan and I pulled on him then, but there was no denying that our work had paid off...many times over.

"It's the list of addresses," Eric went on, and then he pulled out two sheets of paper from a briefcase on the floor next to him. "When we first read through it, we couldn't make anything out. But..." He slid the first paper toward Edward, who took it. "When you compare it to the photo Bella took, you'll see that it matches." Leaning closer to Edward, Eric pointed out a few things on the paper. "Here—Renee Dwyer." Oh yay, my wonderful mommy. *Sarcasm*. "The name was on the list from Cerveteri,

right?" Edward nodded, looking thoughtful. "And she's number thirty-eight on the list. So, if you look at address number thirty-eight here..." He showed Edward the paper from Aro's main estate next. "It's Renee's address in Arizona. And that's not it." After giving me a fleeting glance, where he looked kind of torn, he pointed to the next line. "This second address... Uh, I compared all these to some of the people we were sure of. Sam's dad, for example."

That had been a gruesome day—the day Edward told Sam that his dad's name was on the list I'd found. For Sam to find out that it was the Avellinos who were behind his father's disappearance... Well, let's just say that a flat screen and a wall took the brunt of his rage.

"I'm not following you, man," Edward muttered.

"Look closer." Eric pointed to the sheet. "Sam's pop. There's his home address on the first sheet, and here's another address—an Italian one. My bet? It's where they killed him." He shot Sam an apologetic look before returning to Edward. "And check this out—the second set of addresses isn't always addresses. There are a few that are only coordinates."

I narrowed my eyes, trying to connect the pieces, 'cause I wasn't following, either.

But Edward seemed to be catching on. "Wait, you're saying... You think Dwyer's dead?"

His eyes met mine, but I was blank.

What was I supposed to say?

"It's a guess," Eric amended. "But we have all these addresses that match where these people were last seen. And then we have a list of Italian addresses or coordinates."

"Makes sense," I commented with a shrug. "Is there a second address for Ed?"

Eric grinned. "That's the thing. There isn't. There's only the address to O'Hare in Chicago."

"The last place where me dad was spotted," Liam finished.

"So..." Sam cleared his throat. "What's the last address for my pops?"

Eric blew out a heavy breath and grabbed the paper from Edward. "Uh, I checked it out, and it's in the middle of nowhere. The land belongs to some old lady—never heard of her and she's clean, but..."

"It might be where my father's been buried?" Sam asked tightly.

With a small nod from Eric, the room grew silent for a while.

Perhaps—or most likely—this meant Renee was dead, but what I focused on was the fact that it was just as likely that Ed *wasn't* dead.

Granted, things could change quickly, but this was still good news.

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It was way past three AM when the guys headed to their own suites, and Eric—with a sleeping Autumn in his arms—was the last one to leave. Which left two people in this suite who weren't really on speaking terms.

"I'm gonna hit the sack," I said unceremoniously and walked toward our bedroom.

"Bella?"

I paused and looked over my shoulder. "What?"

He hesitated for a moment, hands stuck into the pockets of his jeans. He looked nervous. "Are you okay?"

My brows knitted together. "Uh, yeah. Why, what's up?"

"I mean..." He waved a hand toward the dining room table. "That stuff with your mother. I was just wondering if you're upset."

I faced him fully. "Why would I be upset?"

"Because she was your mother? I don't know." He frowned at me. "And she's probably dead."

"You'd understand if I was upset?" I cocked a brow.

"Of course I would!" he exclaimed, incredulous. "Jesus, what kind of monster do you think I am?!"

I couldn't fucking believe him. "So, let me get this straight." I took a step in his direction. "You'd understand if the death of my mother upset me, but you can't understand why I'm upset about my father's?"

"You've got to be *kidding* me." He was grinning, though it only made him look evil. "That cocksucker..." He chuckled before he sneered at me. "He wasn't a father to you, Isabella!"

"And Renee was a mother to me?!" I shouted.

"At least she didn't sell you!" he yelled back.

"How the fuck would she have been able to?!" I screamed. "She abandoned me when I was a baby!" My chest heaved, and I forced myself to take a calming breath. "She didn't care," I whispered harshly. "To *her*, I wasn't worth the fucking money. You know—the two million *you* paid for me."

His face fell a little, eyes softening.

"Don't give me that fucking pitying look," I spat out, and his lips pressed together in a grim line. "God, I'm so sick of this." Feeling drained, I turned to the bedroom again, but Edward's voice stopped me, if only for a second.

"Don't leave."

"Fuck you, Edward." I kept walking down the hall.

"I told you not to leave!" he shouted, and before I knew it, he'd caught up to me and pushed me up against a wall. My stomach flipped at the sight of his dark eyes. He was livid. "Why are you doing this, huh?" His face was so close. "This goddamn distance—it's fucking childish."

I stared at him blankly. I knew he wasn't going to actually hurt me. Well, physically. He loved me too much. But...this wasn't the Edward I knew.

"He wasn't your father," he gritted out again. "Can't you see that?"

My jaw clenched. "What the *fuck* do you know about that?" I pushed him off of me. "You have no *idea*." I advanced on him slowly. "You barged into my life and bought me—*saved* me; I'm not denying that. But don't you fucking dare tell me what Charlie was or wasn't to me before you arrived in Forks." I was pissed, furious beyond words, and hurt. "You think you know everything, don't you?" I cocked my head to the side, and he shot me another glare. "Edward..." I shook my head, disappointed and mad. "He may not have been the best father, or even a good one, but he was all I had." One more step, and only two feet separated us. "He took care of me when I was sick, he bought Band-Aids with flowers on them when I was little and had scraped my knees, he—"

To my shock, Edward interrupted me with a humorless laugh. "And then he sold you."

I couldn't help it; my hand flinched toward the butterfly knife I had strapped to my bicep, and I wasn't even sure why. All I knew was that I was all but blind with rage.

He saw it and smirked sinisterly. "Go for it." He jerked his chin toward my bicep. "Maybe that's what you want—now that you have my cousin."

*What the...?*

My jaw dropped.

Now that I had his cousin? "What..." In a daze, I tried to clear my head, but it was impossible. Something was wrong. It had to be. Because this...this was way too out of character.

"You think I haven't noticed?" He tilted his head. "He's always calling you sweetheart, love, darling... And you love that shit, don't you?"

At first, I said nothing. I was genuinely worried about him. But if I remained silent, he'd take it as confirmation, which was so far beyond ridiculous.

"What's going on, Edward?" I whispered. "Why are you doing this?"

He chuckled wryly and folded his arms over his chest. "Doing this? Maybe I'm finally opening my eyes."

No. I recognized it now. Edward had done the same when we were in Rome and I'd ignored him for two days. Only, this was on a much larger scale.

I smirked, because this time I wasn't backing down. I did that last time; I remembered asking him if he wanted me to leave and he said nothing. I also remembered how easy it would've been to leave, yet I never did. Well, this time it was Edward's turn to own up to his bullshit. He knew



very well I wasn't distancing myself from him because I thought it was funny or because I wanted to punish him. *That* would've been childish. But this...this was because I needed time to let this sink in. My own husband was responsible for my father's death—in a way---and Edward couldn't even understand why I was upset. He knew I *was* upset, and he knew I *was going* to be before I found out, but he didn't understand why.

The only thing I wanted was honesty, which he'd promised me.

I wasn't going to lie to myself and say that everything would've been okay if he'd only come to me before he ignored protection for Charlie, but at least I would've been able to trust him.

"You know..." I chuckled. "I don't need Liam if I wanna get away from you."

His features tightened, fists clenching along his sides, his glare more murderous than before.

"You signed the full consent for me, remember?" I whispered. "If I want, I can be a free woman like that." I snapped my fingers.

His chest heaved as he stared me down. "You wouldn't," he breathed out and then swallowed hard. "You wouldn't divorce me."

No. Never. I was adult enough to understand that we lived under too much pressure, and mistakes were a given. We snapped at each other, grumbled and bitched, but that didn't mean we had the right to go off on each other without owning up to it afterward.

Edward was currently making a shitload of mistakes, and I knew my husband. Sooner or later, he was going to feel terrible. Which was why I felt the need to take a step back right now, 'cause he couldn't see it yet—and if I kept pushing, we'd only say things, more things, that we'd regret. He was closing in on himself, protecting himself...and I understood it to an

extent, but that didn't give him the right to throw bullshit in my face—like I was some common whore. I mean...Liam? Really? He was like a brother to me, for chrissakes.

"All I'm saying is that I *could*," I responded. "And right now..." The corners of my mouth turned up in a dark smile. "Right now you're tempting me."

He jerked his chin. "Get the fuck out of my face."

"Gladly," I hissed.

## **49 – LONDON IN AUGUST**

**You'll find the prologue in here...**

**Beta'd by HollettLA and pre-read by Kitty.**

### **BPOV**

"What's with the silly smile, B?" Rose chuckled.

Eyes closed, my smile grew even sillier as I stretched out on the blanket. A few sun rays reached us in the shadow of the large tree, and I could hear normal, regular, everyday, happy noises in the background. Dogs barking, children running around and laughing, parents chasing 'em...

It was a good day in Hyde Park. "I'm happy," I said simply, keeping my eyes closed. Dressed in only a tank and denim cut-offs, I was more than content to enjoy this summer day. I had everything I wanted right here. Big, soft blanket...a large pizza between us...sodas, too. What more could I possibly want? Right now.

"Weren't you miserable yesterday? And pretty much every day before."

*That was before I found out I'm pregnant.*

"Wait." She grabbed my arm, a smile in her voice. "Did you and Edward finally solve things? Did he come around?"

I snorted. "No way. He's as stubborn as ever. Frankly, so am I, but I won't budge."

"As you shouldn't." She patted my arm. "So, why are you so happy?"

"Secret." I grinned and opened my eyes. Above me, all I saw was a clear blue sky and the tree branches shielding us from the sun. "You'll find out soon enough."

As pissed as I was with Edward, he still deserved to find out first.

*That we're having a baby.*

"Gah!" I was too frickin' happy! "Okay." I sat up. "I'm hungry again." I grabbed a slice of cheese and tomato pan pizza; it was fucking delicious.

Rose looked amused, but she didn't press for information.

I got lost in my own little world as I ate some pizza and drank my Sprite.

Not only was I preggers, but I was pretty far along.

It was last week when I got kinda concerned about my irregular cycle. 'Cause the doctor in Sweden said a month or two with irregular bleeding was nothing to worry about, but after that, it should've returned to normal. Alas, it never did. See, after Berlin, I needed to refill my prescription on my birth control pills, but since Carlisle—who'd been my supplier in the past—was in Spain, not to mention that he was so busy, I simply went to a Swedish doctor and fixed it myself. I changed brands, too, 'cause the one I'd been using didn't exist in Sweden.

The doctor in Sweden didn't speak English all that well, so I probably missed when she told me that I wouldn't be perfectly protected for the six

weeks that followed. At least, that was the explanation my doctor from this morning gave me. And the way Edward and I had been at it...

*Yikes.*

So, this morning when I saw a doctor on Queensway—yeah, I totally snuck out—I already had my suspicions.

I was *twelve* weeks along.

Every pregnancy is different, Doc told me. So far, I'd been blessed. Three or so weeks with nausea—what I'd mistaken for the flu—and that was about it.

Edward had been so angry when I got back to the hotel, stating that it was too dangerous for me to be out by myself, but I couldn't find it in me to care. He was the one who had told me over and over that the Avellinos didn't know where we were, and I'd kept my face pretty hidden to the authorities. Plus, the doctor I saw thought my name was Marie Swan. That was the name I was living under here in the UK.

And now I was here in Hyde Park with Rose...well, Sam was here, too, but farther away. We were on the grass; he was sitting on a bench along one of the countless paths, pretending to read a paper.

"What's the plan for tonight?" Rose asked, bringing a slice of pizza to her mouth. "I'd ask Emmett, but..."

Yeah, Emmett was in Dover. It was his turn to watch the border, which meant Carlisle and his crew were returning. And Emmett refused to have Rose with him.

"Tonight..." I made a bubble face, thinking. My plan for tonight was obviously to tell Edward about the pregnancy, 'cause there was no way I'd take any risks. It was the fourteenth today, so we only had three more

days 'til we guessed Aro was entering the country. Three days to make new plans—plans that didn't involve me. As much as I wanted to be there, I'd never allow any harm to be near my baby. *Baby*. I smiled to myself and sipped my soda. This hadn't been the plan. The plan was to wait for the danger to blow over. But that didn't happen. And, to be honest, I didn't give a fuck—not now when there was a little one in my belly.

Just as I was about to tell Rose about my plan to be alone with Edward tonight, my phone rang.

"It's Edward," I mumbled, peering down at the display. Bringing the phone to my ear, I answered with a, "What's up?"

*"Smile,"* was what he said, which made me frown. *"No—smile, princess. And don't look around."*

Wanting to frown deeper, I plastered a soft smile on my face. "What's going on?" I asked quietly.

*"First of all, play along with what Sam's about to do, all right?"*

I gritted my teeth, confused and frustrated.

"Okay," I chuckled darkly.

"Marie!" I heard Sam shout. I looked up at him; he was about a hundred feet away. "I'm just gonna buy another paper! I'll be right back!"

*"Nod at him, baby."*

I blew out a breath and nodded for Sam, struggling to keep the smile on my face.

Obviously, Edward was nearby.

Rose looked confused as hell, but I ignored that as Edward started speaking rapidly. *"I need you to pay attention now, Isabella. This is it. We've picked up new info—Aro's already in the country. Not only that, he knows where you are—right this second. You're being watched."*

"Go on," I whispered in a rush.

