



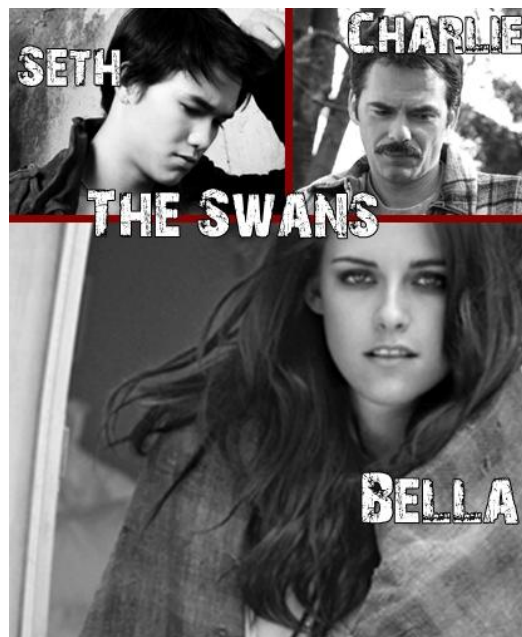
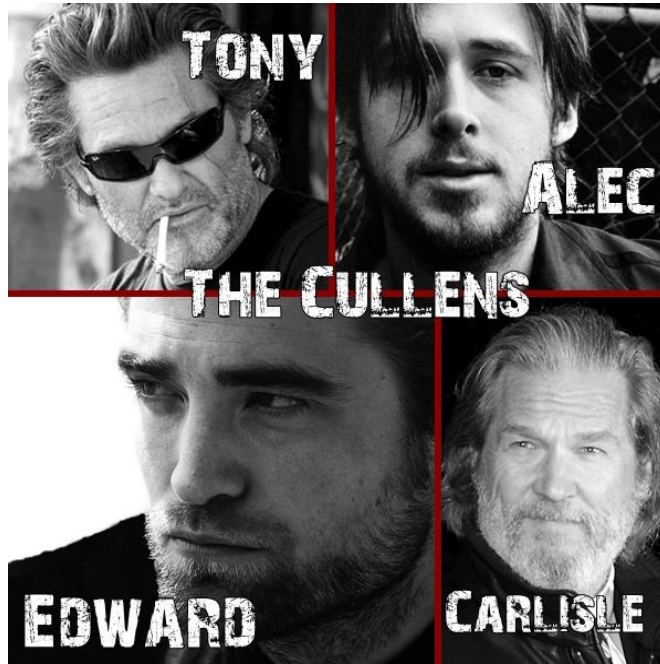
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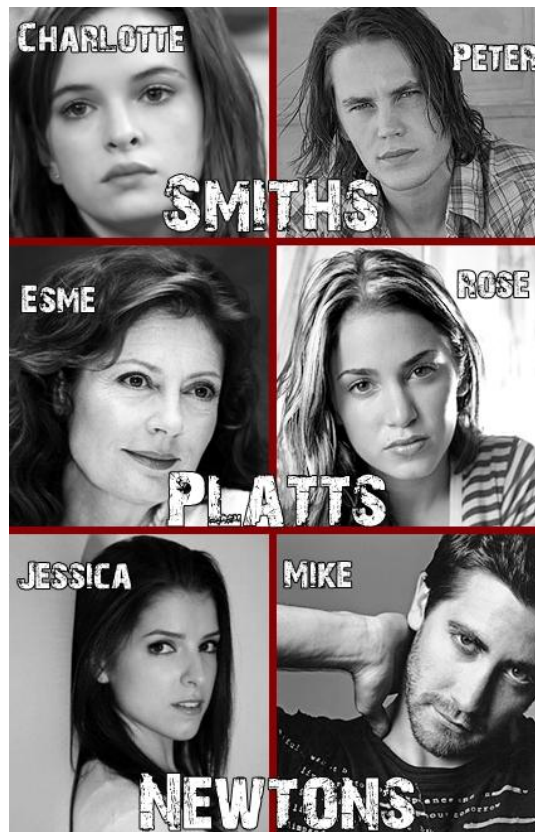
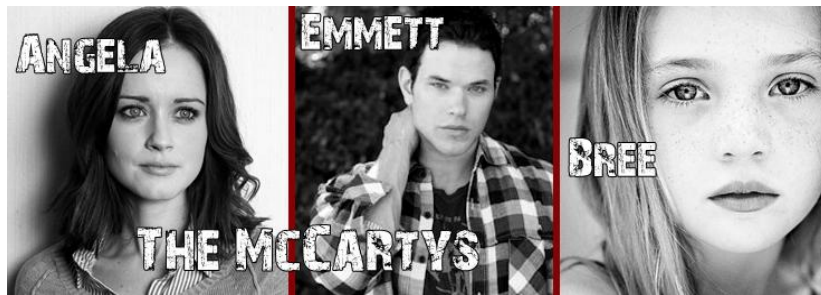
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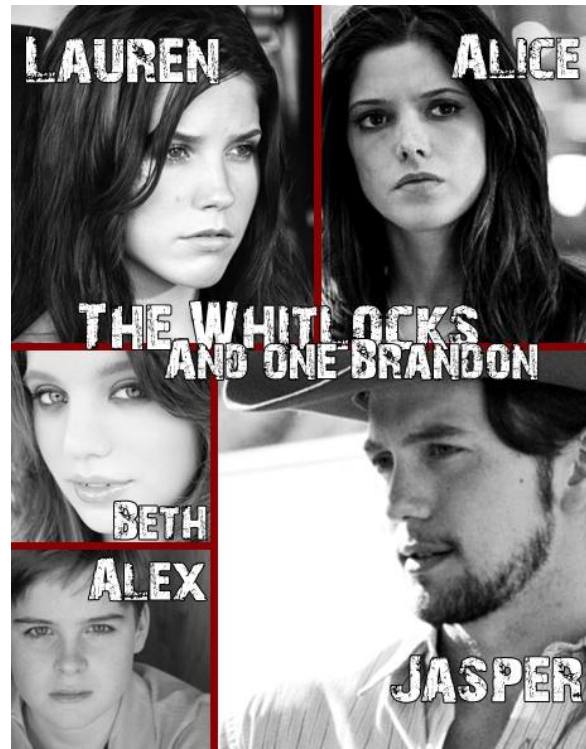
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A story inspired by The Walking Dead.







