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We Could Run

1

Chapter song – No light, No Light by Florence + The Machine

EPOV

"Burn it all!" I shout, running behind my desk. Throwing open the drawers, I begin to empty them of documents. The gun—my nine—is tucked into the waistband of my jeans, and I'm itching to just go out there and blow these fuckers' heads off. "Carlisle! Tell Emmett to bring Bella to me." He nods and darts out the door as I spark up a smoke.

I don't want her to be afraid. The warehouse we're currently in may be surrounded by Feds, but they've got shit on us. Probable cause, maybe, but who cares about that? Still, I don't want my girl to worry.

Chicago got a whole lot brighter when she walked into my life a year ago.

Isabella Crowley.

I fell hard and fast for a fucking stripper. A fucking stripper! Can you believe that shit? I couldn't, but it happened, and she's fucking everything

to me. The diamond ring in my pocket is proof of that. As is her name inked over my heart.

In the past, I've been nothing but a selfish prick. But now... Last week, for instance, when Bella was down with the fucking flu... I took care of her, you know? 'Cause she's it for me. There's no place for selfishness around her.

I was gonna ask her to marry me tonight, but then I got the call from Emmett.

The call warning me about the Feds being on their way.

Goddamn pigs.

Lighting a match, I toss it into the trash can next to my desk.

Paper after paper goes up in flames.

Fraud, murder, kidnapping, insider trading, assault, armed robbery...

Yeah, I'm guilty of a lotta shit.

"Edward."

Looking up, I see my Bella walking in.

My smile is automatic.

She's so fucking beautiful. Since we had a date planned, she's dressed in a sexy dress—red silk, revealing cleavage, a slit that exposes her thigh... Matching fuck-me heels and lipstick.

Locking the door behind her, leaving us alone in my office, she approaches with a pile of what looks like clothes in her hands.

"We've run into trouble, baby," I admit and pull her close to my body. I nuzzle her cheek, inhaling the sweet scent of that perfume I gave her a few months ago.

"The Feds..."

I nod and kiss her jaw. "They'll bring me in, but don't worry." Taking a step back, I take a pull from my smoke. "They have nothing that'll stick." I'm making sure of that right now.

"You're wrong," she whispers. "They didn't warn me—I didn't know it was gonna go down tonight, but..."

With a frown, I pull back and look into her eyes. The frown deepens when I see they're full of unshed tears.

She cups my cheek. "I love you." Her eyes are beseeching. "I *love* you."

I smile, uncertain and confused. "I love you, too. You know that."

"Yeah..." She exhales shakily. "Listen," she clears her throat, snuffles, and dumps the clothes on my desk, "if you put that on, I can sneak you out."

Giving the items a sideways glance, I notice the logo on the back of the jacket.

FBI

I cock a brow at Bella, wondering where she got that shit from, while my right hand goes for another stack of papers on my desk. "What're you sayin', Bella?" She wants us to escape? Fuck that. I ain't running. There's no need for it. Like I said, they've got nothing.

"I'm one of them, Edward," she croaks. Slipping a hand under her dress, she reveals the black elastic strap around her upper thigh. I swallow hard, my stomach tied in knots. And then she shows it... That. That fuckin'...

I stare at her badge. She's holding it up. I see her name. *Isabella Swan*.

Not *Isabella Crowley*.

"Oh, my God." I press a fist to my mouth, suddenly nauseous. My face drains of color, and I drop my cigarette on the floor. "You're..."

She's a fucking cop. An agent. A fucking Fed.

"Your father killed mine," she reveals. "Fucking executed him." My eyes snap to hers. In the background, I can hear the sound of helicopters circling the warehouse, and every now and then I see their search lights flash across the windows. "Ed did that." I keep staring, not wanting to believe. We're supposed to get married; we're supposed to have it all. "All I've ever wanted was to take down the arrogant Ed Masen."

My fucking dad.

It's just...I don't give a flying fuck about my asshole of a father. The only thing I can think of right now is that my girl betrayed me—that she completely *fucked* me over.

"Please," she begs, and I take a step back. My head swims. "There are countries, baby—no extradition. We could get away." She's crying. Hell, I'm almost on the same page. "Just you and me, Edward. I love you."

Those three words make me explode.

"You goddamn whore!" I scream. She flinches as if I've slapped her. Now there's a thought. But no. I can't fucking hit her. Even though it feels like she's currently kicking me in the gut. "FUCK!" I punch the wall behind me, chest heaving, heart pounding. Blind fury surges through me. "You..." I laugh bitterly, humorlessly. "Go." I point to the door. "Get the fuck outta my sight, you—YOU FUCKING CUNT!"

She's ripping my heart out.

"Edward, stop!" she cries, clutching her belly. "Please listen to me! I love you—you need to trust me, and—"

"Trust you?!" I shout, incredulous.

"I never wanted you to go down, too!" she screams. "We could go, Edward! I'll—I'll..." She lets out a sob. "I'll explain everything!"

I stare at her, the love of my fucking life, my light. In all my twenty-seven years on this planet...I've never been so happy as I've been this past year. Now she's telling me...

I was a case.

Everything I've told her...

Every time I made love to her...

I was nothing but a fucking case.

"I'm sorry, Edward."

At that, I shake my head. "No." I'm seething. "You don't get to say that. You don't get to *be sorry*."

Then she's in my face, clinging to me, tears streaming down her face. "I'm begging you, baby," she sobs. "Put the clothes on—I'll get you out. We'll go away. We'll leave everything behind."

I laugh and push her away. She's fucking crazy.

"Edward..." She whimpers. "We could run."

As my heart shatters into pieces, I stare deep into her soulful eyes and let her words go on repeat.

We could run.

We could run.

We could run.

2

Chapter song – Radioactive by Imagine Dragons

EPOV

Seven years later...

Sinking a bit lower in my seat, I watch as Bella unlocks her door and steps inside her little house. I'm pretty sure she's home for the night, so I kill the engine and grab my laptop from the passenger's seat. 'Cause I have a lot to do. *A lot to prepare for us, baby.* Stuff I've been doing for the past two months while keeping an eye on her.

After little more than seven years in prison, time is everything.

In an empty Word document, I type down several things I need to get my hands on.

*Morphine, antibiotics, regular painkillers, sedatives, sleeping pills...
Needles, antibacterial gel, syringes, bandages, gauze, slings, compresses,
thread for stitches, gloves...*

I take a bite of my Double Whopper and give her house a glance.

The light is on in her bedroom; I think she's getting ready to go to bed—always early. After all, she's got work tomorrow.

Vitamins, protein pills, iron supplements, magnesium...

Once the burger is gone, I go for my strawberry milkshake instead. The clock tells me it's almost time to check in with my parole officer, but I still have time to check for some furniture online.

"Fuck." I rub my forehead. "Brain freeze."

King-sized bed, two couches, chairs, recliners, ottomans, kitchen table, coffee table, dressers, shelving systems, nightstands, armoires...

After calling Jasper Whitlock, my parole officer, I move on to all things fabric I need in a home.

Towels, sheets, duvets, pillows, blankets, bath towels, drapes, rolls of fabric...

"There goes another five grand." I snicker to myself.

I add shit for repairs, too.

Hardware is next.

Axes, saws, hammers, knives, drills, screwdrivers, nails, bolts, locks, screws, fuckin' glue...

Bella's light goes out.

She knows I'm out of prison. And that I'm supposed to stay away from her. But I bet she wonders if I plan to seek her out. Maybe a part of her even wants it. *Well, baby, you'll get your wish. I just gotta prepare our new house.*

There's a lot of shit you need to buy when you have no intention of ever buying anything ever again.

"Survival shit," I mumble, hitting up online stores through Google.

Sleeping bags, mosquito nets, air mattresses, tents, flashlights...

"We're gonna need a shitload of batteries." So, I end up spending almost a grand on batteries of different kinds. Still, it's nothing we can depend on for too long. That crap expires. We need stuff that we won't run out of. Nets and fishing poles, for instance. But how the fuck do I...? "Books." Yeah, I have a lot to learn. I tap my way to Amazon and add book after book into my cart.

Surviving in the Wild, How to Build a Fire, Edible in the Sea, Facts on Southeast Asia, a book on building traps, Hunting for Dummies...

My brows furrow as I think further than that.

One day soon, I hope...hmm... Yeah.

Childbirth, pregnancy books, giving birth at home...

Mental note: get your hands on fake birth control—placebos, whatever.

Then I select fiction. Bella and I both like to read, so I spend approximately four grand on books.

Which leads to entertainment.

"Thank fuck I'm not buying this shit in my name," I laugh through my nose and spark up a smoke. I roll down the window, too. Oh, fuck me. I'm gonna have to buy a boatload of smokes. Ah, well. It's not like I don't have money.

Decks of cards... "Bella loves playing backgammon and Trivial Pursuit." ...chess, extra questions for TP, a book on card games, dice, TP Geography, Clue, fuckin' Monopoly...

Guitars, strings, pics, harmonicas, sheet music...

I yawn, done for the night. Tomorrow is another day.

~xXx~

It's a regular night at Carlisle's club, but I knew from the moment I stepped through the fucking door that something was different.

Call it a gut instinct.

Then I see this new broad on stage. I see her tits, her luscious curves, her killer legs, her deadly motherfucking smile, and I see her smoldering eyes. And she can move; she can swing off that pole like she's done it since birth.

Rolling up the sleeves on my black button-down, I make my way over to sit down in the booth nearest the stage. I'd pick a chair right fucking next to the stage if I had a choice, but I have business to do first.

Carlisle emerges from his office soon enough, which means his father will be here any minute to borrow it. Carlisle's pop is my dad's underboss, and it's that time of week where all the capos come to kick up to him.

"Fresh meat?" I slap my hand to his and jerk my chin in the direction of the stage.

My childhood friend grins and sits down next to me. "Yeah—Isabella Crowley. She's fine, ain't she?"

I hum, agreeing.

~xXx~

The island is ready, Bella. The orchard is huge. The water collector is installed. The two outhouses are in place. The house has been built on the edge of the jungle—a spectacular beach view—and the chopper I bought has been hidden. Money really talks in Asia—more so than here, I'd say.

"Oh, baby." I look through my binoculars. "What're you doing?"

She's cleaning her front room in nothing but a wife-beater and hot little panties, that's what she's doing.

So, I go online to buy clothes for us; I save lingerie for last.

Jeans, cargo pants, cargo shorts, sweatpants, pajama bottoms, cotton shorts, thermals, swim trunks, bikini bottoms, basketball shorts... T-shirts, beaters, tops, hoodies, Henleys, jackets, bikini tops...

Flip-flops, gym shoes, boots...

I light up a smoke and stare at Bella for a while. *You still look too good for words.* The file I have on her is next to me. She never married—no kids. But she's still working for the bureau.

She graduated high school at fifteen, college at nineteen—double major. She's some fucking genius. Math club, science club, college paper, swim team, debate team. She's a member of motherfucking Mensa. And at the age of twenty-three, she was ready to take on the FBI, where she climbed all possible ladders rather fucking quickly. Because she was only twenty-five when I met her. I mean, I get it...the bait needs to be young. They couldn't exactly have sent in a forty-year-old to be a stripper—a stripper that I'd fall for. *Isabella Marie Swan.*

Isabella Marie Masen sounds better.

I nod at that.

Exhaling some smoke through my nose, I return to my shopping.

Boxers, socks, cotton panties, those ruffles, fuck, boy shorts... "Lace, satin, silk—fuck yeah." ...thongs, push-up bras, cotton bras, sports bras...

Fuck, now my cock is all hard.

I gotta chill. *You'll be mine soon enough.*

"Vices," I sigh. Smokes, alcohol... Well, I smoke half a pack each day, and how long will I live? I snort and grin to myself. Then I call my guy in Thailand and go to town on smokes and booze.

Going through my list, I see that I need to check for more vegetables to grow. In the fruit fields, we have oranges, mangoes, watermelons, pineapples, lemons, apples, nectarines, plums, and a variety of berries. I just hope the weather won't ruin anything. And next to the orchard, there's a crapload of vegetables. Carrots, bell peppers, chili peppers, cucumbers, onions, garlic, cabbage, tomatoes, lettuce, and different herbs.

Several items won't be good for picking until next season, but our first two years are covered in case a huge fucking storm should destroy anything. I've bought pasta, canned goods, rice, ingredients for baking, spices, dried meats and fruits, snacks... Really, the list is miles long.

You don't wanna know what I spent on toilet paper.

"Maybe I should buy a fucking cow," I mutter. Can you do that? Can I have a goddamn farm or something? Ooh, chickens. Pigs. Fuck, yeah. I'm gonna go for it. If they die, at least we'll have fresh meat. "I wanna see you dressed like a milkmaid, baby."

~xXx~

"There's Paul," Carlisle says and nods at the bar.

Leaning back in my seat, I watch as Isabella slowly slides down that pole, legs spread, pussy barely covered by her thong.

Fuck me. I adjust my cock.

I sip my vodka straight, my mind running to places where she's naked and I'm the only spectator.

"Masen," I hear Paul greet.

Tearing my eyes away from Isabella, I look up and bump fists with Paul, one of Pops' top earners. "Have a seat."

One day, I will take over for my father. Technically, I'm a capo too, though I do more than that. It's all about learning, evolving, getting to know who you're dealing with. And I do that by meeting with Dad's guys every week—as per his request.

"Nice." Paul smirks at Isabella on the stage.

I snap my fingers at him. "Yo! Eyes over here."

Fuck, I'm transparent.

~xXx~

By day, I do what I'm supposed to do as a law-abiding citizen. I go to my meetings, I pretend to look for work, and I'm in constant contact with Whitlock and the brainwasher they've assigned to me. And whenever I have a few hours to spare, I'm at the library, studying for Bella and my new life.

Then...at night...

I laugh under my breath.

You have no idea what's coming, Bella.

I feel like I've been given a new lease on life. A second chance, if you will. *And, baby? You once told me we could run. Well, we're gonna. Just the two of us.* She's all I need.

Over the past seven years, I've dissected every motherfucking memory.

God, you love me, too, Bella.

I know you do.

~xXx~

Once I've done my bit and played the nice guy with every fucker who comes in to meet Carlisle's dad, I order my third...fourth or fifth drink and wait for Isabella's second round on stage.

And when she does appear again, I tell Carlisle to bring her to me.

He can always tell one of the other strippers to take Isabella's place.

Watching as Carlisle speaks in Isabella's ear, I step away from the booth and walk over to a nearby table and sit down in a regular chair. I mean...after watching her sexy body for hours, the least she can give me is a fucking lap dance.

And then she's standing before me.

"Edward—Isabella." Carlisle lets out a chuckle. "That's Mr. Masen to you, hon." That said, he leaves.

"Mr. Masen," Isabella says, though the loud music almost drowns it out.

While she keeps her eyes downcast, I let my eyes drink her in.

Every...perfect...fucking inch of her.

The only thing she's wearing is a fucking thong. A barely-there black fucking thong. And spiky heels.

She seems sorta shy, but I know that's bullshit. The way she moved on that pole... I bet she's a hellcat in the sack. One with claws, one that bites.

Over by the bar, Emmett, the new bartender, is staring at the gorgeous stripper in front of me. I kinda wanna break his face for that. 'Cause she's for my eyes only now.

"Sit." I smirk at Isabella and pat my lap.

~xXx~

After Bella's turned off the lights, I wait a bit longer.

'Cause...my baby can handle a fucking weapon.

And I have no desire to get shot tonight.

Months of preparations have gone by, and it's time.

"I can feel it in my fucking bones," I mutter, looking through my binoculars. "A new age, baby. Fresh start."

I cut deals for her sake. Had it not been for my turning into a goddamn snitch, I would've spent life behind bars. Instead I got out after little over seven...

As a changed man.

Tick, tock, tick, tock.

"Here we go." I smile softly and leave my new SUV.

Twenty minutes later, I've picked her fancy motherfucking lock, and I silently make my way up the stairs in her house.

I'm good at this.

I was fucking born to break laws. My dad made sure I knew my shit.

Christ, it smells like you in here, baby.

~xXx~

Without missing a beat, Isabella straddles me on the chair. I groan under my breath and palm her perfect ass. Leaning forward, I nuzzle my nose along her jaw and give her a quiet command.

"Dance."

To most fuckers in the club, there's no touching allowed until the dancer gives the go-ahead.

Rules don't apply to me.

"You kinda need to let me go if you want me to dance, don't you?" she chuckles.

I shrug and lean back in my seat again. "Improvise." I ain't letting go of her ass, that's for sure.

"If you want me to grind against this—" she smirks and rolls her hips over my hard cock "—you could've just said so."

I nod, staring at her. "Grind away."

And grind away she does. To the seductive beat of the music, she moves over my body in the most sensual fucking way possible. I keep my hands palming and squeezing her ass, letting my fingers run over the crack. At one point she thrusts her pussy against my cock and leans backward so far that she would've slipped off my lap had I not been holding onto her. At another point she grips my shoulders and pushes her round and full C-cups against my chest. That particular move makes me moan and squeeze her ass extra hard.

"Do you work here?" she asks in my ear as she swivels her hips. "Like, with Mr. Cullen."

I shake my head no.

My hands slide up her soft and smooth body until I palm her tits.

She throws her head back, and I roll her nipples between my fingers. It's only a matter of seconds before I let my mouth come into play, too.

"It's just..." She moves closer and weaves her hands through my hair, something that causes her tits to smash together. Jesus Christ. "You seem like an important person."

I hum and kiss my way down her chest.

Open-mouthed kisses leave a shiny trail down to her tits.

"Are you an important person, Mr. Masen?" she whispers seductively in my ear.

I kinda want her to shut the fuck up. "No. I'm just a fucking deli owner." It's partially true; I do own a deli. Though, it's just a front. "Now, shut up." Smashing her tits together, I suck a nipple into my mouth and groan at the sweet taste.

Unfortunately, she tells me a short while later that her shift is coming to an end.

I shrug, showing indifference instead of the disappointment I feel.

After slipping a hundred-dollar bill in her thong, I watch her shimmy her ass as she walks away.

Once she's outta my sight, I walk over to the bar where Carlisle's chatting up Esme, one of the waitresses. She won't give him the time of day, but Carlisle loves a good chase.

"Scram," I tell her.

She walks off, and I lean my hip against the bar as I study Carlisle.

"What?" he chuckles and looks down at himself. "Something wrong?"

I purse my lips. Then I point to the stage. "The new one—Isabella. No more privates."

Carlisle grins. "You said it yourself, Edward. She's fresh meat. That means a lotta dough. Fuck—I have countless guys wanting their chance."

I shrug. "I don't give a flying fuck."

"Aw, man," he complains. "Do you understand how much money she can make me?"

Taking a step toward him, I smooth down the collar of his shirt. "Since when do I have to repeat myself?" I smile and straighten his tie. "Make it happen." I cock a brow. "Are we fucking clear?"

He sighs and nods.

~xXx~

When I slip into Bella's bedroom, my eyes immediately fall onto her sleeping form in the bed. She's on her back, and the covers have slipped down, exposing her chest. If only that fucking tank top wasn't in the way...

It's been so long.

For a moment, I consider just standing here and rubbing one out to the mere sight of her sleeping, but...we'll have time for that later—once she realizes I'm doing this for us.

Blowing out a breath, I pull out the roll of duct tape.

Then, with slow movements, I get on the bed.

I feel my mouth curving into a smile.

She shifts slightly as I hitch a leg over her stomach, but I'm not touching her yet, and she seems to sleep on. With the piece of tape ready, I hover over her and quickly cover her mouth with it. She's already waking up, so I sit down on her stomach and gather both her hands in my right one. Holding them above her head, I keep my grip tight as fuck.

Her eyes flash open, and even in the dark, I catch the dilation of her pupils. *Shock, fear, fury.*

"Did you miss me, baby?" I whisper, so fucking elated to be touching her again.

She screams behind the duct tape, her body fruitlessly thrashing under mine.

"Oh, fuck," I groan through a chuckle. "You're gonna wake up the beast if you keep that up." I thrust my cock against her stomach. "Mmm." I slide my nose along her jaw, breathing in her sweet scent. Good thing I remembered to buy the perfume she uses in bulk. "Christ, I've missed you, Bella—*fuck.*"

She keeps thrashing and screaming, which is beginning to *piss me off*. I just want what's best for us.

"Can you fucking quit it?" I grit out and glare down at her.

Tears well up in her eyes, and it just breaks my fucking heart when I see them sliding down her temples.

I shake my head sadly and bring out my nine. "You once told me all we needed was each other, baby—that we could run."

But I can't have you giving us away, Bella. How will I ever get us to our island then, huh?

So, with a heavy heart, I knock her out with a blow from the butt of my gun.

I have chloroform and sedatives for later, 'cause I'm guessing she won't be cooperative on our way to Asia.

3

Chapter song – Isolate by Paradise Lost

EPOV

As soon as we leave American soil and air space, the anxiety from constantly looking over my shoulder drains from my body, and I can think a bit clearer. I can relax...'cause each mile I put between myself and the States means it's harder for certain people to find me. I mean, it doesn't take a genius to figure out I'm basically a dead man walking. 'Cause a snitch? That's the lowest of the lowest. Hell, I've killed my own fair share of them in the past.

But it's for Bella...

Bella, who is "asleep" next to me on the cargo plane.

"Fuck, you're so beautiful, baby," I whisper and kiss her on the forehead.

Sighing contentedly, I turn back to study her file some more. Not that I don't know it by heart already, but I just can't get enough of the words about my love. I am a little ticked off, though, 'cause aside from Bella's past, her file is pretty empty.

There're plenty of stats and merits, but nothing really on her personal life.

A mother, a father, a sibling... She never married. She doesn't have children. But...there should be *something*. Or has she really *only* worked through these past seven years?

"Maybe she's been waiting for me," I think out loud with a smile on my face. Or... "Shit." Are there things that are confidential? Fuck. I didn't think of that. Maybe she has this whole other life—*secret* life...

I'll just have to ask her when we get home.

~xXx~

A couple days later when I return to Carlisle's club, I'm happy to see that Isabella's on the floor working as a waitress instead. Although, I still expect her to dance for me. I never told Carlisle to take her off the stage altogether; I just don't want her to give out lap dances anymore. But I guess it's Carlisle's way to go above and beyond.

Since this visit is for pleasure only, I make a beeline for the bar and walk up to Isabella, where she's waiting for the bartender to finish her drink order. Emmett...Emmett Newton—yeah, that's the guy. I'm gonna have to keep an eye on him, 'cause I don't like the way he checked her out the other day.

With a smirk on my face, I come to a stop directly behind Isabella's scantily-clad body, and I cage her in by placing my hands on the bar, one on either side of her.

She stiffens as I dip down to nuzzle her neck.

"Isabella." Fuck, she smells good.

She relaxes, if only a little. "Mr. Masen."

~xXx~

After losing track on the hours we travel and several middle landings, we finally touch down in Malaysia—or more correctly, Kuantan. From there—

well, *here*...we have one more flight to catch, and it's to the island of Matak.

Like I said, I've lost track on the hours we've been on the run, but I do know we're on day three. Since we're flying under the radar, no pun intended, it's taken a long-ass time. And this means we're covered in three days worth of sweat and grime. But we'll be staying here for a few hours, so it'll give us a chance to shower and freshen up. Though, I will be doing those things for Bella. Now that we're so close to our goal, I don't want her to wake up and ruin everything for us. During those times she's been half-awake and drowsy as fuck, I've taken the opportunity to give her water and small bites of food. Then I've sedated her again.

~xXx~

"What can I do for you, Mr. Masen?" she asks and turns around to face me.

I trace a finger from her jawline...down, down, down...to her cleavage.

There's no missing the shiver that runs through her.

I dip down and kiss her throat. "I want you in a private room. That's—" I cup her tits "—what you can do for me."

She lets out a shuddering breath.

And Isabella doesn't say no.

Everything in my life is so fucking easy.

~xXx~

While Bella's knocked out in our hotel room, I make final arrangements with my contact here in Malaysia.

When we middle-landed in Thailand, I took care of my guy there, too.

Our final destination may technically be Indonesia, but I've dealt with everything through my contacts in Malaysia and Thailand.

And once every-fucking-thing is taken care of, I feel tons lighter and head back to the hotel.

My sleeping beauty is just where I left her.

"Soon we'll have our own world, baby," I say, walking into the bathroom. It's time to take my last shower. Ever. So, I savor the moment, and with the door open, I talk to Bella as I clean myself up. "I'll have to teach you how to hunt." I shake my head in amusement and lather up my body. "But you already know how to use a gun, don't you?"

Of course she does.

~xXx~

"Christ, baby," I moan.

Isabella grinds her hot pussy over my cock, all while I suck on her tits.

Her corset is somewhere on the floor.

Gotta love these private rooms. No fucker is allowed to watch what I now call mine.

Without asking for permission, I slip a hand between us, push her thong aside, and shove two fingers inside of her.

"Fuck!" she gasps.

Her eyes flash to mine; I see the shock in hers.

I stare at her intently, wanting to own her.

"I want my cock in here," I whisper huskily and curl my fingers upward. She shivers. I finger-fuck her deeper. She gets wetter and wetter and wetter and then she crashes her mouth to mine.

The problem is...with this passionate kiss, so full of fire...I kinda sign away my own life.

That wasn't the plan.

~xXx~

Showered, shaved, and dressed in a pair of black boxers, I leave the bathroom, ready for a few hours of sleep.

I settle into bed, right next to Bella, and pull her closer to my body. It feels like I physically ache for her. My *heart*—my heart *aches* for her.

"I've missed you so much, Bella," I whisper, suddenly feeling a bit emotional. But I can't help it. These past seven years... "It's been so lonely." After ridding out half my father's organization, there was only one way for me to survive. "Solitary confinement." All I thought about was Bella. Coming back to her. And this is what we need—our second chance. To get away. To be happy. To only have each other.

I sniffle and roll my eyes at myself; I never fucking cry. Now, though...it's like the floodgates open. Just because I'm finally so close to her. And we have our goal within reach. So close I can almost taste it.

"I love you," I croak, pressing my forehead to hers. I can't wait for us to get to the island—for her to wake up. In time, she will understand. "I was fucking lost without you." I tuck a piece of hair behind her ear.

The need for her is making my chest feel all tight, like someone's stomping on it.

So, I squeeze her to me a little harder and hold on for dear life.

~xXx~

She's got some odd look in her eyes as I roll on the condom, but I'm too fucking horny to read into it.

"Sit on it," I groan.

She does. Slowly but surely, she sinks down on my thick cock, and I moan, moan, moan her fucking name.

"Can't believe I'm..." She's mumbling some shit against my neck. But all I can focus on is her tight pussy around my cock, her tits in my hands, and my eyes devouring her. "...Better be worth it..."

"Lean back," I instruct her, breathing heavily. Using my thighs as leverage, she places her hands there, and I just fucking watch her before me. "You've got to be the most..." I shake my head slowly, unable to find the right word. Beautiful, gorgeous, sexy, stunning...these words pale in comparison. Letting my eyes wander down, I see how my cock disappears into her. The sight and feeling make my balls tighten.

She fucks me good.

I stare, grab, touch, kiss, and suck.

Addicted to her tits, I end up leaving two marks from my teeth and lips.

"That fucking stung," she hisses, and then she leans forward; I feel her teeth sinking into my shoulder.

I spit out a curse and slam her down on my cock. Hard.

And I fucking knew it; she's a hellcat. Feisty as fuck.