If something was going on, I needed to know right away so I could get my act straight. Panicking wouldn't get me far.

*"I want you to trust me—"*

I laughed sardonically. Trust, right. Easier said than done with Edward Ryan Cullen.

*"Are you done?"* he asked impatiently, not waiting for an answer. *"They're gonna take you and Rose,"* he whispered. I gulped. *"But I don't want you to worry, because you know—you know me, Bella. I would never let anything happen to you. We know what's gonna happen, and everything will end today."*

"Edward..." This sounded so big, and I couldn't allow myself to be near danger. The mere thought of it made my heart hurt. "I have to tell you something—" He didn't let me finish.

*"We know their plan, princess. We know what's gonna happen,"* he repeated. *"Fuck—they're already walking toward you. Look, I will see you again in three hours. Three hours, okay? I promise. I—I swear on everything. Three hours, that's it."*

"I trust you," I admitted shakily.

*"Okay."* He exhaled. *"I love you, Bella. Three hours. I will explain everything."*

I tried to keep my panic at bay, but I was failing. "I love you too, but, Edward, you *have* to listen—I'm p—"

*"Here they come—love you."*

He hung up.

"Fuck," I whimpered, blinking back tears. I took several breaths, quick ones. Rose's expression of worry went ignored by me; I couldn't help it. I just needed a few seconds to get my shit together.

In my periphery, I could suddenly see two guys approaching.

*God, this is it. Edward, I'm fucking trusting you.*

"Isabella Cullen," a man said in a thick Italian accent. Rose's head snapped up, as did mine. "And Rosalie Cullen." He smirked. Opening his suit jacket slightly, he revealed that he was armed. "You scream, I shoot. Simple. Now, follow."

Rose's wide eyes met mine, and I quickly shook my head. "Our husbands will get us out of this," I told her with a pointed look as I stood up.

"Oh, I would not be so sure," the Italian scumbag chuckled. "Come on—we go." Snapping his fingers to the other guy, he added something in Italian, and the second guy held out his hand to us. "Give him your phones."

I swallowed hard and obeyed, praying Edward knew what he was doing.

Rose did the same, and then we were walking.

The quiet guy was holding Rose's arm; the other was holding mine.

Meanwhile, I eyes subtly scanned my surroundings. Not that I expected to see Edward sitting in a bush or something—whatever.

My heart was stuck in my throat.

"Jesus," Rose hissed. "That fucking hurts."

"*Stai zitto*," the guy who was holding me spat out.

Approximately five minutes later, Rose and I were ushered into the back of a dark blue van. It was parked outside the Shell gas station in Lancaster Gate.

I was still scared for my life, but my months of living with skilled criminals had left their mark, and I now had shit to occupy my time with. My thoughts, they were, like, cleared? I was focused and able to look at this from another perspective. This was a job, and I had faith in my boss. My husband.

"We're not going anywhere," Rose growled as we were being cuffed.

Staring at her, I willed her to be quiet. The last thing I needed now was a distraction.

Another few Italian words were spat out, and the quiet guy responded by running his hands up my calves. I presumed it was an order to check if we were packing.

Sadly, we weren't. Though, I doubted it would do us any good even if we were.

When he was done searching me for guns, he moved on to Rose.

"Touch my tits and I will kill you," Rose snarled.

I rolled my eyes internally.



Soon enough, we were surrounded by darkness. The lock on the sliding door clicked, and we were alone. There wasn't even a window or anything between the cab of the car and where we were seated.

"Bella," Rose whimpered.

"It'll be fine," I whispered firmly, quickly, hoping she wouldn't say too much. For all I knew, they had planted a bug back here in hopes of getting info.

"I should've stayed in the States—or gone to Mexico with Esme and Tanya. My baby, Bella... You don't understand."

I understood more than she thought, and a part of me wanted to scream out that I was pregnant, too. But again, the Italians could be listening in. I sure as hell didn't want them to know I was carrying a baby.

Rosalie was crying quietly as the van rumbled to life. "Are—are we gonna die?"

"No." I was too curt, but I needed to pay attention. "*Trust* me, all right? Our husbands *will* get us out of this." There was nothing more I could say.

Even though I couldn't see anything, I closed my eyes to focus easier.

The van turned around; I chewed on my lip and waited.

Nodding to myself, I registered the fact that the van took a left, which meant we were on Bayswater Road in the direction of Marble Arch.

A good criminal knew his—ha!—*her*...environment. And I had gotten to know London; I had *studied* London.

"God, these cuffs hurt," she mumbled.

"Then sit still," I whispered in a rush. "*Please*—Rose, I gotta concentrate."

"What... Are you doing something?" she whispered back.

I let out a frustrated breath, the van coming to a stop. "No—now, *shut the fuck up.*"

Keeping my eyes closed, I counted to seven, and then I breathed a sigh of relief when the van moved again. My guess was that we'd just stopped at a red light.

Bayswater Road was almost completely straight; it went alongside Hyde Park. There was only one exception, and that was when all westbound traffic was directed to take a left, basically going around a block before we ended up along the park again.

At Marble Arch, we took a right in the roundabout, something I had expected. We couldn't have taken a left, and Oxford Street was straight ahead—one the busiest streets in London. Another nod to myself followed when the van swerved left at Hyde Park Corner.

One possibility was that we were headed to Aro's club here in London.

All of the Avellino clubs served a purpose, but we only had a guess for the club here. Money laundering took place at almost every club; the one in Barcelona had been there to allow Aro's money from all his major shipments—firearms, drugs, blood diamonds—to circulate, the one in Berlin had been his front for trafficking, and...actually, the club he had—still had—in Croatia was another one we only had guesses for.

Drugs...possibly vehicles, too. And here in London...our belief was that it was the only club Aro visited himself—on occasion. We believed this was where all the money ended up once it were clean, so to speak. In other words, we were pretty sure his club here was legit—a safe house. It was also the only club, according to Eric and Garrett, that was easy to find. For all the other establishments in Europe, our men had to dig deep to find out whether or not it was an Avellino club.

And right now, right this second, I was almost a hundred percent sure we had just stopped outside his London club.

I was right.

Rose and I were ushered inside the club by the Italians, still cuffed behind our backs.

The establishment was empty aside from one man sitting at the corner booth where Edward had planted his bug.

The man was Luca.

"Have a seat, ladies." He smirked.

"Look—" Rose started, but I cut her off.

"Don't say a fucking thing," I snapped. Facing Luca, I added, "These Italian thunderscunts don't know shit." I smiled sweetly.

Luca chuckled and leaned back in his seat. His fingers absentmindedly drummed the surface of the table. "Aro—I told him about you. He is very...how you say, fascinated? And he is going to have so much fun with you."

"We'll see about that," was all I said.

I'd become a great actress over time, and I knew they couldn't see my fear.

I refused to show it.

"Why are we here?" I asked. "Where's Aro?"

He smirked and snapped his fingers. The quiet guy came over and Luca whispered something in his ear. Then the guy left again, this time with a

man following him—the man who'd been in charge of Rose and my kidnapping. Which meant we were left alone here with Luca.

"You are here because we want your husbands," he revealed. "But they are not easy to find." He grinned and wagged a finger at me, trying to be funny. "All we manage—find you and Rosalie. We got lucky."

I narrowed my eyes at him, wondering when they "got lucky". Rose and I were rarely out; in fact, Edward and Emmett were out more often than anyone. Liam, too.

"We follow you a couple times," he went on with a shrug. He also checked his watch. "Unfortunately, we lost you in Bayswater. But we find you again, no?" The grin was back. A leering one.

Suddenly, there was a loud thud, like a muted bang—it came the direction of the main entrance—and it felt like all my senses were heightened at once. My mind spun, my eyes scanned my surroundings, and I registered it all. I wondered if Edward was here, but then I noted that Luca didn't seem surprised, and that made me worried.

The sound of running was next, and before I knew it, several police officers ran into the club area.

Next to me, Rose gasped.

I was still stuck on the fact that Luca didn't seem surprised, but when I looked back to him, his face had changed. The shock was there now.

Sitting completely silent, gritting my teeth, I heard terms like "mass-arrest" and "warrants" being spewed out. There were officers all over the place, spreading out to search the premises.

I closed my eyes, my faith in Edward fading away a little, and then I had a cop in my face.

*You better be in on this, Edward.*

"Marie Swan, you are under arrest..."

My rights were read, and the warrant was explained, as Rose and I were ushered out of the club again.

Still cuffed, obviously, but now I was wearing a new set of 'em, and these actually brought more discomfort. They were way too tight. It made me want the ones the cop had clipped off of me again.

It struck me as odd, though, since the police in England rarely used handcuffs.

I also found it weird that he didn't cuff me behind my back.

The street outside the club was packed with law enforcement.

I remained quiet, compliant.

"Watch your head, miss," the officer said, and I ducked to get into a waiting car. Rose was doing the same, but she was getting into another car.

Luca was also arrested.

It confused the crap outta me.

If this was Edward and Liam's doings, why didn't they wait until Aro was at the club? Or was he there? Was he hiding? Was he upstairs?

I groaned and sank back in my seat, my hands in my lap.

With the sirens on, we drove away.

\*O\*O\*O\*

*"Marie Swan, you are under arrest..."*

Three hours, Edward? Really, huh? Yeah, sure.

Rose and I had been gone for six hours now.

Everything was fucked up, and while I didn't know a lot about law enforcement or their procedures, several things didn't sit well with me.

*"Marie Swan, you are under arrest..."*

The words had echoed in my goddamn head for the past hours.

I was pissed.

Rose was livid, too. Obviously.

And now we'd been separated. Sitting in cells with handcuffs chafing our skin.

Edward and Emmett were gonna pay for this. So help me God, they were gonna pay for this.

The door opened to my cell.

"Ms. Swan, a Ryan Denali is here, claiming to be your lawyer. Is he?" a man asked.

Oh, for the love of...

Ryan Denali. That fucker. *I'm gonna rip him a new one.*

"Yes, he is," I replied.

"Then follow me," the man said.

I followed him, because what choice did I have? The man was gripping my arm, you know.

Then there was a room. I knew the type. The room with a mirrored wall inside. And a desk. Two chairs.

I was left there. Alone. So, I sat my ass down in one of the chairs.

The door opened, and then he was there. Dressed to the nines.

*Ryan Denali*, I scoffed internally.

He approached with purpose, being the confident man that he was, and I saw. I saw the miniscule smile playing on his lips.

Amused, cocky bastard.

"Ms...*Swan*," he said smoothly, sitting down across from me. "I'm here to help."

I hated this. Hated that *he* was the one bailing me out...when I wanted to punch him in the nuts.

And because I wanted the smugness wiped from his motherfucking face, I brought my hands up, placed them on the table...making sure that my left ring finger was very much visible.

He noticed. As he opened his briefcase to pull out a shitload of papers, he noticed my movement.

He frowned for a second, watching my finger, and I smirked.

*That's right, you asshole.*

No ring.

That was one of the things that didn't sit well with me. As soon as Rose and I had been brought to the police station, they had removed jewelry, shoes, wallets...hell, even the fucking bobby pin I'd had in my hair was gone.

I'd never heard of anything like that taking place at an arrest.

But right now I was too furious with Edward to give a shit. Flashing him my bare finger brought satisfaction to me.

"I'm sorry it took so long. I got held up," he sighed quietly. "But I'm here now, and I'll make sure to deliver you safe and sound to your husband. He told me he wanted his, uh, little bug back as soon as possible." Pointed look.

My brows furrowed.

Since when did Edward ever call me his little bu...wait.

*Bug.*

I watched as he gave the room a quick scan, and I finally got it.

The place was bugged.

"I miss him," I replied. "I haven't seen him in weeks, actually."

That sure got to him, and it was the truth. I hadn't seen *my* Whistler in far too long.

He'd told me avoiding him was childish...but what choice did I have? It was either that or arguing endlessly.

I had told him more times than I could count why I was ignoring him. I had told him how I felt—that I only wanted his honesty. But he couldn't even give me that. I had told him I resented him for giving the green light to have my father killed—without giving a shit about my feelings. I had told him why. I had told him I saw his side, but that I didn't agree. And I had told him I loved him, though right now I wanted space to think, to let things settle.



But he never met me halfway.

He never apologized for a fucking thing.

Instead he asked for my trust.

Three hours, he said. He sent me off on a mission with a metaphorical blindfold covering my eyes, and he wanted me to trust him? If he wasn't sure, he should've just said "soon". Not three hours. At a job, anything could go wrong, yet he made a promise—another one he couldn't keep.

"He knows that," Edward whispered, much to my surprise. "Trust me, he knows."

There it was again...

*"Trust me."*

I shrugged, wanting to get out of here already. Being arrested almost scared me more than being held by Avellinos.

"What happens now?" I asked. "And where's Rose?"

He sorted through a stack of papers as he responded. "She has representation, too. We'll all be out of here in a moment."

I couldn't see how that was going to work. I was arrested for partaking in and/or being associated with organized crime, larceny, and grand theft auto.

Right now, there were no emotions that stuck with me. I was mostly numb and annoyed.

Perhaps I was in shock.

Regardless, I couldn't see myself walking out just like that with those charges hanging over my head.

To be honest, I had no idea what was going on. No one had even approached me about giving a statement or anything. No mug shots, no prints taken...

Just then, there was a knock on the door.

"Here we go," Edward muttered right before the door was opened.

"Mr. Ryan Denali and Ms. Marie Swan?" the man inquired with a smirk. There was sarcasm in his voice, not to mention that he had an Italian accent. "Come with me, please."