1.

Tampa, Florida

June 19th, 2013

2 months and 13 days since the outbreak



While Alec watched the Whitlocks with mild amusement, Edward eyed them with contempt. The latter, the oldest of the Cullen brothers, took a drag from his smoke and shook his head, then muttered, "Fuckin' monstrosity." He faced Alec. "Twenty bucks their bus breaks down first."

When their Uncle Tony had urged everyone in their group to loot the RV dealer farther down the highway, he hadn't expected families to drive out with castles on wheels.

The Whitlocks' bus took the prize. Granted, they were the largest family, but they should've gone the same route as the Cullens: take more than one vehicle. Because traveling cross-country wasn't going to be easy in that behemoth.



"If only bucks was the currency." Alec flashed his brother a smirk before he returned to cleaning his gun.

Edward did the same. Guns took you further than money these days. With his smoke dangling from his lips, he wiped off the axe he kept in his belt, he cleaned out his sawed-off shotgun, he made sure the mag in his Glock was full, and he checked the silencer on his Sig.

It was getting dark, and the three Cullens had the last graveyard shift where they protected this gigantic Walmart parking lot.

Some fortress. But they couldn't be picky. They'd needed a safe place to regroup when their last hideout had been overrun, and this was it. Here, they had made their first decision regarding an actual future.

Living day-to-day was only gonna keep them alive for so long; they needed something solid. And now they had it. Plan-wise, anyway. There was still the small matter of executing the plan.

The Cullens were prepared, but were the others?

Uncle Tony and Alec had done their best, instructing the twenty-something other people on what to bring, how to prepare for their journey, and how to protect themselves. Everyone had shelter now,

regardless of what Edward thought about some of the choices, and they'd spent the past three weeks stocking up, going out on supply runs, and so on. They had water and food. They had medicine and gas. Tools, guns, spare tires, ammo...they had a lot, but the trick was to make it last.

If Edward saw Alice Whitlock washing her hands in Evian one more time because she "had clammy hands," he was gonna blow a gasket. Or if he saw Rose Platt throw out half her grilled fish because "she was full." Same applied if he saw Angela McCarty take Tylenol each time she had a headache or fucking cramps or just "felt a bit off."