Cupping her neck, I pull her forcefully to me and crash my lips to hers. I kiss her like there's no tomorrow, we fuck harder, her nails dig into my skin, I moan, she curses, my head swims, I rub her clit, she rides me faster, I roll my hips to get deeper, she cries out, we pant, we fucking explode.

At this point, I have no idea that Isabella Crowley has the power to literally drive me to insanity.

~xXx~

"Please don't struggle, baby," I plead softly and tip back the water bottle for her. She's drowsy, pretty much out of it, and her head lolls from side to side, eyes fluttering. But she needs some more sustenance before we go. The water goes down somewhat easily, but the small cubes of toast, cheese, and chicken are another matter.

Luckily, I'm only going to have to sedate her one more time.

When she wakes up again, we'll be home.

"I...ple...y're hurtin'..." She mumbles incoherently while I feed her. Her eyes, though they rarely open, are glassy and unfocused. "...me...Edw..."

"Shhh." I smile and caress her cheek. "I'm here, baby. I'm here."

She whimpers and a stray tear rolls down her soft cheek.

Maybe it's relief that I'm finally here for her.

"Okay, it's time to go," I sigh.

~xXx~

The day after, I come to the club to have lunch with Carlisle. But I purposely arrive half an hour early, which will give me time to look over the file on Isabella.

For some reason, I can't get her outta my fucking mind.

Taking a seat behind the desk, I bring out the file on her, as well as a small bag of coke. I haven't gone to bed yet, having spent all night taking care of Jared who's failed to kick up tribute—a piece of his profits—for the past three weeks, so I need a goddamn pick-me-up.

"Okay, here we go..." I open the folder and roll up a bill. "Isabella Marie Crowley," I read out loud before snorting the first line. I swallow convulsively and tilt my head back. The sense of being awake, alert, and ready for anything is instant. "Date of birth..." Twenty-five years old. Born in Arlington, Virginia. Clean bill of health. Her home address... "Shit." She lives just a block away from my deli.

Now, that's awesome news.

Picking up the phone, I order a dozen roses and have them sent to Isabella's apartment. In my personal message, I tell her not to be a stranger and come see me in my shop some day.

~xXx~

It doesn't feel like it's only been a few hours since my shower.

This part of Asia...Jesus Christ, it's goddamn humid.

My t-shirt is fucking soaked by the time we reach the docks on the island of Matak. Don't even get me started on the airport, which had been packed with shitheads carrying scuba diving gear...or whatever it's called.

"This yours," my guide tells me in broken English and points at the speedboat I ordered. "Bigger boat already on island."

I nod and carry Bella onto the boat, placing her on the cushioned bench/sofa thing where she can lie down.

Soon, we're on our way out into the open sea, and I smile to myself, knowing that I won't ever see a single person other than Bella again.

The island I bought isn't very large by any means; it only takes two hours to walk around it, but it's all we need and very difficult to find unless you know what you're looking for.

And when it finally comes into view after approximately an hour and forty-five minutes, it looks like a slice of motherfucking heaven.



"We're home at last, baby," I whisper in awe. My eyes even well up a little as the island comes closer and closer. A huge weight comes off my shoulders, too, and I just know this feeling won't leave me.

Five huge Maersk shipping containers have been dumped on the beach, about half a mile away from our house, just as instructed. I mean, it's not like they'll ever be moved, so I don't want them too close to our house.

The only thing I gotta hide from Bella before she wakes up is everything I've bought revolving around us having children someday. All the books, maternity wear, toys...

"Welcome home, Bella," I chuckle as I dock the boat. I don't think I will have to blow it up or anything; emptying it of gas and throwing away the key oughta do the trick. Fuck, I can barely believe it. We're finally here. *Home*. Picking up Bella, I carry her toward our house. A beautiful fucking house, I gotta say—one that can hold its own through storms and use. "I bet you will love the pool." The pool is right in front of the house, separating the jungle from the white-sand beach, basically, and it won't need a lotta work. 'Cause it's ocean water, and a stream runs through it.

Entering the two-story house, I head straight for our bedroom. White walls, billowy fabrics, beiges, greens, and browns, marble floor... It's perfect.

"Okay, baby," I grunt, putting her down on the bed. "You just rest now." I kiss her on the forehead and smile down at her. My smile turns curious when I see those two stretch marks on her abdomen again; I'd seen them earlier when I cleaned her up, too. I guess it's just another thing I'll have to ask her about when she wakes up. "Gorgeous." With one more kiss on her forehead, I leave. As tired as I am, I have plenty of stuff to do. The wet season isn't here yet, but that doesn't mean it won't come down heavily anytime soon. That's just the climate—how it is here. And I don't wanna move clothes or other things made outta fabric when it rains.

On my way down the beach, toward the containers, I light up a smoke and take in my surroundings. To say it's beautiful here would be the understatement of the year. The sun isn't out at the moment, but the place is still beyond exotic and stunning. Crystal clear water, white beaches, and palm trees. It doesn't get much better than this. Well, maybe later tonight when I sit down with a drink on the terrace. We'll see.

It's a shame we can't have ice or a really chilled beer; though, not having electricity is a small price to pay for what we get here. Our own paradise.

A chuckle slips through my lips when I see two pigs sniffing about at the edge of the jungle. They're two out of eight, and like the four milk cows and four goats, they roam free. If they survive on the local fauna, that's awesome. If not...eh. Only the chickens are locked up—in a coop behind the main house. Back there, there's also a house for storage and a smaller shed-like building for tools and whatever. Oh, and that's where the underground shelter is, too, in case we'd need it. I don't know, but I've read the storms here can be pretty fucking fierce.

Better to be safe than sorry.

~xXx~

There's a knock on my door, followed by, "Boss?"

"Yeah," I mutter distractedly and look at the photos on my desk. Photos of a traitor, a fucking rat, whom I'm gonna make disappear. Talking to the Feds? Really? "Goddamn idiot," I whisper. Marcus was once one of my dad's closest...and now I have evidence of Marcus having lunch with a known federal agent. Fucking jagoff.

"You've got a visitor," Alec tells me through the door. "A Ms. Crowley?"

Oh, really? I feel the corners of my mouth turn up.

Getting up from my chair, I walk over to the door and tell Alec, "Take your lunch now."

He doesn't ask why. "Yes, sir."

Together, we both walk out to the shop, only Alec keeps walking.

"Isabella." I smile genuinely and rest my elbows on the counter separating us. I hadn't thought it was possible, but she's even more gorgeous when she's not dressed like a stripper. Now, in dark blue skinny jeans and a tight black vest, she looks even better. There's still that sexy edge to her—seriously, that vest...it's leather and pretty damn revealing; it pushes her perfect tits together as well as shows a sliver of her stomach...not to mention it's sleeveless, obviously... But her hair being down combined with less makeup brings a sense of casualness to it, and it fucking works.

"This is me—" she grins a little, looking both amused and nervous "—not being a stranger."

I wanna kiss her fucking dimples.

"You got my roses," I state, reaching forward to tug on a strand of her long hair. I haven't seen it like this before, but it's fucking long, lingering below her luscious tits in soft waves.

"I did." She also comes forward, mirroring my stance. Now we're both on either side of the counter, elbows on the glass top. "They're beautiful. I don't know why you'd send them to me, though..." She raises a single brow.

I play it off with a small shrug, my eyes focused on the lock of hair between my fingers. "I felt like it."

"Uh-huh." She sounds amused, but what suddenly grabs my attention is that she starts fingering the hem of my black hoodie's sleeve. Her fingernails are painted dark red, I note. "But since you don't work at Mr. Cullen's club, I gotta say I'm curious as to how you got my address."

I chuckle quietly, finally looking into her soulful eyes. "I have my ways."

"Oh, I don't doubt that," she mumbles, averting her eyes to the store window for a beat. When I give her hair a playful tug, though, she looks

back at me with an impish grin and changes the subject. "So, you really own a deli."

"Yep. Extravagant, huh?" I smirk. But when she traces a finger over the Rolex on my wrist, I feel the need to elaborate. "I'm a man—food is my passion. I just got lucky enough to inherit a bunch of dough from a nasty old hag—my nana, by the way—" I wink—"—so I could do what I love and still indulge."

She laughs lightly, like she's humoring me. "Lucky you."

I don't say anything for a while, feeling a bit disarmed. She does it to me, and it's not awesome. I don't know why, but it feels like she holds all the cards. I'm used to being in control; I'm used to having it all. Then again, what's having it all? 'Cause right now it's like I haven't had shit up until this broad walked into my life on those spiky fuck-me heels and slid down that pole with her legs spread.

"If I wanted to fuck you here on the counter, would you say yes?" I ask.

Her eyebrows shoot up, eyes searching mine.

I cock a brow.

I never have to chase. My name causes people to agree with me, offer anything up, sacrifice a lot, and never decline.

My sister adores being a Masen. Rose, bless her bitchy heart, loves getting whatever she bats her lashes at.

"You're not Mr. Masen in here," Isabella says casually—as if we're discussing the fucking weather. "Well, to me you're not."

"That's not what I asked you," I point out.

"Hmm, was I too subtle?" She smirks. "Fuck no, Edward. I wouldn't say yes."

And she fucking owns me—just like that.

~xXx~

Several hours later, darkness has fallen and I've accomplished a fuckload. The cellar in the main house has been stocked with food, everything I don't want Bella to see has been stashed away, I've tasted the fresh water from the spring a few minutes into the jungle, and I've made sure the speedboat has been disabled.

The cellar under our house kinda surprised me; it's colder down there than I thought it'd be. It's not like a fridge, but the temperature is still pretty low. The water from the spring, on the other hand, is ice-fucking-cold. That spring was what made me decide to have the house built here. I ain't dumb, after all. Fresh water is vital.

Regardless, I'm glad I spent so much money on salt. That will keep meat and fish fresh longer.

~xXx~

"Lemme take you out to dinner," I murmur, leaning forward another few inches. With my forehead nearly touching her temple, I brush the pad of my thumb over her cheek; it's a little pink right now, and hotter. "Are you blushing, Isabella?"

"It's Bella," she blurts out quickly.

I smile. "Bella..." I gently grip her chin, making her face me. "Will you let me take you to dinner?"

Her breaths come out quicker, pupils dilating. Fuck, I wanna kiss her so bad.

"I never saw you as the type'a guy that dated."

I purse my lips, already knowing the answer to that. But I don't want her to know the exact amount of power she's got over me. There's no need for her to know she's the reason.

"Why are you dodging my questions, baby?" I whisper and let my lips ghost over her cheek. "Dinner. My place...I'll cook."

For the first time ever, she comes off as shy, which I find refreshing. Maybe I can still control a few things.

"Okay. Dinner." She smiles.

I smile right back.

~xXx~

By the time I hear Bella restlessly tossing and turning in bed, I'm done for the day. My muscles are protesting, my eyes are getting heavy... But I'm too content and too anxious to move from here. And *here* happens to be one of the couches on the terrace. Beer in hand, smoke in mouth. A fire is blazing in the pit in the middle, replacing a coffee table or whatever.

"Come on, baby," I whisper. "Wake up."

If I look behind me and crane my neck, I can see past the front room and into the bedroom.

When I hear a mumbled, "What the...?" coming from Bella, I take a final drag from my smoke before putting it out. Then I set down my beer on the side table and get up. She's finally waking up; I'm not missing that for anything in the world.

Just as I reach our bedroom, she sits up in bed, eyes wide yet unfocused, one hand clutching the sheets to her chest. It was really hot out earlier, so I figured I'd done her a favor when I removed her clothes. Except for her panties; they're still there.

It was fucking difficult to remain a gentleman.

Okay, so maybe I sucked on a nipple. Just one, though—for like three seconds.

But never mind that now.

I smile nervously, standing in the wide doorway. "You're awake, baby," I whisper. Her eyes flash to mine, wildly searching, registering... "Um. Welcome home."

She screams.

4

Chapter song – Dirty Paws by Of Monsters and Men

EPOV

Wiping my hands on the dark red rag, I walk toward the front door, only pausing to check the mirror in the hallway. I throw the rag over my shoulder, push up the sleeves of my black button-down, and make sure there aren't any stains on my jeans—or shirt, for that matter—and run a hand through my hair.

Before I open the door, I dim the lights low to create a better atmosphere. There are already candles lit in the front room, and there's soft music playing in the background—some good ole' rock ballads.

With a deep breath, I open the door and see Bella standing there, a smile on her full lips.

I let my eyes drink her in unabashedly, not giving a fuck anymore about how clear it is that I want her. It's been four days since she came to my deli, and watching her at the club isn't enough any longer. And tonight...damn, tonight she's fucking gorgeous. Those snug, black dress pants make her look like she's ready for a board meeting, but she's matching it with pure sex. Dark purple heels, high as fuck, and a strapless corset-like top in the same purple. But unlike the corsets she sometimes wears at the club, this one looks more comfortable, less stiff.

Her hair is down again; I love that.

"Are you going to stare at me much longer, handsome?" She looks amused as I meet her gaze. Then, deliberately, she gives me a once-over, too. "Damn, you look too good, Edward. A woman doesn't stand a chance."

I chuckle quietly, a bit huskily, and pull her into my condo. "Dinner's almost ready." With my hands on her hips, I dip down and kiss her neck, all while breathing in her intoxicating scent.

"Miss me?" She drops a soft kiss on my collarbone, making me hate that I'm wearing this fucking shirt. Would a naked date be so horrible?

"Cocky," I comment, biting her earlobe. She slides her hands up my chest, and at the same time I weave my fingers through her hair. I don't know why, but I fucking love her hair. It's so soft, full, long.

"I've noticed something," she mentions, and I back away slightly. I gotta remember that she's not here only to enter my bedroom. There'll be wining and dining, too. Christ, if only she knew this is the first time I've brought a woman to my own place.

"Noticed what?" I ask. Lifting my arm, I gesture for her to walk, which she does, and I guide her into the kitchen. I'll give her a tour later—not that

there's much to see. It's just a three-bedroom apartment, and each area is decorated in the same style. It's clean, sleek, simple. Black, gray, white, dark red, and silver. Straight lines, spotlights, and hardwood floors.

"You're a man of few words—that's what I've noticed," she says, looking around herself. "I love your place. Very manly, but still warm." That's just 'cause I've dimmed all the lights and allowed my sister to buy a few candles. When Bella faces me again, I'm standing on the opposite side of the kitchen island, pouring us some wine. "Sexy kitchen." Her fingers ghost over the stainless-steel top of the island. "See?" She grins impishly at me. "So quiet."

I smirk. "I speak when I have something to say." After checking the rice and the chicken, I return to my wine. "I'd rather hear you talk." Bending over a bit, I rest my elbows on the island, bringing me a couple feet closer to her.

She grins into the wine glass I handed her. "This is good." I prefer beer, but wine is okay, too. "Chardonnay?" She eyes the label on the bottle between us. "Fancy."

I say nothing, content to just watch her. A small smile remains on my face, which it will throughout the evening—except for when she makes me laugh.

"Nothing to say?" she teases.

The left corner of my mouth turns up. "I'm glad you're here."

Her eyes soften before she looks away. "Me too," she whispers; it's almost too low for me to hear. Almost. "So..." That grin is back, as are her dimples. "Can I help?"

~xXx~

"Baby, please," I beg uselessly, kneeling next to her on the beach. "You have to calm down—*breathe*." I'm so fucking worried about her. She won't stop crying and throwing up. I've expected this; I know this is overwhelming, but her hysteria is causing her to lose her breath.

Earlier, just after she woke up, I told her this is our home now. I told her I had come for her—that after more than seven years—closer to eight, really, when you count the trial and the months I had her tailed—of thinking about only her, I need her. We only need each other. Forever. So, I brought her here because I love her. We love each other, I know it...she just needs to let this settle.

Her reaction to my revelation was to run out here, head whipping around, maybe to see if I was speaking the truth, and then she just collapsed and started sobbing uncontrollably and puking.

I rub her back soothingly and hold up her hair.

Between her bouts of retching, I tell her about our journey here, about how I've built a new life for us in this paradise.

I tell her about watching her for the past few months.

I remind her of how much I adore her, how much I've *missed* her.

"Edward—you can't-" She lets out a heartwrenching wail and starts rocking back and forth. She cries, sobs, pleads. "Oh, my God...oh, my God..." She clutches her belly, still moving back and forth; meanwhile, she's shaking her head as if she's in disbelief. "This c-can't b-be happening!" She sounds so heartbroken. *Despaired*.

"Honey," I say softly, watching how close we are to the water, "let's get back to the house, okay?" The moon is full and the waves slide up the beach silently, almost reaching us. She also needs to get dressed, 'cause she's only wearing panties and a thin top. Even at this hour it's crazy

humid, but she's shivering as if she's cold. "Come on," I coax gently and stand up. I pull her with me, and she seems too weak to struggle.

~xXx~

Bella watches me curiously as I plate our food and bring it to the table for two I set in the front room. Had it not been raining, maybe I would've set something up on my rooftop terrace, but...this'll do. The massive window provides a pretty awesome city view if nothing else.

"This looks really delicious, Edward," she murmurs once we've taken our seats. "Do you like to cook?"

I shrug, a smile tugging at the corners of my mouth. "I like to eat." Cooking isn't that bad; it's just that I only know how to make three dishes. This—roasted chicken with sugar snaps, rice, and green pepper gravy—being one of them. I can also make the best beef sandwich in the city, and that's huge coming from a Chicagoan. "I usually don't have a reason to cook."

"Yet, this was your first choice when you asked me out."

I chuckle and cut into my chicken. "I wanted you alone."

"Ooh, that doesn't sound creepy at all," she giggles. I'm about to apologize, which, by the way, is something I just don't do, but creepy is definitely not what I want to come off as; however, Bella stops me before I can even get a word out. "I was kidding." She winks.

I relax.

"Wow—this is so good." Her eyes light up as she begins to eat with more enthusiasm. "Maybe you don't like to cook, but you sure can."

Looking down at my plate, I hide the smile of satisfaction and dig in myself. And when a couple minutes of comfortable silence have passed, I'm more than ready to find out more about Isabella Crowley.

"How did you start working at the club?" I ask. "No offense, but you don't fit the stereotype of a stripper." She really doesn't.

"A friend hooked me up." She shrugs a little. "It pays well, and I have expensive hobbies."

"Such as?" I arch a brow. "And who's this friend?"

~xXx~

When I return to the terrace, Bella is where I left her five minutes ago—on one of the couches, and she's staring blankly into the fire pit in the middle. I need to stoke it, I note.

"Here you go, baby." I sit down next to her with a plate of fruit, chocolate, and a small bag of chips. She needs to get sugar into her system—fast. There's also water and pop. Had I planned ahead better, I would've left a few bottles in the spring earlier; that way, they would be cold now. But I'll do that in the future instead.

She doesn't look at me at all when she takes the water, sipping it slowly.

At least she listened to me about the blanket, though. Which is draped around her.

"You've lost your fucking mind, Edward," she says flatly, hoarsely, still watching the fire with a blank expression. "You're insane."

"I'm perfectly lucid," I argue with a smile. "This is what we need." She will see it soon enough.

Slowly, she tilts her head in my direction. A dark smile plays on her lips.

"I'm gonna kill you in your sleep."

I've seen this coming.

"You could do that," I muse, nodding thoughtfully. I have no intention of hiding any weapons. It'd be useless anyway. She's trained to survive, to be creative. "But then you'd be stuck here *alone*." I pause to make sure I have her attention. "There *is* no way off the island." I won't ever tell her about the helicopter that's hidden on the other side of the island. A part of me doesn't even know why I bought it, but I guess in case of emergency...

Bella stares at me, eyes welling up. Her expression is no longer empty, but full of pain and fury. "You're diabolical," she whispers.

I sigh. "Baby—"

"No!" she screams. I'm taken aback by the volume, the rage. "You can't just—you can't just kidnap people, Edward!" She shoots up, steadying herself since she's still dizzy, and starts to pace the deck next to the couch area. "You're crazy," she cries. "How could I ever have—" Her sobs take over again, and she bends over, clutching her belly as if she's going to be sick again. "God, my..." A bloodcurdling scream. She drops to her knees on the floor and pulls at her hair. "Take me h-home!"

I let her get it out. As much as it pains me to see her so visibly upset, she will get over it.

Reaching down to the floor, I pick up the blanket she left behind.

A few minutes later, she's kneeling by my feet, hands on my knees, begging me. Through sobs and wails, she begs me to take her home again.

"No." I try to cup her cheek, but she flinches away.

"Please," she whimpers. I wanna look away from the evident heartbreak in her eyes. She grabs my hands and squeezes them. "*Please*, Edward. I *have* to get home." She hiccups, more tears streaming down. "I—I have a...we have... Oh, *God*." She screws her eyes shut and cries heavily. "I knew it." Her forehead drops to my knee. "I had a feeling you'd c-contact me. I-I just didn't think you'd go t-this far..." Looking up at me once more with those big eyes, she goes on. "Please, please, p-please, please—I'm begging you."

My own eyes well up, but I stand firm. "We'll be so happy here, baby," I choke out. "You have to trust me."

"*Trust* you?" she hisses. It's like her eyes catch on fire, and suddenly her fingernails are digging into my knuckles. "You need *help*. In every fucking way possible." She's seething, nails digging in so deep that they draw blood. I wince. "The day you got released from prison—they *warned* me. Family, friends, coworkers...they *all* warned me." I try to pull away from her, but it only causes her nails to sink deeper into my hands. By now, blood's trickling down. "Guess the joke's on me, huh?" She chuckles bitterly. "I should've listened to them. Thank God I at least—" She stops abruptly.

And with even more rage in her eyes than before, she releases her hold on my hands only to *slam* her palm up my nose.

~xXx~

"*Emmett*," she responds lightly. "*He'd only been working at the club for like a month or something, but he heard Mr. Cullen talk about needing another dancer...*" She trails off with a shrug, instead focusing on her meal.

I can't focus on food, though. Not when it's becoming abundantly clear that Bella and Emmett know each other outside work. My chest feels tight, and I don't fucking like it.

"So, how do you know Emmett?" I ask, keeping it casual.

"He's my partner in crime." She laughs quietly to herself like it's some inside joke. "Nah, he's just a good buddy. I met him when I took an aerobics class with his little sister. Over the past couple years he's been sorta like a big brother to me, too."

Now I find myself smiling as well, finally able to calm down. "I see. So, aerobics is one of those expensive hobbies, huh?" I wink.

She giggles and reaches for her wine. "Not if you compare it to bouldering and skydiving!"

Wow, it looks like I've got a little thrill seeker on my hands. "What's bouldering?"

I swear her eyes light up like the sun. "It's like rock climbing, only you don't use ropes. If you fall, you fall." My eyes widen. "Of course, you have a crash pad, and you're not really all that high up, but still. It gives a rush like you wouldn't believe." She's really animated about this, I notice. Much more than if I ask about friends and family, which I tried after her shift at the club a couple days ago. She gave answers, but they were shorter, practiced, and to-the-point. Now, though...it's like she's really into it. "It's not an expensive sport, per se, but it is when you include all the travelling, you know?" She pauses to eat some chicken; then she dives right back into her story. "I mean sure, I could climb right here in Chicago—go to one of those indoor venues, but that's for pussies." She grins, and I can't help but laugh. "You gotta be out there, use what Mother Nature provides—" she waves a hand "—or some shit like that. You should try it!"

I smirk and shake my head no. Then I cover one of her hands with mine and bring it palm up. "Bouldering," I muse under my breath, tracing her skin with my thumb. I can see that her hobby leaves traces behind. The pads of her fingers are slightly calloused, smooth but still with harder skin. There are also little scars everywhere—from cuts and blisters, I assume. Just the thought of her hanging off a mountain—or a boulder, whatever...like that... "Don't you use gloves?"

"No. Um, just tape if it's needed. And chalk. Lots and lots of chalk."

I hum in acknowledgment.

Changing the subject for a second, I ask about her family, and I'm curious as to why the light goes out in her eyes. She talks briefly about her parents living back in Arlington, but she doesn't seem to wanna talk about them. I don't know why; her parents are both alive and well, living in a nice house, or so she says, and she describes her childhood as a good one. Still, it's like the topic bothers her. Same goes for when I ask about grammar school, high school, and college experiences. She lists off a few things, never delving into anything in particular, no memories to share, and then she shrugs and says, "That's about it."

But when we return to hobbies, likes, and dislikes, she becomes animated once more. She talks passionately about movies she likes, music she listens to, and how fun it is to mock art.

She makes me laugh when she tells me a story about when she and a friend of hers went to an art exhibit in New York, pretended to be pretentious, high and mighty, and snobbish. They dressed up, jutted their chins, and pretended to know what they were talking about.

"And the funny thing is," she giggles so hard, "people around us started listening and agreeing! One woman asked me what a particular painting—I mean, how it 'spoke' to me." She widens her eyes; I grin. "And I told her

that the painting didn't speak to me at all, because it felt dead." I crack up at that, picturing Bella turning up her nose and using big words to trash-talk a painting. "And you know what? That crazy old bat nodded and agreed with me! She was like, 'You're right, dear. The painting does lack life.' And I'm like, 'Yeah, no shit, lady!' Okay, I didn't say that, but I sure as fuck thought it!" she laughs.

It feels like someone squeezes my heart when I look at Bella, but it's not an uncomfortable feeling. More like it's some warmth or whatever-the-fuck that's...I don't know...enveloping it tightly.

I decide right there that her laugh is one of the most beautiful sounds I've ever heard.

~xXx~

My eyes automatically water as the pain shoots through me.

"Fuck!" I groan, cupping my nose. Blood pours out of it, so I rush into the house and don't stop until I reach the kitchen. There, I grab paper towels and a bottle of lukewarm water. "Can't fucking believe her," I hiss.

"Believe it!" she shouts from outside. "You're a fucking basket case, Edward Masen!"

Through the ripples of pain, I laugh darkly and check to make sure she didn't break my nose. Luckily, she didn't. I've had that done to me before, so I sure as hell know how that'd feel. But even though it's not broken, anger flares up inside of me, and I know my temper can be unreliable.

If she knows what's best for her, she won't fucking push it anymore.

Walking back outside again, I ignore Bella, walk around the pool, and step down to the beach.

Unfortunately, she follows.

"Back off, Bella," I warn menacingly. Bending over a little, I pour water over my face and wash away the blood. Then I cover my still-bleeding nose with the paper towel and hold it in place. "*What?*" I glare down at her, standing at full height again.

She grins sinisterly. "You really think I'm done? YOU KIDNAPPED ME, YOU SICK FUCK!"

"Get over it!" I snap. "Once you come to your senses-"

She cuts me off by walking toward me, hooking her foot around my knee, and tripping me, which causes me to fall back against the sand. Before I can even recover, she straddles my chest and punches me in the jaw. Her fist to my throat follows quickly, and I start coughing and wheezing for air.

Jesus Christ, you really know what you're doing.

"I hate you!" she screams, trying to hit me again. "I hate you, I hate you, I HATE YOU!"

With all my strength, I manage to roll us over so that I'm on top. Rage surges through me at the same speed as the pain does. Blood still oozes outta my nose, and my jaw hurts like a sonofabitch. All this combined with the blazing fury, I stop thinking rationally.

I backhand her.

Hard.

I both hear and see it. The slap resounds in my head to the point that it makes me nauseous. I'm completely frozen. Even in the darkness of the night, I see the handprint forming on the side of her face. *Oh God, oh*

God, oh God. Not really registering it, I move off her and kneel next to her face. Bella doesn't move. Her eyes are open, her chest heaves, tears run down...but she doesn't move her arms and legs—no struggling, no screaming.