Without a choice in the matter, we left the room. Down empty halls, we followed the man. Again, I was confused. This didn't seem like protocol, either—nothing did. I also wondered what Edward knew about this, because it was clear he did know. He wasn't surprised at all by this turn of events.

"Does it hurt?" Edward whispered in my ear. He had two fingers lingering on my cuffed wrists.

I offered a shrug, eyes still focused on the halls we were walking through. It felt odd that they were so empty. It was quiet, too. But before I could ponder further, a door to another room opened, and a police officer—who looked a lot like the officer right in front of me—walked out with Rose...and Liam. Huh. So, he was Rose's "representation"?

"Where are we goin'?" Liam asked the two men.

"To another precinct," one of them replied.

To which Liam and Edward exchanged a small smile.

If someone could just shed some light, that'd be swell...

## 50 – LONDON IN AUGUST

**Beta'd by Lisa and pre-read by Kitty :)**

### **Whistler's POV**

Liam and I pretend to be confused as to why our "clients" would be moved to another "precinct". We also "wonder" why on earth we're supposed to tag along. I mean...*this is just not proper procedure*. Or whatever. And we pretend to buy their crap when they say that this is a special case.

Let's just say that Aro's henchmen aren't cut out for a life in Hollywood, 'cause their acting sucks and they've got the terminology all wrong.

It's a little insulting. Aro really thinks we're buying this horseshit.

Outside the "station", Liam and I immediately spot Kellan's car down the road. Eric and Sam are there, too.

"Let's go," one of the goons says, opening the door to a big van; we already knew it was gonna be this vehicle. In their defense, it's actually a police van—the Mercedes Benz Sprinter. Which means it looks legit.

"Is this really necessary?" I ask, playing stupid. "We are not your arrestees." I wave a hand between Liam and me.

"It's the only car we have at our disposal," the goon replies in his Italian accent.

I shake my head internally, offended by their poor charade.

"We are not pleased by this," Liam says gruffly, entering the van. "But I'm eager to get my client home, so..."

After Liam, Rose and Bella follow, and then I get in, too.

"Bugs?" Bella whispers.

I shake my head no, proud that that was her first question. She's always alert, taking precautions and being careful.

We're completely separated by the bulletproof window between the cab of the van and us. It means we can speak freely, and I know my wife is dying for information.

"Kellan and Eric are close by," I inform her quietly, reaching under my seat. "They made sure it's clean in here—swept it for bugs." They also left us a duffel bag, which I pull out. My Glock and Sig. Liam's Glock and Wesson. Bella's knives. Fake cuffs. Ear and mouthpieces. And a small hacksaw for the girls' very real cuffs. "Come here, princess." I hold up the saw just as the van pulls away from the curb. It's both a blessing and a curse that it's dark back here. The small window only brings a little light, and though it prevents the two Avellino men from seeing us, it also makes it difficult for me to help Bella.

"Oh, thank God." She holds up her hands when she sees the tool. "Mind explaining everything now?"

I could explain it.

But she's looking at Liam...

I hate myself.

Bella thinks I don't see her side of things, 'cause that's what I've made her believe. I'm a prick with no excuses for my behavior. The truth *is* that I didn't consider Bella's feelings at all when I told Dad to stand back after the hit on Charlie was issued. I cared about what I personally wanted—nothing else. And after she found out, I stupidly thought that if I argued with her, she'd eventually get over it so we could just move on. I tried to bend her will, sway her.

Not only have I underestimated her strength, but I have betrayed her by wanting to manipulate her.

Just because I was too stubborn to admit that she's right. Just because I was too proud to beg for forgiveness. Just because I'm a fucking coward.

"While ye were out—in Hyde Park—we got new info from the club," Liam explains. "We suspect that since the club was empty, they didn't feel the need to go upstairs to their office or whatever-the-feck. Anyway, we heard them—Aro and Luca."

"So, Aro was at the club?" Bella asks in disbelief as I keep sawing with quick and small movements. Almost through, I manage to push a finger between the cuff and her wrist. That way, I'm not risking her skin.

As soon as I'm done, I flip her hand over to saw through the cuff there.

If only I could bend steel, right?

"Aye," Liam responds. "When they had tracked us down, they planned this coup."

"I don't get it." She shakes her head. "Luca told me they were only able to find Rose and me."

I snort quietly. "Luca lied. They've known since yesterday. And not just about you and Rose." Finished with her first wrist, I pull her second one closer to me and start all over again. "We believe they managed to tail Sam and Liam yesterday when they left the club. They know our hotel and who's staying there. All of us, really. That was why it upset me this morning when you snuck out." I raise a brow at her, still wondering what she was doing outside.

"That doesn't make sense," my wife mutters, a small crease between her brows. "Why didn't they just attack or whatever?"

I exhale, slightly outta breath from the fucking sawing. This isn't the easiest, but with so little time, we gotta be quick.

"They want us unarmed," Liam answers.

"Jesus, finally," I mutter, almost through with the last incision. "Does it hurt?" This cuff is secured one notch tighter, so it's almost impossible for me to slip my finger underneath.

"A little," she admits, downplaying her discomfort.

A curse escapes me when we drive over a bump or something, 'cause it happens just as I'm through, so I prick my fucking finger. Weird, isn't it? I can handle a gunshot wound, but a small cut? Forget about it.

With both her wrists freed, I bring out a little tube of soothing salve from the inner pocket of my suit jacket.

After handing Liam the hacksaw so he can help Rose, I brush off the metal dust as well as I can.

Bella sends me a small smile as I gently rub in the ointment on her chafed wrists, and Liam continues. "They staged everything, darlin'. The arrest...everything was fake. But they knew we'd respond by getting ye two out." He glances between Bella and Rosalie. "Right now, for all they know, they have Edward Cullen and Liam Masen without means to defend themselves." He smirks a little. "They also have Emmett Cullen's wife." Pointed look. "There's nothing yer husbands wouldn't do for ye."

Rose cries silently.

Bella grins wryly, which hurts. But I only have myself to blame. After all, I haven't really given her a reason to trust me lately.

"Sure. So, why was Luca arrested?" she asks.

I pass the tube of salve to Rose for later. "To make it look believable. If it were the real police, they wouldn't take two women and leave the Italians behind."

"Hunh." Bella sighs and pulls her hands to her lap. "What about the fake names? Why did Sam shout Marie and not Bella?"

Liam shrugs, focused on Rose's wrists. "It's the name ye're in London under. It would be considered careless to yell yer real name, wouldn't it? We have to keep up a charade, too."

"What happens now?" Rose croaks. "I'm not..." She blows out a breath, looking angry. "I don't want this life. You didn't even give us a warning."

I'm about to speak, but Bella surprises me by actually defending me...or us. "They didn't exactly have time, Rose."

"We would've told you more if we'd had the time," I say quietly. "But it all happened too quickly, and then we suddenly had a new gig to plan and pull off. We also had to call back Em and his crew from border. And my dad wasn't even back yet. They got back an hour later."

"So, none of this was real?" Rose asks next. "The arrest, being taken into custody..."

Liam shakes his head no. "None of it. It's all Avellino. The police were his men, and the station was fake. It's actually been there for a long time, according to Eric's research, and we think Aro brings people there sometimes, either to scare them or to interrogate them. It's bloody brilliant in theory." He taps his temple. "He could 'save' people by pretending to have them arrested and then get them out. And then he'll have people owing him."

"How did you learn about the arrest, then?" Bella wonders.

"The papers came through in Brighton," I respond, referring to the listed address for Marie Swan. "It took a while, but..."

She nods. "Six hours—not three."

"I'm sorry," I sigh, sorrier than she'll ever know.

"We did the best we could, sweetheart," Liam murmurs.

I clench my jaw. "That's *Isabella* to you. Are we fuckin' clear on that?"

"Edward!" Bella hisses. "For fuck's sake."

I groan internally and scrub my hands over my face.

After pushing Bella away from me for weeks, I've turned into some insecure bastard. Actually, I used to be like this back in Rome, too. It sucks.

"Are ye done, cuz?" Liam asks impatiently.

"Yeah," I mutter. I have no right or reason to be jealous. Liam calls every fucking woman by some term of endearment, but...fuck, I still don't like how close he's gotten to my wife. Granted, it's my own goddamn fault. Had I not acted like a prick, Bella wouldn't have had a reason to grow closer to Liam—as friends.

I've dug myself into this fucking hole all on my own.

During our last week in Sweden, Bella made it clear to me.

She only demanded what I had promised to her—honesty and respect.

When I couldn't give her that, when I refused to even listen to her, hear her out, she asked for space. She told me she wanted some time alone to let this sink in. My actions basically told her that I just wanted her to get over it already—without apologies on my end. I wanted us to move on like



nothing had happened. So, she asked for time. And I responded by accusing her of infidelity. I called her childish. I shouted at her, commanded her to listen to me since I'm her husband. But when the fuck did I listen to *her*? Never, that's when. And after all the times I've told her that I hate the American laws—that men and women aren't equal—it's no wonder she's lost faith in me.

*She'll probably divorce your sorry ass.*

*She's not even wearing her rings, remember?*

I swallow hard as my chest constricts.

I do know that she's not wearing her rings, and not just because she flashed her bare finger earlier—very purposefully—but because I have both her engagement ring and her wedding band in my pocket. I managed to retrieve them—Rose's rings, too—while Liam stalled the "police" before they searched us for weapons.

"Like Rose asked, what happens now?" Bella whispers. "Where are we going?"

Unable to speak, I just let Liam explain.

"Aro has a big estate outside of Midhurst," he says, squinting through his eyes to look out the window. Not that we can see much. I think the window's partially tinted, 'cause it looks darker outside than it should be around eight PM in August. "We heard them talk about it—Luca and Aro. That's where they're taking us to end it all. It's in the middle of nowhere—nothing but forests surrounding."

"But we're not unarmed anymore," Bella concludes quietly as I check the mag on my Sig. "How much danger are we getting ourselves into?"

Liam smirks. "I doubt there'll be any danger."

Bella gives him a blank stare and absentmindedly places a hand on her belly. "You doubt. But you're not sure."

"We won't be alone out there," I murmur. "Dad and Emmett are already there with their crews, and we have Kellan, Eric, and Sam following right behind us."

"Chris and Mac are on their way, too," Liam adds, referring to his two closest, and we all know they're both ruthless killers. Like Seth, they happen to be snipers.

"That's why it took so much time?" she asks softly. "Because you needed to orchestrate all this?"

I nod, hoping she'll understand. "We let them go through with this 'cause it'll once again give us the element of surprise. They think they've got the upper hand—that they've just kidnapped four big shots from our organization. But in reality, we finally have them where we want them. What did you call them, princess?" I can't help but grin. "Thundercunts?"

She chuckles shakily. "You were listening in when we were at the club?"

I nod. "You did really well—you know that, right?" I want to touch her, hug her, fucking kiss her so badly, but... "I'm proud of you," I whisper.

"Thanks." She nods slowly and bites her lip. "Where's Autumn?"

"At a new hotel. In Notting Hill." I hand her the two knives. "She's safe; staff from the hotel is looking out for her. Put these behind your back—tuck 'em into the waistband or something."

Since we've been on the road for a while, Liam pretends to be confused and upset as he bangs on the window and demands to know where they're taking us. In response, the two Italians just laugh and keep

driving. The sound of their laughter is muffled as hell, reassuring me that they really can't hear us.

"It won't be long now," Liam sighs, sitting back in his seat. "Let's get ye girls cuffed again."

"Oh, no," Rose whines.

I grind my teeth together.

"God, shut up, Rose," Bella snaps.

My eyes widen a little, having not expected her to go off on Rose like that.

I guess I thought I was the only one who thinks she's whiny.

"Shut up?" Rose bites back. "Oh, I'm sorry. I'm *sorry* for not being as cut out for this as you are. But unlike you, I have a child to think about, too."

"Watch it," I threaten quietly. She has no fucking right to speak to my wife that way.

"You have no idea what you're talking about," Bella hisses, glaring at Rose. "I suggest you keep that mouth shut. That way, we can do our job and finally leave all this behind us."

"Meow." Liam grins. "Claws comin' out, eh?"

I give him a look before turning to Bella. "They're not real." I hold up one set of cuffs, and she offers me her wrists. "It's a chrome plating, but the rest is fake. The chain—you just pull your wrists apart, and the chain will break." She nods in understanding. "On second thought, can you place your blades at your hip instead? It'll make for easier access since you're cuffed at the front." Another nod, and she moves her knives to her side before I cuff her other wrist. "Great. Rose, you're next." I hand Liam her cuffs.

"Did Emmett really agree to all this?" Rose grumbles. "To use his pregnant wife as bait, I mean."

"He didn't exactly have a say," I tell her. "Just like I didn't." I point to my chest, even though I doubt she can actually see me in the dark. "You think I enjoy having my wife around danger? We didn't have a fucking choice, Rosalie."

"We knew ye'd be safe, though," Liam says. "We heard Aro and Luca talk about it all, remember? Ye were bait to them, too—to get to Eddie and me. And Emmett."

We grow silent after that.

Lolling my head to the side, I look down at Bella; she's worrying her lip, and I can imagine her brows being knitted together. The angle of her face and the darkness don't allow me to see it, though. But she's definitely deep in thought. Her left leg, crossed over her right, is bouncing a little, which it does when she's thinking hard.