Uncle Tony and Alec had the patience for all that bullshit—Edward didn't. He was the quiet one, seen as a loner. If he said something, it was rarely nice. Gruff mutters, grunts, and sarcastic remarks. No one really went near him, not counting his brother and uncle. No one came to him for advice on how to prepare for their trip.

Still...he went out every night, risking his life, to find supplies and to kill those fucking biters. Those...rotting, flesh-eating, brainless walkers.

After taking a final drag from his smoke, he threw the butt into the small fire; they were hobos out here, huddling around trashcans on fire. But he didn't give a shit. He just wanted to get on the road—get as far away from Florida as possible.

Alaska was that place.

Sparsely populated, it would be easier to create safety up there. They'd also have the cold, which meant food lasting longer and bacteria not spreading so easily. Down here in humid Florida, nothing lasted for long. Unless they were talking oranges and Cubans.

"So, how're we gonna celebrate your birthday tomorrow, bro?"

Edward ignored that and started reattaching his guns to his belt. He also had an elastic strap around his right thigh where he had a few throwing knives. Lastly, two boot knives were stuck in their sheaths in his combat boots.

Alec was just as strapped, though instead of an axe, he had a rifle on his back.

"What?" Alec laughed. "It's the big four-oh for you."

Funny...Edward was more fit now, the day before he turned forty, than he'd been in his years in construction. Or back in college when he played quarterback all his way to the state championship. Three years straight.

Fighting for your life did that. It wasn't fun and games anymore. Everything came with a risk. A life put at stake.

"Find someone who's willing to give me head," Edward muttered eventually. "Don't even remember when I last got laid."

How sad. Even sadder was it that being a hermit wasn't new. He'd led a quiet life in upstate New York. Women weren't important. He'd had his family.

It was with Alec he'd run Cullen Construction. On weekends, he sometimes went fishing with Uncle Tony. Or hunting. Or he went down to the neighborhood bar to shoot the shit with the locals. And by shooting the shit, he meant he'd exchanged a few words every now and then with the bartender.

"Just stay away from Lauren, Ed. When we get to safety, I'mma make sure to carry on the Cullen name with her."

Edward grunted, unimpressed.

Back in college, he'd had a type: brunettes, preferably with big tits, but as the years passed, he stopped giving a shit. While Lauren Brandon, Alice Whitlock's cousin, was a brunette, he wasn't interested. If anything, Lauren was one of the boys—she was good with a gun. More sister material than anything.

Regardless, Edward didn't live in a world where settling down with a little lady was priority anymore. Not that it had ever been a priority of his. Alec was different. Approaching forty himself with his thirty-six years, Alec often talked about finding someone—but that was before the outbreak.

Garrett had been the real family man.

But none of that mattered now.

"You ready, boys?" Uncle Tony walked toward them, decked out in combat gear and guns. He'd done a stint in the army when he was younger, but a little of that mentality hadn't left. He was the unofficial leader of the entire group; he was someone who people came to. Strict but patient. No nonsense. You didn't bullshit him and win. Militant, but...he looked like a fucking biker, and there was no way to wipe that grin off his face.

Last month when they'd run into a group of hostile humans and they'd dragged a knife over Uncle Tony's face, he'd still come out the grinning champion. Maybe he was getting old and raggedy at fifty-eight, but he held his own. More than that, even.

"We leavin' the premises?" Alec asked. Because their father's brother was holding the keys to Liam Dwyer's four-wheeler. They sometimes used that when they weren't going far, but usually they stuck to either Edward's GMC Sierra or Alec's Jeep Wrangler.



"I'm just gonna drive over to the Radio Shack down the highway. See if they've got more batteries for the walkies and wires." Uncle Tony pointed in the direction. "I'll bring a walkie—you keep watch here."

By now, it was pitch-black out, so he had to squint to see the fence that lined the big parking spot. He couldn't see any of the rotting flesh-eaters right now, but that didn't mean they weren't gonna come. After all, they were more active at night.

"Some of the women went into the store." Uncle Tony looked over his shoulder, toward the Super Walmart. "I sent Black and Dwyer with 'em."

Edward didn't get that; they'd raided what was left in there. It still looked fully-stocked in some aisles, but no one had use for lawnmowers or sewing machines. Or anything that ran on electricity. Or more blankets and pillows—they had that in abundance, just ask the Whitlocks. They didn't need lawn furniture or pool cleaners. They'd already taken a few camping grills, so they didn't exactly need the two hundred left in the store.