"I'm sorry, Bella," I croak, pushing some hair away from her face. Fuck, I'm panicking. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" My eyes well up as she finally looks up at me. Her expression...the look in her eyes...it's like I've taken away the reason for her to live. "I'm so sorry, baby," I whimper. "I didn't mean it—I swear."

She just stares at me...unseeing.

Blank.

Empty.

~xXx~

After finding out that Bella's only been in the city for about six months, I'm glad I picked cheesecake for dessert. New Yorkers may claim they have the best cheesecake, but they're full of shit.

"Did you make this, too?" she asks as we sit down on the couch. It's more comfortable here; plus, it brings us closer. "What is it?" She's eyeing the cake.

"It's caramel-pecan cheesecake," I answer, plating her a piece. "And no, I didn't make it." I picked it up at my aunt's pastry shop. "The best cheesecake you'll ever have."

"Hmm." She grins and relaxes in her seat. "I'll be the judge of that. 'Cause when I was in New York, I had this amazing-"

Fuck that. I lean close and gently grip her chin. "Don't finish that sentence, baby," I whisper, trying to come off as threatening. Emphasis on trying...since she catches the smile I'm struggling to hide. "You're in Chicago now, remember?" I chuckle and let her go. "You gotta choose your words wisely."

She purses her lips, eyes dancing with mirth. "Know what I've noticed?"

I roll my eyes, chuckling. "No. What've you noticed this time?" After taking a sip of my coffee, I shovel some cake into my mouth.

"That I love your accent," she says simply.

I cock a brow. "My accent?" I don't fucking have an accent. I speak like people in the city speak—end of. Well, people from my neighborhood.

"After you asked me out—when we were in your deli," she giggles that giggle, "you remember what you asked me?"

I scrunch my nose, thinking back. The only thing I can remember...

"You asked me if I wanted a soda." She smiles. "A can'a pop."

"Oh, Christ." I shake my head in amusement. "You gotta get your shit right, baby. We call it pop here, all right? And while we're at it, don't ever call it Willis Tower. It is and always fucking will be Sears Tower." Moving closer to her, I add, "And if you hear people mention the LSD, it's most likely not in reference to a fucking drug."

"Ooh, I know that one!" She bounces. "Lake Shore Drive!"

I snicker and set down my plate. Then I lean back against the couch, taking her with me. "All right—gimme your worst. What else about my supposed accent?"

To my surprise, she straddles me. "The way you say Chicago. Like, ChiCAHgo. Your vowels become longer." She smirks and places her hands on my chest. "Name your favorite sports team."

"The Bears," I say, not missing a beat.

"Da Bears," she mimics, and I chuckle at her. "Um—" she taps her chin, and I grip her hips "—say car key." And I do, and she goes, "Cah'kee. Say garage." Again, I obey, to which she mimics, "Grach."

"How am I supposed to get you into the bedroom if you keep mocking the way I talk?" I tease.

She stares at me for a beat—like she's solving a math problem. But then her eyes light up again and she goes, "How'my suppos'ta get you inta'da bedgeroom if you-" That's where I cut her off by crashing my mouth to hers.

"That's enough outta you, baby," I laugh against her lips. "You suck."

"No, I don't," she laughs back and weaves her fingers through my hair.

Down to chuckles, I let out a groan when she rolls her hips over my hardening cock, and I slide my hands from her hips to her ass instead.

"Say hundred," she breathes out, nipping at my jaw.

I moan and buck my hips. "Hundred."

"Hunnerd," she giggles breathlessly. I grin and slap her ass. "Ungh—oh, fuck." She kisses me hard on the lips again, pushing her tongue into my mouth. I meet her eagerly and pull her impossibly closer to me. "I want you, Edward."

"Fuck, yeah," I groan. "I want you, too."

~xXx~

I sit down on the terrace with a cup of coffee and a pretty stale muffin, cigarette number five long gone. The coffee turned out better than I thought it would, since I heated it up over a fucking fire, but it's still not awesome. Not that I'll cry rivers over it. I only drink a cup in the morning; it's not my drug of choice.

Though, to be honest, I think I'm just supposed to heat up the water. Not the coffee itself. And *then*, once the water's hot, I'm supposed to put it through that French press or whatever it's called.

"Dammit." I wince when the hot beverage comes in contact with my lip; I hadn't even noticed until I looked in the mirror that Bella busted it last night. Speaking of Bella, I hope she wakes up soon. After our...fight...last night, she didn't speak another word to me. She just went into our bedroom, gave me a look that told me I was under no circumstances welcome in there, and then slid the double doors closed.

I can't say I slept very well. I think I managed to doze off for a few hours on the couch in the front room, and then I was up with the sun. Since then, I've done a little bit of everything.

I even sat down to write Bella a letter, and then I slipped it under the doors for her; it's just a list of things about our house and whatnot. Things we have, things we don't have... I guess I'm trying to be a fucking salesman. 'Cause I want her to want this.

Suddenly, I hear the doors slide open, and I look over my shoulder to see her walking out of the bedroom. She's dressed in a pair of cotton shorts and a wife-beater, so she must've found her closet, which means she read the letter. There are piles upon piles of clothes that won't fit in our closets, but they're all in storage already. I think I divided things pretty well.

Still watching her, I see as she pauses in the kitchen to grab a couple slices of watermelon. A bottle of water, too, which is cold, 'cause I left them in the spring for a few hours earlier. But every thought about what she's doing disappears when I get a closer look at her face.

My stomach churns at the size of her bruise, perfectly shaped after my hand. I swallow hard, hoping she will forgive me for that, too. I know she beat me a lot worse, but I'm not the one who was taken in the middle of the night, pistol-whipped, drugged, and brought to a deserted island.

When she walks this way, I kinda hold my breath and try to act normal.

"Good morning," I say carefully as she steps out onto the terrace.

She doesn't even look at me.

"Die," she replies flatly and walks past me.

I sigh and slump back against the couch cushions.

5

Chapter song – Live and Die by The Avett Brothers

EPOV

"You're awake, baby," she whispers, kissing the arm I've thrown over my eyes. I can feel my mouth turning into a sleepy smile as she straddles my body, deliciously naked. "You know what I wanna do today?"

I hum and uncover my face, sliding both arms up her sides. Even though my morning wood is pressed between us, the moment isn't very sexual. Maybe because we crashed around four in the morning after hours of fucking. Seriously...Bella Crowley in the sack is un-fucking-believable. She's bendy, insatiable, fearless, and unashamed. Her appetite rivals my

own. She's also a woman I can't get enough of, and that's not just because of the mind-blowing sex.

"I wanna take it easy." She drops soft kisses over my chest. "Just you and me." My smile widens and I finally open my eyes. "Maybe we could go out and get some greasy food...?" Fuck, she's gorgeous. The black sheets pool around her body, revealing every bit of her—every bit I've spent the past several weeks worshipping. "Whaddya say?" She finishes with a kiss on my chin. "I feel like I haven't seen you in so long."

I feel the same. This week, I was outta town. Bella thinks I was visiting old friends in LA, but the truth is that I staged a robbery in Toronto.

"Sounds perfect," I say quietly in my morning voice. After our first date two months ago, I've lost count of the dates I've taken her on. We've ended up here at my place every time, and as much as I love this little bubble, I kinda wanna take it to the next level now. "And...maybe this weekend you could meet my parents?" I stare up at her, one eyebrow slightly arched.

"Yeah?" Now she looks shy. "You really want me to meet them?"

I nod and watch my hands caressing her thighs.

Everyone at the club already knows she's my girlfriend, which means the news has obviously reached my father, too. And if he knows, my mother knows. There isn't a lot he shares with Ma, but the possibility of their only son meeting a woman to settle down with is huge. I know they both want grandbabies.

There's no way in hell I'm ready for that just yet, but I do believe Bella is the one I'll find myself sharing all that with one day. I'm already crazy in love with her, after all.

"God, you're beautiful," I whisper and pull her down on me. I kiss her softly, nibbling a little on her bottom lip. "I've missed you."

She smiles tenderly; it's a new smile. "Right back at'cha."

~xXx~

"Are you still pissed that I backhanded you?" I ask, aggravated, and sit down next to her in the sand.

I've apologized and apologized—come on. Enough is enough. It's been three days now. Three tortuously long days of her ignoring me.

To my surprise, she laughs, although without mirth. "Please. I've taken worse hits than that. You fucking baby." I narrow my eyes at her; she keeps watching the water. "Plus, if you throw a punch, you better know how to take one." She shrugs. But then she glares at me. "So, no. I'm not pissed about that pathetic slap," she spits out. "I'm pissed about the fact that you kidnapped me!"

Sick of those words, I shout, "It was your idea to begin with, Bella! You were the one who told me we could run away!"

"Yeah, run *together!*" she screams. "I didn't tell you to wait seven years, hit me in the fucking head with your nine, and then drag me around the world to some remote pile of shit in the ocean! I was talking about escaping to a place where we could live freely—amongst people!"

"I did this for us!" I yell, jumping up as she does. I tower over her. "We fucking belong together, Bella. And you know it—you once *said* it," I growl. "You also told me you loved me."

"I did love you," she seethes, poking me in the chest. "You were *everything* to me—why do you think I jeopardized it all to get you out?"

I smile darkly. "Right, I was a case."

She nods and takes a breath. "I'm not denying that I betrayed you. But you know what? I don't regret it, either. Just like I don't regret falling in love with you, I don't regret gathering evidence against your family." She really knows how to hit where it hurts. It feels like she's breaking my heart all over again. "Edward, you killed people. You murdered innocent people for money. You *tortured* them." She looks at me in disgust. "For instance, the sixteen-year-old boy you drowned with your bare hands-

"How the fuck do you know about that?" I ask angrily.

"Oh, I know *everything*," she spits out. "I also know about the bank job in Texas that went wrong. You ended up slaughtering six employees there just so you could get away." My stomach rolls. "And the pregnant woman in Vegas who tried to con money outta your associates out there? How did you kill her...and her unborn baby?"

"Stop talking," I choke out, my body breaking out in a cold sweat.

"You slit her throat."

"*Stop.*" I fall to my knees and bury my face in my hands.

"The heroin dealer in Bridgeport who couldn't pay you on time." Why won't she just quit? God, oh God... "You smashed his head against a wall until he died. What was it your father called it? Oh, that's right. Setting an example. You were so fucking *brutal.*"

"Please stop," I cry.

"Someone needed to take you down, you fucking monster," she hisses before walking away.

~xXx~

"Do you know how happy you make me?" I whisper in her ear. Drawing the covers over us completely, we're surrounded by darkness and the scent of our lovemaking. I kiss her neck, my body covering hers.

I feel her smiling against my shoulder as she slowly, sensually, drags her fingernails over my back. It causes me to shiver.

"You better stop saying things like that," she whispers back and slides her foot up my calf.

"Why?" I bite her nose playfully.

She giggles...before she exhales and becomes serious. It's so dark, but I can make out the contrasts of her face, and I can see outlines of her eyes. She cups my face softly and brushes the pads of her thumbs over my cheeks. "Because you make me feel things I didn't..." She releases a breath. "I didn't expect this." When I dip down to kiss her lips, I notice that she's chewing on her lip.

She does that sometimes. Usually when she's watching me with a pensive look on her face. It can be when we're chilling on the couch, reading, or watching movies together. Sometimes it's when we're at some restaurant. Or when I send her flowers.

Pushing down the covers to my shoulders, I gaze down at her face, at her hair splayed across my pillow...

I swallow. "You know I love you, right?" I say quietly, nervously.

"Oh, Edward," she exhales, followed by her eyes welling up. I become even more nervous, not to mention anxious, when pain flits across her features. Suddenly she hugs me so tight, like she's scared I'm going somewhere. "I love you, too." She sniffles into my neck.

I breathe out in relief and elation.

"I can't help it," she whimpers, and I brush away a few tears from her cheeks. "I love you so much."

"Why are you crying?" I smile, worried, and cup her cheek.

She shakes her head. "Ignore me. I'm just..." She blows out a breath. Then that tender look comes back, and she leans into my hand and kisses my palm. "You're amazing," she whispers.

"So are you." I grin, happy beyond words. "I love you."

Thing is, she knows nothing about who I really am. But now...maybe I could open up to her? At least a little. Piece by piece.

"I don't wanna lose you," she admits, the tears coming back.

"Never," I vow.

She offers a small smile.

And I can't fucking wait for my family to meet her tomorrow.

They're gonna love her.

~xXx~

Lighting up a smoke, I stare out at the ocean.

The sun is slowly setting.

Pulling up my knees, I rest my forearms on them.

I take deep breaths.

I know she still loves me.

Despite everything I've done.

Like I've mentioned, I spent the past seven years dissecting every memory I have of Bella, and... Now I know. I know what was real and what was fake.

The Fed in her listed off a few things from a script. She told me she was from Arlington, Virginia. She told me she had a happy childhood. Her parents were happy. She shrugged and briefly spoke about college, where she'd studied business.

The real Bella spoke passionately about her hobbies. She smiled tenderly and brushed away hair from my forehead. She kissed me because she felt like it. Her eyes lit up when things she loved were mentioned. And there are countless memories I have of when her eyes lit up when I entered a room or whatever. And then there are the images of pained expressions. That's when she was at war with herself. Or when she found out something disturbing about me.

Still...

She always stayed.

Granted, she fell in love with me long before I *really* let her into my life, but...

And there's no way she could've known sooner. I mean, if she had known—if the Feds had known—then there'd be no reason to infiltrate our organization.

Looking down at the sand, I think about all those times I revealed more and more about myself. I take a drag from my smoke and recall the tears, the disappointment, the fights, the screaming, the fury...

She stayed, though.

I wanna ask her who her father was, but I don't know... If my father really murdered him, which I don't have a hard time believing, I'm not sure what good it'll do to find out more. Besides, Dad has killed too many people; I sure as fuck wouldn't know who died in what way.

Whatever.

All that is in the past now.

We're here—where we're supposed to be. Together.

So far, she has acted just like I knew she would.

But I expect her to warm up to me soon. Step-by-step.

She's my everything.

I will be her everything again, too.

~xXx~

I can't help but grin as I watch Bella take on Rose in a discussion about shopping. While my sister is nuts and loves to shop, Bella says it only takes a few clicks on her laptop to get what she wants. And in turn, Rose looks appalled, though there's also a look of wonder.

Rose isn't used to having people disagree with her. No one speaks bluntly to her, which is why my baby sis often comes off as a fucking bitch. 'Cause she sure tells people like it is. But Bella seems indifferent to Rose's digs, and now it looks like Rose might actually look up to Bella.

We've only been at my parents' for two hours, and Rose has gone from instant hate to...whatever it is now.

And so I remain in the doorway, leaning against the frame, and watch my girlfriend get to know my sister in the front room. I doubt they even know I'm here.

"She's good for you, honey," Ma says quietly, walking up behind me. Looking at her, I catch her sweet smile. "You love her, don't you?"

I nod and face Bella again, keeping my voice low. "Yeah."

"She loves you, too."

"I know." I smile as Bella and Rose move on to discuss restaurants and cafés in the city.

"You've exchanged 'I love you's?" Ma seems surprised by that. "Oh, Edward." She hugs my bicep. "I'm so happy you're finally settling down."

"Always with the theatrics, Ma." I snicker. "I'm only twenty-six."

She ignores me and goes, "She's got good hips for childbearing."

~xXx~

I wanna tell Bella not to get all cuddly with the fucking poultry 'cause one day we're gonna eat them, but when I see her sitting on the terrace with a baby chick in her hand, I decide to keep my mouth shut. 'Cause there's a small smile on her lips as she pets the little fuzzy yellow head of the chicken.

"Are you hungry?" I ask quietly, a tray full of food in my hands.

She nods but says nothing.

I serve the fish I caught earlier with the baguettes we need to eat before they go stale. There's also the last of the cream cheese that I've kept refrigerated in the spring and sliced cucumbers and yellow bell peppers.

Sitting down on the couch, the one she's not sitting on, I set the tray on the edge of the fire pit. There's no fire burning, so it's all good. But it is getting darker, and while candles and a couple torches are lit, a bigger fire provides better light. I'll just light it once we're done here, I guess.

"How do you learn to cook fish like this?" she asks.

A rush of happiness runs through me simply because she asked me a question.

"I ordered plenty of books—they're all inside," I explain and break off a piece of bread. "I also read a lot before I came for you." And now I've set up a food station behind the house. There's a workbench for when I gut the fish, and there's another fire pit for cooking it. "Did you like it?" I stare as she chews.

Again, she offers a small nod.

I smile widely.

It's quiet for a while, and Bella keeps her eyes on the little chicken running around on the couch next to her.

Then she speaks again. "I betrayed you—hurt you."

I say nothing, but I'm definitely listening.

"I also gave you an out," she continues, finally looking up at me. "Will you ever give me one?"

I frown.

"I don't *want* to be here, Edward," she whispers beseechingly, tears welling up. "I have a life in Chicago—at *home*. Friends, family..."

"But what about me?" My voice breaks.

"What *about* you?" she shoots back. "You know what? I don't even understand *why* you want me. I tore your family apart—how can you even love me?"

"I don't care about them," I say quickly. "They're nothing compared to you—you're everything."

She stares at me, not saying a word, but I can tell she's thinking hard.

"What's so good about Chicago, anyway?" I gotta know; I'm *desperate* to know. "Is there someone else?" I already know there isn't. After all, I watched her for almost three months. Some days, many nights, several mornings. And the inside of her house...no toys, no shit that belonged to a guy... "It's not like you have a husband or kids or anything, and..." I blow out a breath, frustrated. "What we have is more important."

"So, just because I don't have a man in my life or children, you think it's okay to kidnap me?" she asks in disbelief. "Edward, what if I did have those things? What if I was married-"

"Don't say that shit!" I snap, furious in an instant. "You're *mine*, Bella. *Only* mine."

Fuck that noise. Even if she'd been married and juggling a handful of kids, I still would've gone after her. It's that simple, 'cause no one will ever love her more and better than I do.

"Do you still love me?" I ask impatiently. "And tell me the truth. Behind that anger, don't you still love me completely?"

I fully expect her to say yes.

"Yes," she breathes out, looking nauseous for some unknown reason.

I smile. "There you go. You'll get over that anger."

Happier now, I return to my fish. It's pretty fucking tasty, if I may say so myself.

"I love you, too, by the way," I tell her softly. "And we'll be happy here. We'll live together here and die together here." I nod to myself.

~xXx~

"You picked a good one, son," Pop says, winking at Bella as we get ready to leave. She smiles back politely at him, and I help her put on her cardigan.

"I know," I reply with a grin. If my father hadn't liked my girlfriend, it wouldn't've mattered. She's everything to me now. "Thanks for dinner, Ma." I kiss my mother's cheek.

"You'll come back soon, I hope." She glances between Bella and me.

"Definitely." I nod. Since Rose is busy talking on the phone with some friend in the front room, I yell, "Rose! We're leaving!"

"Bye!" she shouts back. "Good to meet you, Bella!"

"You too," Bella chuckles.

"I'll see you on Wednesday." Dad gives me a pointed look, and I nod. He's having a sit-down with a friend of ours from Detroit, and he wants me to be there, which I usually am. Carlisle and his father will be there, too.

After a few more promises to Ma that we'll be back soon, I usher Bella outside and into my car.

"What happens on Wednesday?" she asks lightly as I turn the key in the ignition.

I grin and place a hand on the headrest of her seat, looking behind us as I back out the car. "Just a meeting." I rev the engine a couple times before I push down on the gas—skid marks on the ground granted. "Sometimes I help Dad around the office." I shrug. Officially, my father owns a PR company in the city. "Hey—my birthday's coming up," I mention. "How about going away for a weekend?" My house at the lake comes to mind; I'd love to take her there.

"Sounds good," she says and snuggles into my side. "But I'm curious. You never really speak about your family. Tell me more about them? They seem very nice."

I chuckle and kiss the top of her head...then deflect. "You don't speak about your family either, you know."

"There's nothing to tell." She sticks out her tongue, being funny.

"Yo, get that tongue over here." I leer at her, grinning. "Lemme suck on it."

She slaps my arm playfully. "Focus on driving, you goof."

Capturing her hand, I place it to my chest. "I'm your goof." I kiss her hand.

"Damn straight." She kisses my cheek. "So, what do you wanna do tonight?"

I purse my lips, thinking.

"Club?" she suggests. "We could dress up and get crazy drunk, dance all night..."

"Sounds like a plan to me." I'm definitely down for a night of having her grinding against my junk. "A friend of mine—Jake—just opened a new place."

"Sweet. It's settled, then."

~xXx~

Also as I expected, Bella looks for ways to escape the island.

I never stop her, which I assume is her reason for not hiding her intentions.

She checks the boat, she wanders the island, she searches every nook and cranny in the house, she uses binoculars to estimate how high the breakers are, she swims out and checks the currents, she...she tries. She's creative, strong, and stubborn.

I let her get it out of her system. The faster she does this, the sooner she will realize there is no way off the island.

It's not like she's going to find the chopper.

In the meantime, I keep busy. There are still two and a half containers of stuff to go through and find storage for, and there's a whole island to explore. Because...while we have food for now, store-bought food, it won't be there forever. We only have a couple more days before we have to chuck the milk products, a week before the bread molds, and then we have two years worth of canned goods, ingredients for baking, rice and pasta...although, I suspect several of the dry goods will be pretty lacking in two years. Edible but lacking.

I'm storing away toothbrushes, toothpaste, toothpaste powder, mouthwash, dental floss, and Fluor-a-day pills in the bathroom when I hear Bella cursing up a storm about wanting to get off the island. Okay, so

it's not really a bathroom, seeing as there's no toilet, sink, or shower. But it's the small room next to our bedroom where I've chosen to keep all things bathroom-related. The only things in here are a full-sized mirror on the wall, a closet for towels, cabinets, a chair, and a counter. We actually do have a bathtub, however. It's next to the house, outside, under a sun roof. It's big enough for three people, and all you gotta do is fill it up with water.

"Edward?" Bella appears in the doorway to the, um, bathroom...storage.

"Yeah?" I give her a quick smile before I return to what I'm doing.

"What happens if we get hurt?" she asks, exasperated. "If we need a doctor—a fucking hospital."

I shrug and think about all the books, medical stuff, and drugs I've stored away on the second floor. "I've showed you everything upstairs," I remind her.

"And if that's not enough?" She huffs and rolls her eyes. "What if we break a bone—something that a simple cast won't fix? What if we need surgery?"

I still don't see the problem. "Then we'll die, Bella." If she dies, I will take my own life and follow her. If I die...well, she'll die eventually, too. "Stop thinking about the outside world—pretend it's not there." I look at her intently. "You're it—everything. And I will be everything to you soon enough, too. This is it."

"You're serious," she chokes out.

"Dead serious."

~xXx~

"Oooh, we gotta dance to this song, baby!" Bella squeals and drags me away from our friends. That includes Carlisle, Esme—yeah, she finally caved and agreed to go out with him—Jake, Leah, Seth, and Colin. I laugh and let my drunk woman have her way with me. "This song is hot." We find a spot on the crowded dance floor, and she slides her hands up my chest. "And so are you." She grins that impish grin, flashing her dimples.

"And you're drunk, baby," I laugh and nuzzle her cheek. This song...fuck if I know who it is...but yeah, it's hot. Well, it's Beyoncé, but I don't know the joe. They're singing about Bonnie and Clyde, and Bella's my own little Bonnie.

Seductively, softly, she sings the lyrics in my ear as she grinds sexily against my thigh. "Down to ride 'til the very end, it's me and my boyfriend." When she pops a button on my black shirt and slips her hand in to touch my chest, I groan and run my hands up her thighs 'til they go under her sinfully short denim skirt. In this crowd, no one notices that I'm kneading her luscious ass with both hands. Her very naked fucking ass.

"I'll be there for you, if somebody hurts you," she sings and drops kisses along my throat. "Even if that somebody's me." A low moan slips through my lips before I capture her mouth with mine. I kiss her hard, so fucking hungrily.

Sometimes I trip on how happy we could be

And so I put this on my life

Nobody or nothing will ever come between us

And I promise I'll give my life

My love and my trust

If you was my boyfriend

"I love you," she groans as I finger her slit from behind. Our lips, red and bruised from forceful kissing, never venture far before we go back to kissing, licking, sucking... "Fuck, Edward."

Looking up, I make sure no one's paying attention to us. I breathe heavily; I'm in a cloudy haze. So fucking horny. Needy. For her. "I love you, too." I drop my forehead to hers and move my hand to her front instead. "Can I see you come, baby? Right now?" I gently swipe my index finger over her clit. "Christ, so wet," I mumble into a kiss.

"Yes," she gasps against my neck.

Put this on my life

The air that I breathe in, all that I believe in

I promise I'll give my life

My love and my trust

If you was my boyfriend

~xXx~

Tracking down Bella in the kitchen where she's dividing kitchen utensils from one of the Maersk containers, I walk over to her and make sure I have her attention.

"What?" She stares up at me.

I purse my lips, just watching. Thinking. Pondering. Phrasing my words.

"You promised me your life," I eventually say.

Her mouth opens, but then it closes again.

She remembers.

I see hurt, anger, resignation, vulnerability, determination...

It takes a while for her to reply.

Then she does...

"Well, you have it, don't you?" she answers tightly, eyes oddly devoid of emotion. Maybe she's just overwhelmed. Or shocked. "Literally, figuratively...you have my life."

I beam at her.

"I love you." Quick as hell, I dip down and steal a kiss. Then I give her a wink, feeling giddy, and head outside for a smoke.

Things are looking up!

6

Chapter song – Temptation Waits by Garbage

EPOV

Walking toward the back of Carlisle's club to reach his office, I hear Bella ask, "What's with the look?" to someone, so I stop before rounding the last corner, curious. I assume she's talking to one of the dancers, but you never know. She's not a dancer anymore, much to my satisfaction and Carlisle's disappointment; I refuse to have my girl on display for other jagoffs' pleasure. She was a waitress for a while after that, but fuckers were still staring. So, I ordered Carlisle to make her a bartender instead, and that could also be her reason for being back here. 'Cause the stock room is just down the hall.

"Are you gonna give it to him soon?" That's Emmett's voice. "You're stalling."

I still don't like that guy, but Carlisle seems to have plans for him—says he's trustworthy and will be a part of the organization soon.

"I'm not—I'm not stalling. Get off my fucking back, Em." Bella sounds annoyed, defensive. "I'm gonna give it."

Give who what?

"You're really in love with him, aren't you?"

I frown to myself, waiting for Bella's response. Now it's clear they're talking about me, but I don't fucking understand how our relationship is any of his business. I mean, I know they're friends, but that close? I don't fucking like it.

"I can't help it," she says in a hushed tone. "He's... I just..." She sighs. "I love him." My shoulders sag with relief. "Please don't tell—"

"You think I'm stupid?" Emmett chuckles humorlessly. "You'd be gone before you could blink if the big man found out how deep you're into him."

My frown deepens and I hold my lips together, wondering who they're referring to now. Is there someone who'd be opposed to Bella being with me? 'Cause fuck...I'd ice that motherfucker in a heartbeat.

"I wonder what your father would think," Emmett muses.

Huh. Her father...that's who he meant by "big man"? It didn't sound like that, though.

"What the fuck did you just say?" Bella asks in disbelief. "Mention my father again—I fucking dare you."

I can't help but smirk. My girl's feisty.

"I'm just sayin'..."