The timing isn't right, but I physically can't stop myself from leaning down to whisper something in her ear. "For what it's worth—" I release a breath, a nervous mess—"I'm so sorry. For everything." I swallow thickly and back away enough to peer down at her—into her eyes. Questioning eyes. "When this is over..." My mouth feels too dry, and I can suddenly hear a ringing in my ears. The silence is deafening; the steady hum of the engine a barely-there lull.

"When this is over...?" Her voice is soft, shaky.

I stare at her intently, wishing I could read her fucking mind or something.

"I hope you'll give me a chance to earn back your trust," I admit in a hushed voice.

There's no doubt both Liam and Rose can hear me, but I don't give a flying fuck. At least they're polite enough to ignore what's going on between Bella and me at the moment.

"Why the sudden change of heart?" she whispers, almost flatly.

I shake my head minutely. "A part of me wishes it was sudden. I've... Fuck." I run a hand through my hair. I gotta go with honesty. For once. Well, in a long time. "I've known all along," I confess. "You have no idea how guilty I feel. I tried..."

"You tried to change my mind," she states, the corners of her lips turning up in a sinister smile. "You were too proud to just apologize, so you got defensive instead. *Offensive*. You tried to make me believe my feelings were unjust and wrong—that I was ridiculous for giving a shit about my father."

I say nothing, my silence confirming everything.

"Well," she whispers and leans a bit closer, "how did that work out for you, Edward?"

It didn't.

I fucking gulp. "I'm sorry."

Bella smirks, still looking sinister and beyond pissed off. But she's also hurt, and that's what tears at me.

"Not yet," she says with a shake of her head. "You're not sorry enough. But you will be before I forgive you."

I know she can see the hope in my eyes at that.

I don't care how much I have to grovel and beg. I will do it.

"You really thought I wouldn't forgive you at some point?"

I shrug. "You have no reason to."

She chuckles a little. "Well, I don't agree with *that*, but..." She sighs and settles back in her seat. "You gotta take the consequences, you...you motherfucking prick."

*There's my princess.*

Liam snickers but stops when I shoot him a glare.

"I forgive you for the delay earlier, by the way," Bella adds flippantly. "It was out of your control—you can't control every little thing that happens on a gig. But—" she cocks a brow at me "—you shouldn't have given me a time. You shouldn't have said three hours—you even swore it. We were *blind*, Edward. And when you told me three hours, that really mattered. Because what else did we have to go on?"

I nod, accepting that. "You're right."

She nods, too. "I know. That said, I'm looking forward to seeing Whistler again."

I give a small smile, wanting nothing more than to *be* her Whistler again.

"I love you," I whisper and kiss her cheek quickly.

"You know I love you, too."

"For some unknown reason," I mutter.

She shakes her head, looking torn between angry and amused...and adoring.

"The list is endless, Edward. Just stop being a prick." She pauses. "We need to get this over with. Then we'll talk—straighten shit out. And you will be at my mercy." I nod. *Anything*. "Oh, and I have news for you."

I cock my head. "News?"

She actually smiles. It's not wide, but it's still bright and happy. "I'd tell you right now, but I don't want you to freak out and lose focus—make a split-second decision that'll jeopardize everything."

Um. Yeah, there's a frown on my face now. "You gotta tell me."

"No. I don't *gotta* do anything."

"*Bella*." I'm down to pleading.

"It's good news—*amazing* news. We'll leave it at that."

Hmph. Well, at least it's not her dumping me. *Good news*. I can live with that. Whatever it is. *Amazing* news.

\*O\*O\*O\*

Before the van comes to a stop in the middle of a fucking forest, I make sure—once again—that Bella's earpiece and mouthpiece don't show. Her hair is down, though, so it's all good. Same goes for Rose. And that's why Liam and I can't wear the earpieces, 'cause they'd show. Like the girls, we do have mouthpieces strapped to the clasp on our watches, but that's about it. Basically, it means we can only dish out orders—we can't hear a fucking reply.

"Ye girls ready?" Liam asks.

"Yes," Bella responds firmly.

"Do I have a choice?" Rose snaps.

Liam and I exchange a look but say nothing.

And the next few minutes are a flurry of activity. Much to our disappointment, although we had expected it, Liam and I are cuffed by the Italians. Behind our backs. And they're no flimsy handcuffs, either. But we sorta saw this coming, so whatever. Kellan's got a bolt cutter with Liam and my name on it.

Liam and I struggle feebly to show our anger, but we're compliant enough for the goons not to do something stupid. I mean, it's not like we can't take a hit, but we need all our goddamn limbs to pull this off.

Bella and Rose cry. Though, I suspect Bella's the only one who's faking it.

Looking ahead of us, I see a large house—it looks like it belongs in some lame motherfucking Austen novel—just as two more men walk out.

One cocksucker for each one of us.

"Where are you t-taking us?" Bella sobs, being the terrific actress she's become. "Fuck—stop pushing me!" She struggles against the Italian gripping her arm. "Tell me where you're taking me!"

Brows furrowed in concentration, I scan the woods, knowing that we have approximately fifteen guys out there just waiting.

"Aro won't get away with this," Liam states flatly as we enter the estate.

The Italian jerkoffs laugh and usher us up a set of stairs.

No more charades.

By the time we reach a set of doors on the third floor, I've only counted five Avellinos aside from the four walking us.

Those are good odds.



One of them knocks, and...

"Enter." A man's voice slithers through the heavy doors, and I hope—God, I fucking pray it's Aro.

Turns out I'm right.

We're pushed into an old-fashioned office, Aro seated behind a massive desk, and three guards are there, too.

And Luca, who's standing next to Aro's chair.

Bella coughs, which is an answer in affirmative to whatever she's been asked in her earpiece.

"Well, well, well." Aro looks smug as he tents his fingers on the desk. He's the picture of calm and collected. Superior. "I've wanted to meet you all in person for so long now."

"Here we are," Liam says with a shrug. "Where's me old man?"

"Oh, you mean my beloved half-brother? He is in the basement—alive," Aro responds simply. "For now."

"Why the wait?" I ask.

His beady eyes find mine. "For everything you've caused..." He chuckles darkly. "I want you all to die together. Now I only need your father and brother, too." Then he faces Princess, much to my fury. I don't even want him breathing the same air as her. "Ah, *bella ragazza*. I wonder how your husband is going to react when I cut you up in front of him."

Every fiber in me turns to ice.

"I'd like to see you try, you greasy motherfucker," Bella spits out.

"Easy," I caution her in a whisper, my glare never leaving Avellino.

Aro grins. "I did fuck your mother, *si*." He nods, looking pleased with himself. "Then she got clingy, and..." He sighs sadly. "I already have a wife. I do not need another!" He cackles.

But his cackling is abruptly cut off when a shot rings out downstairs.

*Finally.*

"What now?" Aro growls as all the guards point their heat at us.

Adrenaline courses through me and I want to spring into action so fucking bad, but I can't—not when I'm cuffed.

Only a couple seconds later, Eric, Sam, and Kellan kick down the doors and barge in, their own heat raised and ready.

This office, large by any standard, is too small for a fucking stand-off.

Nine Avellinos, Aro the only one not pointing a gun. And seven on our side, although only four are ready to fire. Rose isn't strapped, and Liam and I are restrained. So, that leaves the three newcomers and Bella.

Aro, looking like he's calculating and scheming, speaks up. "Is this all you have, Masen? You are still outnumbered!"

Liam doesn't respond.

"Luca," Aro beckons calmly, "shoot my dear nephew..." He faces Kellan, Eric, and Sam. "That is, unless you lower your weapons."

"Keep them aimed," I order. "Bella." I give her a nod.

I watch her in my periphery as she breaks free from her cuffs, sticks a hand down my waistband, and pulls out my Sig, quickly aiming it at Aro's head.

I cock a brow at Aro. "Kellan."

Kellan walks up behind me, bolt cutter in hand, and snaps the chain that holds my cuffs together.

He does the same with Liam.

"You still want my father and brother, and you think we're gonna help you with that," I say to Aro, pulling out my Glock. "That makes you greedy. You should've just shot us when you had the fucking chance."

By now, Aro's calm exterior is gone. He's livid and showing it. "You're correct," he grits out. "Luca—now!"

My eyes widen for a second before I snap into action and all hell breaks loose.

As soon as the first shot is fired, I dive in front of Bella at the same time as I aim for Luca's head. The room is too fucking small—too many people. Too fucking dangerous. And with only one priority, I don't want to think about who I will lose. But as long as my wife is safe...

I fire my gun just as I slam into Bella, bringing both of us to the floor.

"Now!" Aro barks out again, this time to all his men.

"Take cover!" Kellan shouts. He pushes Rosalie away from him.

Luca falls to the floor, blood oozing from the bullet wound between his eyes.

"Stay down," I snarl, grabbing my Sig from Bella. Across the room, I see one of the guards aiming for Eric.

Shots ring through the air, accompanied by shouting in two languages.

"Get off me!" Bella screams. "Carlisle! Get in here!" She pushes and shoves, two knives in her left hand. With me above her, she still manages

to throw one of them, and the titanium blade slices through the air until it sinks into an Avellino guard's throat.

Before I know it, the door is kicked open, and more shots are fired.

It's fucking mayhem.

Chaos.

"Fuck!" Eric cries out.

"After h-him!" Liam coughs.

After killing another guard, I look over to see that my cousin's been shot in the chest. Dad is quick to run over to him, and more guys fill up the room—guys on our side.

"Where the fuck is he?" I shout, getting up from the floor. My eyes frantically search the crowded room, but I can't fucking see Aro. Dead guards...Luca...but no Aro. "Shit!" To my right, I see another door. "Ford, Sam, you're with me!" I command.

Then we're running out of the office and into an adjoining room—some fucking sitting room, I don't know.

"Edward!" Bella yells, but I'm already gone. "Liam! No, no, nooo!"

When I feel something warm and wet trickling down my neck, I clamp a hand over it, realizing I've been grazed by a bullet. *Jesus Christ.* Thankfully, it's just a flesh wound.

"This way," I growl, and we start running down an empty hallway. It's the opposite direction of the office, which means it's also the opposite direction of the way our men came.

"He's been hit," Kellan grunts, pointing at a red spot on the floor just as we fly by it. "We'll catch up."

*We better.*

"Sam, give me your earpiece," I pant, tucking my Sig into my waistband. My Glock will do just fine. Amidst the frenzy back in the office, I couldn't see Aro leave, and that means I don't know if he left alone. I didn't exactly stick around to do a body count. Regardless, there's three of us, and we have family seconds away. Aro doesn't.

Sam hands over his earpiece, and I'm quick to attach it to my ear as we round a corner. "Fuck." There are doors everywhere.

"More blood," Kellan whispers.

Relieved, I keep running; we follow the random little stains of blood on the floor.

I cringe when I'm met by rapid yelling and shouting in my ear, and I curse the fact that we're all on the same frequency.

*"Third floor clear,"* I hear my brother grunt.

*"We need backup in the main foyer!"* That's Garrett.

*"Office is clear,"* my dad reports in a rush. I can hear Bella crying. *"Chris, Mac—head down. We need a car. Right now."*

*"We're on our way, Garrett."* My brother again.

"Fuck me," I wheeze out in a breath. "Up or down?" We're standing in front of another staircase, and we can't see any more blood to guide us.

"Down—he's looking for an escape," Sam pants.

I nod, agreeing, and then we're running again.

Rushing through a dimly lit hallway, we end up in a massive garage.

"Shit," Kellan breathes out.

There are cars in the million-dollar class every-fucking-where.

Each of the fifty-or-so spots is filled.

"Fan out," I whisper. There are three aisles, one for each of us.

Before we can spread out, though, the sound of screeching tires causes us to spin around.

## **51 – LONDON IN AUGUST**

**Beta'd by Lisa and pre-read by Kitty.**

.

*Through these fields of destruction*

*Baptisms of fire*

*I've witnessed your suffering*

*As the battles raged higher*

*And though they did hurt me so bad*

*In the fear and alarm*

*You did not desert me*

*My brothers in arms*

.

*Let me bid you farewell*

*Every man has to die*

.

*Brothers in Arms ~ The version by Celtic Thunder and Ryan Kelly*

## **Whistler's POV**

"Tires!" I shout, raising my Glock.

For a second, it appears as if the car—a magnificent motherfucking Infiniti concept car—is driving toward us, but just as I manage to blow out one of the front tires, it swerves to the right—in the direction of the exit.

"Don't let that fucking car drive outta here!" I scream, running toward the car.

I can't take the shouting over the radio, so I pull out my earpiece and shove it into the left pocket of my dress pants.

Bullets flying, we take out the windshield, another tire, and the window on the passenger's side.

The gates open slowly, and the three of us wind up behind the car, guns going off without ever ceasing.

"Goddammit!" Sam growls.

*Come on, come on, come on.*

I aim for the side of the car with both my guns and hope to get the gas tank, though the angle is far from the best since we're still behind it, not next to it.

*Come on, come on, come on.*

The car slows down significantly when all of the tires have been blown out.

Then, fucking finally, the car catches on fire.

Fuckin' nick of time; the car was almost out of the garage.

Closing the distance, we watch as the door on the driver's side opens.

"That cocksucker," Kellan spits out.

Aro tumbles out and crawls away from the vehicle seconds before it explodes.

My guess is that there wasn't much gas in the Infiniti, 'cause the explosion wasn't a big one.

"Oi! Avellino!" I shout.

With shaky movements, he faces me. There's blood all over him, and his leg is on fire.

I grin and advance on him.

"We...we can," he rasps. "Let's..." Bruises and cuts cover his face. Soot, too, and he's been shot in the shoulder and his gut.

I cock my head to the side, seeing the almost-black blood seeping out from the wound in his stomach.