It went on like that with hundreds of items, but no matter how many times they went back in there, they weren't gonna find more food. Or toiletries. Or batteries. Or clothes. Or camping gear. It was cleared out—by them or others before them. Still, that damn Alice Whitlock always came back with something, be it a scented fucking candle or roll of Scotch tape.

Fuckin' pack rat.

Just because they were leaving didn't mean this was the last place they'd find supplies. They didn't have to find *everything* here.

"Did you hear that?" Alec asked, looking toward the highway.

Edward and Uncle Tony paid attention, both assuming Alec had heard the telltale sounds of walkers. Those raspy groans and garbled snarls that came with dragged feet and muted thuds.

"Help! Anybody!"



It was more an echo than a voice.

"Well, we heard that," Uncle Tony said. "Let's get goin'."

No other words were needed.

Alec ran over to Edward's Sierra, the keys already in it, and Edward let out a sharp whistle that had the German shepherd a few feet away wide awake and alert. The dog didn't belong to anybody; it had just shown up one day. Since then, they'd discovered it was a great guard dog, and it often went along on the supply runs. Actually, she kind of went wherever Edward went.

No one understood why it had taken a liking to the recluse of the group, but it was what it was. Edward didn't care. Well, he said he didn't care. A part of him kinda liked the bitch.

Once they were all inside the truck, Alec drove toward the opening they guarded religiously at all hours. Window rolled down, he told Emmett McCarty and Royce King, who were standing guard right now, that they'd heard something and were on their way out to investigate.

They drove with all windows down in order to hear better, and it didn't take long before they heard the cries for help again.

The streets were deserted, littered with trash, abandoned cars, and dead people.

When Edward saw one of the undead, he aimed and fired.

"Help!"

"Over there." Uncle Tony pointed toward a street that led to the marina if you went far enough. "Be ready—could be a decoy."

After a sharp turn, they drove into mayhem.

"Shit," Edward muttered, seeing walkers everywhere. One car was on fire, another's alarm went off just as one walker was thrown onto it, and two trucks were blocking the road. He quickly counted eleven of the gory sumbitches as he got ready to exit the Sierra. "There—a kid." Between two buildings, he saw a kid fighting a walker. More were heading for him.

The undead only fought for one thing: food.

"Alec, you and Edward go for the kid; I'll check if there're others."

"Seth!" they heard someone scream. A woman's voice. "Oh my God!"

"I'll go." Uncle Tony took off in a run, disappearing behind a building. He took down two undeads on the way.

~oOo~

Bella screamed, putting all her strength into each blow, but the surface was just too small. She could barely move, cornered in an alley by three fucking monsters. Out of options, all she could do was fight with her fists to buy time until she reached a head she could drive a blade into.

She was covered in sweat and grime. The smell from the undead was revolting; nausea crept up, but as sad as it was, she was getting used to it.

Her clothes were in shreds, jeans and a too-big hoodie. Hair greasy and tucked in under her shirt in a ponytail; she didn't want to give a walker more to grab onto.

"Fuck!" she cried out and shoved her blade up the closest one's chin. He fell to the ground with a grunt, blood and gore splattering all over. Another beast tried to claw at her, but with tears of fury and exhaustion streaming down her cheeks, she managed to push him away for now. "Seth!"

She needed her little brother to be alive. He was out there—right now, fighting. A fifteen-year-old boy...he shouldn't have to see this. With another scream, Bella's fist flew out, her knuckles throbbing so painfully. Her only protection was the duct tape that covered her hands. They could bite through, but it gave an extra few seconds.

Somewhere out on the street, a car alarm went off.

Bella was too busy staying alive to give a rat's ass, but she still acknowledged the fact that the blaring noise was going to attract more walkers.

"Seth!" she shouted again. Due to the rotten-smelling blood soaking her fingers, her blade almost slipped out of her grasp, and it was enough for a walker to try to take a bite outta her arm. "Oh my God!" She pushed and shoved, internally weeping...*I don't wanna die, I don't wanna die...over and over*. But she refused to let her weakness show. She couldn't quit.

It was amazing how quickly you could harden your heart and pull up armor to keep the emotions at bay.

Little over two months ago, she'd been a carefree twenty-three-year-old who'd recently opened a garage with her father outside Kansas City. But the only thing she used a wrench for now was bashing walkers' heads in. If she could reach it, of course. At this point, hers was on the ground ten feet away, drilled into the remains of a skull.