"Look," she grits out. "Nothing has changed. Regardless of...whatever, I won't screw this up."

She's speaking about our relationship now, I think. Well, I hope. And that makes me smile. 'Cause we've been together for six months now, and if I get my way, I will marry her one day. We're actually celebrating our half-year anniversary tomorrow, and I hope she'll like what I've planned. As for my gift... It's actually not a gift. It's more of a testament to my love for her. A tattoo. Her name over my heart. Got that shit done a couple days ago.

"You should get back on the floor," Bella tells Emmett. "And next time, don't seek me out here at the club—you fucking got that? God, it's like you're-"

"I get it, I get it," Emmett rushes out. "Sorry, it's just..."

"It's just nothing," she snaps.

Sensing that they're about to split, I turn around and head back to the club area. My father is here, and that's why I needed to get to the office, 'cause I gotta get some files to him. But I guess I'll do that later.

Thing is, I trust Bella with all my heart.

I just don't like that she's friends with Emmett fucking Newton. 'Cause it's clear to me that he doesn't really like her being with me. As for Bella's father...I will just have to talk to her about that. Maybe we can take a trip down to Arlington or whatever.

~xXx~

"Hey." I plop down on the sand next to Bella. "Enjoying the sun?" After a week of constant rain, we woke up to bright skies this morning. There are still clouds looming on the horizon, but it's paradise right now.

"Yeah," she sighs, adjusting her black bikini top.

I smile.

As expected, Bella has started to warm up to our life on the island.

We talk more, although it takes a while to get her going, and she has stopped screaming at me. She has also stopped crying at night. Because before...I heard her every night, and I hated it. But now we've been here for almost two weeks, and I guess it has given her the time she needed to let things settle.

Maybe she'll let me sleep in the same bed soon, 'cause the couch isn't all that comfy anymore.

It's getting old.

"How about a barbecue tonight?" I ask, hopeful.

"Sure." Flat. Hmm.

Mental note: add bottles of vodka and orange juice to the spring to cool.

Looking down at her exquisite body, I can't help but hope she'll invite me to do more than just sleep in our bed soon, too. Her tits still look so amazing, full and round, her stomach is toned yet soft, *smooth*, and her legs are still miles long.

As I think about this, I come to the conclusion that it's only realistic and logical for her to want me soon.

She has needs.

Oh, and I want to have her to myself for a little while before we start trying for a baby.

"You're so gorgeous," I murmur and trace a finger down her arm. She shudders; it's in pleasure, I bet. But when I look over her stomach again, my train of thought changes. I frown, 'cause... "Didn't you have a stretch mark or two here before?" I point to her flat and smooth belly.

Her brows furrow, but she doesn't open her eyes. "I don't even know what the fuck you're talking about."

I hum, confused. 'Cause when she was, uh "asleep" on the way to Asia, I could've sworn I saw... Or was it sleep lines? No. That can't be it.

~xXx~

"Look at you, kid," Pop chuckles and squeezes my neck. "You can't take your eyes off of her."

Looking away from Bella behind the bar, I give my father a tight-lipped smile and take a swig from my drink.

To be honest, I kinda expected him to go off on me since I've acted aloof throughout the entire sit-down we just had with a few friends of ours from Detroit.

"You haven't told her anything yet, right?"

I shake my head no. Which is a lie. Slowly but surely, I've started to open up to Bella, and I'm not regretting shit. I trust her. So far it's only bullshit, nothing big, no capital offenses—whatever. But waiting 'til we get married to tell her about me is outta the fucking question.

Dad wouldn't understand.

If I'm cold, he's the iceberg that sank Titanic.

~xXx~

Later that night, we're both sitting on the same couch on the terrace, only the open fire providing us with light. The rain pours down and thunder cracks in the distance, but it only serves to create a cozy atmosphere.

Right now, my heart is so fucking full.

"You're still so beautiful," I murmur, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear.

She giggles and downs another shot. "You're s-still hot," she slurs.

My new plan is to make sure Bella drinks alcohol. Often.

If that doesn't work, perhaps I can drug her.

"Another one?" I grin and hold up the vodka bottle.

"Please!" She hiccups. "What else is gonna-na make m-me forget I'm here, right?"

My face falls.

"Right." I hand her the shot.

She clearly needs more to drink.

~xXx~

"I have a gift for you," she pants as I kiss her neck.

I groan as she unbuckles my belt and take the opportunity to pull her shirt over her head. "It's not our anniversary until tomorrow." Her jeans are next, and she lifts up her hips so I can pull them down. Then I'm back, hovering over her on the couch. My own shirt stays on, 'cause I don't want her to see the ink yet. "Christ, I love you." Black, lacy, frilly, barely-there lingerie.

"I have another gift for tomorrow," she moans when I wrap my lips around a nipple. Hard. Through the transparent fabric of her bra. "I wanna give it to you right now."

"Oh yeah." I slip a hand down her thong and find her soaking wet. "Give it to me, baby."

"Such a man!" she giggles and swats my chest. "I'm not talking about my pussy."

"Oh." I sit back on my heels, my cock straining in my black boxers. "I'm kinda ready to explode here, Bella." I run a hand through my hair and then point down to my very hard cock. "What about after, yeah?" Smirking, I cover her body with mine again and go in for the kill.

~xXx~

She puts up a good fight, but there's only so much she can do before she succumbs. I made her fall for me seven years ago; now I'm doing it all over again.

Another few weeks have passed, and I don't know how many bottles of booze my love has consumed. But that doesn't matter, because I can only think about Bella's happiness. And now she's smiling a lot more. She's also more affectionate and talkative.

"I m-missed you, you know." She grins lazily and holds up her glass for me to refill. Which I do gladly. It's another night on the deck, and we've just had a romantic dinner together.

"I missed you too, baby," I say softly and drape an arm around her shoulders. While she guzzles her drink, I skim my nose over her jaw; it makes her giggle.

It's music to my ears. A sound I've missed so much.

Truth be told, though...not everything is awesome. Over the past few days, I've been having a weird feeling in my chest. It's there whenever I look Bella in the eye—her oddly empty gaze. She can smile, laugh, giggle, and joke, but her eyes don't change. It worries me.

Maybe there's something wrong with her.

"Spend the night with me," I plead in a whisper, my hand caressing her thigh. "Please, honey. I miss feeling your body next to mine."

She's going to say yes.

"Okay," she breathes out before throwing back her drink.

~xXx~

"Do you like it?" she asks nervously.

I grin and kiss her hard; then I go back to admiring the sleek white gold watch she just gave me. "I fucking love it, baby."

She exhales in relief and smiles. "I thought it'd go well with a suit, you know? Like, if you're in a meeting or something..." She winks. "You gotta look sharp, right?"

"Sharp," I chuckle. "That sounds about right. I actually have a big meeting next week." And "meeting" stands for sit-down. A lot of shit is about to go down, which means a crapload of dough. "I can wear it then." I hug my girl to me and kiss her temple.

"Mmm," she hums. "And now we can move on to round two."

She attacks.

~xXx~

"Shhh, it's okay," I whisper, hovering over her on the bed. The rain is coming down outside, thunder cracking and lightning flashing. But in here...here it's fucking serene. "God, you feel so good, baby." I kiss her deeply as I move inside of her, my cock hard...so slick from her arousal.

"More," she pants, clawing at me.

I don't know why, but there are tears rolling down her temples. Yet, she's the one who initiated it tonight. Granted, I could feel it in my gut that she was ready to make love to me again, but a part of me—that ache in my chest...fuck if I know; I'm not making sense. I can't explain it. But it's like that ache has a voice, and it's been telling me to slow down? Whatever.

"I love you," I grunt, grinding deeper into her pussy. There's no describing this pleasure. It's outta this fucking world.

"You too." She kisses her inked name over my heart.

I remember... I had that done for our six-month anniversary.

She got emotional then, too. I recall the wet kisses, the tears I wiped away, and how we made love all night.

"You're—you're wearing a condom, right?" she moans, and I push harder. Our skin slaps together. Her legs tangle with mine. We smell like sex.

"Yeah," I lie.

She's a bit too intoxicated to notice the difference anyway.

All I gotta do is convince her to take a midnight dip in the pool or something later; that'll clean away any evidence of our lovemaking.

"I wanna come," she gasps.

Oh, I make her come.

~xXx~

That night, I have a nightmare.

In my head, I have Bella screaming at me. She sobs, begs, pleads. She tells me we can run.

We could run.

We could run.

We could run.

I hear her words so clearly; we're right back to where we were before I went to prison.

The ache in my chest intensifies.

Do I regret my decision? Should I have run with her from the beginning?

She's ripping my heart out.

"Edward, stop!" she cries, clutching her belly. "Please listen to me! I love you—you need to trust me, and—"

"Trust you?!" I shout, incredulous.

"I never wanted you to go down, too!" she screams. "We could go, Edward! I'll—I'll..." She lets out a sob. "I'll explain everything!"

I jolt awake with a start, my body covered in sweat. The sheets I'm tangled in feel like they're suffocating me, holding me in place, and I almost have a full-blown panic attack.

It's not until I reach the terrace that I feel air reaching my lungs.

"Fuck," I choke out and rub my chest. Wearing only boxers, I sit down on one of the couches. The storm rages on, but I'm thankfully shielded from it; only a few sprinkles of water land on me with the carrying winds. On the edge of the fire pit, I grab my smokes and light one up. I focus on my breathing. And I wonder why the hell it hurts so much. It's like someone's literally squeezing my heart.

Guilt, a voice whispers.

No. I shake my head at that. Fuck it. Fuck guilt. I have nothing to feel guilty about. I love Bella; I only took back what belongs to me.

"Shit," I spit out, the pain getting worse.

Worse and worse and worse and worse. The weeks that follow fuck me up.

~xXx~

Time loses meaning.

I stop reminiscing about our past; memories seep out of me.

I feel drained.

"Here." Bella sits down next to me on the deck, a glass of juice in her hand which she extends to me.

I think I'm sick—a bug or something. "Thanks," I rasp.

Chugging down the cold liquid, I think it tastes a little funny, but it might just be me. In my opinion, everything has tasted...off...in the past few days.

"How long did I sleep this time?" I ask hoarsely.

It's still pretty early, maybe nine or ten in the morning.

"Sixteen hours," she sighs. "Edward, I think you need a doctor."

I shake my head. "I'll be fine." Rubbing my chest, I wonder if that's really true. The ache keeps getting worse, and my vivid nightmares haunt me every night. "Doesn't matter anyway," I reckon. "There's no way off the island, remember?"

Bella narrows her eyes at me and then smiles. "You can't lie to me, honey."

"What?" I frown.

She arches a brow. "Didn't I already tell you that I know everything?" Leaning closer, she taps my temple. A soft little nudge has my head pounding as if she just hit me with a sledgehammer. I flinch. "I know what's in here."

"What..." I clear my throat and blink, feeling dizzy. My vision is a bit blurry, too. "Um, what're you talkin'..." I blink some more when I suddenly see two Bellas next to me.

"Now, if you'll excuse me." She stands up and brushes her hands down her thighs. "It's five o'clock somewhere, and I have a drink waiting."

I stare stupidly out at the ocean, squinting through my eyes.

"We're on a smooth course toward our own demise," she whispers in my ear.

My head whips back, nausea building in my gut. "What?" But when my eyes zero in on the space behind me, Bella's not there. "Bella!" I call.

"Yeah?" she shouts from inside.

I try to stand up from the couch, but I fail, falling down again. "Shit," I mumble. "Did—" I cough. "Did you say something?!" I yell as loudly as my raspy voice will allow.

"Huh? No!"

Looking down at my lap, I frown. My shoulders slump. I'm just...exhausted. Confused. Terrified, for some reason. I don't know what's going on with me.

In need of more fluids, I drain the last of the juice.

~xXx~

Another night, another nightmare. This time I dream about one of the days I got home to a seething Bella. I remember...we'd been together for eight months or so. I'd been to a sit-down, and I was tired as fuck. But Bella refused to tell me what was wrong. She just stared at me as I removed my suit, my tie, my cuff links...her eyes lingering a little when I removed the watch she'd given me...

It happened on occasion, yet she never explained.

Thinking about it now, as I sit down on the beach and smoke a cigarette in the middle of the night, I try to figure it out. But my mind still won't cooperate with me. I'm still sick. Disoriented. There's dizziness, nausea, and memory loss.

Last night, Bella told me we've been on the island for four months now.

Can that really be true?

"Edward! Are you out there?!"

I look over my shoulder to see her standing by the pool in front of our house. "I'll be right in!" I croak.

"It's the middle of the night, honey!" she hollers.

I nod, unable to speak, and turn back to the black ocean.

A couple tears that I don't understand the meaning of roll down my cheeks.

You feel guilty, that voice whispers again.

I deny that with a shake of my head. It can't be guilt. Bella and I are happy here—this is all we need. She's taking care of me now; she's wonderful, and she kisses me and hugs me and smiles at me. And I try to take care of her in return. I just need to get over this pain—this...this thing...in my chest. Whatever it is.

We'll be happy.

"Do you want something to drink?!" Bella calls.

"Yes, please!" I choke out.

"Be right there!"

My hand goes to my heart; I rub the spot, looking down. I see the watch my love gave to me, and I can't help but smile. Time—that's all we need, and then we'll bounce back. *I will bounce back*. Because we're not leaving.

I'd rather put a bullet in Bella's head and then my own.

It'll be better soon. Maybe I can find some medicine in the storage closet; after all, we have a whole fuckin' pharmacy here on the island. I sure as fuck brought enough to last a lifetime.

It's just a bug.

Once I'm back to my old self, I'll plan a romantic evening for her—show her how much I love her. 'Cause, as much as I hate to admit it, I haven't

really been able to fulfill my duties in the bedroom. The times we've made love here on the island aren't many, and aside from our first night, I haven't performed well. Either I've lasted all of about two minutes, or I haven't been able to come at all. Talk about embarrassing.

But whatever. It'll get better.

Time.

All I need is a little time.

7

Chapter song – Miracle by Hurts

...Look at all of the damage you have done in time

You can see what a savage I've become in my eyes

If you look in my heart, you will find

No love, no light, no end in sight...

EPOV

I'm vaguely aware of the chilled cloth Bella places on my forehead, but I'm too deep into my nightmares to break away from them and wake up fully.

Voices haunt me—voices belonging to victims. People I've killed over the years. Some quickly, some brutally and slowly. Back then, I never gave a fuck. But now, when they look me in the eye...

One woman sits down in an empty room, explaining the pain she felt when I strangled her with my bare hands.

"It really hurt when you put your thumb over here," she giggles, pointing to the middle of her throat. "I couldn't breathe. I saw spots, you know? It, like, blackened my vision. And my throat burned—my lungs felt like they were on fire."

"Shut up!" I scream at her, pulling at my hair.

I try to find a way out, but there's no door to the room.

"But I guess I deserved to die." She sighs. "I don't really know what I did, but I'm sure it was justified. Just wish I could've said goodbye to my little sisters before." God—please, stop. "I was taking care of them. But they're good; they'll be just fine in some foster home. Lily's seven and Meg's four."

Dropping my forehead to the concrete wall, I squeeze my eyes shut, remembering the time I iced her. It was right before I was initiated—made a member of the Borgata. I'd earned my wings, proved myself, and became a made man, someone my father was proud of.

When I turn around again, the woman is gone, replaced by a Latin American man; I recall his face...I think. Yeah, he worked in the bank. That bank down in Texas. A heist gone wrong. I had to clip a handful of workers there so we could get away unseen.

I know I shot this man between the eyes.

"Can I show you a photo of my granddaughter?" he asks softly, his accent barely there. "Edward?"

I stare at him.

"Can I, Edward?" he asks again. "Edward?"

"Edward..."

I moan, shuddering. Something wet trickles down my temples. I can feel the ocean breeze on my face. This smell...I can smell the fucking sunshine. I didn't know the sun had a smell.

"Edward?"

"Bella," I whimper.

My eyes burn with tears. I can't open them, but I know she's close. She's right next to me on the couch. Holding me, her touch soothing.

"I went snorkeling," she tells me, wiping some hair or whatever away from my forehead. "It's really beautiful down there. Under the surface."

"What's h-happening?" I croak.

Trying to open my eyes again, I manage to crack one open, but Bella's all blurry. I squint, struggle to zero in, and...maybe, not right now, but soon I'll see her. I hope. Slowly, I open the second eye, too.

"You've had a tough week," she murmurs. "You're hallucinating."

I am?

I scrub a heavy hand over my face; a headache is building up at the back of my head, and it feels like it's threatening to break my skull.

"Close your eyes again, honey," she whispers. "You shouldn't look at me anyway."

"Why?" Another couple of tears slide down my temples. "I wanna see you."

"You won't like it," she warns.

More determined than ever, I push myself up on my elbows and narrow my eyes. Then, slowly but surely, I see her. *What the hell?* "What

happened to-to you?" I rasp. Fuck, she's all bruised. I see bruises, scrapes, and cuts all over her beautiful face.

She smiles. She flinches. A drop of blood trickles down her bottom lip. She smiles again. "This is what I'd look like if all emotional battle wounds were displayed on my body." Her eyes light up with excitement; meanwhile, I feel fucking nauseous. "You're all black and blue, too," she whispers, excitement fading. It's replaced by sadness as she traces a finger down my chest. My eyes follow, and I see the damage done by...um. "I've hurt you a lot. So has your father. Each time he was disappointed in you...when you didn't climb the ladder in the organization quickly enough—you got another cut. In your heart."

I sit up slowly, inspecting my battered arms and legs.

When my chin touches my chest, I suddenly see the gaping hole where my heart once resided.

I tremble, shake, and feel violently ill.

One look at Bella shows me that her heart has been removed, too.

Ripped out, that fucking voice whispers.

I look my love in the eye, agonized and defeated.

She smiles. "Two lost souls." Singsong voice.

And I jolt right outta the bed.

"God," I choke out, bending over. *Just a dream, just a dream, just a dream.* Hands on my thighs for support, I will my heart to slow down. 'Cause it's pounding—still there, protected within my ribcage. *It was all a dream, all a dream, nothing's real.* Glancing over at the bed, I see that Bella's asleep. There're no bruises. No cuts. Not a single flaw.

That nightmare, it'd felt so real. I *thought* it was real.

A few minutes later, I'm collapsing down on the beach.

Sobs rack my body, the sounds almost drowned out by the crashing waves.

The moon is lit up too fucking brightly. It's staring down at me, judging me, calling me a savage.

"Please stop," I cry, hugging my knees to my chest. Rocking back and forth, more faces flash before my eyes. They taunt me with sarcastic grins, coos, echoing giggles, crooning, and singsong voices. They tell me what I've done—as if I'm not aware. "*Please—*" I gag and reflexively turn right to empty the contents of my stomach. "*Urgh.*" More vomiting.

I've never felt emptier, hollower, yet weighed down.

My skin crawls. Sweat seeps from my pores. My abs clench painfully.

I ache all over.

And for the first time in my life, I'm sorry.

For what I've done.

But not sorry enough, the voice whispers.

~xXx~

The sun is out the next morning, but I'm sitting on the deck with three blankets wrapped around me. I've got chills, and my fever won't break.

Bella stands next to the fire pit, a pensive look on her face and a glass of juice in her hand.

"You're really not gonna see a doctor?" she asks me.

I shake my head, which hurts like hell. "No," I rasp. "There's no way off the island."

She eyes the juice.

I eye the juice.

I lick my dry lips, parched. "Can I...?" I barely manage to lift my arm toward the glass.

With a resigned sigh, Bella walks inside again, leaving me confused.

"Bella," I croak.

"I'll be right back!" she snaps.

I exhale shakily and face the ocean.

For some reason, I'm on the verge of crying all the time. Always a minute away from crumbling. The stony weight in my chest hurts more than ever. It's unforgiving and unyielding. And that voice...right now it's whispering the number sixty-four in my head over and over. *Sixty-four, sixty-four, sixty-four*. Sixty-four faces, names, souls. Lives. That I've taken.

I killed for the first time when I was eighteen. Dad rented me out. I took care of people. Good at cleaning. Hitman for fucking hire.

I've seen the way a pair of eyes dim until there's nothing left.

I've heard final breaths—that raspy, wheezing, choked-up sound.

"Here we go." Despite her soft voice, Bella startles me when she returns with juice and a plate of food. While I try to take calm breaths, she sits down next to me and mumbles about how stubborn I am. But I can barely focus on the words. "Um, try some blueberries." She holds out a few for me. "They're good."

She places one in my mouth and I chew slowly, not really counting on keeping it down. I haven't been able to so far.

Next she gives me the juice; I nearly moan at the taste. I must've been really thirsty, 'cause it's fucking delicious.

All the food my love offers me is either diced or sliced. The banana tastes good, but I can only stomach a couple pieces. The small slivers of chocolate taste good too.

"Some water," she whispers and hands me a refilled bottle. It's cold, coming straight from the spring. My eyes well up for no reason at all. "If you can keep this down, I'll give you more later, all right?" She softly weaves her fingers through my hair.

I shudder in pleasure and close my eyes. "Thanks," I breathe out.

~xXx~

A few days later, I finally feel better. I drink a lot of water, and I can eat small meals without throwing up. The fever has finally released its hold on me, and I can sleep better. However, the nightmares are still there. If anything, they're more brutal now. It's every night. I wake up choking on screams, tangled in the sheets, a sweaty mess, and I always end up on the deck or the beach. I smoke, I think, I drink water, and I eat the berries Bella now always keeps in a bowl by the fire pit. For fat, I eat some chocolate, too, and Slim Jims for protein. Well, they're kinda fatty as well.

If only I could shake the nightmares...

Sixty-four, sixty-four, sixty-four.

I cringe and take a drag from my smoke, eyes on the slowly rising sun.

I've been sick for so long now, only occupied by my thoughts and dreams, but perhaps I can actually do something productive today. Maybe catch a fucking fish or...I don't know, at least take a decent walk. I haven't seen our farm animals in a long time—who knows if they're even alive. Maybe I should set out and look?

A distraction—that's what I need.

And I do get distracted a few hours later when I hear Bella retching into a bucket.

As fast as I can, I make my way over to the deck and hold back her hair as she heaves.

"Oh, baby." I hope it's not her turn to get sick. "Tell me what to do; tell me how I can make it better."

"Go away, Edward," she croaks into the bucket. "You've already done enough."

I frown. "If this is about bringing you here—"

"God, just shut the fuck up!" she screams.

I fall back on my ass, shocked to see blazing fury in her eyes.

"Bella..."

She gags and throws up some more.

"The birth control pills you gave me..." She whimpers. "I haven't missed a single day, Edward, and you said you wore a condom the times I was drunk."

"I did!" I blurt out my lie quickly, but then my mind spins. Pills. Condoms. The placebo pills. Holy shit. Nausea—she's throwing up. "My fucking God."

I cover my mouth that stretches into a huge smile. "You're pregnant, baby?"

She starts to wail.

It's okay. I expected this. After all, it's only realistic for her to be frightened. Her maternal instincts have probably kicked in, so my guess is that she's scared the island won't be enough for her. But it will. I've prepared everything.

"How long have you been ill?" I ask softly. This can't be the first morning since she's already sure she's pregnant. Especially when she believes her birth control pills are real. Plus...that I've told her about the times we fucked before she went on the pill; she was so fucking hammered, so lying was easy. And now I'm fucking stoked. We're having a baby. A *baby*.

"About a month," she rasps. "You were just too sick to notice. Fuck, my tits hurt."

"Damn," I chuckle emotionally. "We're having a baby, Bella."

I'm giddy, and the weight on my chest has lifted slightly.

This is fucking perfect.

"The pill..."

I shrug and reach for the water bottle by the fire pit. "Maybe it's your body's fault." I eye her as she drinks. "It could be, you know. I've heard of some women whose bodies reject birth control." The lies come too easily. But I'm willing to try anything to keep her from lashing out at me. "Yeah—" I nod pensively at her hurt expression "—it's you, honey. Your fucking fault. But you know what?" I grin and tap her on the nose. "It's a good thing I have it all planned out."

I move us over to the couch where I tell her all about the things I've bought for us—for our baby. The toys, the clothes, the books... There are books on pregnancy, home remedies, names, different stages in the kid's life...the list goes on. And I've thought of each and every little thing when it comes to Bella, too. Everything from maternity wear and breast pumps to vitamins and lists of things she can and can't do.

"You planned to knock me up?" she asks flatly when I'm done speaking.

And I laugh a little. "Well, at some point, of course. But I didn't expect it to happen now. I didn't think your body would screw it up." I hand her an apple and a half-melted chocolate bar. "This is still amazing, though." I beam at her and put my hand on her still-flat stomach. "Our little island miracle."

Maybe my nightmares will stop now.

~xXx~

Only, they don't...

"The worst part was probably when you shoved a dull knife under my knee caps," a young man chuckles, running a hand through his surfer-like hair. "I mean, I know I fucked up. I sold H on your turf." He nods somberly. "So, I guess I had it coming."

I slam my fists down on the table he's sitting behind. I'm not the good cop in the interrogation room. I'm not the bad cop, either. I'm the fucking barbarian who iced him without blinking.

Carlisle's dad ordered the hit.

"Stop. Talking," I grit out.

"I was number fifty-six, right?" He casually drums his fingers against the tabletop. "That's a lotta people, Edward. But I'm sure your reasons excuse your behavior."

The sound of a helicopter jolts me awake, and I whip my head around to find Bella.

Has she found the chopper?

No!

"Hurry!" She's screaming—from outside, I think. "Come on!"

"Fuck!" I growl, jumping outta bed. Dressed in a pair of sweats, I storm out of the bedroom, prepared to fight for my life. Scary thoughts run through me as I reach the patio, eyes searching wildly for Bella. No one can find us here—they fucking can't. And my helicopter is safely hidden on the other side of the island. "BELLA!" I spot her half a mile down the beach and take off in a sprint. There's no sight of a goddamn helicopter, but that doesn't mean I didn't hear it. However, right now I'm more worried about the sight ahead of me.

Bella. Doubled over. Clutching her belly.

"I'm gonna fucking kill him," I hear her mutter as I finally get to her.

"Bella!" Fuck, I'm panting like a lunatic. "Bella, baby..." I drop down to my knees and cup her face, looking for traces of pain. "What's wrong? Is the baby okay?" We don't really know exactly how far along she is, but it's only been a month since she told me she's carrying our child. We're guessing ten weeks or so, 'cause I read in a book that they start counting the two weeks prior to conception. "Please talk to me, honey. I'm worried sick."

"I'm fine," she wheezes out. "Just a bad cramp."

I feel all the blood leave my face. The worry almost paralyzes me.
"What?" My bottom lip trembles, but I push down my emotions for later. This is about making sure Bella's okay—safe. "Come on. Let's get you back to bed." The sun is still touching the horizon, so I know it's early.
"You need to rest."

Insisting that she needs fresh air, she settles down on one of the couches on the deck instead of returning to our bedroom, and I busy myself by bringing her water, caffeine-free pop, and snacks. I also make sure she's comfortable and bundled up properly.

"Anything else I can get for you?" Once again, I find myself on my knees before her. I kiss her on the forehead, afraid to take up space on the couch. I mean...what if touching her can harm the baby? What if the baby's already harmed? Oh, *God*.

My gut churns painfully.

What would I do if the baby needed medical attention?

Before, the answer was simple. But that was when it only concerned Bella, and we're destined to die together. No one will *ever* separate us—I love her too much; I'm fucking obsessed with her—but our son or daughter... That's another kind of love. He or she needs to be alive. And well. Safe. Protected. Cared for.