If he's been shot in the liver, he doesn't have many minutes left.

Lifting my Sig—which is empty of ammunition, mind you—I squat down and lean over him, pressing the barrel of the gun to his forehead.

My grin widens as I pull the trigger.

A strained choking sound slips through his thin and bloodied lips.

The fact that he pisses his pants doesn't escape my notice, either.

"Oh-ho! Sorry 'bout that," I chuckle. "I forgot this one didn't have any bullets left." I hold up a finger. "Gimme a sec." I aim my Glock instead.

Then I pop one between his eyes.



The light in his eyes fades right away, and his head slumps down on the ground.

The adrenaline is still pumping through my veins as I stand up and face Kellan and Sam.

*It's over.*

"It's over." Kellan echoes my thought.

I nod and release my breath. "It's fucking over."

Exhaustion settles in my body, but so do relief and happiness.

"Let's get the fuck out of here," Sam yawns. "I reckon we have a hospital guest to visit."

I sober at that, knowing Liam's been shot. In his chest. I remember it wasn't anywhere near his heart, but for all I know, a lung has collapsed or his spine has been damaged. Fuck.

Taking a last glance behind me, I nod to myself. The burning car is surrounded by cement or concrete; the fire won't spread. We have to put it out, but there's no immediate rush.

"Ford, report back to the others," I say as we start walking.

He nods and retrieves his earpiece from a pocket. I didn't even know he'd taken it out, though I can't blame him. More than fifteen guys reporting over the same frequency was a must, but it was fucking nuts.

"Kellan here," he starts, scrubbing a hand over his face, "Edward took out Aro. Murphy's here, too—we're on our way to the front."

Sam sighs when we pass a Ferrari Enzo—a red beauty.

And when I see Aro's yellow Bugatti, the vintage '37 coupe, I conclude that he actually managed to move all his most prized possessions here. I assume he did that after Liam torched the garage Aro had in Copenhagen.

Most of his concept cars had been there, save a few.

"If there's one thing the Italians can do..." Sam trails off.

I nod. "Cars. I hear ya." Spotting another one, I jerk my chin. "Check out the Birdcage." A sleek motherfucker. One of Maserati's concept cars from 2005.

"But why's this ugly fuckin' car here?" Sam points to a black convertible a few spots over. It's a Panther 6.

I grin and squeeze Sam's shoulder. "It may be ugly, but only two were ever made—one black and one white."

"Guys."

Sam and I turn around; Kellan has fallen back a few steps.

"What's up?" I ask. We're almost at the stairs again.

"It's Eric," he says, grief in his eyes. "He's dead."

My face falls, and I shake my head no.

*No.*

Without another word, I run up the stairs, taking them two or even three at a time. Still dressed like a fucking lawyer, I shrug out of my suit jacket, not bothering where it lands.

*No.*

I pick up speed.

Down all those goddamn corridors again.

I was close to James—hell, even Seth—but *Eric*...

He's a brother.

There's people crowding the space outside of Aro's office, and I see Bella right away. She's curled up in a little ball on the floor, leaning against a wall, crying her eyes out.

*No.*

"Edward!" Emmett calls.

At that, Bella's teary eyes snap to mine, and she's off the floor in a heartbeat.

She walks a few steps, more tears falling, but then she picks up speed, too.

Meeting in the middle of the hallway, she throws her arms around me and starts sobbing.

I exhale shakily and pick her up, wrapping her legs around my waist. Then I walk us into the adjoining room I ran through earlier and sit down on a couch. My eyes sting and prickle. My vision blurs.

"Edward," she wails.

Slowly rocking us back and forth, I screw my eyes shut and cry silently against her shoulder.

"Fuck," I whimper.

Nausea churns in my gut when I open my eyes and see what's left of my crew.

Sam and Kellan sit down on the couch across from us, heads bowed.

"Liam?" I inquire thickly.

"He'll be fine," Kellan says, clearing his throat. He keeps his eyes downcast, elbows resting on his knees. "Chris and Mac took him to the nearest hospital. The bullet went straight through, and Carlisle managed to close the wound for now."

I release a heavy breath, hoping no one at the hospital will recognize him.

"Emmett lost two guys, too," Kellan adds tiredly. "Carlisle one."

I nod minutely, not really giving a fuck about that right now. Maybe that makes me a prick, but those were guys I've never been close with. Eric, on the other hand...

"Anyone else?" I rasp.

He shakes his head.

"I s-saw him," Bella cries. Squeezing my wife tighter to me, I let out a shuddering breath and blink back more tears. "Edward, I—I saw him."

"Shhh, baby." I cup her tear-stained cheeks and wipe away some moisture with my thumbs. My heart clenches; the despair is written all over her face.

Her hands cover mine, and she looks down, her long lashes nearly touching her cheeks. "He was shot in the head," she whimpers.

My eyes well up all over again.

Sitting here, I promise myself to take Bella away from this.

It's all over now, and we need to get away. Far away.

"Bro," I hear my big brother say quietly. Looking up, I see him standing in the doorway. "Ed is downstairs—just wanted you to know. He's..." He flinches a little. "Um, he'll be okay, but..."

I offer a single nod, guessing he hasn't been treated like a human being the past almost nine months.

"My crew and I are gonna stay behind for cleanup," he continues and scrubs his hands over his face. We all look exhausted and...done. We're all so *fucking* done. "Dad's gonna head back to London with Uncle Ed in a minute. He's taking Rose and Garrett with him, too—and you should also get back."

I wipe my nose with my sleeve and nod again. "Got it." I swallow.

\*O\*O\*O\*

The car ride back to the city is quiet.

I rub my wrists after having the cuffs sawed off.

Bella cries silently as she tends to the flesh wound on my neck.

Sam's driving.

Kellan's staring out the window.

And I'm here in the back with Bella.

I feel numb.

"I love you." Bella snuffles and kisses my cheek.

"Always, princess," I croak, lolling my head along the headrest to face her. The gauze strains a little on my neck. "Beautiful." I touch her chin.

Leaning her forehead against my cheek, she snuggles close and pulls up her legs.

I'm there to hug her to me.

Whenever I close my eyes, I see Eric's face.

Our last real encounter goes on repeat.

It was before we headed to Hyde Park to monitor the girls.

"When all this is over, the first round's on me," Eric had said with a grin.

*If only, brother.*

I choke up and bury my face in Bella's hair.

\*O\*O\*O\*

When the elevator dings and we reach our floor at the new hotel in Notting Hill, the first thing we hear are Autumn's heartwrenching wails.

"Fuck," I spit out and pull Bella with me.

With quick steps, the four of us hurry toward the suite we'll share tonight.

Or more correctly: we pass our suite and head next door to Dad's suite.

"Open up!" I shout angrily, banging on the door.

*I can't fucking believe him.*

I'm sure he had all the best motherfucking intentions, but he was wrong. He *is* wrong.

"Open the fucking door, Carlisle!" Bella screams.

A second later, Garrett is the one who opens.

We push past him and enter, immediately spotting Dad and Autumn in the sitting area.

"Get the *fuck* away from her," I seethe.

He's just trying to comfort her, I get it, but it's not his goddamn job to do that.

"Bella!" Autumn sobs and runs for my wife.

"Shhh, we've got you," Bella says soothingly, picking her up. "We've got you, sweetie."

"Son..." Dad stands up, approaching slowly. "You don't have to worry. Your mother and I will take care-"

I cut him off with a dark chuckle. "Let me stop you right there, Pop. Whatever you're thinking, just forget about it. It ain't gonna happen." Placing my hand on Bella's lower back, I usher her out the door again. "Come on."

"Want us to stay back, boss?" Kellan asks.

I shake my head. "No, you too. Let's go."

Once inside our suite, I tell Bella I'm gonna take a quick shower. There's splattered blood here and there on my body, and it fucking needs to go.

"There's a bathroom in the other bedroom, too," I tell Kellan and Sam.

\*O\*O\*O\*

By the time I get out of the shower, only a towel wrapped around my hips, I see a white t-shirt, a pair of black boxers, and a pair of those blue/red plaid pajama bottoms on Bella and my bed. And when I check

the tags, I see that it's all from the hotel gift shop. Only Bella would think of getting this, but that's who she is.

When I return to the living room, I crack a small grin upon seeing Kellan dressed in the exact same outfit.

"Sam's in the shower," he mentions.

I nod and walk over to the couch where Bella's consoling Autumn.

"Princess, you should get a shower, too," I whisper and sit down right next to her. I hate to pull her away from Autumn, but though Bella wasn't harmed in Midhurst today, she still has remnants of the hellish night on her clothes. With a pained expression, she nods and whispers something in Autumn's ear. It's past three in the morning, so it's no wonder we're all looking worse for wear. Autumn snuffles and nods a little before releasing her hold on Bella's neck, and then she leans over to me instead. "Hey, baby girl." I kiss her hair and hug her tightly as Bella leaves the room to grab a shower.

"I don't want Uncle Eric to be dead," Autumn whimpers against my neck.

"I know," I sigh sadly and rub her back. "I know."

She snuffles some more and looks at me. "Bella says he's with Daddy in heaven."

I nod, my throat closing up.

I don't want to tell her bullshit. I don't want to make up a story about God needing Eric.

If anyone needs Eric, it's Autumn.

Lucky for me, she doesn't ask why he died.



Maybe she will one day.

But right now she settles for hugging me close and crying quietly.

It breaks my fucking heart.

"What happens next?" Kellan asks in a hushed voice.

Having no idea, I pull Autumn with me as I lie down on the couch. My tired eyes are trained on the ceiling. I can hear two showers running. I can feel Autumn's fingers playing with my shirt. I hear her sniffles and whimpers, too.

I breathe.

"I'm so over this," I whisper to the ceiling. "I don't know the next step, but...I'm taking Bella away for a while. We need it." I pause, gathering my thoughts. "I suppose whoever returns to the States will have the Feds waiting."

There won't be any arrests. I'm sure of that. But there will be questioning.

Bella and I will face that whenever we go back, but it won't be now.

What we need is time away to repair our marriage. I wouldn't call it damaged, but there's a crack—a dent—and I physically ache to fix it. We love each other something crazy, but mistakes have been made and we could use the next few months or whatever to get back on track—talk and focus on us. Reconnect.

"Where are you going with Bella?" Autumn rasps softly.

"I don't know yet," I muse and kiss her hair. "But you better believe you're coming with us." In an attempt to lighten her mood for a second, I tickle her side and growl playfully into her neck.

She squirms and giggles a little. "Stop it!"

The humor only lasts a couple beats, but it was worth it.

The tears return, and she rests her head on my chest.

Thinking of Eric and the other guys we've lost, I suddenly make up my mind. I know Dad and the others won't object; it will be our ending of this.

"We're going to Dublin," I whisper to Kellan, tilting my face in his direction. "Our brothers need a final resting place."

He nods solemnly. "Sounds like a good plan to me."

I think so, too. "I'll talk to the others tomorrow. We'll wait 'til Liam's been discharged, and then we'll go." Since it's so late, I sit up and suggest to Autumn, "How about we try get some sleep, Blue Eyes?"

Her bottom lip quivers. "I can't sleep with Uncle Eric."

"Uh, no." I clear my throat. "You're having a sleepover with Bella and me. That okay?"

Chewing on her lip, she seems to think about it for a moment. "When I have sleepovers with Bella, we paint our nails with my Hello Kitty nail polish."

"Uh-huh," I say, knowing that but wondering where she's going with this.

Her eyes narrow, and she wipes her nose. "Can I paint your nails?"

I look over at Kellan with a fucking-help-me-or-you'll-regret-it look.

I have one of those looks.

Kellan's own look is one of I-don't-give-a-shit-you're-on-your-own.

He thinks this is so funny.

Sighing, I face Autumn again. "Nothing pink."

She snuffles and grins. "No. Purple. With glitter."

'Cause that's better?

"Yay me," I grumble and stand up, Autumn positioned on my hip. "See ya in the morning, Ford."

"Good night," he chuckles.

About twenty minutes later, Bella is snacking on some grapes and a bag of chips in bed while Autumn's painting my nails. We're also on the bed, and I just wanna go to sleep. However, if this is what keeps Autumn from crying...

"Gimme one?" I open my mouth.

Bella, leaning back against the headboard, grins and pops a grape into my mouth.

Her eyes are red from crying, which I'm sure she did plenty of in the shower.

"You gotta sit still," Autumn whispers as she struggles with my thumbnail.

Sit still? Pardon me, but I'm lying down. Too fucking tired to sit, dammit.

I yawn.

The bedroom stinks, by the way.

I briefly consider letting one rip to hide the stench of the nail polish, but I'm not sure the two girls would appreciate it.

"Isn't it pretty, Bella?" She holds up my hand.

Bella nods. "Definitely. Maybe you can do his toes tomorrow after breakfast."

I gape at her. "Why would you—why? *Why?*"

"I'm enjoying this. *Immensely,*" she responds, drawing out the last word.

I huff. *Twice.* And throw my head back on my pillow. Then I huff again for good measure.

"Be still!" Autumn scolds.

"Geez. Sorry," I mumble and cover my eyes with my free arm. "Fuck, I'm exhausted." Another yawn slips out. "You almost done, baby girl?"

"I'm done when I'm done," she answers matter-of-factly.

Well, I got my answer, didn't I?

\*O\*O\*O\*

When I wake up next morning, I'm alone in bed.

I'm kinda used to that—the being alone part. Only, this time there's a note. And I'm in a bed, as opposed to on a couch.