"Somebody in here?" The voice didn't belong to Seth.

It was too dark to see, and Bella didn't have time to look for her savior, either. "In the corner!" she yelled hoarsely, delivering a kick to the walker's chest.

In the next second, the other one was back, clawing at her. Brown teeth from a broken jaw snapped, broken fingers tried to find purchase, and its foul breath made Bella sick.

Luckily, a large man appeared through the veil of darkness, and he shot the two monsters in the head.

As they slumped to the ground, Bella let out a breathless wail, exhaustion winning for just a second. She bent over and rested her hands on her thighs, and her chest heaved with each breath. She was just...so *spent*.

"You all right, honey?" The man got down on one knee and started checking her arms and legs. "You didn't break skin?"

Bella only managed to shake her head; she was too close to collapsing. But there was still the matter of her brother. "S-Seth," she panted tearfully. "My—my brother..."

"My nephews are helping him," he replied and stood up. "Come on—I'll take care'a ya." That said, he moved to pick up Bella in his arms and—

"Wait!" Bella scrambled over to her wrench and pulled it out of the soggy head remains. The wrench, nearly a foot and a half in length, and the blade, were her only weapons.

The man chuckled and picked her up. "Feisty kid."

"Do—do I look like a kid?" she croaked. Despite the horror of their life, she cracked a small grin. After all, this man had saved her. "Thank you for helping me. Really, I can't thank you enough." They got closer to the opening of the alley, and Bella listened but heard nothing. "Though, maybe carrying me is a bit over the top?"

"Eh, it's not every day an old man like me gets to save a beautiful young woman like yourself."

"I thought I was a kid." A smirk tugged at the corners of her mouth.

"That was in the darkness of the alley." The man winked. "Now..." They both glanced around, and Bella saw two other men, guns drawn, the fire from a burning vehicle giving them a dangerous edge in the dancing shadows. "And there's your brother, I reckon." He nodded at...Seth! Oh, thank God. He was fine. Fine and standing near a truck that wasn't theirs.

Before Bella even knew it, she was on her feet running to her little brother. She threw her arms around him, wanting to cry like a baby. She wasn't going to, but *Christ*, did she want to.

"You're okay, you're okay." She cupped his cheeks, ever so protective, and checked for wounds. There was blood and gore all over, but that was nothing unexpected. She nodded to herself, because she needed her words to be true. "You're okay." The fact that Seth was a few inches taller than Bella's five four was of no importance; he was still the baby in the family.

Sobering thought. Since Seth might be all Bella had left.

Overwhelmed by gratitude to the three men, she ran over to them, one by one, and hugged them tightly. In return, the stocky one, her savior, chuckled, but the other two were kinda stunned, not that Bella stayed long enough to notice their reactions or even look at their faces. She was already back to hugging her brother and chanting that he was okay, he was okay, he was okay.

The leaner of the men, though still muscular, recovered fairly quickly and approached Bella and Seth and stuck out his hand.

"How about introductions? I'm Alec Cullen, and it ain't often we run into people who aren't after our supplies anymore."

While Bella laughed softly, a bit tiredly, and shook hands with Alec, the tallest man shot Alec a look.

"And now they know we've got supplies," he muttered and lit up a cigarette. Next to his feet sat a dog—a German shepherd, Bella was pretty sure.

"That's my asshole brother." Alec pointed at the grouchy one. "He's Edward. And the man who—"

"You can call me Uncle Tony, hon." Bella's savior tipped an imaginary hat in greeting and grinned at her. "Everyone else does."

Bella smiled a little and pulled up the hood of her shirt to cover the grime on her face. "I'm Bella Swan. This is my brother. Seth Swan."

Alec spoke. "So, now that we all know each other—" he smirked "—mind telling us where you're headed?"

The Swans weren't born yesterday, though. They had no intention of revealing the truth. All right, the truth wasn't so bad, but if these guys knew the trip Bella and Seth were prepared for, they'd probably wonder

just how much stuff they could find in their truck. Unfortunately, their truck had died, but finding a new vehicle was easier than finding food and medicine, both of which they had plenty.

"Ah, you don't wanna say, huh?" Alec flashed a grin, a crooked one. "I get it. You're gonna have to find a new car, though." He jerked his chin toward the Swans' truck.