Breathing suddenly becomes difficult.

"Edward?"

Right. I'll worry about my own fucking shit later. "I'm here, love." I grasp her hands in mine and kiss her knuckles. "Tell me what to do."

Her smile is faint. "I'm fine," she whispers. "Just tired."

I narrow my eyes at her, and the reason why I woke up earlier rushes back to me. "What were you doing out here, anyway?" She's only wearing one of my t-shirts and a pair of panties—not exactly what she wears when she goes running.

"It got so hot inside." She shrugs a little. "I...I wanted to take a walk."

I cock a brow. "I heard a helicopter."

"What?" She frowns in confusion, but what I notice even more is that she averts her eyes. "What do you mean? A helicopter?"

Pursing my lips, I wonder if I should say anything more. It's clear that she's hiding something, but Bella is usually a skilled liar. She's the fucking master of it. And now...

Plus, if I say more, I might give away the truth: that there is, in fact, a way off the island.

"Probably just a dream." I force a smile and kiss her cheek. "How about I bring you some more pregnancy books?"

"That sounds perfect."

With a nod and a smile, I get up and go inside the house to retrieve the books.

And Bella spends the day reading. Though, every once in a while, her eyes will flick to scan her surroundings. Like she's expecting something to happen. Or someone to come.

Which puts me on edge.

EPOV

She's so beautiful.

The crystal clear water only reaches her hip, but after fully submerging herself, she's wet and glistening all over. Her long hair is plastered to her sun-kissed skin, almost reaching her elbows. The black bikini top has shifted slightly, so I can see just how tan she's gotten after a guesstimated year or so on the island.

Approximately seven months pregnant.

Her protruding stomach is my beacon, yet I don't touch.

The ache in my chest has a voice; it tells me not to taint our child by coming close. So, I stay put. A few feet away in the water.

And the smile on Bella's lips as she washes her belly is small but so serene that it hurts me. It's physically painful, 'cause...that's not how she smiles at me. She hasn't for a long time—since before I went to prison. It's only now that I see the difference. She can't love me...

I don't blame her, either.

In the past several months, the nightmares have continued to plague me, and memories of...everything—family, so-called friends, moments I've shared with Bella, sit-downs, heists, killings...I think I've changed. I think I've gained some clarity.

"You're frowning again."

I shrug and ghost my palms over the surface. My toes disappear under the white sand of the sea floor. A fish hightails it outta there.

The sun is warm on my back.

But I feel like an icicle.

I wonder when I lost my mind—if it happened gradually in prison...or if there was something specific that pushed me over the edge.

Then again, would an insane person know he's insane?

"He's kicking," she says softly. "You wanna feel?"

"It's a girl," I respond automatically, keeping my eyes on the life beneath the surface.

Another tiny fish swims closer to my calf, curious.

"Edward..." She's got that defeated tone in her voice again.

She knows something is bothering me; she also knows I don't want to talk about it. Lastly, she's noticed that I rarely go near her anymore. But how could I? I've ruined her. Guilt continues to eat at me, but I'm too much of a pussy to do anything about it. I refuse to let her go, 'cause I know she'd leave me in a heartbeat. Only a nutcase wouldn't.

Having a conscience sucks.

Having a *guilty* conscience sucks even worse.

That little voice that used to whisper has now taken over completely.

I think I've always been a little obsessed with Bella—even from the beginning. But what I'm doing now...she's my fucking hostage.

I blow out a breath and duck under water.

~xXx~

After stoking the fire, I lean back on the couch again and take a swig from my JD. The sun has set, we've eaten, we've cleaned a little, and now

we're just chilling on the deck—as we do most nights. But unlike other nights—and days, for that matter—I'm thinking about things I haven't before. Like...what did Bella do while I was in prison? Does she still listen to the same music she did in the past? Our batteries haven't expired yet, so there's an mp3 player and a set of speakers we can use, though we haven't for some reason. Have her hobbies changed? Is...was...she close with her family?

All I know is what's listed in her file. One mother, one father—deceased—and one sibling. A sister who's a year older than Bella.

We haven't talked about the past even once since I...took her. Since I literally kidnapped her. Pistol-whipped her, drugged her, and stole her. Like she's some object.

On the island, the past hasn't existed. I haven't spoken about the trial, my years of incarceration, my family...anything. Instead we've lived day-by-day; everything has been about the island life. There have been storms. Days of heavy rain. Fights. Searching for food. Chopping firewood. My insistent talk about our future here. And then I was sick. Months disappeared without my knowledge. I didn't know what was real or...

I still don't know. I have no fucking clue what my head has cooked up during this time here on the island. The helicopter sounds, for instance: I've woken up to that noise countless times since that first one. They haunt me as much as the nightmares, and I guess...I guess there's some symbolism in that shit. A helicopter would ensure Bella leaving me. A helicopter would be the end of us, turning all this into a brief moment, not forever.

Leaning forward on my knees, I reach for my smokes and light one up. Bella's next to me, reading another pregnancy book, and I peer over my shoulder, my eyes intent on her. The small yet serene smile is still there. A hand splayed over her exposed belly. A soft blanket is pooled around

her, and she's got a cotton cardigan hanging off her shoulders, but it's unbuttoned. Underneath it is all skin, aside from another bikini top.

"I can feel your eyes on me," she murmurs, not looking up from her book.

The left corner of my mouth quirks up.

I've admitted it; I'm obsessed with her, but...God, I fucking love her, too.

I just wish...

Jesus Christ.

I wish I had run. Back then. When it was offered to me. She wanted us to run. We should've run.

Unfortunately, I've never been a runner.

And it's too late for wishes.

But it's not too late for honesty. "Can you tell me the truth about one thing?" I ask her. Her brows knit together as she faces me, and at her hesitant nod, I go on. "Do you really love me?"

Because I can't see it anymore. So far, she's done so much according to my expectations. If I've expected her to say yes about something, she has. She said yes when I asked her to sleep with me, said yes when I asked if she still loved me... She has acted according to my "plans." But is it real? I doubt it.

She studies me for a long time, several minutes, and then puts her book aside. "You're finally ready for the truth?" She cocks her head a little. She's got that look in her eyes—the one that tells me she can read me perfectly.

"I think I know it." I wince and flick some ash into the fire pit.

"Ask me what I am."

I frown. "What?"

She nods and scoots closer to me. "Ask me what I am—what my job at the bureau is."

Fuckin' Feds... I sigh. "What are you, Bella?"

"I'm a profiler," she whispers. "It's my job to pluck intel from people by simply looking at them, studying them. And you're a textbook case. You made it so easy for me."

I smile bitterly and take a pull from my smoke. "Thanks for making me feel special."

"No." She grasps my arm as I'm about to turn away. I swallow my heart. It hurts inside. "It's not about that. Just...Edward, don't you get it? When you first brought me here, you were..." She licks her lips and looks away for a beat. "You were *so* unstable. And..." She blows out a breath. "You scared the shit out of me. I was scared for my *life*."

"I'm sorry," I choke out. My insides churn painfully; remembering hurts, too. I wasn't...I wasn't right in the head. And to think that I made Bella fear me...*fuck*.

"I told you what you wanted to hear," she admits softly. "I figured...if I acted cool, you'd remain calm. I also hoped it would buy me time to find a way off the island."

She really doesn't want to be here.

"You want to go home," I state quietly.

"Of course I do." Of course she does. "I know there is a way off the island, too, you know."

I swallow hard and struggle to keep a straight face. "There isn't."

"Yes, there is." Her mouth curves into a small smile. "You wouldn't be you if you didn't have a Plan B—a 'just in case.' Because as reckless as you can be, Edward...you are methodical. Don't even try to deny it. I know you. I dated you for a whole year, and some things don't change."

Instead of arguing, I find myself requesting, "Give it a shot—explain to me how I am, what I'm like."

In return, Bella lets out a little laugh in surprise and reaches for her water bottle on the side table. "I'm not sure that's wise." She grins to herself and takes a sip from her water. "Honestly, Edward—you, of all people, shouldn't ask for this."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Now I'm getting defensive and annoyed.

She shrugs. "Just that you, who demands to be in control all the time, won't get a kick outta someone else knowing too much."

"Tell me," I order impatiently and put out my cigarette.

She gives me a look, but then she sighs and leans back against the cushions and says, "Fine. You're controlling, manipulative, and shrewd. You're stubborn. You lie a lot—" She sends me a sideways smirk. "You have two tells: sometimes you purse your lips when you lie, a small twist to the right side, and sometimes you scratch your eyebrow. You take what you want, and in your head you'll justify whatever you need to sleep better at night, *but*—" she holds up a finger; meanwhile, I feel like there's a noose around my neck—"it always catches up to you sooner or later. You're both a bully and a sweetheart. If anyone pushes you down, you return with vengeance and won't rest until whoever and their grandmother are six feet under. At the same time, you have this compulsive need to please. In Chicago, it was your father, and—"

"I think that's enough," I whisper, averting my eyes. Jesus Christ, Bella has a way of sending me on weird roller-coaster rides—ones that leave me disarmed and confused.

"Oh honey, I've barely started." She sits up straight. "When you're desperate, you're the most lethal. You act irrationally, you delude yourself into thinking you're on top of things, you run down obstacles, not giving a flying fuck about consequences, and you're a master of deceit. It gets to the point where you don't have a fucking clue about what's right and wrong, true or false, fact or goddamn fiction. You prefer to take the easy way out—"

I shake my head. "Stop." My throat feels thick, my blood boils, my hands ball into fists.

"When someone corners you, you charge—by any means necessary. Sorta like you wanna do right now." She gets even closer. My chest heaves with barely-contained rage. "You want to shut me up, don't you?" Her words slice through me like the sharpest knife, yet her tone is gentle, her expression is soft, and when she reaches up to push some hair away from my forehead, she does it almost tenderly. "You can't stand it, knowing that I'm more aware of you than you originally thought." I glare at her, silently seething. "You're scared that someone's gonna beat you at your own game."

"Fuck you," I spit out.

She doesn't even flinch. Bella's so *fearless*. "I intimidate you, don't I?" she asks softly. "Is that why you felt the need to kidnap me? Did you believe I'd never meet with you on neutral ground?"

I bark out a dark laugh. "You don't know shit, Bella." Standing up, I tower over her and cage her in by leaning forward and placing my hands on the back of the couch. "You know what *I* think? I think you feel the need to

psychoanalyze me in order to justify your own feelings. You hate that you didn't put up more of a fight, that you surrendered to me so easily." I smirk condescendingly. "You hate that I can make you heel like a *fucking dog*."

To my fury, she merely smiles. "Do you feel better now, Edward? Have you put me down enough? Do you feel like a king again?"

"What?" I don't fucking get her. "Oh Bella, you shouldn't drink when you're pregnant. It's whorish and bad for the baby." I grin and straighten up, shaking my head at her. She's goddamn insane. She has to be. She just has to be. "Then again, you've been my little whore from the beginning, haven't you?" I wink. "I snapped my fingers and you came running, eager to spread your legs. You were the happiest when I fed you my cock."

Bella doesn't cry. Her smile doesn't falter. The light in her eyes doesn't dim. If anything, she looks like she's just proved her point.

"Wanna know what's gonna happen now?" She cocks a brow.

I roll my eyes and decide to humor her. That's all it is. I don't really give a fuck. "Sure thing, Dr. Crowley—oh, excuse me. Dr. *Swan*. Or do you have any other names, Ms. Hollywood?"

"Please." She chuckles and pats my arm. "You can try all you want, but you won't bully me, Edward."

I stand back and fold my arms over my chest and give her a bored look. "You were sayin'?"

"Right." She nods. "Now you're gonna storm off; you're gonna convince yourself that I'm full of shit, that I don't know what I'm talking about, and then..." A slow smile spreads over her lips, but it's not superior. Instead

it's understanding, a little sad, and wistful. "The sweetheart in you, the one who actually loves me, is going to feel awful."

I laugh and pick up my smokes and lighter. "Dream on, babycakes."

"I'm not dreaming. It's facts," she says frankly. "You've just called me a whore; you've accused me of drinking alcohol when I'm pregnant...oh, and that I'm basically your lapdog." That brow arches again. "Trust me, the Edward I fell in love with—and he's still in there somewhere—is gonna feel nauseous with self-hatred."

I grit my teeth and walk away.

She's—fuck, she's wrong. She's gotta be.

"Edward?" she calls.

I pause but don't turn to face her. With one foot on the last porch step, I brace myself for more of her... *"Now you're gonna storm off; you're gonna convince yourself that I'm full of shit, that I don't know what I'm talking about, and then..."* ...for more of her...her fucking *crap*.

"There is of course the possibility that you won't apologize to me," she muses. "Because you know what?" I can practically hear the smile in her voice. "Most of all, you hate being proven wrong."

I leave.

~xXx~

Proving Bella wrong is literally impossible. If I don't apologize, she'll just think I'm too stubborn; that I do, in fact, hate to be wrong. And if I do apologize or show that I feel fucking horrible for what I called her...well, she's right again.

And she is, 'cause...

Fuck.

What sick son of a bitch calls the woman he loves a whore?

I don't even wanna think about it. And I don't. I let it die instead. Easier that way.

Easy way out, huh?

Fuck you.

To let off some steam, I continue my hike into the jungle. In the middle of the night.

But when the itch to see Bella grows too strong, my legs begin to carry me back. It's like there's someone squeezing my lungs, and it won't get easier until I see her face, hear her voice...touch her. But I won't do that. I won't touch. I will just sit close.

I can't be sure since my watch is back at the house, but my guess is I've been gone for four or five hours, and I find Bella asleep on the deck.

Sitting down on the floorboards near her head, I rest my own head on the armrest of the couch, my limbs tired and my mind exhausted.

You should let her go.

Never. I can't. No way. This is our paradise. We'll be happy here.

Yet, that last thought doesn't ring true anymore.

I wish all of this was a nightmare—a bad dream that I'll wake up from...now. Right now. And then I'll be back in that warehouse, ready to say yes to Bella when she repeatedly begs me to run with her.

I sigh heavily, knowing that's not gonna happen. There's no waking up, 'cause this isn't a dream. Reaching for the half-empty water bottle near the fire pit, I chug it down before banking the fire a little.

There's no way I wanna sleep, because that's the place for real nightmares. But I do need some rest, so I move off the floor and collapse on the other couch, keeping my head at the end nearest Bella.

"Long time, no see, my friend."

Fuck. I fell asleep.

I turn around slowly, as always stuck in this interrogation room without windows and doors, and see...

Carlisle.

Why the fuck am I dreaming about him? He's not dead, is he? So far, I've only dreamed of my victims—people I've killed over the years. Sixty-fucking-four of them.

He smirks, seated at the table, and I sit down across from him, fearing that any of my ghosts will show up at any minute.

"Lookin' sharp." He jerks his chin at me, and I look down at myself. Huh. I'm in a suit. A hand over my face tells me I'm clean-shaven, too. What the fuck?

Lookin' sharp. Lookin' sharp. Lookin' sharp.

Bella gave me that expensive watch—so I could look sharp at my "meetings," or, in my own words, sit-downs. And when my eyes find my wrist, I push up the edge of the sleeve to see the very same watch. The overhead light catches the white gold, causing it to twinkle and look extra expensive.

"You ready, man?"

I look up. Ready for what?

He peers behind me, and not two seconds later, two men appear. Shit. Dad and Carlisle Sr. They walk around the table and sit down on either side of Carlisle—on chairs that weren't there a minute ago.

"If it isn't my son, the snitch." My father gives me a blank look.

I try to swallow past the anxiety, but it's futile. Despite knowing that this is a dream, my fear is real.

Carlisle Sr. stares at me in disgust.

In the real world, I know he's behind bars. They all are. Because I ratted them out. I became the lowest of the low. Well...Carlisle, the junior, had plenty of charges against him, but as the top dogs—not counting Dad, the boss, and Carlisle Sr., the consigliere—we've worked hard to ensure our fathers' safety. That's what you do in the mob. The boss' hands are always kept clean. But I sang like a fucking canary—all in order to get out faster—which was why the Feds busted down the door to my parents' house one bright Chicago morning and arrested Dad.

When I got out of prison, visiting either my dad or my mother was out of question. Hell, it wasn't even a consideration. I left it all behind me when I handed over the damning evidence I had to the authorities. Plus, if I visited my old man, he'd have me killed. He'd order someone on the outside to ice me.

Family is about loyalty—not blood.

"I hope Isabella's at least a decent lay," Dad says, rubbing his jaw.

I grit my teeth.

"I can't believe she lets you fuck her," Carlisle laughs. "Or that you want to fuck her!" My childhood friend grins and shakes his head. "I remember when they took us in, you know? The looks between you and Bella when the pigs cuffed us in the warehouse." He sobers and glares at me, stabbing a finger at the desk. "She fucking played you, bro. That cunt was nothing more than a Fed!"

Now I want to argue, but I find that I can't. Literally, I can't speak. What the hell? I try, but no words come out. And not for the lack of them, trust me. No one calls my woman a cunt. I want to shout at Carlisle; I want to scream that he's the one who fucking hired her! Not only that, but he hired that Emmett Newton, too! He did that. Not me. But if he hadn't...fuck, then I wouldn't have met Bella.

"I know what you're thinking," he goes on. "This is your dream, remember? I'm in your fucking head, man. And..." He chuckles. "Didn't you call her a cunt, too? A fucking whore?"

As much as I want to deny that, I can't. I've called Bella everything under the sun.

"You should've run," Dad states simply, straightening his tie. "You should've run and never looked back."

Carlisle Sr., who hasn't said a word so far, nods grimly. "You ruined everything, Edward. You took down the entire Borgata." He grunts. "Goddamn piece-of-shit rat. You and that little whore of yours."

I want to shout, "She was only doing her job!"

And I'm floored.

Not because I haven't had that thought before, but because I see it now. God, I fucking see it, and it's gutting me. Bile rises in my throat; I can't breathe. Panic sets in, too. Oh, God. She was only doing her job. Her

father had been killed, and she wanted justice. Bella wanted to take down my father.

The only mistake she made was falling in love with me.

I despised her for betraying me, and I had years in prison to think of the day I'd meet her again and remove her from a life where she was in charge of herself. But...was she ever in the wrong? Aside from deceiving me and playing a part, what did she do?

The answer is simple.

She took us down—a bunch of ruthless murderers.

"Time to wake up, Edward." Carlisle doesn't smile. Instead there's disappointment. "I thought you were cut out for our life. Turns out you were nothing but a pussy."

I stare at him, not really affected by his accusation. 'Cause I don't believe it's true. While my reasons were wrong, ratting everyone out was the right thing to do. It's just...I've never been on the right side of the law before, so I don't fucking know how to act.

"Edward..." My father shakes his head at me. "Oh, Edward. If only I had a son to be proud of."

I wince, loathing the hold he's had on me all my life.

It was all gravy in the beginning. Loose women, fast money, waking up in the morning with lipstick stains on my cock and cheap perfume from bitches on my clothes, expensive cars, the intoxication that pure power brought, the feeling of people respecting me—

But they didn't, did they? There was no fucking respect. It was fear and my name.

"Edward." Carlisle Sr. smirks. "We will find you one day and end you."

I wake up from the gasp rasping its way through my throat.

My heart pounds, as it always does after my nightmares.

"Shit." I drag myself up in a sitting position and squint through my eyes for the blinding sun.

"Good morning," I hear Bella's soft voice say. She's just coming out of the house, and she's carrying a tray with food. Fruits, eggs, some of the rolls she baked yesterday, and glasses of juice.

With the events from the nightmare—not to mention the realizations—still haunting me, I don't speak a word as Bella starts boiling eggs over the fire and plates our breakfast. Instead I stare out at the ocean, taking deep drags from a smoke, and let my mind run even wilder.

Funny—Bella once told me I'm a man of few words, and I have been, at least in the past, but it was never because I'd been rendered speechless. But now...I *have no* words. Nothing to say.

If there was any resentment lingering from her betrayal, it's long gone now, that's for sure.

If this was a fairy tale, there would be hope of redemption. I would work to deserve her, and she would forgive me before we took off into the sunset. But this isn't a fairy tale. There is no redemption for me. Bella took me down hard—rightly so. Sixty-four murders, many in cold blood. Innocent people who have suffered because I've been greedy or had the urge to please my father, show him that I'm capable. I've stolen for him, taken lives, scammed, and removed competition by burning down their stores and beaten them senseless. I don't even know how many families I've destroyed.

How am I any different from my father—the man who destroyed Bella's family?

Disgustingly forgiving people—*brainless* people—might say I have my heart in the right place, and that that is my way to redemption. But do I really have my heart in the right place?

'Cause no matter what, I'm not letting Bella go.

There's no way to run.

9

Chapter song – Split My Personality by Salem Al Fakir

EPOV

Another night on the deck. Another fire. Another dinner finished and enjoyed.

The difference tonight is that we're talking about the past.

Or more correctly, about us.

After two days of silence between us, I couldn't take it anymore. I apologized to her while she served dinner, and I told her I felt fucking terrible for...Christ, I still can't believe I called her all of those things—*fucking dog, whore, drunk...* Things that are so far from true.

Bella shrugged it off and explained that she'd known it was coming: not only my apology, but before that—what I called her. She'd expected it, and that's horrible, too. Calmly, she said it was my way of defending myself, but that's messed up.

And now...

I say I understand she can't love me.

I wouldn't love me, either. I *don't* love me.

She retorts, "When did I actually *deny* loving you?"

And I frown and think long and hard.

Didn't she say...?

Hmm.

Fuck, she didn't. Instead she dodged the question.

She sighs. "I still love you, Edward—but it's complicated. You kidnapped me, and...I resent you for it. But at the same time, I'm so far from innocent, too." She pauses. "I love the man who protected me because I was precious to him, the man who made me dinner at his place 'cause he wanted me alone, the man who brought me to his house at the lake and shut off his phone for an entire weekend..." She rubs her belly lovingly and smiles to herself. But it's sad. "I see glimpses of that man here on the island, too. It's rare, but it happens. And I miss him."

I swallow hard, feeling emotional, and light up a cigarette simply to have something to occupy my hands.

"I'm not a good man, Bella." I smile without humor, wishing I could be someone who deserved her. "I'm fucked in the head." I tap my temple. "Honestly, I'm insane." At least I think I am.

"Have you ever stopped to think that maybe I'm not right in the head, either?" she asks bluntly, to which my brows furrow. She shrugs. "I did fall in love with you knowing you were involved in the mafia." She slides me a pointed look. "No warning bell in the world was loud enough to stop me."

I nod pensively and tilt up my chin to exhale some smoke. "But you fell in love with me before you found out I'm an actual murderer."

"Oh, come on." She chuckles and rolls her eyes. "Like that came as a shock to me. Ed Masen's son—I hardly expected you to be a petty thief. I was pretty well-informed when I went undercover." Her eyes soften as I glance at her. "We had a few informers."

Nice word for rat.

And I do know that. Back in prison, I did the math. "Marcus." I flick the cigarette into the fire, remembering one of my father's closest friends in the family. He was talking to the Feds, and then I killed him. This was around the same time Isabella entered the picture. She was new as a stripper when Dad told me to ice him.

Bella hums and watches the glowing wood in the fire pit. "He disappeared a few days after our first date."

I don't reply.

I'm sure she can make an educated guess.

"There was something else, too." She eyes me.

I cock a brow.

And she asks, "Remember the watch I gave you?"

Fuck. Me. She didn't.

"You—" I can't say another word; I'm too fucking stunned. Hell, I can't even move. Goddamn rigid.

She offers a short nod in confirmation. "It was bugged."

Holy shit.

With a heavy exhale, I let that sink in and scrub a hand over my face.

There's anger, but surprisingly it's not taking over my senses. I suppose...I don't fucking know, but maybe I should've expected it. I know I never did, though now it sorta makes sense. 'Cause now I'm thinking...*well, what agent wouldn't try to bug me?*

That damn watch. It's on my nightstand in the bedroom right now. The only possession I had when I got outta prison.

Wait! "Is it still—" I shoot up, panic searing through me.

She smiles wryly and arches a brow. "After eight—almost nine years? Please. No, it's not still bugged, and no, there's no fucking GPS on it. We took care of all that while you were locked up." She waves a hand to the sliding doors. "Feel free to check."

Okay, when she puts it like that...

Sitting down again, I shoot her a glare and say, "You actually had me wired."

"Can you blame me?" She huffs a chuckle. "It was my job, Edward."

What-the-fuck-ever.

Jesus, she can be such a bitch and...then...fuck, she's still my baby—my Bella.

"Back to you being crazy," I mutter, twirling a finger. "What did you mean by that?"

She laughs, and it's fucking beautiful. "I'm not crazy, you asshole."

"Fine." I crack a grin and lean back against the cushions. "'Not right in the head,' then. Your words."

She shrugs and sighs, also leaning back. Our shoulders touch. "I don't know..." Another sigh; she looks contemplative. "My sister used to call me a chameleon—I roll with the punches. Adapting has always been easy for me, and..." She licks her lips. She's miles away, I can tell. "I use my surroundings and go with it. And it can mean two things: either my mind is very weak because I can't stick with who I am, or... Or, my mind is extremely strong because I can handle any kind of situation and setting and use it to my advantage. Like with you, for instance." Her head lolls to the side so she rests it on my shoulder. I like it. I like it a lot. "As soon as Emmett got me in, I was in. I didn't bat an eyelash when they told me I had to be a stripper. And when you came onto me...I didn't care. I didn't see it as an issue, I guess."

"Well, thanks," I drawl. "Glad I'm so irresistible."

"God." She lets out a giggle and smacks my chest. "Like you don't know the effect you have on women."

I wanna say I'm only interested in the effect I have on one woman, but I have a feeling she knows. Christ, how could she not?

"My point is," she murmurs, back to serious, "my mind adapted. The crimes, your lifestyle—I started accepting it. Not...*accepting* it, but...I knew it was suddenly a part of my life."

"That's pretty horrible," I comment quietly and start playing with her fingers on my chest. The pads still show evidence of her old hobby—bouldering. I remember when she told me about it, how she climbed without ropes and stuff. Just chalk and a fucking...what was it called? A crash mat or something. The skin on her fingers is smooth but slightly harder, thicker. On her knuckles, there are a few tiny cuts—scars from long ago.

"Yeah, so...maybe I'm not right in the head," she sighs.

I think she's right in the head, but that's just my opinion. I don't know, but Bella has this way of making sense. She's logical. Words spoken by her are easy to understand. There's no bullshit, no sugarcoating, and no crap about what's politically correct. She speaks, and I get it.

"How did you adapt on the island?" I ask, tracing the fingernail on her index finger with my thumb. "When we first got here, I mean."

"It wasn't about adapting here. It was about finding a way off it. Using a gun on you would never work." Her tone is matter-of-fact. "You'd rather die than lose me."

Yes.

I...I think so. Yeah. Yes.

Actually...it's not so much about living or dying. I don't really give a shit about what happens to me anymore, but it's my view on Bella that has altered in the past few months. She *has* to be alive.

The world is ugly without her.

"Mind games," she whispers, causing me to frown. "That was my weapon."

"What do you mean?"

She doesn't answer for a long time, but I don't push 'cause I can see she's building up to it. She's phrasing her words, choosing them carefully. See, I can read her, too. Definitely not always; she's too skilled. But I have my moments.