*Whistler,*

*Don't get up. I'll be right back with breakfast.*

*~Princess*

More hope blossoms in my chest, and I can't help but smile. *Whistler.*

Unfortunately, I gotta ignore her request, 'cause I need to take a fucking piss.

But once I've done that, and brushed my teeth, I'm more than happy to get under the covers again. The clock says it's ten, which means I've only slept for about six hours. Plus, Autumn is a wild sleeper. Her kicks woke me up more than once.

A moment later, I'm looking at my purple fuckin' nails when the door opens and Bella walks in with a tray of food.

"Hey..." She smiles softly.

"Good mornin', baby," I say, stretching my arms above my head. Sitting up, I lean back against the headboard. "Where's Autumn?"

She giggles, eyes a whole lot brighter than yesterday. "She's painting Sam's and Kellan's nails." She places the tray between us on the bed. "They're in the living room."

"Fucking A." This oughta mean my boys won't bully the shit outta me when I see them. "You ordered breakfast?" Stupid question. I don't know why I asked, but I'm kinda nervous. For the past several weeks, it's been, um, frosty? There's been no fussing over each other. She hasn't tended to me, and I haven't done my share by being the caring husband I'd like to say I've been in the past. I haven't taken her on dates, spoiled her, complimented her, or...been there in the capacity she's needed me to.

"Yep." She hands me a cup of coffee. "I've told the guys that if she starts crying, they can get us. I think it's important that we keep her busy, as happy as possible, but if she cries, we have to let her." She takes a sip from her OJ. "I don't think it's healthy if we don't let her get it all out. She needs to grieve."

I nod slowly; all that makes sense. Bella tends to do that. "Understood." I groan quietly into my cup. "God, this is good. Thank you, by the way." I jerk my chin at the tray. "You didn't have to do this, you know."

"Yes, I did. I love doing this," she says seriously. "And I want us to get back to what we had and what we were before."

"So do I," I reply quickly. "I'm just saying that I'm the one who fucked up. You're not making it any easier on me by taking care of me when I don't deserve it."

She cocks her head to the side and smirks. "Oh, Irish boy. Who said anything about making it easy on you?"

I chuckle and nod. "Touché."

"That said—" she turns serious again "—I won't punish you by taking a shitload of steps back in our marriage. We need to talk, solve this, but not by retreating to...I don't even know. What I mean is, we're still husband and wife. That's never gonna change, you know?"

The left corner of my mouth turns upward. "You have no idea how amazing that sounds to me, princess."

"I disagree—I do know, but whatever." She waves a hand. "Here—" she hands me a plate with a bagel and a stack of pancakes "—eat. We have to talk about the police station. My rings, Edward. Aro's guys took 'em. They better still be there."

"They're not," I say around my bagel. As I chew, I reach over to my nightstand and pull open the drawer. I put both Bella's and Rose's rings there last night. "They're right here."

She gasps. "Oh, my God! How did you...?" She looks at me, eyes wide in wonder.

I smile softly. "I knew they were gonna take away everything valuable, but there was no way I'd let them. Rose's are here, too."

Her own smile, as she slips on her rings again, is wide. "This is much better. Thanks."

I don't reply, but I do feel like a pussy for wanting to cry. Sorry, but to see her so happy to wear my rings again feels fucking glorious.

The rest of breakfast is far from quiet, but it's still hushed and comfortable. I tell her about my idea and hope to take her and Autumn away for a while, and Bella agrees wholeheartedly. And this turns into a brief conversation about Autumn, but we're thankfully on the same page there. We'll take care of her—end of. We're already family, after all, and we honestly don't think Autumn would be comfortable with anyone else—at least not right away. But she knows us.

With breakfast winding down, Bella mentions softly, with a small smile, that it's been a wild year.

One year. It's been a year since I started pursuing Bella.

Christ, the things we've been through... The things *I've* put *her* through...

I remember, way back when we were still in Forks, that I promised to never involve her in what I do.

What was I even *thinking*?

As if she can read my mind, she tells me not to dare apologize. If I did that, I would insult her, or so she says. Because she wouldn't trade this for anything.

I concede with a nod but hope our years to come won't be *this* dramatic.

\*O\*O\*O\*

"This was delicious," I say, rubbing my belly. I think I ate too much, though. Like I usually do. "Thank you."

"Uh-huh." Bella puts away the tray and then sits up on her knees, looking like she could burst at any moment. "Can I tell you the good news now?"

I frown, confused, until I remember that she told me yesterday she had something to tell me. "Of course." Now I'm kinda curious, too.

"Okay, I wanted to tell you last night, but the day sucked ass, and..." Her face falls for a second, and I squeeze her hand, also thinking about Eric. "I don't want bad things to go hand in hand with what I'm about to tell you," she whispers. "Only good memories."

"I'm kinda at the edge of my seat here, baby," I chuckle nervously.

She surprises the shit outta me by suddenly squealing.

"I'm pregnant!"

I stare at her dumbly, stuck on stupid—Planet Slow Motherfucker.

Pregnant...

"You're pregnant," I state.

She nods furiously. "I didn't even know! You knocked me up in Sweden. I'm already twelve weeks along. That's what I was doing yesterday morning," she rambles. "I went to see a doctor—to make sure. I had a hunch, but I was honestly more concerned about my irregular period. Anyway, I found out. Yeah. Pregnant. The doc did a sonogram, but I wanted you to be there, too, you know, so I didn't ask for pictures or anything. We'll do that together." She releases a breath.

My eyebrows rise, but that's about the only reaction so far. I'm still trying to figure out...I mean...comprehend...what?

"Say something," she whispers. Her beaming smile falters, and now she looks nervous. "Edward...?"



She's *pregnant*? "Like, with a child?" I ask, rubbing the back of my neck.

"No, a fucking giraffe!" she exclaims. "What's wrong with you?!"

"I'm in shock!" I cry out. "Fuck!" I jump out of the bed and start pacing the bedroom. Pulling at my hair, I try to get with reality. This ain't a moment to be slow. But I can't fucking help it. I've wanted to have a kid with Bella for some time now, so to just hear it like that, and that she's so far along? Fuck me!

"You're pregnant!" I point at her.

"That's what I said!" Now she's actually standing up on the bed. "You're supposed be happy!" Accusing stare.

I open my mouth then close it again.

Happy?

Oh, I don't think that word quite covers it.

"I'm gonna be a dad?" I whisper.

Her features soften, and there's the beginning of a smile, but then it's gone—like she's afraid to smile now.

"Yes," she whispers back.

"Oh," I mouth.

My eyes begin to sting.

On instinct, I look at her stomach, only covered by a white wife-beater.

There's a fuckin' kid in there?

*Holy shit.*

"Princess," I croak. My feet carry me over to the bed of their own volition, and I get on it. And Bella kneels down again. And I'm there. And I squeeze her to me. And I'm completely fucking overwhelmed. "Oh, my God." I breathe out a shaky little laugh. I cup Bella's cheeks. Now she's smiling a little. "We're having a baby?"

Eyes welling up, she nods slowly. "Yeah..." Her thumbs brush over the skin under my eyes. "These better be happy tears, Whistler."

I choke out another weird laugh. "You have no idea." And then I'm kissing her. Kissing her hard, kissing her deeply, kissing her with everything I have.

## **52 – DUBLIN IN SEPTEMBER**

**Beta'd by Lisa and pre-read by Kitty :)**

**A song to listen to: *The Next Round* by Frank Turner.**

### **Whistler's POV**

Suit jackets are gone.

Ties have been loosened.

Sleeves rolled up.

"...and he thought he was bein' so fuckin' smooth," I chuckle lazily. With my arm around Bella's shoulders, I brush my knuckles over her arm in aimless little motions. My free hand goes for my Murphy's. I tip it back, drops of condensation wetting my fingers, before I set it back on the wooden table with a small sigh. "He was damn clueless with women."

Kellan, seated across from Bella and me in the booth, raises his own stout at that. "He got an A for trying, though." Sam, who's sitting next to him, laughs and nods in agreement.

"No," Bella muses softly, shaking her head. "He wasn't clueless. He just wasn't cut out for finding chicks in bars." Too true. "He was a sweetheart."

I hum and nod slowly.

"Callahan!" Liam shouts...which causes him to flinch. Fucker shouldn't be shouting. He's still in recovery; he's even wearing one of those braces around his chest. "We need another round, I reckon."

"Comin' up," Father Callahan replies from behind the bar.

The pub's empty, aside from our little group of five. It's two in the morning, I think—something like that—and the rest of our immediate family went to bed an hour or so. Emmett and Rose, Mom and Dad, Garrett and Tanya, Kate and Irina, Alec and Nessa...Uncle Ed...and several others. Autumn's with my folks for the night.

Approximately thirty of us are gathered here in Dublin at the moment.

The memorial for our lost brothers was held today at St. Ann's.

"James was the playboy," Bella giggles, nursing her glass of Sprite. "Didn't you and James have some contest the first time we were in London?" She looks to Sam with a cocked brow.

I snicker, remembering our pub nights. James and Sam both got slapped several times.

That was fun.

"Yeah, that went well," Sam huffs and then takes a swig from his whisky.

"No one knows the ladies like I do," Liam says with a firm nod.

I smirk and light up a smoke. "That's why you're single?"

"Yeah, and that's why you, at the age of twenty-eight, already have an ex-wife?" Bella asks, amused.

Liam actually turned twenty-eight two days after Bella turned nineteen. We celebrated their birthdays here in Dublin together. Right before we left London, we celebrated Rose's, too.

"Pshh," is Liam's response as Father Callahan sets our drinks on the table.

"You guys need to settle down—have a bunch of babies," my wife gushes.

She's come down with baby fever.

Fuck, so have I.

It feels like five minutes can't go by without touching her belly. There's actually a bump now, too—a cute little thing. And we have sonogram pictures, which means the entire family does, too. My mom is over the moon, and Autumn's hoping it's gonna be a girl. Me, on the other hand? I'm torn. I can't say I don't have a preference; it's just that I keep changing my fucking mind. One second, I want a son...but in the next, I want a little baby girl.

Regardless, we hope to find out tomorrow. Yep, doctor's visit.

"Babies..." Liam chuckles and shakes his head. "Not really me cuppa tea."

"Oh, that's such bullshit, cuz," I laugh, flicking some ash into the ashtray. All of us here are saps around kids. Autumn, for instance, has us all wrapped around her pinky. And I remember when Cub and Nessa were little; Liam was so fucking overprotective. Even now, he watches over them like only a parent would do. Hell, he was wary when Uncle Ed requested Alec and Nessa to be on the first flight out, and that's Liam's own father. But he relented when he saw a change in Ed—a change Liam has gone through, too, over the past several months.

The Ed Masen I've reconnected with these past few weeks is a humble man. His priority is his children, all three of them, and after hearing about how Aunt Elizabeth has changed for the worse, he hasn't even mentioned her.

I'm no fool; Ed will continue to run our organization with an iron fist, but I think there are several things he will no longer be part of. I guess what I believe is that he will tone down the ruthlessness. He's not as cold anymore.

"Eric wanted kids," Kellan says quietly.

The moment of humor is gone.

We fall silent.

Bella cries soundlessly against my chest.

I blink back my own tears—we all do, it seems—and I think back on the service we held in their honor today. At St. Ann's. Several photos were lined up at the front. Many of us spoke.

*Looking down at the first pew where Bella sits with Autumn, I take a couple calming breaths before I give the photo of Eric a quick glance.*

*"The first time I met Eric Bell..." I press my fist against my mouth and clear my throat. "I was nineteen—same as him. Emmett and Joe, our brothers, a year older. We were in Chicago..." I catch my brother's gaze; he nods solemnly, remembering. "We got into trouble." I crack a small smile. "See, Eric had this infatuation with a girl near where he lived. Joe was encouraging him to find the balls to talk to her." I let out a shuddering breath and look down. "And Emmett and I decided to help him." My mom snorts softly, seated next to my wife. It makes me grin a little. I guess she remembers, too. "Anyway, we dragged Eric and Joe with us. To the girl's house. Um, it was in the middle of the night, by the way."*

*A few chuckles can be heard, most of them in anticipation. "We were young—stupid feckin' kids," I chuckle thickly. "There was no time to waste. Everything had to happen right away. So, we broke into this girl's house. Where she lived with her parents—her preacher father, equally religious mother, and gun-toting brother..." I sniffle and recall how Eric nearly pissed his pants when we accidentally opened the door to the brother's room instead of the girl's... "Let's just say we ended up running for our lives with the girl's mountain of a brother chasing us down the street."*

*Blowing out another heavy breath, I face the pews again. I return Bella's sad smile with one of my own. "I will always owe Eric. He saved my wife once, he's been there for his niece, and he's been a great friend and brother." A debt never to be repaid... "Rest in peace, Eric," I whisper to myself.*

Bella also gave a speech. About Seth. About Eric. About James. Men who'd quickly become family to her.

Dad spoke of the men he had lost. Liam, too. Same goes for my brother.

"We need another toast," Kellan declares, pouring four shots of Jack Daniel's. I hate the stuff, but it was James' favorite. "To our brothers." He raises his shot glass.

I hold up my own. "To make sure they didn't die for nothing."

Bella's next with her Sprite. "To never forgetting them."

After throwing back my drink, I slam the glass back on the table and relish in the liquid burn sliding down my throat.

"Jaysus," Liam coughs and wipes his mouth.

"You shouldn't be drinking," Bella chides.

"There's a lotta shite I shouldn't do, darlin'," Liam chuckles.

"Don't make us regret our decision," I joke.

At that, he sobers. "Feck that! That baby's mine." He points to Bella's stomach. "My godson."