That was how they spotted a flesh-eater down the road, but that guy, Edward, was quick to shoot it with a gun that had a silencer. Alec frowned and looked around, seemingly pondering something.

Edward noticed and rolled his eyes. "Here we go."

"What?" Alec widened his arms.

"You were the one who took home birds with broken legs and stray dogs when we were kids, Alec." Edward stubbed out his smoke and then turned toward a truck that looked brand-new. "I know you, baby bro. Now, I'll be in the truck while you bring home the new strays."

It was quiet for a while after that, but like Edward had predicted, Alec offered Bella and Seth a safe place to stay for the night. And while Uncle Tony kept watch, Alec helped Bella and Seth move six large duffel bags from one broken truck into a new one.

~oOo~

When they all got back to the Super Walmart parking lot, the two newcomers were whisked away by Alice Whitlock, Lauren Brandon, Angela McCarty, and Carmen Hernandez.

Edward didn't give a shit. All he wanted was a shower and some new clothes. All of which he found in his Mercedes Sprinter, his temporary

home. Okay, so the shower sucked—no fucking pressure—and you had to refill the water after approximately sixty seconds, but it still did the trick.

With a bucket of water at his feet, he sat down on the toilet in the bathroom that was smaller than the ones in an airplane and scrubbed down completely with a bar of soap before moving the showerhead over him and washing off. It wasn't fresh water. This came straight from the marina, and he looked forward to driving inland soon and finding some lakes.

He didn't have many luxuries, but the shower and his smokes were two things he wouldn't give up. They kept him sane. He'd even stocked up on extra car batteries in case his showering caused the Sprinter to run outta juice too quickly.

What he wanted next was some grub and some sleep, but he still had the night shift with his brother and uncle. So, after he was clean, he got dressed in another black Henley, another pair of holey jeans, and this time he went with a pair of construction boots instead of the combat boots. 'Cause he needed to clean zombie outta those fuckers.

Once the guns were back on his body, he stepped out of his Sprinter, ignoring the hustle and bustle to his right where all the women were busy with the newcomers, and walked toward the entrance of the parking lot. The dog moseyed along with him.

Uncle T and Alec were already there.

"Any trouble so far?" Edward peered out over the highway, seeing nothing but darkness. It was quiet, too.

"Nope." Uncle Tony leaned against the fence, his stance casual, and had a smoke dangling between his lips. "By the way, it looks like Bella and Seth will ride with us for a while."

Edward cocked a brow, wondering when the hell *that* had been decided.

Alec explained. "I think they lowered their guards when they saw we had women and kids with us, so they told us they're heading for Kansas City to find their dad." He shrugged. "Kansas City's pretty close to where we'll pass, so..."

Edward grunted but didn't comment. He wasn't pleased, that much was clear. Another two mouths to feed. And...okay, now he had to speak up. "Where're they gonna sleep?"

As far as he knew, every RV was full. The four Whitlocks and Alice's cousin, Lauren, occupied the big-ass bus, the three McCartys lived in another—and Angela was pregnant—the Smiths and the Newtons shared one, Esme and Rose Platt shared a small one with Carmen Hernandez, and...well, everything was full.

As soon as they reached Atlanta, they'd pick up Edward and Alec's father, too.

"Doesn't take a genius to figure that one out," Uncle Tony said with a wry grin. Edward didn't like the sound of that. "Between four Cullens, we have four vehicles, and the fourth Cullen ain't even with us yet. We have space, Edward."

"We *don't* have space," Edward argued. "What we have are two vans and two cars. There's no way I'm letting strangers drive my Sierra, anyway." He'd barely even gotten a glimpse of the two Swans—just that it was a young girl and boy, both covered in blood. Sweat. Torn clothes. The standard result after a run-in with biters.

Much like Edward's Sprinter—which he intended to share with Alec once they'd picked up Pop in Georgia—Uncle T's RV was fairly small. It was a brand new Chevy and had just enough space to house two grown men.

The plan now was for Edward to drive the Sprinter, Alec to drive the Chevy van, Uncle Tony to drive the Wrangler—leading their big group across the country—and Liam Dwyer was gonna drive Edward's Sierra.

Alec shrugged. "You got room in the Sprinter until we reach Atlanta. I'll bunk with T. After that, we can come up with another plan."