"When I realized how unstable you were, I began to mess with your head." Sitting up straighter, removing her hand from my chest, she reaches for her pop. "I made you doubt yourself." A small and bitter smile

tugs at the corners of her mouth. "Remember I said I'm far from innocent?" She faces me, looking apprehensive. I nod, confused. "I drugged you."

I stare at her, completely blank. I mean...drug...*drugged* me? Yeah, right.

As a smile slowly stretches over my lips, Bella kills it by saying, "I'm not lying, Edward." Not a single fucking trace of humor. "I mixed antidepressants and sleeping pills in your juice. I lied to you, played with your sense of reality, and tried to sway you. Or, at the very least, tried to get you to seek medical help."

My face suddenly feels drained of color. Hands clammy. The chill running down my spine feels like an icy rod. Mouth dry. Mind sluggish. A part of me wants to laugh. The other wants to cry.

"While you were out for the count, I searched for a way off the island," she goes on. "You didn't know what was up and what was down, but you still refused to give me anything I could actually use. I could make you believe the sky was purple, but I couldn't make you tell me where that goddamn chopper was."

I blanch, another tremor of panic jolting through me. Fuck. How does she know there's a chopper? I haven't said a fucking word!

"I assume it's a helicopter, anyway." She purses her lips. "Months ago, you told me you'd heard the sound of one, and... Fuck, at first I thought I might be rescued. I kept hoping—for days, I had an eye on the horizon, hoping. But then I got to thinking...it was all in your head." She cocks her head at me, a pensive expression on her face. "Like I've told you, the Edward Masen I know always has a backup plan, and...your greatest fear out here is that I'd leave you—that I'd find a way to escape. But, if there was no way off the island, you wouldn't have that worry. And it's not a boat; I've walked around the island several times."

"You...you drugged me," I rasp, unable to let go of that disturbing thought. It's all I can think about—I have her words on a loop in my head. She *drugged* me.

For the first time, I see how extremely powerful she is. And how vulnerable I am.

"By any means necessary," she hisses. The amber light of the fire reflects in her eyes. "You thought I'd sit here and accept that you uprooted my entire life and held me hostage?" Now she's seething, and I feel my own anger flare up. "I had to get back to—" She stops abruptly, eyes widening for only a second before a schooled expression takes over.

But I've had it with her vagueness. "Back to what?" I grit out. "Huh? Tell me, Bella—back to *what?*" What the fuck does she have in Chicago that's so goddamn important?

"Forget it," she snaps.

I laugh without mirth and shake my head. "Oh, no—nice try, honey. You've had no problems talking all night; go on. *Back. To. What?*"

She doesn't respond.

"Fuck!" I shout. Standing up, I leave the seating area and start pacing outside the sliding doors, near the porch steps. "You owe me this." I point to her, knowing I'm about to explode. "You say you've been fucking with my head—the least you can tell me is how. What have you told me? How have you lied? And what the hell is so important in the States?"

Her blank look is gone, but I can tell she's got no intention of telling me anything.

"How long did you drug me?" I ask impatiently.

"Months."

I nod. "What made you stop?"

"You refused to see a doctor. It made me realize that you didn't give two shits about yourself."

No shit. I stopped doing that long ago.

"But *I* do," she adds, sounding like she doesn't really like that.

Not for the first time, I don't blame her.

"I can't tell you why I need to go home," she says softly and walks toward me. As always, my eyes drink her in. The sun-kissed shoulders, the bikini and half-open cardigan she's wearing, her long legs, delectable curves, and...the swell of her belly.

Everything inside me hurts. There's an ache, a physical need. I miss her. I miss her so much that it's painful. And that can't be normal, can it? I mean, I'm supposed to stay mad at her now, right? Well...maybe I shouldn't.

Hell.

Standing right before me, she places a hand on my chest and peeks up at me.

I fucking melt.

My face nearly crumbles with the shit I hold bottled up inside me.

What were we talking about?

It's difficult to think when she's so close. And it's not my cock talking. Well, it's not only my cock, but...ah, fuck it. It's everything. I'm weak for this woman.

"Edward—" She swallows thickly, pain flitting over her features. When her eyes flick to my mouth, my resolve shatters, and I dip down and kiss her.

The whimper slash gasp she lets out gives away nothing but relief, though I can't see how that's possible. There's no way she can miss me as much as I miss her.

Her mouth is willing and hot; my tongue invades it with desperation lacing my every action, and she...she fucking mirrors my every move.

"Fuck, baby," I breathe out, scrunching my face together. The hollow ache in my chest eases for a brief moment. "Bella..." I palm her luscious ass and pull her close, groaning at the feel of her protruding stomach against my lower abdomen. *Our child.* "Christ."

"Please." She pulls me with her as she walks backward toward the seating area again. "Please." Opening my eyes, I see that hers are beseeching. Pleading, *begging.*

Never breaking the kiss, I lower her to the couch and press my weight on her as much as I dare. For a seven-months pregnant woman, she's far from huge, but she's filled out in all the right places, and my hands get greedy. After months of not daring to get too close, it feels like I'm about to combust.

"Are you doing this to distract me?" I pant, throwing my wife-beater to the side. Then I'm back hovering over her, kissing her, pawing at her.

"Is it working?" She throws her head back as I kiss her neck; at the same time, she pushes down my board shorts and boxers. "Oh, God." Fuck, she's wet. With a hand down her skimpy bikini bottoms, I finger her deeply, and I tell her yes, it's working. But then she moans, "I'm not tryin'a distract you. Oh please, don't stop—don't stop!" With shaky and frantic fingers, she tugs down her bottoms, and I slide them off when she

can't reach. And while I did that, she evidently pushed off her bikini top and cardigan, exposing her full tits. *Holy fuck*. She's...beyond sexy. Gorgeous, beautiful, stunning, you fucking name it. "I want you, Edward. Please. I—I miss you."

"I'm here," I murmur, meaning it more than ever. Because right now I feel like the man she fell for. The man I was those years ago in Chicago. The man she made me want to be. Doting, caring, protective. "I'm here, baby."

Her eyes are wide in wonder, peering into my...my black soul, I guess.

In one smooth thrust, I've replaced my fingers with my cock.

"Jesus." I drop my forehead to hers, in need of a moment. It's—it's overwhelming. "Bella..." Eyes squeezed shut, I shake my head infinitesimally—at myself, maybe. Yeah, 'cause the feelings rushing up to the surface, I don't want them right now. But there they are. Remorse, regret, sorrow. Our forever feels so limited all of a sudden.

"I love you," she whispers and cups my cheeks.

A low growl reverberates from my chest, and I begin to move in her. I keep it slow. Deep. Hitching her leg over my hip, I go even deeper. "I love you," I mumble into a kiss. "And I'm sorry." Pathetic. A sorry won't give me shit. But...she needs to know that I am sorry. Sorrier than she'll ever know. "I'm so fucking sorry, Isabella." I open my eyes, hoping she can see my sincerity.

"So am I."

No words about forgiveness. We're just sorry.

A selfish part of me wishes Bella had as much to be sorry for as I do. Perhaps that would've made us even. As it is, we will never be even. I will

always be the cold-blooded killer who kidnapped her—took her against her will, with violence and force, to a place she didn't want to be. With a man she doesn't want to be here with. And she will always be the woman who fought for justice before a sick fuck took her and forced her to fight for freedom.

"I'm sorry," I say again, though it comes out like a whimper.

"Stop, Edward," she whispers. "Whatever's going through your head, stop it."

"I'm weak," I chuckle darkly, compensating by thrusting harder. Her breathing hitches, and I start circling her clit with my thumb. If there's one thing I know, it's how to make Bella come hard.

"I'm your weakness." She moans and digs her fingernails into my back. When she throws her head back again, I move down and get reacquainted with her spectacular tits. I've missed them. "You're mine, too."

I didn't expect Bella to have a weakness, but I suppose loving me would be it.

You're twisting her words. That's not how she meant it.

Whatever.

Letting all that go for now, I slide home over and over and focus on Bella writhing in pleasure under me.

"Shit," she whimpers. "So good..."

Claiming her mouth again, I apply pressure to everything I do. My strokes into her pussy become longer and harder, my left hand teases her sensitive nipples, and my right stimulates her wet clit. It's nothing I can

sustain for a long time; I hold myself up on one elbow, and it makes my thighs throb. But...I can't stop. I need to be all over her.

"Goddamn," I groan. The sound of skin slapping and her soaked pussy causes my balls to tighten, my neck to stiffen, and my fucking toes to curl. Knowing I'm about to lose it, I blow out a breath of relief when I see that Bella's close, too. I nip at her lips, our foreheads still connected, and gaze into her darkened, lust-filled eyes. "Come," I breathe out. "I wanna feel you."

"Fuck!" she cries out.

Only a few seconds later, she clamps down on me, shuddering and moaning, and it pulls me with her. I grit out a curse, my cock pulsing in her slick pussy; I come so fucking hard.

"Jesus H," I pant, collapsing next to her.

Bella's breathless, too. "I needed that."

So did I.

~xXx~

Afterward, we lie there spent and sated. I've scooted down on the couch so I'm facing her stomach, and the baby's all I can think about. Having denied myself to get close for so long, it's beyond overwhelming to kiss, nuzzle, and touch. I feel tiny little kicks now and then, and Bella shakes with a silent giggle each time it happens. She's also playing with my hair, massaging my scalp, and just...fuck, I don't know, loving on me.

"You're so sure it's a girl," she muses.

I nod and kiss the spot under her belly button. "I can feel it in my gut. A baby girl who'll look like you." There are a few small stretch marks, and I

brush my lips over them, finding them incredibly meaningful. But as occupied as I am with them, I can't help but think back to the mark I found on her body long before she got pregnant. When we first got here...I was so sure I'd seen one. But Bella claimed she didn't know what I was talking about. Plus, at that point, I couldn't see the mark. And how do you just hide it? You can't, right?

With a quick shake of my head, I push away my paranoia.

I guess I read too much into things.

"I'm scared, Edward," she whispers after a moment. Craning my neck, I look up at her and frown in confusion. As far as I knew, Bella had no fears. Almost none, anyway. "Giving birth on the island," she elaborates.

Oh. I nod soberly, conflicted. Had this come up a few weeks ago, I would've smiled confidently, knowing it's gonna be all right. Now, though... No. It *is* gonna be all right. I can't allow myself to doubt my decision. Not now. Women have given birth this way for thousands of years—without doctors, without drugs. And we have drugs. We also have knowledge. Bella and I have both read the books. All of them. Home birth—we know what to do.

"Being scared is normal," I say, hoping I come off as strong as I want to feel. As I want to *be*. "We've got this, love." I nod to myself for good measure. "Everything will be fine. Trust me."

But that night, when Bella and I are wrapped around each other in our bed, I have the nightmare that catapults me into uncertainty about what to do.

"Bella," I choke out, wiping sweat off her forehead. A few minutes ago when her eyelids started fluttering shut, I abandoned my task, and now I'm desperate to make sure she stays awake. But I'm failing, I know it,

*and the sheets in our bed are too soaked with blood. Too much loss.
"Bella." Panic gripping my heart, I shake her shoulders. "Bella! Stay with me!"*

Her head lolls slowly from side to side.

All I hear is incoherent mumbling.

And a baby's wail.

After a sixteen-hour labor, Bella can't quit on me. Not now. She can't. I won't fucking allow it! "Baby—wake up." I shake her some more, my bloodied hands staining her shoulders and arms.

Our daughter cries, still attached to Bella through the umbilical cord.

There's so much blood.

Tears stream down my face, blending with the sweat of heat and anxiety.

"Don't leave me!" I beg frantically. I fuss over her, but I don't know what the fuck I'm doing. She's supposed to be breathing, but she's not. She's trying. Failing. It's faint, labored, raspy...weakening.

"Edw..." She suddenly coughs, and it's more blood.

The voice in my head tells me my number of sixty-four victims is about to get higher by one.

"No," I sob. Cupping her cheeks, I lean down, closer. "Breathe, dammit! Bella, breathe. Please!"

Another cough. Another trickle of blood seeping from the corner of her mouth. "Lo..." Her chest heaves; it looks like she's weighed down—as if someone's stomping on her ribcage. Pain is written all over her face, and she's trembling. "Love... Love her for me?"

"Stop," I cry. The raw terror is too much. Denial is easier. "Stay with me—you g-gotta see our baby girl." More sobs rip through me. "She'll look like you, honey." I nod and push a few sweat-drenched strands of hair from her face. "I'm sure of it. She will. She'll be as beautiful as her mommy, but..." I whimper. "You have to open your eyes for me. You have to breathe."

But she doesn't.

Her eyes don't open again, either.

Wrapping my arms around her still form, I crush her to my body and cry. I rock back and forth, crazed with horror and grief. Our baby screams, something the books told us is a sign of a healthy infant. But the sound is like a knife stabbing into my heart.

"I'm sorry! Bella, I—" I can't fucking breathe. "I'm so s-sorry. Oh, God..."

Sixty-five, sixty-five, sixty-five, sixty-five.

She's dead.

My own scream wakes me up.

The terror is like an iron fist squeezing the life out of me.

And the room is empty.

10

Chapter song – Don't Forget About Me by Emphatic

EPOV

Scrubbing both hands over my face, I wade through the knee-deep water, having hoped a swim in the ocean would've made me feel more alert and refreshed. Less...in need of serious sleep. But it didn't work, so I close in

on the shore, my swim trunks plastered to my legs. The sun is high in the sky; it's not as humid today, but it's hot as hell, and I'm glad Bella's safe in the shadows on the deck. There are several bottles of cold spring water and a battery-run fan, too.

I grab the towel I left in the sand and throw it over my shoulder, unable to deny that the deck has looked more perfect than it does now. Perfect for...a nap. There's a slight breeze from the fan, and Bella's seated in one of the couches with a bowl of fruit and more pregnancy books. She's only wearing white bikini bottoms and one of my t-shirts. It's loose on her upper body, allowing me to see one of her shoulders, almost golden with its tan. Slumping down on the empty couch, another wave of exhaustion hits me, but that's what I get for refusing to sleep for two days.

Two days. It's been two days since I woke up screaming, afraid I'd lost Bella in childbirth. Two days since terror gripped me like nothing else. Two days since an agony I've never felt before slammed into me.

I'm scared of sleep. And of not knowing where Bella is.

Whenever she's outta sight, I panic.

It's sick.

"Nice swim?" She gives me a faint smile.

Knowing what's troubling her, I leave my couch for hers instead and place my towel on my lap. "It was okay. Gimme your feet, honey." I'll do her lower back afterward. It's the least I can do, I guess. According to the books, swollen feet and back pain go hand in hand with pregnancy, but most say it usually comes closer to the end of the thirty-seven to forty weeks. And Bella's not even big. She's got a basketball belly and more curves, but she's still so...I don't know, on the slim side?

"Oh, that's so good." She lets out a little moan as I start rubbing her feet. But instead of lying back and simply enjoying it, she returns to her book, eyes more intent than ever.

"You've already read that, haven't you?" I ask.

She nods, brow furrowed. She doesn't look up from the pages. "I need to read it again." I can tell she's really into the book, concentrating and focused. "I mean, last time..." she mumbles and flips a page, "...with all the complications, and..." I frown at that. Last time? "I've been having some dizzy spells."

Whoa. I sit up straighter. "What?" That iron fist of fear around my heart makes itself known by tightening. "Dizzy spells?"

Another nod from her, this one smaller, and I see a brief flash of fear in her eyes. "Headaches, too. I'm watching what I eat, and I take all the vitamins, but I'm still afraid I don't get enough iron."

Oh, *God*. "Um, well, what does that mean?" I swallow my heart.

"There's anemia," she explains. "Iron deficiency is fairly common when you're pregnant, but if you become anemic, it could get ugly. It could also lead to hypoxia—lack of oxygen in your body, and..." She winces. "The baby could get it, too. It's..." She sighs and closes the book. "I'm not a doctor, and it's not like there's anyone around to ask." *Ouch*. "From what I've read, it's all connected to how the baby's lungs develop in the final stages of the pregnancy. Oxygen is vital—goes without saying." Tossing the book on the floor, she slumps back against the armrest of the couch and throws an arm over her face. "Fucking piece-of-shit island," she mutters.

"I'm sorry," I rasp. Not knowing if she still wants my touch, my arms go slack; hell, I'm afraid to move a fucking inch. Jesus, what kind of monster am I?

"Not sorry enough," she replies flatly.

I nod and look down at my lap. She's right.

She sounds like that voice in my head. It's often telling me I'm not sorry enough.

"You know what, Edward?" She sits up again, anger flaring in her eyes. "I don't care about the shit between you and me anymore—we've both fucked up royally. We've made mistakes and we've done really horrible things to each other, but..." Her jaw ticks with tension, and her hands are balled into tight fists on her thighs. "This is our baby," she grits out imploringly. "An innocent fucking *child*." Tears of fury well up in her eyes.

I felt like scum when I ratted out my entire organization, but it has *nothing* on how I feel now.

"I'm sorry—"

"Stop saying that!" she screams.

My eyes widen in shock.

"God, just—" She stops, perhaps too angry to go on. Then she pushes herself off the couch. "It's impossible to talk to you. You don't care enough."

"Where are you going?" I hear the worry, the neediness, the panic in my voice. But I don't care. She's walking away from me, toward the doors, and I don't fucking like it.

"To the spring for some cold water—don't follow me," she spits out, and then she's gone.

~xXx~

Later that evening, we sit in uncomfortable silence as we eat dinner, and when we're done, Bella goes to bed without a word.

I sit in the chair on her side of the bed, a book with baby names in my lap. Some of them call out to me with their meanings; I circle them with a pen. Some are plain awful. Some are cute. Some are okay. But not a single one of them holds my attention for long.

It's not my intention to fall asleep, but...

Bracing myself for another nightmare, I turn around and expect to see the same interrogation room I'm always in when I dream. But I'm not there. For once. Instead I'm on the island—the beach, to be precise. And I'm not alone. Farther down the beach, I see Bella—no, wait. I frown, my legs carrying me closer of their own volition.

A young woman walks along the shore, the calm waves chasing her feet and her long hair blowing in the wind. She looks...lost. Even with her back to me, it looks like she's searching for something. And not some object she's lost, but something else.

As I walk closer, I automatically take in my surroundings. I expect to see the house, and I do, but...it looks different. Decayed. Old. In serious need of restoration. One window is cracked. The white paint has peeled off in places. Weeds grow wildly between the floorboards on the deck.

It's eerie.

The sun isn't out. Rain clouds are forming on the horizon, big, ominous, and dark.

The calm before the storm.

About ten feet before I reach the woman, she turns around and smiles sadly at me.

I freeze. Even my heart stops. I pale.

"Hey, Dad," she says softly.

"No," I choke out, pressing my fist to my mouth. It can't be, but it is. God, it is. Emotions well up inside me, and there's no hiding it. It's her, and she's so beautiful. "Oh, Christ." She looks like Bella. She's...maybe fifteen or sixteen, a father's nightmare with her mother's looks. All but the eyes. Big green eyes peer up at me, but the rest...

"I miss you." The sadness in her voice, eyes, and smile slay me. "I miss you both."

"What—" I don't even know what to say.

"Wanna take a walk with me?" She tilts her head. "Like old times?"

Old times...?

Not saying anything, 'cause I fucking can't, I merely nod and walk beside her.

I can't take my eyes off of her.

"What's your name?" I suddenly blurt out. Feeling awkward, I stick my hands into the pockets of my basketball shorts. While she's beautiful in a white cotton dress, I'm wearing ragged shorts and a holey t-shirt. What the fuck?

"You named me Nova." She gives me a sideways grin. A dimple appears; I have one, too. Bella says it's there when I smile. "It means new

beginnings, and you wanted me to be yours. Your and Mom's—here on the island."

Nova. I smile tentatively. "It's gorgeous." New beginnings—I like that, and I tell her as much.

She nods pensively, lips pursed, and eyes trained ahead of us. "But what about me, Dad?"

Stunned, I watch as she transforms before my eyes. Gone is the teenager, and instead I find myself standing next to a girl who can't be more than seven years old.

"Oh," I exhale shakily.

Tears blur my vision, and I blink; she's so adorable, this little girl.

"What about me, Daddy?" she asks again, and now the voice belongs to a child. When she gazes up at me, all I see is sorrow. "I'm all alone."

Instinct taking over, I kneel down before her and grasp her hands in mine. "Mommy and I would never leave you. We love you." Fuck me, I can't believe this. She's really here. My daughter. Our daughter. Forcing back a sob, I quickly look around me, wanting Bella to be here—to see our girl. Nova.

But when I look back, the little girl is gone. However, the teenage version has reappeared, and my joy has returned before it could really vanish.

"You did leave me, though." She eyes me as I stand up. Her voice is gentle, but I see hurt in her features. Someone's hurt her. And as we start walking again, the realization hits me like a wrecking ball. I hurt her. Somehow, I hurt her. "I feel condemned, Dad. This island...it's all I've known, and when you and Mom died..."

"What?" I stop short and place a hand on her arm. "I'm right here, sweetheart. I'm not dead."

She shrugs. "This is a dream. But it could be reality, you know." There's wisdom in her voice; she sounds like Bella. "You and Mom won't live forever. And then what?" She cocks her head at me. "What will I have left? Who will I have?"

Oh...

"Am I destined to live here on my own?" she asks softly. "You say you love Mom and me, but..."

"I do!" It pains me that she'd ever doubt that. "You and Bella are everything to me."

"What about our happiness?"

I don't respond; how can I? There's nothing to say.

"I don't want Bella to leave me," I admit.

It's my greatest fear—that she'll leave and forget about me.

I don't want to be alone.

Like your daughter will be?

Oh, fuck.

"Maybe you should have more faith in her than that."

The corners of my mouth quirk up in a smile, but there's no humor. If anything, it's defeat. There's no winning this. "We've hurt each other too much," I say quietly, looking down at the white sand. "How can I trust her? How can she trust me?" It's impossible. "I trusted her once..." And

look how that turned out. She wasn't Bella Crowley. She was Agent Isabella Swan.

"Betrayal of the heart." My daughter nods. "I can only imagine how that must've hurt. Not that you were forthcoming, either." She shoots me a wry look. "You weren't honest from the beginning, Dad—just like she wasn't."

"You don't speak of the mob," is my automatic response.

"Federal agents don't speak of missions," is hers.

Fuck me. She's too smart.

"You sound like your mother," I murmur.

Now there's pride in her expression. "And you love that, don't you?" It's a genuine question.

"Of course I do." I couldn't be more honest.

"What does that tell you?" She stares at me with those wise eyes. "You can't stop talking about it. You want me to be exactly like Mom. Doesn't that tell you something?"

My brows knit together as I ponder that, and I have a feeling a point is about to be made.

"You love Mom the way she is, Dad," she whispers. "You don't want her to change. You don't want a docile shell. You want the fighter you fell for. You need someone who can call you on your bullshit—someone who can ground you, give you stability, and..." She sighs and shakes her head.

Blowing out a breath, I peer up at the grey sky, understanding that this girl isn't so much my daughter as she is my conscience. But what shape

could be more convincing than my baby girl's? And that shocks me a little, because...because that means my daughter is more important than Bella.

I remember Bella saying that, actually.

The love you feel for your child is the strongest. It's a bond you can't break. At least it's supposed to be that way. It sure wasn't for my father, which Bella knows, and she's talked about that, too. She's called my father a lotta shit, and I guess she couldn't be more right.

"I have to let you go, don't I?" I look back to Nova, feeling my heart shatter into a million pieces. "I have to let Bella leave this place."

The apparition of our daughter resembles Bella so much, and she doesn't say a word, though her eyes tell it all.

I sniffle and chuckle without humor, despising myself. "Why can't I be enough for her? For both of you."

"Are Mom and I enough for you?"

"Yes." I answer without hesitation. "As long as you and your mother are safe, I'm satisfied. It's all I want. I need you to be happ—" The rest of that word dies, and my eyes widen at what I was about to say.

Nova smiles gently; it's a little lopsided. That dimple is there. And her eyes are shining.

Point well made.

"You want our happiness?" she inquires with a knowing grin.

I nod, ashamed I haven't been smart enough to figure that out until now. I literally feel like an idiot.

"Maybe Mom and I want that for you, too." She pauses. "And maybe what the island has to offer isn't enough for that. Don't you see, Dad? It's not that you aren't enough. It's this place. We can't have what we want or need here."

"But if—when..." I take a breath. "When I let Bella go, I will lose her."

"You sure about that?"

"Yeah." Definitely. There's no way Bella could want me. Here, she doesn't have a choice, but if given one... Yeah, no, she's outta here.

"And you're still willing to let her go? Even though you'll lose her, you'll let her go?"

My lungs constrict. The next breath hurts and comes out labored. "I don't have a choice." My knees nearly buckle. The pain intensifies.

"You do, actually." She hugs herself and smiles sadly. "You can keep her here until the day you die."

But that thought suddenly disgusts me. Revulsion jolts through me, bringing nausea with it.

And the nausea is still there when I wake up drenched in my own sweat.

It's also there as I frantically begin to pack a bag for Bella.

She's asleep, so she can't see my tears, hear my ugly, un-fucking-manly sobs, or wonder what it is I'm doing.

She'll know soon enough.

As I walk to the hidden stash I have behind the house, I think about everything I'm losing. *The birth of my child.* I grab one of the handguns and shove it into the duffel. *There will be no more memories.* I also pack

the three wads of cash I have; there's approximately seven grand. It'll be more than enough to get her home safe and sound. *I won't hear her laugh again.* Though, I'm comforted by the knowledge that once she's home, she'll laugh for someone else. With someone else. Okay, not comforted by the knowledge, but...it's what she deserves. *Happiness.* Before burying the metal box in the soil again, I grab the fake passport I have for Bella. Then I head back inside and up to the second floor where we rarely go. *I won't make love to her again.* In one of the rooms, I go to the armoire and locate some of the baby clothes I ordered before we came here. Just in case. Diapers, a pacifier, and a bottle. *I'll miss Nova's first steps—*

I shake my head. I really am crazy. Who knows—maybe we'll have a boy. I can't see the future, for fuck's sake. Or maybe we'll have girl and Bella will name her after someone in her life—back in Chicago.

After wiping my eyes, I pack some clothes for Bella, too.

In the kitchen, I get whatever she might need in the next couple of hours: her vitamins, bottles of water, painkillers, a few candy bars, and some fruit.

That done, I head outside and leave the almost-full duffle on the deck before I count my steps with precision in order to reach a particular spot in the sand.

In my periphery, I see that Bella's up. She appears from the house, rubbing her eyes, and frowns in confusion.

"What are you doing?" she calls sleepily.

I want to tell her that I'm letting her go, but the words get stuck in my throat. The pain is unlike anything I've ever felt, searing through me like wildfire.

All I can think is...*I'm losing her. I'm losing her. I'm losing her.*

Sweat trickling down, mixing with the godforsaken tears, I dig until I find the last supply I need. Another metal box. Inside it, there are four items: the keys to the chopper, a map with our coordinates, spare batteries for the comm. device that's hidden in a security box between the seats in the chopper, and...the last thing. A map with the helicopter's exact location on the other side of the island. Once she's there, she'll also find all the manuals and instructions she could ever need to fly it.

I know she won't need them, though.

"Edward!" she calls again.

My hands shake as I stand up.

I prepare myself to give her the escape she so desperately wants.

With dread creeping up my spine, I walk back to the deck and silently dump the box next to the packed duffle on the couch.

She eyes it all, trepidation and speculation evident in her gaze. She's too smart to ask, "What's this?" She knows. She knows exactly. And the second it dawns on her, she swallows and faces me.