Bella giggles and buries her face in my armpit, at which I shake my head in amusement.

Honestly, I know we won't regret the decision we made to ask Liam to be our child's godfather.

Things between Bella and Rose are still a little frosty, and there's only so much we can blame on Rose's hormones. But yeah, it is what it is, and Emmett understood that we want Liam. Plus, Emmett and Rose have asked Ben and his wife to be godparents to their daughter.

I don't really know when it happened, but we've drifted apart a little. Emmett is my big brother; I will always love him, and we're still solid. There's no animosity or hard feelings. It's just...we've grown apart from each other, if only a little. But it's okay. We're family; we just don't hang out every day anymore. And as long as there's no fighting, it's all good.

Who knows, when we return to the States, maybe we'll grow closer again.

But we're not pushing it. That's all.

"What if it's a girl?" Bella asks Liam.

He shakes his head and grabs the acoustic guitar leaning against Kellan and Sam's side of the booth. "Nah, that's a little boy in there. I'm sure of it." He places the guitar on his lap and sparks up a cigarette. "Now, how about some Frank Turner?"

I side-eye the guitar next to me but decide Liam can take this on his own. We've played quite a bit tonight; it's been our relief amongst all the memories we've shared. Though, the songs haven't been the most joyful ones.

"Okay..." Liam sighs and retunes the strings. Meanwhile, I tighten my hold on Bella and kiss her temple. "'The Next Round'."

*I drink 'cause I'm thirsty*

*I drink 'cause I'm dry*

*I'm not yet quite thirty*

*But I feel like I'm dying*

Softly humming the melody along with my cousin's playing, I keep dropping slow and soft kisses on Bella—her temple, her forehead, her hair. And I glance over at Kellan, who I know has taken Eric's death particularly hard. They were as close as I was with Eric. Like Sam with James.

*I drink 'cause I want to, 'cause I need to, 'cause I don't know*

*What else to do with my time*

*I won't say it*

*You can see it in my eyes*

I know that both Kellan and Sam are heading back to the States in a couple days. After their inevitable questioning by the Feds, they're gonna lay low for a while before getting back into the game. Kellan's still head of security for Ed, the position I gave him after Conn didn't have the balls to stand up to Liz. And Sam...I don't really know what his plans are. In the past, he ran in Liam's crew and handled drug smuggling a lot.



Uncle Ed has made it clear, though, that if I ever need my boys, it's a done deal. Sam and Kellan work for Ed, but I still have them at my disposal.

*You drink 'cause you're lonely*

*You drink 'cause you're sad*

*You always claim every party*

*Was the best time you've ever had*

And that leads to Bella and me... While we do have every intention of taking a break, we also know that we're made for this life. Definitely not what we've gone through these past eight months, but what we did in Rome—the Maserati show. Bella was actually the one who approached me with it. She craves that thrill just as much as I do, which both terrifies me and elates me.

We're becoming a family, though, so there will most fucking certainly be a change in how we live, but..

We won't stop.

We'll make sure at least one of us is safe at all times. We'll travel together and keep our family closely knit, but only one of us will work a gig. And the days of making plans in a few hours are over. I need to go back to the time where Emmett and I would study our intel for weeks. Sometimes months.

*You drink 'cause you're scared of*

*A life living off your own company*

*You won't say it, but I can see it in your eyes*

"You okay, baby?" Bella whispers.

I nod and place my hand on her belly. "Just thinking about the future."

She smiles. "We have a lot to look forward to, don't we?"

"A lifetime of things." I give her a quick kiss on the lips before she settles against my chest again.

*Of all of the things I could become*

*A lonely drunkard isn't one*

*Which I would've wished*

*When I was young*

Resting my cheek on the top of Bella's head, I look over at Liam, and it's too fucking easy to see the battle of emotions he's fighting. Though he plays flawlessly and sings without his voice cracking, I see that he's not really here at the moment.

*Drink has drunk my days away*

*I tried to live like Hemingway*

*Life just doesn't work that way*

*Pills don't kill the pain*

*They just delay*

For the rest of his life, he has to keep looking over his shoulder. He's on the run from a life sentence in prison—charges he's actually guilty of. Hell, we'd all face life in prison if the authorities knew... But Liam—there's evidence against him that will force him to hide.

His priorities have also changed. He's more grounded now than what I remember of my rambunctious cousin. Fuck, if I've been wild...it has nothing on Liam. Always the life of the party, always something up his sleeve. But now he wants to settle down, I know that. He just can't see how that would be possible. He wants to spend more time with his brother and sister. He wants to live in the house he bought on Bella and my street on Bainbridge. He wants to take a few steps back in the organization, maybe devote his time to something that is less dangerous.

*We drink 'cause we're scared that*

*If we should stop*

*The good times will go away*

*But the bad times will not*

*What if it's over and we're sober*

*And we still feel like we're fixing to die*

*What then?*

*Don't say it, 'cause I can see it in your eyes*

Liam sends me a grin, and I chuckle, nod, sigh, concede, and bring up my guitar, too.

*Next round's on me*

I follow his lead, the tempo of the song slowly escalating and becoming more powerful.

"Next round's on me," I sing, looking down at the strings.

Eric's voice echoes in my head. That grin on his face...

*"When all this is over, the first round's on me."*

*"When all this is over, the first round's on me."*

*"When all this is over, the first round's on me."*

"Next round's on me," Liam sings.

The crescendo builds.

Bella kisses my bicep, silently telling me she's there.

Liam and I play a little harder, exchange a nod, and sing together.

*Next round's on me*

*Next round's on me*

*\*O\*O\*O\**

A chorus of "Good morning" rings out when Bella and I walk down to the pub for breakfast the morning after.

Since Liam's sitting with his crew and Kellan and Sam appear to be asleep still—well, at least they're not here—I place a hand on Bella's lower back and usher her over to the booth where my parents are. Uncle Ed is there, too, with Cub and Nessa. And Autumn looks surprisingly cheery, seated on Mom's lap.

"Okay, I can sit on Bella's lap now." Autumn jumps up. "You slept too long."

Dipping down, I kiss the top of her head. "Sorry, Blue Eyes." I let Bella slide in at end, next to Alec, and I end up on a chair at the head of the table. Autumn's quick to settle down with Bella.

"When did you go to bed last night?" Mom asks, smiling knowingly. Maybe because we're still in pajamas. Well, we don't wear them when we sleep. My dick doesn't like clothes, not for him, and definitely not on my wife. But yeah, breakfast in pajama pants and t-shirts are a helluva lot more comfy than getting dressed in jeans and whatever.

I grin at Bella before answering my mother. "Um, I don't think we crashed until four thirty or somethin'." I yawn and scratch my scruffy jaw. Gotta shave today. "And now I'm starving."

"You're always starving, silly," Autumn giggles.

I wink at her.

"What're the plans for today?" I ask, pouring myself some coffee. After that, I pour Bella some orange juice and fill two plates with food.

"Well, we're leaving tonight," Pop reminds me.

I nod. He and Garrett, along with Mom and Aunt Tanya, are gonna travel Europe for a while as they make sure we haven't left evidence behind us. I'm pretty sure a couple other crew men are joining them. Dad's also gonna check up on the crumbling Avellino business.

"Nessa wants to go shopping," Uncle Ed says, smiling fondly at his daughter, who grins widely in return. It makes me smile, too, 'cause I finally feel comfortable leaving Cub and Nessa alone with at least one of their parents. While I've never held a real grudge against my uncle, I still haven't trusted him enough. Work has always been at the forefront of his mind, but I'm glad to see that's not the case anymore.

He hasn't only changed internally, though. It's evident that he was abused, if not straight out tortured, while he was held hostage by Aro. He's skinnier and has scars scattered all over his body. I've only seen the smaller ones on his neck, but Dad told me after he'd examined Ed.

My uncle looks like he's aged ten years.

"And then you're going house shopping," Ma pipes in with a pointed look.

Ed rolls his eyes, but a grin is there, too. "Aye, you keep saying."

"Houf fopping?" I ask with a mouthful of muffin.

"Aunt Esme's convinced Dad to move to Washington, too," Alec informs me with a wide smile.

My eyebrows shoot up as I look to Ed, who nods. "Liam wants to get away from Chicago, and so do the twins." He ruffles Alec's hair a little.

"That's a great idea." Bella's beaming like the sun. "Maybe there's something on Bainbridge?"

Mom nods. "You know, I was *just* thinking the same."

And then my wife and mother begin to talk about interior design and...something about sconces. Whatever-the-fuck those are.

It even bores Autumn half to death, so she ends up sitting on my lap.

"What do you wanna do today?" I ask her, bringing my cup to my mouth. Father Callahan's wife is in charge of all cooking here at the pub, and this includes the coffee, which she makes with cinnamon and vanilla. It's fucking delicious. "We only have that doctor's appointment for Bella—the rest of the day is free."

"You gonna see if it's a boy or girl?" She looks so excited.

I smile. "That's right."

"I hope it's a girl." Her eyes grow wide, and I imagine her thinking about all the girly stuff she could pass on. "What do you want it to be?"

"A boy." I nod then shake my head. "No—a girl." My brows furrow. "Or a boy... Um. Shite."

Autumn giggles behind her hand and grabs one of my pancakes to munch on. Good for her I haven't drenched them in syrup yet.

"Can we go to the park after?"

"Sure," I say, liking that idea.

"Eddie..."

I grab for the syrup bottle. "Hmm?"

"Will the baby be my cousin?"

I scratch my nose in thought and fork up a pancake. Thing is, Bella and I have discussed this at length over the past few weeks. And our plan is to tread lightly with Autumn—let her set the pace—but we will still make things clear to her. She's just as much family as the little one growing in Bella's belly. We're already head over fuckin' heels in love with Autumn, so it's not like it's gonna be some feat to include her. But, as Bella has pointed out—and my wife happens to be a smart cookie—children need both the words and the physical proof. We need to show Autumn as much as we tell her that she's with us for life.

And you never know with Autumn. While she usually goes to Bella with questions—or just in general—she sometimes turns to me, too. Which Bella predicted, hence the talk we've had to prepare ourselves for whatever and whomever Autumn asks.

"No," I finally say, keeping my tone soft. As I drop a kiss on her forehead, I see that we have Bella's attention. The rest of the table is occupied with talk of Uncle Ed's move, but Bella's definitely with me, so to speak, and she gives me a subtle nod and an encouraging smile. Tilting my head to

face Autumn, I feel the left corner of my mouth turn upward. "He or she won't be a cousin to you," I murmur. "More a little brother or sister."

"Oh," Autumn mouths.

Suddenly a little nervous that Bella's not handling this convo, I ask, "Uh, is that okay?"

Her furious nodding causes my shoulders to sag with relief.

\*O\*O\*O\*

"Don't forget to be casual," I remind Bella and Autumn, my right hand on the door. "They're all sitting in there." Looking through the window, I see all our closest inside the pub. It looks like they've just finished dinner. I blow out a breath, and I feel like I need to fart or something. It's the nerves and the happiness. "Casual."

"We get it, Whistler!" Bella laughs. "Just open the door."

I bite down on my lip as I watch her unbutton her hoodie, revealing the new t-shirt I bought her before we went to the park. I forced her to put it on right away. Over her tiny baby bump, it says, "Daddy's Precious Cargo" in light blue block letters. Yep, blue. Not pink. And I'm fucking ecstatic. We're having a *son*.

Shit, you shoulda' seen the dick on my boy.

The doc and Bella told me it's his arm, but what the fuck do they know, right?

"Okay." I nod and nod and nod. "Casual, got it? Not a word about what we're havin'." 'Cause we wanna know who figures it out first—just by looking at the t-shirt. Oh, and besides the letters in blue, there's also this little blue teddy bear printed on it.



"Eddie." Autumn taps her foot impatiently.

"Fine." Grabbing her hand, I open the door and let Bella enter first. Then Autumn and I follow. "Not a word," I repeat.

"Oi!" Kellan stands up from his seat. "Did ya find out?"

*Casual, casual, casual.*

I feel like I'm about to burst.

*Casual, casual, casual.*

"We're having a boy!" I shout at the top of my lungs.

Oh, shit.

"Good God," Bella mutters, rubbing her temples.

"That was—" Autumn repeats my words without sound and counts on her fingers "—many words."

I smile sheepishly.

"Didn't I feckin' call it?!" Liam bellows. "I knew it! I KNEW it!"

"Sorry," I whisper to Bella right before she's engulfed in hugs. She just laughs it off, though.

Mom's there, Liam's there, Pop, Uncle Ed...

"Congratulations, boss," Alec says. I thank him and hug him tightly before doing the same with Nessa. And then more people follow. Firm handshakes, hugs, and shoulder claps.

"I'm so happy for me," Mom gushes, a sniffling mess.

"For you?" I tilt my head.

She nods. "Well, I'm happy for you, too."

"Right," I chuckle and kiss her temple.

"Congrats, little bro." Emmett smiles widely and pulls me in for a hug.

"Thank you. Pretty fuckin' indescribable, huh?"

"I know the feeling." He glances over at Rose, who's embracing Bella. I hope those two can work out their shit. Or rather, that Rose man-er, womans up. Then he faces me again, still smiling, and squeezes my shoulder. "You think our kids are gonna drive us nuts?"

"I'm counting on it." I hear karma's a bitch, and since Emmett and I were wild little shits growing up... Oy. But I'm not up for it. Leaning in a little closer, I say, "I'm totally gonna knock her up again soon, though." I look him in the eye and nod seriously. "Dude, I'm going for Irish twins."