"I—I won't stop you." I fold my arms over my chest and avert my eyes, trying to get my breathing right. *I'm losing her. I'm losing her.* "I should've run with you." Clearing my throat, I turn to her again. "I should've run." When Bella's bottom lip quivers, I gotta collect myself for the millionth time. "And I'm..." I grind my teeth together and wish I had the right words. Words that were adequate to describe the guilt...how much I regret this... "I'm so sorry, Bella—" Fuck. I refuse to break down now. She doesn't need my shit. All she needs is her freedom. "I'm sorry I failed you, and...that I loved you the wrong way."

"You're letting me go," she states in a whimper. I nod with a dip of my chin, then tilt my head and wipe my cheek on the sleeve of my t-shirt. "I don't—I mean...what about you? You're s-staying here?"

"Yeah." Not wanting to prolong this, drag it out, I borrow the words Bella used in my nightmare a couple nights ago. "Love her for me?" I croak out, swallowing a sob.

Her jaw tenses as tears spill over and roll down her cheeks. "I wanted to say goodbye to the insane man who kidnapped me," she whispers fiercely. Eyes full of fire. "Not the man who I actually love."

I squeeze my eyes shut, sure I've never felt this level of heartbreak before.

I'm losing her.

"You're really gonna stay here?"

"Yes." I grit my teeth and nod with a quick jerk of my head. There's no way I'll get off this island. There's nothing out there for me, anyway. I'm a fucking monster; I belong here.

"Edward..." Her voice cracks.

Looking down, I force out the next words. "Run, Bella. Before I lose it again." My throat feels too thick. "I'm sure it's only a matter of time."

She hesitates, and it's the last thing I need. The agony is already tearing me to shreds, but I gotta be alone before I let go.

So, I take a deep, shaky breath and remind her of what she's got back in Chicago. "Go back to your home—to your job, to the life I took from you." I have to stop, then I choke out the rest of the words in a strained whisper. "To...to your family."

That does it.

She picks up the duffle bag and the box.

In a second pause, I can see that she's about to hug me, kiss me, what-the-fuck-ever, but I can't take it. I shake my head and step backward, unable to face her.

"Run."

She obeys.

And while every fiber of my being screams at me to go after her, I stand rooted in place. Hands balled into fists. Breathing choppy and strained. More goddamn tears.

I'm losing her.

Several minutes go by, and I don't move an inch. Not a fucking inch. If I did, I would slip, and I would stalk her like prey. Like I did a year ago before I kidnapped her.

I know it takes a couple hours to circle the island, and to occupy my time, I try to calculate how long it'll take Bella to cross it. She's done it before, and she's fit. She's a fighter and a survivor. But she's also seven months pregnant.

With a shuddering breath, I take a single step toward the porch steps. Then another. And another. My legs feel like they are weighed down with heavy shackles. Defeat consumes me. That, and guilt. It's physically draining. And by the time I collapse down on the beach, it feels like I've run ten miles.

I don't know how long I sit there in the sand. Arms resting on my knees. Facing the horizon. Memories flashing before my eyes. But it's gotta be a while, 'cause the next thing I hear is the distinct sound of a helicopter.

Peering behind me, over my shoulder, I watch with nausea churning in my gut as the chopper appears over a tree-covered hill in the jungle. Even if I can't see her in it, I can see that she handles the helicopter expertly. She's done that before. It shows. And as she makes a sharp turn to reach the ocean, the chopper tilting heavily, I break at the thought of never seeing her again. I don't imagine she's even giving the island a backward glance. Instead she flies speedily near the surface, toward freedom, away from me.

Too soon, I can't hear the sound of the blades anymore.

Next she's outta my view as well.

I lost her.

And the voice in my head whispers something new.

Now you're sorry enough.

11

Chapter song – Cover Your Tracks by A Boy and His Kite

BPOV

"Here you go, Ms. Swan," one of the officers says, handing me the bottle.

With a nod in thanks, I twist off the cap and chase down two iron pills with some water. Then I'm back to pacing. They graciously offered me some privacy here in the private lounge at LAX so that I wouldn't have to deal with the reporters just yet. And for that I'm thankful. The media is the last thing on my mind.

Another officer comes in and tells me that Agent McCarty and Riley have arrived at the airport and are on their way to me.

Thank God.

"Anything else I can get you?" he asks politely. And like all the other helpful officers, there's pity and concern in his eyes.

I don't want any of it.

"I'm fine, thanks." I offer a tight-lipped smile and wince when the baby kicks at my ribs. It doesn't help that my back is killing me. *Holy mother of fff...uck.* Another wince. "Good thing Mommy loves you, honey," I murmur and rub my belly.

I'm not out of the woods yet, but I hope to be soon. Last time I was pregnant, I lost our child in week thirty, and it almost killed me. Losing another baby would be the end for sure. So, the hospital is next. The officers who have been escorting me to the States wanted me to seek medical help on the island of Matak, where they met up with me, but I was too eager to reach the mainland—any fucking mainland, really.

And now I gotta see Riley before anything else. I'm *aching*, for chrissake.

They can bring me to the hospital for whatever tests they want, look for tropical diseases and shit, but not before I've been reunited with Riley.

In Hong Kong, they did take blood samples and gave me a standard check-up, mostly because of the baby, but I know the regulations here in the States are stricter. Thankfully, seeing as I showed no signs of illness, they're allowing me to see Emmett and Riley right away.

If only they'd get here. Like right now.

It's been a wish—this reunion—for almost a year, and for the past two and a half days, it's been a helluva wait for it to come true. There've been phone calls since Matak, obviously, but that's not enough. Now that I'm free, I guess I'm greedy.

I can't wait to see Mom, either.

Running a hand through my hair, I blow out a breath, feeling a headache settling in. A shower would be nice, but there will be time for that later. I showered before we boarded the plane to LA, and...my God, it was the first real shower I'd had in a year. I'm sick of baths. *Sick* of them.

"Ms. Swan, perhaps you should sit down," Officer Littlesea suggests.

I shake my head; all I can do is pace. The room is small—only a coffee table, two couches, and a small desk with a chair—and I hope the two officers leave when Emmett and Riley get here. *God, Riley*. My eyes sting, but it feels like I'm fresh out of tears.

I've been sobbing since I lost sight of the island. Consumed by overwhelming relief and heartache, all rolled into one.

The sleeves of the hooded sweatshirt they gave me at the US Consulate in Hong Kong, where we middle-landed, are still damp from my last round of crying. And the pockets of my too-big sweatpants hold more than a few tissues.

I could've dressed in something other than these sweats, but...I couldn't part with them. As soon as they'd been washed, I was back in them. They're Edward's.

Stupid fool.

He thinks he can just stay on that island?

We'll see about that.

A sudden commotion halts my pacing, and I spin toward the door, willing it to open. Come on. Come on. *Please*. I've been so worried. I suppose it's a good thing I didn't know about the danger, though. That would've surely made me lose it. I almost did lose it when Emmett told me about it over the phone. But I have a plan. It's all going to work out.

Then, at fucking last, the door is pushed open and I see Riley for the first time in a year.

"Baby," I whimper.

"Mommy!" she sobs, running toward me.

"Oh, God." I choke up completely and fall to my knees just as she reaches me. "Oh, baby." I crush her to me and bury my face in her dark hair. I've missed so much. So, so much. "I love you," I cry. "I love you, I love you, I love you."

"Mommy..." She cries harder, her little hands locked behind my neck. "You were gone—I didn't see you, Mommy!"

"I'm here now, Riley." I cup her face and smile through my endless tears. God, she's beautiful. But I've missed too much; she's not six years old anymore, and... "So perfect," I blubber. Her hair is long and has lost some of its curls; she's also lost some of the softness in her cheeks. Less baby, more girl. Her crystal blue eyes are full of unshed tears. "Mommy missed you so much." Breaking down again, I hug her to me. "I'm never letting you go now."

"Promise," she sobs and trembles in my arms.

"I promise." I swallow hard and look up: Emmett. He smiles, but his eyes are red and brimming with tears. Waving him over, he kneels next to Riley and wraps his arms around both of us.

"Christ—I missed you, honey." He breathes me in and tightens his hold. "I can't believe you're here."

"I missed you, too." I whimper, torn between spewing out all my questions now or waiting for later. Since it's an urgent matter, I didn't waste time forming a plan earlier, so that means we've already talked a lot over the past two days, but I need to be reassured.

I need to know about Carlisle.

"You have a lot to explain, Bella." Emmett rests a hand on my belly and kisses me on the forehead.

And I know I have a lot to explain. That I'm pregnant isn't a secret, but I haven't confirmed anything regarding Edward or the exact location of the island. If I did, the authorities would head out there immediately and arrest him, and we can't have that. No way. I'm not done with that man.

"Uncle Em, you're crushing me," Riley mumbles, pushing at him. "Away, away." Emmett and I chuckle tearfully, and he backs away a little but keeps an arm around me. "Mommy, you not going away again, are you?"

That sobers me. "Never," I vow and kiss her cheeks. "We are going away together, though." That was a whisper, not for the officers' ears. "But I swear I won't ever leave you alone." I've already explained to her that I would never leave voluntarily, and Emmett and my mom have told her the same thing. Riley knows, but I'm more than happy to tell her again and again and again.

~xXx~

About two hours later, I'm in a hospital bed, and Riley's asleep in my arms while Emmett and I speak quietly to each other about my plans.

"Mom suggested Argentina," I whisper. "Did you look that up?"

He nods and leans forward on his knees. "It's not foolproof, 'cause there is a treaty with the States. But some sources say they probably won't extradite you if you renounce your US citizenship."

I grimace. "I won't hold my breath on 'probably.' I need certainty."

"And you're not gonna tell me why?" While his voice is soft, there's no missing the frustration. "You can trust me, honey."

Usually, that's the case. But not when it comes to Edward. Emmett despises Edward, and I can't blame him. I'm not blaming either of them. It is what it is.

Everyone suspects that Edward's the one who kidnapped me, but they need me to confirm it, which I haven't. And I won't.

"I'm sorry," is all I can say.

He sighs and mutters a "Fine," and then he moves on. "The list of countries without an extradition treaty with the States is pretty long. Most of those nations are in Asia and Africa." I knew that much already, but I'm not interested in Asia. I've had enough of it. "Indonesia's safe—"

"Not that one," I say quickly, but I'm relieved to hear this information. According to Edward's maps, his island belongs to Indonesia, and if they don't have a treaty with the States, that's good. It means they can't touch him. He's safe there, but not from himself.

Puffing out his cheeks, Em thinks for a minute. "Cuba? There's a treaty, but the diplomatic relations are shaky."

Better, but... "I'd like to avoid the treaty, as well."

"Of course, yet you won't tell me why." The frustration is back. "Sweetie, I don't get you. You haven't committed a crime; you don't need to hide from the US government. You only wanna get away from Carlisle. And we're looking for him—"

"You won't find him." I'm sure of it. "You say it's not necessary, and I understand: you've kept Riley safe for two months now, but it's only a matter of time. I can feel it."

When I first made the call, as soon as I'd reached Matak, I pushed past pleasantries with Emmett, desperate to soak up anything he'd tell me about my daughter. And that was when he admitted there had been a prison break and that Carlisle had successfully escaped.

He's after Riley—a fact he's been honest about since she was born seven years ago.

She's mine legally; I started the adoption process right after Esme was buried. It was what she'd asked for in her note, and it was what I wanted, too. I never expected to befriend her, especially not when she was dancing at Carlisle's club, but we became great friends, and even more so when the Masen case was closed.

Carlisle has no claim on Riley whatsoever—he's not even the biological father. But after hearing what happened to Esme, he wants Riley for whatever reason, and I say over my dead body.

Seeing as he's not a man who'd take legal measures, I have to keep Riley safe. It's not that I don't trust the Bureau—I do—but I'm done here anyway. My old life doesn't call to me anymore.

"Is there anything in Europe?" I ask.

Emmett dutifully lists a few countries that have no treaties with the States, and although they maintain diplomatic relations, one country stands out to me as very appealing. It's small and often overlooked. But I don't want Emmett to know details, so I continue asking about Africa, showing interest in some of the geographically larger countries in which a fugitive could hide.

"How will you fund all this?" he wonders when conversation has idled for a while.

I shrug. "I have money saved up." It's only a half-lie. I have a few thousand, but that won't be enough. However, I happen to know one of Edward's hiding spots. I made a copy of the key back when he was arrested, and I've already sent Mom there to make sure there's still money, and there is. She's the only one I can trust with the truth, the only one who I know can support me fully and understand. Because at one point, she fell in love with a man in the mafia, too. Granted, my dad wasn't a made man; he was low in rank, but that doesn't matter. She fell for him, and she got lucky. Dad changed his ways early. Loving Mom changed him, and he left that life behind him in New York.

He became a federal agent.

And when Ed Masen murdered him in cold blood, I vowed to myself to get revenge. Little did I know that I'd both gain and lose more than I thought was possible. But I'll make sure it's all been worth it.

"You gonna tell me about the baby?" he asks next.

"I can tell you anything you want about the baby," I say, "but I won't tell you about the father. Sorry."

"Please." He rolls his eyes. "You can pretend all you want, but we both know it was Masen who took you. He's the father. Just like he was last time."

Ouch. Being reminded of the baby I lost... "Thanks for that, Em," I reply sarcastically.

I was terrified when I found out I was pregnant the first time—just a few days after Edward was arrested, actually—and I stalled when it came to telling him. His trial lasted for months and it was so intense, and I already felt sick with worry and regret. I should've come clean about who I was sooner; maybe that would've changed his mind when I told him we could run away together. Alas, I dumped it on him the night the Feds stormed that warehouse.

The pregnancy was difficult from start, though, so I promised myself to tell Edward as soon as the baby was born instead. But that didn't happen, and he rejected the letters I sent him afterward. I lost our baby—a son. I was anemic, and the baby's organs didn't develop as they should've.

And then I took a desk job at the Bureau, having lost some of my passion. I'm an excellent profiler, and I don't see the field as much. Instead I work closely with examiners and lab workers to puzzle together pieces in various cases. They find evidence; I help with reason and motive.

Work... Make that "*worked*." It's not my life anymore.

"I'm sorry." Em sighs and averts his eyes for a beat. "It's just hard. You've been gone for a year, Bella. We feared—" He stops, and we both flinch at the end of that unspoken sentence. There've been times when I feared I'd die, too. Not necessarily at Edward's hand, but of going crazy or surrendering. "Now you're back..." His eyes well up. "You're back and you're already planning to leave."

A pang of guilt jolts through me; I fucking hate this. I wish I could trust him. He's such a good man—one of my best friends. He was also my brother-in-law once. Two years after the Masen case was closed, he went with me to visit Mom and my sister in Baltimore, and he fell head over heels. So did Kate, my sister. They were married after a year, but then she died in a motorcycle accident a few months later.

Since then, it's basically been Emmett and me, two people missing the ones we love. Coming from an abusive home, he left his family and started at the FBI after a stint in the army, so it's not like he has many to turn to. He's close to my mom, and I'm willing to bet they grew even closer when I disappeared, but she's in Baltimore and he lives in Chicago...

Sitting next to me now, he doesn't look like the ever-social Emmett I know. Always boastful and cheery. Now...now he looks tired. His age shows; actually, he appears older than his thirty-seven years.

I bet I look older than my own thirty-four, too. Time didn't really exist on the island, so I wasn't sure if I'd already turned. That means Edward will turn thirty-six soon.

Looking back on it now, the Bella I was when I first went undercover... Twenty-five and so eager. I had one goal and that was justice. But then I fell hard and fast for Edward, and we had a year together. Then came the trial, months of gut-churning pain where I hid my pregnancy, and... Next, a little over seven years of both heaven and hell while Edward served his sentence. Justice was mine; Riley also came along, giving me a new sense of purpose. But I could never really let go of Edward, and, evidently, he couldn't let go of me, either. Once he was released, he stalked me for a few months before kidnapping me to the island. And now, another year later, here we are. It's surreal, especially when you list it off like that.

"You should get some sleep, honey." Emmett pats my hand and clears his throat. "Renee will be here tomorrow morning."

"What's your plan?" I blurt out, not wanting him to leave. I also want to trust him. He's essentially family, and he's been taking care of Riley for the past year. Back when Edward left prison, Emmett was also the one who took care of Riley. She lived with him for several months, and I only saw her when I stopped by for breakfast and then after preschool. But everyone around me thought it was for the best. Mainly because Edward had just been released—and some thought he posed a threat; smart people—but also because Carlisle had attempted to break out. We took precautions. For that, I'm obviously grateful, but I wish I'd been strong enough to defend myself, too—not only Riley.

Truth be told, I was expecting one of Carlisle's goons to seek me out. Not Edward. Okay, a big part of me did expect him to contact me, but to actually *kidnap* me? Christ, no.

Anyway...

I'd be a heartless bitch to Em if I didn't offer more of me. But I need a bit of time to see if I can trust him or not. "Are you going back to Chicago? You're still with the Bureau, I know that. But..."

He shrugs and leans back in his chair. "What else is there? Yeah, I'll return to Chicago, I guess."

"Do you *want* to?" I ask imploringly.

He stares at me, brows furrowed, and I can see that he knows what I'm asking.

~xXx~

Seeing my mom again is almost as emotional as it was to be reunited with Riley. We're all in tears here in my hospital room, and the three of us—Mom, Riley, and me—spend an hour or two hugging and telling each other repeatedly how we missed each other.

Mom calls me crazy one second for falling for that "son of a bitch," but then she blubbers about how she gets it and that "love is an effing hag sometimes." Lastly, she settles on, "You say he's got a heart; I need to see it for myself first. God, my baby girl." She crushes me in another hug.

I know Edward has a heart. The greatest. That's why I'm so in love with him, and if that makes me crazy, then so fucking be it. We've both hurt each other, but I hope we can start over. And not on the island. As much as I love that man, I won't ever pick him over my own child. Children, soon. I get that he's insecure, though I'm willing to work on that. He doesn't have to lose me—I don't want that—but I need at least a sliver of civilization. Hospitals, running water, people to talk to...and most of all, my family.

Edward will be a part of that family—if he chooses to. He's never had a real family before, 'cause I sure as hell don't count his parents and sister. Ed Sr. is the devil—may he burn in hell; well, behind bars—Liz is a doormat, and Rose is too self-centered to give a shit.

~xXx~

"So, you've really decided?" Mom asks gently.

I nod and pull the blanket up to Riley's chin. How she can sleep in these hospital beds, I don't know. I find them uncomfortable. "I've pulled all strings, called in all favors..." I sigh and fluff my pillow before leaning back. "It's all being taken care of as we speak."

"And you think Edward will come?" She looks doubtful. I have doubts, too, but I gotta try. "If he doesn't..."

I smile wryly. "I can always kidnap him." It's mostly a joke.

Mom doesn't see the humor. "He's a murderer," she reminds me, a tinge of desperation in her voice. She understands, but she wishes she didn't.

She can see it from my perspective, but it's going to take a long time for her to warm up to Edward. Not that I blame her. And that's what it all comes down to: blame. I'm sick of it. There's a lot of blame on all our shoulders, but I simply don't give a shit anymore.

"You can't help who you fall for," I reply with a small shrug. "I don't expect you to get why I can trust him, and...well, a part of me doesn't. But I do when it comes to my safety." He proved that by letting me go. His conscience won and that's all I need. Then, I mean...yeah, we're talking major trust issues. There's his temper and his way of telling himself that things are fine when they aren't. And he believes it. But this time I'll be able to defend myself. I won't put myself in certain situations, and...I hope the rest will come with time. Exactly like I hope Edward can grow to trust me again, too.

I'm willing to try.

"Can you trust him with your children?" she asks, grasping at straws. Or maybe not grasping, but she wants to make sure I've thought this through.

"Definitely." I nod firmly. The final months on the island proved how much Edward cares for our son or daughter. In the end, I'm sure that's why he let me go. He'll protect our baby—I'm positive. As for Riley...

"What was that look?" She narrows her eyes at me.

My mom can read me—there's no denying that.

"He doesn't know about Riley," I admit.

Her eyebrows rise in surprise. "What? You spent a year on some island with this man and you never told him about your daughter?"

I shake my head minutely. "I was afraid he'd do something." In the beginning, the main reason I didn't tell him was because he was unstable, volatile, and unpredictable. But then...he wanted me to love the island so much, and I was afraid he'd do something drastic—like bringing Riley to me. And as much as I love her, I didn't want her in that place. Plus, I had no idea who Edward would call for such a favor. He doesn't have many people loyal to him after ratting out the Masen organization—which presented the first problem: what if he thought there was someone he could trust who then ended up being on Carlisle's payroll? No matter how hard the authorities try, criminals will continue to run their shit, regardless of being in prison or not. And second...what if Edward decided to leave me behind and retrieve Riley himself? More correctly: what if he got caught on the way? Yeah, no...too many ifs. It was a risk I wasn't willing to take.

"But you don't have that fear now?" she asks.

"No," I say honestly. I saw a big change in Edward, starting when I got pregnant, and the man I fell in love with made more and more appearances. The crazed monster disappeared long ago, but his insecurities made sure he didn't budge when I begged to go home.

Now he doesn't see himself as worthy, but that's debatable. He stayed behind because he sees himself as the savage he was when he kidnapped me. But he's not that man now—I know that.

Had I not been worried sick about the baby's health and vitals, maybe I would've tried to convince him to come with me. I'm not sure. The love for my children comes first—simple as that. And at that point, when I saw the keys to the chopper, all I could think about were Riley and the little one in my belly.

In retrospect...I should've told him this wasn't the end, but... I'm not infallible or perfect. It was a split-second move—to run, and run fast. It'd

been a year on that fucking island; I wasn't going to throw away my one chance to leave.

However, another part of me thinks this is good. Because if he'd come with me, the risk of his getting arrested would've been greater. And it wouldn't've given me this time to come up with a plan for the future I'm hoping for.

"You look tired, baby." Mom smiles a small one and squeezes my hand.

I chuckle wryly. "I'm exhausted." But I can't sleep. Despite the two agents assigned to wait outside my room, I'm still afraid something's gonna happen. The logical thinker in me says I'm safe—that Carlisle wouldn't make a move with not only agents near but also the media—though, what parent is logical when it comes to possible danger for their child?

Speaking of the media...they obviously want to hear from the woman who was abducted a year ago, but I'm not gonna give them shit. If all goes according to plan, I'm leaving the States soon.

"Mommy..." Riley blinks slowly, waking up from her nap, and peers up at me. "Oh—" a slow smile stretches across her mouth "—you're here."

I smile even though I feel like crying. "I promised you, honey." I kiss her on the forehead and draw her closer to me. "I'm not leaving you."

She hums and snuggles against my chest, her eyes closing again. "Love you..."

"I love you too, Riley," I whisper and kiss the top of her head.

~xXx~

Two weeks later, I get emergency clearance from my doctor to fly despite that I'm in the home stretch of my pregnancy, and I promise her to see a colleague of hers as soon as I arrive in London.

My iron levels are good, and I've also been given magnesium pills and an abundance of vitamins. Which I pack in my carry-on as I stand in Emmett's hotel suite, surrounded by bags and boxes.

Mom left a few days ago to pack up our stuff in Chicago.

"Last chance to back out," Em says jokingly. Okay, half a joke. He won't ever be Edward's biggest fan, but I now have his trust. Emmett has chosen, and I couldn't be happier about his decision.

"Not gonna happen." I grin at him.

He chuckles, rolls his eyes, and heads for the mini fridge. "Pumpkin!" he calls out for Riley who's in the bedroom. "It's time to go!"

And Riley runs out, arms spread like she's an airplane. "Yay! Vacation!"

Well, not really. It's a bit more permanent than that.

At least I hope so.

12

Chapter song – Ghosts That We Knew by Mumford & Sons

EPOV

I'm almost a hundred percent sure. Yeah, it's been twenty-one days.

Or twenty.

Twenty-one...?

Twenty.

Three weeks. Since she left.

"Does it matter?" I mutter to myself and spark up a smoke. If I wasn't so damn lazy, I'd fetch a fucking drink, but...I remain on the beach. In the sand.

Ever since Bella left, I've found myself sitting down on the beach instead of on the deck. I've abandoned my couch for sand.

I don't sleep in our bed anymore, either. Too many memories—good and bad. At night, I'm on the couch in the front room instead. It's a new routine, basically. I wake up, run a few miles, eat some, and then I end up on the beach with my eyes on the horizon and sit there for hours before I crash.

Ironically, I now look forward to my dreams. Some are nightmares, some are pure heaven. That's when Bella or Nova visits me. The only company I have in this barren wasteland. What was once paradise is now hell.

But it's all good. It's what I deserve.

A couple hours later, I understand that I actually am asleep. So, this must be one of those dreams where I think it's reality. Only, I'm getting smarter, 'cause it has to be a dream—seeing as there's a boat coming closer and closer.

How crafty. Nova and Bella usually just appear. But now there's a boat.

A while ago, I did get my thumb outta my ass to grab a beer, so I pick it up and take a swig, but I keep watching the boat that's now almost at the dock. I'm not sure I would trust that one, though. The planks the dock consists of aren't the sturdiest anymore. Hell, I haven't been on that thing since we arrived a year ago. And we've had storms and shit. My old boat

is still there, though it doesn't work. The keys are gone, there's no gas, and one particular nasty storm slammed it into the dock, creating a massive crack in the side.

"Oh, damn," I mumble. That's not Bella, nor is it my baby girl. Unless either of them gained a hundred pounds and shot up a foot in height. 'Cause walking along the dock now is a mountain of a man. Maybe it's another one of my victims.

Wait.

Squinting my eyes, I try to zero in on the figure nearing, and...huh, if I didn't know better, I'd say it was Emmett Newton. Or whatever his real name is. He was Carlisle's boy. Carlisle vouched for him like I vouched for Bella. But it can't be him, 'cause I haven't killed him, and I only see victims in my dreams—not counting Bella and Nova. Well...I suppose in a way they are my victims, only they happen to be breathing.

But fuck reason, I guess, 'cause when the man hits the beach and only a hundred feet or so separates us, it's clear that it's Emmett.

He walks closer with purpose, dressed casually in cargo shorts and a t-shirt, but his posture ain't casual.

I cock my head and nod in greeting. "Emmett Newton. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"It's McCarty, actually," he replies dryly and stops in front of me. I peer up at him, nodding slowly; I think I recall Bella telling me his real last name. "Pack your shit, Masen." He folds his arms across his chest. "We're leaving in twenty."

I chuckle. "Well, this is new." In my dreams, I've never been told to leave before. "And where are we off to?" I humor him, a little amused, but I don't stand up. I remain seated in the sand, elbows resting on my knees.

He tilts his head, studying me. "You drunk?"

I shake my head no. Not drunk. Just asleep. Apparently. "Hey, could you tell Bella to come instead?" I ask. "She's a better view—no offense."

"Fuckin' idiot," he mutters and sits down next to me. "You actually expected us to save your sorry ass?"

Save? I laugh through my nose. "In my dreams? Hell yeah." I sigh and light up a cigarette, then I hold out the pack to him, but he declines with a shake of his head.

"This isn't a fucking dream, moron," he grunts. "So, get packing. I don't wanna spend a minute too long on this island."

"You know, if Bella wanted to save me, why would she send you of all people?"

When he faces me, he's got that look again—the one asking if I'm drunk.

"Because we're family and I'm stupid enough to agree to her insanity," he answers eventually. "Look, if you don't wanna miss the birth of your kid, you might wanna hurry along."