He laughs. "Good luck. You planning on letting Bella in on your plans?"

"Well, sure." When the time is right. Say, about six weeks after the birth of our son?

"Eddie!" Autumn tugs on the hem of my black Henley.

"What's up, baby girl?" I pick her up and position her on my hip.

She leans in to whisper in my ear. "Can I tell them the name?"

"Of course." Unlike Emmett and Rose, who are keeping their daughter's name a secret, Bella and I have already agreed to let people know our son's name. "Everybody pipe the fuck down!" I shout. Walking over to Bella, I add, "Autumn's gonna tell you our son's name."

Autumn blushes and ducks her head. She mumbles something—the name—but only Bella and I can hear it.

"Honey, they can't hear you," Bella chuckles softly. "Can you say it again?"

Autumn harrumphs before facing the crowd again, her hands cupping her mouth. "Ryan Eric Cullen!"

As expected, the smiles and comments of agreement are solemn. My folks say it's a perfect way to honor Eric, Sam and Kellan raise their glasses to us, Uncle Ed nods and smiles softly, and several others express their own kinds of approval.

It sorta works out even better since Ryan is not only my middle name but one of Liam's, too—that fucker has four names or something like that—and he's gonna be the godfather.

"And now baby Ryan's starving," Bella declares with a grin, rubbing her belly.

"Well, let's get my son fed, then." I nod then guide Bella over to an empty booth.

Liam and Alec end up there, too.

"What do you wanna eat, sweetie?" Bella asks Autumn.

Leaning over the table a little, Liam asks me what our plans are now that everything is over.

I answer as I check my menu. "Pop's letting us borrow his place outside'a Killarney."

"Oh—ye're staying in Ireland then, eh?"

I nod and scratch my eyebrow. "Until the baby's born." It's what we all want and need. We'll unwind, travel the country, reconnect, plan our future...

For Princess? I'm gonna kiss the fucking Blarney Stone.

Our plan is also to begin to ease Autumn into our family and give her time to let everything settle. Other kids her age are in school, so we're gonna talk about that, too.

"What about you?" I jerk my chin at him.

"We're ready to order, baby," Bella says quietly.

"Right." I quickly scan the menu again, once more deciding on Callahan's fucking delicious fried fish burger and chips. "Callahan!" I shout. He perks up from the bar. "What'd you want, girls?" I look to them, and they tell me they wanna share the pizza they usually eat here. "The usual!" I tell Callahan. After adding drinks to our order, too, I turn back to Liam.

He shrugs and drapes an arm around Alec. "Laying low and hanging out with me brother and sister. Dad, too."

I think that's good. Whereas my family has always been solid, the Masens have gone through more than a little shit. "So, back to the States, huh?" He nods. "That's cool." I let my eyes wander a little, soon settling on my brother and Rose across the pub. "I guess we'll all meet up Em's daughter's christening in a few months."

"They're gonna do that here in Dublin?" Liam eyes Emmett and Rose, too.

"Yeah, he told me." I smirk. "Gotta follow the traditions and all..."

Several in our family were baptized at St. Ann's here in Dublin, Emmett and I very much included. Our kids will go through the same.

"Here ye go," Father Callahan says, appearing with our drinks.

"Cheers, man," I reply. Accepting Autumn's bottled Fanta, I pour it into a glass and hand it to her. "When are you going back to the US?" I ask Liam.

"Few days, I think." He rubs his jaw. "Pop and the twins are flying. I'll get in through Mexico."

That makes sense.

"Be careful," Bella tells him softly. Then a grin. "You're no good to us in prison."

I chuckle and nod at her. "What she said."

"I'm always careful," Liam huffs.

Alec snorts and rolls his eyes.

Once he's given his little brother a playful glare, Liam turns to me again. "What about ye three? When are ye leavin'?"

I look over at Bella and smile; we're so ready to get the fuck out of here.

"The day after tomorrow," I answer.

"So, we've got two days to have fun," Alec says, grinning. "Two days of fun before we split up." I shake my head in amusement, enjoying his exuberance. He rubs his hands together. "Oh, the possibilities..."

Liam and I chuckle.

But the thing is...those two days pass quickly.

Before we know it, it's time to say goodbye.

With Dublin in the rearview mirror, I drive away with Bella and Autumn...and the bun in Bella's oven.

## Epilogue

Beta'd by HollettLA and pre-read by Kitty Vuitton.

### *This Marriage...*

#### Whistler's POV



"He's gonna wake up soon, baby," I moan.

Ryan's almost nine months old, and though we're grateful beyond words that he's now sleeping through the night, it means he wakes up *really* fucking early. And it's almost seven in the morning, so...

"Shhh..." Tilting her head back, she rides me a bit faster. "God, so good." And when she rolls her hips over my hard cock, she takes me a bit deeper, too. "Fuck—can't...can't get enough."

"Don't I fucking know it." I'm all breathless, barely keeping up with her goddamn appetite. Not that I'd ever admit it, but...two, three times a day? Fuck me! The other day, I actually had to fake it when there was a round four.

*I don't fucking run on batteries!*

Let's just say that while she went through a phase when she was pregnant with Ryan where she was particularly horny, it has *nothing* on this one. At seven months pregnant with our daughter, she's fucking bonkers in the bedroom.

I aimed for Irish twins. Well, I fucking got it. Baby number two is cooking in her, and I'm goddamn proud of my Irish swimmers.

"Shit!" I gasp when she slams down on me. This is just the first round today, so I'm all good and horny. "So fucking wet, princess." I swirl two fingers around her clit, causing her to cry out and dig her nails into my shoulders. Then I fall back against the mattress and thrust my hips upward, and that makes her gasp and nod and plead and moan and fuck me harder.

A drawn-out groan slips through my lips as my entire body tightens under her.

"Fuck!" she pants. Addicted to her amazing body, I watch her through hooded eyes as she fucking devours me. This time around, her stomach isn't as big as it was when she was pregnant with our son. She's more petite. She's stomach and tits. "Almost, almost, almost," she chants, outta breath.

"Come on, Bella," I moan, feeling my ass cheeks flex when my insides coil. "You're close, aren't you?" Hell, so am I. "I can feel you—your pussy, so fucking *soaked*." Reaching up, I cup her tits and brush my thumbs over her sensitive nipples. "God, you're fucking beautiful..."

Another couple passes over her clit and my wife explodes around my cock.

She takes me with her, and my vision sorta blackens there for a moment.

*Talk about a good fucking morning.*

### ***This Family...***

#### **Princess' POV**



"We gotta hurry now," I said, starting to clear the breakfast bar. "Autumn, baby, can you eat your banana, too?" She needed the energy. Why swim meets started this early was beyond us.

She nodded, mouth full of yogurt and blueberries.

"Mama, Mama, Mama!" Ryan banged his bottle on his highchair. "Bam, bam, bam!"

"I've got him, princess." Whistler shoveled the last of his cereal into his mouth, quickly followed by a whole piece of toast that he just jammed in there. And then he got up to pick up Ryan. "Blue Eyes, is your bag packed?"

"Dada, Dada, Dada!"



"Yeah, that's me, Ry," Edward chuckled.

"She packed it," Autumn answered, nodding at me. I hid my smile and continued to clean up. Autumn never referred to us by name anymore. We were "he" and "she". Which, after speaking to a therapist who specialized in children who came to new families, we knew was normal. It was after we returned to Seattle and Bainbridge half a year ago that we told Autumn that Edward and I saw her as one of our own. We loved her, and we wanted her to have the family she deserved. And though we'd never pressure her, we had a feeling she wanted a mom and dad again. Especially after witnessing her with Ryan—she was so protective of her little brother. So..."he" and "she" was a part of the transition. One day soon, she'd probably start calling us Mom and Dad, and we couldn't deny that we were anxious for it.

Since we lived in a house with heavy security, we knew it was a family member when the door slammed. It was followed with an, "Oi! Ye're late!"

"In the kitchen, Liam!" I hollered. "Whistler, can you dress Ryan? It's cold out so make sure to pick something warm."

He nodded, kissed my forehead, and carried Ryan out of the kitchen.

In the foyer, I could hear Liam and Edward talking, mainly about Ryan and how he looked more and more liked Whistler with each day. And that was true. Ryan had the same shade of hair I did and my dimples, but that was it. The rest was all Edward.

I was waddling all over the place when Liam entered the kitchen a minute later.

"Good morning!" Liam was a morning person. After kissing my cheek, he sat down next to Autumn. "Ye ready to kick some Speedo arse, cupcake?"

I shook my head in amusement and poured him some coffee.

Autumn giggled. "Yes." Then the giggling died out, and she scowled. "But I hate Tammy. She's always so mean. And Lucas, too—he's a stupidhead. He always pulls my hair, and when he does, Tammy gets even meaner."

"That's because Lucas likes you, honey," I sang and stood on the other side of the breakfast bar. I winked at her as I slid Liam's coffee toward him. "And Tammy's just jealous."

"Sounds to me like Eddie and I should have a talk with this Lucas," Liam muttered.

It was my turn to giggle. "Oh, please. Whistler called that shit the first time we came to one of Autumn's practices. Believe me, whenever Edward's around, Lucas looks like he's ready to piss himself."

"I just had a friendly chat with him." Edward joined us in the kitchen, and he was grinning like the not-so-innocent man he was. "Are we ready to go?" He handed Ryan over to me, who was babbling away in his own language. "Pop texted me, and they'll all be there soon."

"Everyone's coming?" Autumn suddenly looked nervous.

Whistler was quick to comfort her. "Remember what we said, baby girl? It's not about winning. Although that *is* pretty fucking glorious."

"Edward," I chided as the baby did cartwheels inside of me. "Jesus." I rubbed my belly.

*I swear, when our daughter's out, I'm taking a break from the baby-making business.*

"I'm gonna kick butt," Autumn decided firmly.

"That's me girl!" Liam cheered.

"That's *my* girl!" Whistler argued. "You should just tell Sarah—you know, the woman you're screwing on the sly and think you're so stealthy about—that you want kids of your own."

I cracked up, watching my own version of a soap opera, all while I had Ryan cooing and babbling in my arms.

As for the woman Liam was sneaking around with...yeah, we all knew. She lived on this street, too.

"How did..." Liam's mouth opened and closed. Then opened again. "How'd ye know?!"

Whistler and I rolled our eyes.

### ***This Life...***

#### **Whistler's POV**

"Well, that's interesting," I chuckle, cradling the phone between my shoulder and cheek. Seated in Bella and my office on the second floor, I can hear my wife and our kids in Autumn's room down the hall. Bella's helping Autumn hang up her very first silver medal, which she won today. It's not a gold, but it's still a fucking win. Plus, that little Tammy girl or whatever was disqualified. Anyway, I'd love to be in Autumn's room right now, but I gotta finish this first. "Are they close?" I ask Garrett over the phone.

I'm pretty sure Liam's run a check on the woman he's fucking—we can never be too careful—but the name Whitlock wouldn't ring a bell to him. It sure as fuck rings a bell for me, though. Garrett, too, since he and Tanya live in Forks. And that's why Garrett called me with this, obviously.

*"Somewhat,"* Garrett says. *"They meet up on holidays and such. But there's apparently a rift between Peter and his brother—Sarah's father."*

I nod pensively, looking out the window. If I crane my neck, I can see the van parked down the street. Feds. Not that they have anything on us, but they're always gonna try. And Billy Black is still leading the case. With Jacob "Sidekick" Black as his son, and...Jasper Whitlock as a fellow police buddy to Sidekick.

"Do you think this Sarah chick knows who Liam is?" I wonder. We need to keep track of them, especially now since we've started making plans for two car shows next year. One in Geneva and one in LA.

"Whistler, the kids are asleep—oh." Bella pokes her head in, holding up a bag of Doritos and a beer. "I'm sorry, I didn't know you were on the phone," she whispers.

I grin and wave her over. "Garrett," I mouth.

She nods and plops down on my lap, her delectable ass causing me to groan internally.

*"I doubt it," Garrett replies. "I've had a tail on her for a couple weeks now. She's...heh, she's nothing if not predictable."*

"That's good," I muse, rubbing Bella's stomach. I can feel my little girl kicking up a storm. "But if they become official and her family finds out who she's dating, there's bound to be issues."

I definitely have Bella's attention now.

*"We'll just have to take it from there. We should probably talk to Liam, though—hold up."* In the background, I can hear Aunt Tanya yelling at him. It makes me snicker. *"Christ. Okay, I gotta go. Tan tells me my work day is over."*

"All right," I chuckle. "Talk to ya later, Garrett." After hanging up the phone, I dive for the beer. I grab a handful of Doritos, too. "Wanna know something funny?" I shove the chips into my mouth.

"Sure," she giggles. For some reason, she finds me amusing when I eat.

"You know Farah? The fuck Liam's ph datin'?" I ask.

"Chew, swallow, talk."

I nod, remembering that. I chew, I swallow, I talk. "Sarah—the chick Liam's 'dating'. Her last name is Whitlock—well, her maiden name. She's divorced."

"No!" Her eyes widen.

"Yep."

"So, she's related to Jasper?"

"Yeah—" I take a sip from my beer "—they're cousins. Peter, Jasper's dad, has a brother. That's Sarah's pop."

"Holy shit," she whispers, and then purses her lips. She looks away, in thought. "I remember that Jasper had family in the Seattle area, but..." She shakes her head slowly. "Wow, this is..."

"Something," I supply. "We won't take action, but we'll monitor it." I shrug. "We have more important shit to do."

Because the thing is, just a small part of this life is over.

The rest?

It's just beginning.

**The End**