Nova. I smile to myself and take a deep drag from my smoke. If I sleep long enough, maybe I can witness her birth at least in a dream. That'd be sweet. But then...I can only image the gaping hole in my chest when I wake up and nothing's true. That oughta kill me, and since I don't have the balls to pull the trigger myself...

Edward Masen—afraid of pain.

I'm such a pussy.

"How is Bella?" I ask.

"She's settling in, and she's expecting you." He gives me a pointed look.

"Settling in." I look down at the sand. "Right. Chicago. I bet she's happy to be home."

"And I bet my left nut you don't know what the fuck you're talking about." He's getting impatient. "Don't make me regret this, Masen—all right? Pack whatever you need; leave the drugs behind, and take the next three days to get your act together while we get to our destination. You're gonna scare the shit outta Riley, not to mention Renee."

My brows knit together. "Who are Riley and Renee?"

"Well, here goes nothing." He sighs then faces me fully. "Bella gave me permission to answer your questions, and if you don't believe me, you can always call her." He fishes out a phone from his pocket. "There's obviously no reception here, but there will be when we get to Matak or Kuantan."

Right. We're going somewhere. I huff a laugh. This dream is fucking weird.

"As for Riley and Renee..." He clears his throat. "That would be Bella's daughter and mom."

"What?" I chuckle, confused. "You just said she hasn't had the baby yet. That if I didn't wanna miss the birth..."

Riley's a cool name for a girl, though. It's not Nova, but it's cool.

"Yeah, the baby she's carrying isn't her first," he tells me, waiting for my reaction.

I don't know *how* to react. This makes no sense. "Bella doesn't have a kid."

"Yes, she does. Riley's seven."

"No..." I shake my head, not liking this dream anymore.

"Look, she told me about the, ah...mind games—how she tricked you and stuff?" He winces. "And uh, something about asking her if she's been pregnant in the past?"

"I haven't asked her that. I know she doesn't have kids. I would've seen it in her file."

The one that was suspiciously empty?

I frown, remembering that I did think it was oddly empty of information. As soon as I wake up, I can get the file; it's in the bedroom, I think.

"Right, you stalked her," he says tightly. "Whatever." A quick shake of his head, like he's getting rid of a thought. "And you can forget about the file you somehow got your hands on. Half of Bella's life was confidential at that time. Your goons wouldn't have found anything on her."

I narrow my eyes, thinking this is the most unbelievable dream so far. Like an alternate universe.

"What was so secret?" I play along, wanting more info. Despite that it's make-believe.

"Riley." He shrugs.

"Of course." I nod and roll my eyes. "Bella's seven-year-old daughter. Sure."

"Jesus fucking Christ—why do I even bother." He points to the house behind us. "Can't you just go pack your fucking bag? Bella can tell you everything you wanna know when we get to Europe."

"No, no—" I smile "—this is fun. Tell me *everything*." I widen my eyes in mock-excitement.

Now he stares at me in disgust. "What the fuck does Bella see in you? You're high or some shit, aren't you?"

I laugh. "'Fraid not. So, tell me. Why was Bella's file sealed, and who did she *fuck* to have a child?" My smile turns sinister. The mere thought of Bella with another man is enough to have my gut churning.

"She didn't *fuck* anybody," he spits out. "And if you don't watch that fucking tone, I'll knock your teeth out. She adopted that little girl after Esme died. A noble fucking thing, and she's a great mother."

A scowl takes over my face, and I look around me, wondering what's really going on. There's weird, and there's straight up bizarre. My dreams often come with a message—a meaning. This...this just doesn't.

"Esme?" I ask dubiously. "The stripper who Carlisle fucked?"

"Yeah, that one," he replies flatly. "She was raped by two of Carlisle's low-men—after he got arrested. It destroyed her, and she killed herself before Riley was a year old."

I swallow thickly, wary and on edge.

It feels too real.

"Now Carlisle wants Riley," he goes on. "We have no clue why, but it ain't gonna happen."

Too much, too much. "Carlisle's in prison," I hear myself say, but the words sound strange rolling off my tongue. It's as if I'm more than playing along. "He got a life sentence." Just like Dad, Carlisle Sr., and a few other high-ranking members of the family did.

"He escaped a few months ago," he fires back, and my eyebrows shoot up in surprise. "There's a whole department looking for him, but Bella's not

taking any chances. She's already gone into hiding—though, not only for Riley's sake." He looks bitter about that for some reason. "Anyway, Carlisle tried to get out at around the same time you were released too, so we took precautions. Riley moved in with me for a while, and we made everything that wasn't trivial confidential."

This is way too much to process, but one thing is sure: it still doesn't make sense. "I was in Bella's house," I remind him. "I didn't see any sign of anyone other than her living there."

"Oh. You went through all her stuff before you kidnapped her?"

Well...um, no. But...

Thinking back, I remember entering the dark house, and...then how I snuck up the stairs...

A voice in the back of my head tells me that if I don't expect to see something suspicious, I won't. In other words, after reading Bella's file and seeing that she was single and had no children listed, I didn't expect to see anything in her house that would prove otherwise.

And, admittedly, the only thing I had on my mind that night was being reunited with Bella.

I shake my head abruptly; what the fuck am I doing? Why am I even considering this? This is all a dream...right?

Suddenly, I'm not so sure.

"Masen," Emmett snaps. I look to him. He frowns. "You're green in the face."

Oh, I bet.

"Is this real?" I ask wearily.

"What?" His frown deepens. "What the hell—ah, shit." He shakes his head and runs a hand through his short hair. "You're on drugs; I fucking knew it."

"No!" Shit. Panic creeps forward. "I—" I swallow and exhale shakily. "I'm not...I'm not on drugs, I swear. I just..." Oh, God. I lick my lips, quickly looking around me again. Can this really be happening? "Holy shit," I breathe out. *Don't start hyperventilating, man.* Too late. "This isn't a dream, is it?"

Emmett stares back at me, probably thinking I've lost my mind.

I can't tell him I haven't.

"No," he says slowly.

"You're here, and..." Jesus Christ, it's real. I hesitate. "Bella's...expecting me...?"

His eyebrows rise, and his response this time is also slow. "Yeah..."

"Oh," I mouth, my heart quickening.

In a flash, I jump up. A buried part of me flares to life, recognizing Emmett as a threat. But my need to have my questions answered overpowers everything else. Emmett's here. And he's here to...? He told me to pack a bag. Bella expects me. She's settling in, he'd said. She has a daughter. *Jesus.* One she adopted.

"Why the hell didn't she tell me?" I blurt out. As the question leaves me, anger spikes. Anger directed at Bella. "About Riley, I mean."

"She didn't trust you," he answers and stands up. Brushing sand off his hands, he adds, "Can you blame her?"

I wish I could.

"I think she was afraid you'd kidnap Riley, too," he says, and as much as I'd like to argue, I can't. It's revolting to think about it, but it does sound like something I would've done. But now...now I have something else to worry about: the fact that I kept Bella from her child for a whole goddamn year.

The pile of guilt grows.

A memory flashes before my eyes, causing my insides to twist painfully.

"Edward, what if I did have those things? What if I was married—"

"Don't say that shit!" I snap, furious in an instant. "You're mine, Bella. Only mine."

Fuck that noise. Even if she'd been married and juggling a handful of kids, I still would've gone after her. It's that simple, 'cause no one will ever love her more and better than I do.

"Do you still love me?" I ask impatiently. "And tell me the truth. Behind that anger, don't you still love me completely?"

I fully expect her to say yes.

"Yes," she breathes out, looking nauseous for some unknown reason.

"Fuck," I choke out, bending over, resting my hands on my thighs. Nausea builds up and my throat feels thicker. Shallow breaths. "What have I done?"

"Yeah, I'm not touching that one, man." Emmett snorts.

I held her captive. I separated her from her own fucking daughter. She missed a whole year of Riley's life. Then I knocked her up, thinking we'd play happy family here. "I made her worry so much." I take a wheezing

breath. "Her pregnancy...she was so worried." Yet, I told her—even though I had no damn clue—that things were gonna be fine.

"That's partly because of what happened the first time," he says quietly.

Straightening, I frown at him. "First time?"

Another memory...

"You've already read that, haven't you?" I ask.

She nods, brow furrowed. She doesn't look up from the pages. "I need to read it again." I can tell she's really into the book, concentrating and focused. "I mean, last time..." she mumbles and flips a page, "...with all the complications, and..." I frown at that. Last time? "I've been having some dizzy spells."

Whoa. I sit up straighter. "What?" That iron fist of fear around my heart makes itself known by tightening. "Dizzy spells?"

Last time. "Complications," I whisper to myself.

Searching Emmett's eyes, I find him averting his. "Shit," he mutters.

I think my heart stops for a second. "What? Tell me!"

Last time. Last time. Last time.

The stretch marks...

For a beat, it feels like I'm gonna faint. The earth tilts off its axis.

"I, uh..." He shifts, looking uncomfortable all of a sudden. "I wasn't supposed to go there." He rubs the back of his neck. "She was gonna come clean when we got to Europe."

"Come clean about what?!" I shout.

He grits out a curse, seemingly at himself. "She's been pregnant once before, but she lost the baby. All right? But you're gonna have to take the rest up with her. It's not my place—"

I cut him off with a bark of humorless laughter and step close enough to fist his t-shirt in my hand. "Listen, you prick," I spit out. "You're gonna tell me right the fuck now. You hear me?"

In a moment of clarity, it all hits me with an unbearable force. The words Bella has accidentally dropped...the stretch marks she obviously hid—fuckin' makeup? I guess so—until I was crazy enough with her drugging me, and then she got pregnant; I started distancing myself from her, too, so...I didn't look and she had a fucking shirt on...and when she was big enough, a few new stretch marks graced her belly. Little symbols of life inside her.

Staggering backward a few steps, Emmett's words come back to me. *She was gonna come clean when we got to Europe. She was gonna come clean when we got to Europe. She was gonna come clean when we got to Europe.* Which means I'm involved—it concerns me. It means...

"It was my baby," I rasp; my throat is closing up completely. "She—" She lost our baby? When the fuck—how did...I mean... "When did this...?"

Emmett's shoulders slump. "She found out a few days after we arrested you."

The flu...fuck, she had the flu... I took care of her. About a week before the raid, I held her hair while she puked her guts out.

I close my eyes, letting it all sink in.

Complications.

She lost the baby.

Christ, honey.

And if there were stretch marks, she had to have been pretty far along.

The trial—the look on her face when she testified...she looked so ill.

"Why didn't she tell me?" When I open my eyes, I gotta blink back tears.

There's sympathy in his gaze for a quick second, but it's replaced by something else. "She wanted to," he says firmly. Ah, he's defensive. Of Bella. "She tried a few times, but she couldn't. She'd say she chickened out—took the coward's way—but *I* say she had too much shit on her plate to deal with as it was." I glare at him, my hands balling into fists at my sides. "Don't give me that fucking look, Masen," he seethes. "You have no idea what she was going through. For some unknown reason, she loved you—loves you; whatever—and she turned you in. That's what she had to live with. For years, she beat herself up for betraying you. But why the fuck would she? Fifteen brutal murders, and who knows how many we didn't find evidence for?" The disgust is back, and rightly so. And Bella never handed in all the evidence she had. If she did, I wouldn't have been able to cut a deal that sweet. I mean...sixty-four killings, and they only pinned fifteen on me. "She did the right thing, turning you in. You're lucky you got away with only a few years in prison. So, don't fucking ask me why she feels guilty." He shakes his head. "But she does. Like I said, she wanted to tell you, but she couldn't. Then she said she was gonna tell you when the baby was born."

"But she lost it," I say, gravel in my voice. "The baby died."

He offers a short nod. "She wrote to you..."

I know. But I rejected the letters. I was still hurting too much—I was too angry at her.

"The pregnancy wasn't easy on her," he sighs. "She was on bed rest a lot. The doctors were worried, and...everything happening around her—the trial, what she'd supposedly done to you...the strain was too much. She took some time off work, but it wasn't enough. There was some iron thing, too...I don't really remember. Uh, anemia or something. She lost the baby in week thirty."

"Oh, Jesus Christ." I avert my eyes and squeeze them shut. It'd been an almost fully developed baby. And after reading so many pregnancy books, I also know that she had to give birth to it. Knowing it was already dead. "Fuck." Tears burn behind my lids—tears for not being able to support her, for not being able to mourn with her, but mostly because of the burden she had to carry alone. For a second, I feel robbed. But then...what would I have done? Back then, if I'd found out—while I was waiting for my lawyers to make me that deal, and then when I was in prison...whenever, however, and whatever...if she told me, before or after, I doubt I'd be in the mindset to react in any way that would make her feel better. Hell, with the fury consuming me at that point in my life, I probably would've fueled her guilt. I would've lashed out and tried to make her feel worse.

My God, I'm tired. Sick and tired. Utterly fucking drained. Emotionally exhausted.

"I wasn't supposed to tell you all of this—"

I wave him off as fatigue washes over me and sit down in the sand again. "I'm glad you did," I mutter, and it's true. Not that I don't want Bella's version, but I have a feeling I just got more truth from Emmett than I will from Bella. 'Cause she's not the kind of person who advertises her own struggles. She's too strong and stubborn for that.

"What a mess," I groan, resting my elbows on my knees, hands fisted in my hair. "This is un-fucking-real."

"Except it's not." He sits down, too. "Right now, Bella's settling into her new life, one she wants you to join. She asked me to come for you, 'cause she's in no condition to do it herself. Plus, Riley would panic if Bella left now."

"Why?" is all I can ask. Why the hell would she want me to join her? "I've ruined her goddamn life."

"She says otherwise," he responds frankly. "So...you gonna pack that bag or not? We've got a long journey."

~xXx~

After a year on the island, I leave with nothing but a duffle bag.

The trip to Matak is silent, aside for the waves crashing against the boat, and I try to process everything that's happened.

I feel numb, so I expect a helluva shock to settle in soon, but despite the numbness, I'm alert enough to take care of business. On Matak, I contact a private shipping company, 'cause as much as I don't mind leaving everything behind, there's still shit on that island worth a lotta fuckin' dough. And when we reach Kuantan, I've finally processed another thing: the crap with Carlisle. So, I call the one and only person I can really trust with this matter.

I do it while we're waiting for a flight; we're at some hole-in-the-wall restaurant, and Emmett has just handed me a fake passport. I already have my own, but I accept it.

"This looks real," I comment, waiting for my contact to pick up the phone. Around me, life is buzzing, and it annoys me. It also puts me on edge, hence picking a seat where I'm in the corner looking out at movement around me.

"Bella called in a few favors," he drawls, forking up some curry rice. "Who are you calling, anyway?"

As I'm about to answer, so does my contact.

"Speak," she says.

"I got a name for you."

"Well, well, well. If it ain't Robinson Crusoe."

Clever. "That's funny." I crack half a smile, but I'm not really in the mood to catch up. Alice Brandon—more lethal than Death himself, and she's got connections all over the world. She helped me when I got outta prison.

I happen to be the only man she's loyal to. I'd say person, but I'm pretty sure she's loyal to her wife. If there's someone I can trust to carry out this task, it's this little assassin.

"I know. Name." She's all business. Always.

"My childhood friend," I say, glancing up at Emmett.

He stares back, jaw tensing.

"Oh, get in line, hon. Half the underworld is looking for him. But I'm on it." Alice taps on a few keys in the background. *"Matter of payment?"*

"Security box one-eighteen at the usual place," I say. Doing the math in my head, I'd say she's about to get paid for more than one killing, but it'll be worth it. It's one of my five hiding spots for unmarked cash, but this is one place I can't touch. It's too public; I could be spotted too easily. "You can take what's left in there."

"Lucky me," she teases, knowing I'm not a guy who only stows away spare change. *"How do I contact you?"*

"You don't," I answer. "I'll call you."

Number sixty-five is now in the works.

"Gotcha." She hangs up, and I snap the phone shut before handing it over to Emmett.

"Why do I have a feeling you just committed a crime?"

I grin and take a sip of my *real* coffee—gotta say it tastes fucking good. "I don't know, maybe 'cause you're a good little cop?"

He ignores the jibe and asks, "Childhood friend?"

Hundred bucks says he knows exactly who I was referring to, but if he's looking for confirmation, so be it. "Carlisle."

"And no bones about it?" He tilts his head. "The douche you grew up with—just like that?"

I shrug. "If he's standing in the way of Bella's safety—Riley's, whatever...no. No bones about it."

"Who did you call?"

At that, I laugh. "Sorry. Don't know what you're talking about."

"Goddamn criminal," he mutters and rolls his eyes. "All right, what if he fails?"

She, actually. Not he. And she doesn't fail. She never does. It might take a while, but Alice delivers. Always.

~xXx~

As feared and expected, I do find myself going into shock after everything that's happened since Emmett set foot on the island. Along with shock

comes worry, an anxiety attack, and some good ole' panic for good measure.

In an alleyway in Thailand, I vomit violently, though the noise is drowned out by heavy traffic and the shouting from a farmer's market nearby. The combined odors are strong and the impressions are too many. Too much to take in. Too much to process. Bella probably saw safety in all of it; it was welcome to her. But to me...I want seclusion. That hasn't changed. Wherever Emmett's taking me, I hope it's not some major city.

"Water?" Emmett holds out a bottle when I appear in the opening of the alley where he leans back casually against a building.

I nod in thanks, limbs tired, mind both spinning and sluggish. "I think I lost my intestines back there."

"Masen's got humor." There's a miniscule smile, but it's gone again. "Who knew?" Straightening and ignoring my scowl, he asks, "Ready to go?"

I nod.

He explained to me earlier that we'll reach Europe through Morocco, and that's where we'll continue on by boat until we reach Barcelona.

Our final destination is apparently Andorra, a small country crammed in the mountains between Spain and France. Bella chose it because there's no extradition treaty with the States, which is for my sake.

My gratefulness will come later.

Right now I'm trying to wrap my head around the fact that Bella still wants me.

And that I'm on my way to her.

Like I said...un-fucking-real.

We Could Run

"She's Home & He's Home"

Chapter song – Here's Where We Begin by Joshua Radin

...It seems like the end

But it's not over

Here's where we begin...

EPOV

Three long days later, Emmett and I arrive in Barcelona, and we quickly make our way to the spot where Bella's mother has evidently left a car for us. It's got French plates, and we set off north along the coast. We're both beyond exhausted, but we're too close to stop now.

Pushing up my Ray-Bans, my head lolls against the headrest and I stare out the window, the colorful landscape flashing by. The fields and rocky hills between towns are naked and burnt from the sun, but the tourist resorts shoot up with rich green, hotel complexes in various colors, haciendas, and bushes with all kinds of flowers.

To our right, we have the dark blue ocean.

It's so different from Asia. The air is crisper, cleaner. The heat is drier.

I roll down the window, definitely seeing the appeal of Costa Brava.

The clock ticks by slowly, though.

"Jesus Christ—sit still, Masen."

I frown and face Emmett. "What the fuck did I do?"

He huffs and switches lanes to pass a tractor. "Fingers tapping, knees bouncing—don't tell me you haven't noticed."

I hadn't.

I guess I'm too anxious.

Emmett spoke briefly with Bella over the phone before we reached Barcelona, but I couldn't handle it. Just like I couldn't handle it the other times he's called her. Over the phone...I wouldn't know what to say.

What I do know is that Bella gave Emmett an earful for telling me about the baby we lost.

It was almost funny to hear her shouting at him.

But I doubt I'll be able to relax enough to really smile until I know Bella and I stand a chance.

Emmett says it's what she wants, but I gotta hear it for myself.

The only person I've spoken with over the phone is Alice. She's collected her payment and has a source tracking Carlisle in Mexico; Alice is on her way there, too. That was yesterday morning. With her spiderweb of connections in the underworld, I knew she'd find him, and I left her my number this time to text me when the job was done.

Like I said. She always delivers.

As the hours roll by, the scenery changes. The Pyrenees stretch out powerfully on the horizon, and Emmett mentions that Bella's rented a house for us in the mountains. I don't respond, partly because I don't have a preference, and partly because I'm too nervous to speak much.

"Renee and I will be living in the city, though. She's already rented us two apartments." He slows the car, 'cause movement has stopped ahead.

That's something I've noticed: you get stuck in traffic a lot. "It's the capital—Andorra la Vella—but it's tiny. Only like twenty thousand people live there, not counting...um, something Bella said. Wasn't suburbs but...uh, the entire parish? Eh, whatever. It's small, and you will live with Bella and the kids on the outskirts—up in the mountains."

...you will live with Bella and the kids...

...you will live with Bella and the kids...

...you will live with Bella and the kids...

He said it so casually, but for me it can't be more loaded—more meaningful.

~xXx~

Hours later, we drive into the capital of Andorra.

Emmett has filled the silence every now and then with some small talk—plans for the future and whatever—and I managed to push my nerves aside enough to tell him that money won't be an issue for at least a year or two—for either of us. And when I sell the island, we'll have even more. The only problem is that my hiding spots are in the States, and after hearing that I'm wanted, it's probably not very safe for me to retrieve that money. Luckily, Emmett offers to do it for me in a few weeks—after the baby's born. And if Bella trusts the guy, I guess I can, too.

I've also learned that Riley is Emmett's niece because he was once married to Bella's sister, who died in a motorcycle accident.

The hate the man feels toward me simmers on the surface; it's always there, but I'm glad he can rise above it and still hold a conversation with me. Even if I'm not the best conversationalist at the moment.

Since he was Carlisle's low-man when he was undercover and not mine, I don't really have any feelings concerning Emmett. Bella thinks I loathe him; it's not true. I don't give a fuck. I'm grateful he's been there for Bella and Riley, but other than that... It's too soon to form an opinion about him as anyone other than Bella's friend, former partner at the FBI, and brother-in-law.

When we get closer, farther up the mountains, silence takes over again, and I use the time to just look out the window and take in my surroundings. The window has been rolled up again; it's a helluva lot colder up in the Pyrenees than it is down in Spain. But it's fucking beautiful. Breathtaking, really. I've already learned it's a popular ski resort during the winter, and that the season is long, too. Still, despite the slight nip in the air, it's clear that we're in a country near the Mediterranean. The Spanish culture is reflected in the architecture of the buildings, the narrow cobblestone roads, and people we pass. They stroll out in families or with friends from restaurants and tapas bars, probably ready to go home for bed.

Farther up still—city life long gone—we leave a tiny village behind, and Emmett says we'll be there in two minutes. 'Cause that's what the GPS on his phone says.

In a moment of panic, I fidget in my seat and worry about the goddamn clothes I'm wearing. And if I hadn't been so anxious, or fucking petrified, I woulda laughed at myself. Bella has seen me at my worst, and this isn't it. Jeans and a hoodie will do just fine.

"This should be it." He slows to a stop next to a square-shaped stone house, two stories high, with ivy climbing the front walls. Rustic and homey. Warmth radiates from it. Now this is paradise. *I wouldn't mind calling this home. Not one bit.* It's almost completely dark out, and the last house we passed is at least a quarter mile back. The windows on both

floors are lit up; plus, a lamp next to the door automatically lights up when Emmett leaves the car.



My gut tightening, I get outta the car, too, and follow him to the door.

Just as he knocks on the wooden door, his phone chirps and he checks it with an unreadable expression before handing the phone to me.

"This is probably for you."

Taking the phone, I read the message.

Done, Crusoe. Suppose it'll be on the news in a few hours.

I smile a little and return the phone to Emmett.

"Does that mean what I think it means?" He cocks a brow.

I nod. "Yeah." Carlisle's gone.

His shoulders sag with relief; however, he doesn't wanna show it since I got it taken care of in my own little way. Sometimes, criminals can do the job better than Feds, although I won't advertise that.

I'm turning over a new leaf.

Emmett's about to say something else, but a girl's giggle on the other side of the door stops all conversation.

Pretty sure it stops my heart, too.

"Can I get the door, Mommy?!" I hear her shout.

Yep, not breathing. *Holy shit.*

There's some rustling and bustling, but then the door opens and it's Bella I see. A very pregnant Bella. And a little girl who I'd think was related to Bella if it wasn't for her bright blue eyes and few other little Esme-isms.

She's fucking cute.

"Uncle Em!" she squeals and jumps into Emmett's arms.

My wide-eyed gaze lands on Bella again; she's smiling nervously and her eyes are full of unshed tears.

I swallow hard, drinking her in. The deep blue cotton dress. Bare feet on the polished stone floor. Her long and dark hair, those loose curls... Slightly pink cheeks. Her basketball belly. A hand resting on it.

"Edward," she breathes out.

My jaw ticks with tension, and I don't know what to do—what's okay for me to do. My hands hang limply at my sides, my fingers itching.

She's really giving me a shot?

"Hug me." She decides for me. Thank fuck.

As a couple tears roll down her cheeks, I close the distance and wrap my arms around her in a tight embrace. At the same time, a million emotions surge through me, but it's relief most of all. *Oh, Christ.* She's here. I hug her harder and bury my face in her hair, greedily breathing her in.

My eyes sting.

I vaguely register that Emmett has carried Riley inside.

"I'm sorry," I choke out.

"I'm sorry, too," she cries. I shake my head, about to tell her she doesn't have shit to be sorry for—at least not *that* sorry—but she cuts me off before I can even open my mouth. "Don't, Edward. I don't wanna hear it. Just fucking hold me."

I chuckle through my tears and give her a squeeze in response. Hold her? Yeah, I can do that. Preferably for the rest of my life.

Apologies keep bubbling up, and I can't keep them inside. "I'm so sorry, baby—I kept you from her." Riley's laughter comes from somewhere within the house, maybe the front room...

"Stop." Bella cups my face and pulls me down to her level, our foreheads touching. "One day, when she's grown up, we'll tell her parts of the truth—when she can understand. But not now. She deserves to see the man I love, okay? The good guy. She'll love you, too."

"I'm not good," I argue, screwing my eyes shut.

"You fucking are, so fucking stop it." She lets out a little growl. "Jesus, listen to me. I'm worse than a fucking sailor."

"Stop trying to make me feel better." Damn her, I grin anyway. But I keep my eyes closed. "I'm not good."

But I want to be. For Bella, Riley, and the little one.

"You can be, Edward," she whispers. "I've seen it so many times."

Her soft voice makes me open my eyes, 'cause I need to look her in the eye—to see her expression. And it's just as soft. Almost...no, nothing *almost* about it. The serenity is there again, and this time it's not only because of the child she's carrying. This crazy woman wears the expression for *me*.

"I love you," I murmur thickly.

She smiles. "I love you, too. And I wanna start over."

My forehead creases. "Start over?"

A small nod. "Yeah. Past the bullshit, no more lies, no deceit." She fists my hoodie and makes sure I don't move away. Not that I would. "We'll get to know each other again. We'll make a life together. We'll build a foundation on *trust*. Here. As a family."

Family.

Sobbing like a baby isn't very manly, so I'll save that shit for later.

"You really want that?" I croak, moving a hand to her protruding belly. One of these days—soon—I'll suggest the name Nova to her. "With me?"

She grins, but she also gets more emotional. "Dammit, yes." Her bottom lip quivers. "What do you say?"

I caress her cheek. "I want nothing more, honey."

"Good." She releases a breath and takes a step back, a smile—dare I say playful?—on her lips. "In that case..." She swallows and holds out her hand.

"Bella Swan—former federal agent."

A breathy, strained chuckle slips out. And I grasp her small hand in my larger one.

"Edward Masen—former capo in the Masen Family."

The End