That had Edward seething. "Fine," he snapped. "They can borrow my truck to sleep in. Dwyer can go with Black."

Uncle T was amused. "You mean the truck they're packing with the last of our supplies now?" He pointed toward the Sierra that they'd just used to save the newcomers. Jacob and Liam were currently loading the group's storage of spare parts and tools. The bed of the truck now housed all the spare tires as well as Liam's four-wheeler. "The Dwyer kid is driving that one, Edward—as we've decided."

Edward grumbled and bitched for a while, though there was nothing he could do but accept it. Until they all reached Atlanta, Edward was gonna share his Sprinter with the Swans.

It could be two nights if they were lucky, but...recalling their trip down to Florida, Edward would guess five days to a week. Highways were blocked by cars, and it usually took hours to clear the way. Not to mention herds of walkers or hostile looters they might run into. That was why Uncle T was gonna drive the Jeep; it was powerful, and they'd found chains to use when they needed to tow a car or something.

"Think about it." Uncle Tony squeezed Edward's shoulder. "When we take off at dawn, won't it be nice to catch some shut-eye while Bella drives?"

Yes. But Edward wasn't about to admit to that shit. He wasn't exactly a loner because he liked to share his space now, was he?

2.

Tampa, Florida

June 20th, 2013

2 months and 14 days since the outbreak

At around four in the morning, an exhausted Edward stepped into his Sprinter, too fucking ready to get outta Florida. Down here there were just too many people.

Like the Cullens had done, Edward guessed others had traveled down the East Coast to check the military bases, drawn to authority or at least a semblance of order. And base after base either deserted or overtaken by walkers eventually brought you to Florida.

A lot of people resulted in chaos. Not only did you have to defend yourself from the walking dead, but you had to fight armed scavengers—greedy motherfuckers who never stopped wanting.

Tonight Edward and his brother and uncle had taken down two fuckers who thought they could come here and steal water and food, seven undeads, and one pregnant teenager who'd been bitten in several places.

Good times.

Since the bed was fully rolled out overhead, Edward had to duck in order to fit.

The Sprinter was divided into four parts. There was the front; it had two seats, the driver's seat and passenger's seat that could be spun around. Behind the front was the dining area. A table came down from the wall, and there were two more seats; that section was "complete" when the two front seats were facing away from the windshield and the table was down.

The third part of the van was the back of it; one corner for the kitchen cabinets, a small counter, and a mini fridge that didn't work unless the car was running because it just used up too much of the battery...and the other corner of the back for a bathroom so small only a kid could be comfortable in it.

Lastly, overhead. The "bedroom." When the bed was retracted, there was only a nook straight above the driver's and passenger's seats with the mattress stored in it. And that was the only time Edward could stand at full height in the dining area. Now he had to either sit down or go over to the tiny kitchen section; he could stand there, too. When the bed was rolled out, two people could sleep up there somewhat comfortably, but...they were three now. So, Edward supposed that meant someone would always be up.



He muttered a curse under his breath as he made his way over to the back, nearly stumbling over a duffel bag that sure as fuck didn't belong to him. In fact, there were five more—under the table that had been

lowered. Edward eyed them with disdain; the dog who rested in one of the seats eyed him right back, although without the negativity.

There was no way they'd find space for those six bags. Edward had already filled every nook and cranny of the Sprinter with his own stuff.

"Edward?" a soft, sleepy voice mumbled. "Is that you?"

Leaning back against the little kitchen counter, Edward opened a bottle of water and raised his eyes slightly to the sleeping area. And *shit*, Bella Swan wasn't covered in gore, sweat, and mud anymore. He couldn't see much; the only light came from the small bulb above him, and Bella was under the covers, not counting her head and shoulders.

He saw long, dark hair, messy from sleep, and he saw a gorgeous face and the thin straps of a tank top.

"Your pillow goes the other way," he said gruffly and then chugged his water. Seth, Bella's brother, had it right. Edward could only see his feet.

"I feel less closed in this way," she answered with a small smile. "Is it time to go yet? You can rest—I'll drive."

That sounded appealing, it really did, but he didn't trust easily. He already knew he wouldn't be able to fall asleep up there while she sat behind the wheel. Besides, he didn't like the thought of sharing the mattress with Bella's little brother.

Finally, he looked down and gave a quick shake of his head. "We're leaving in half an hour—I'll rest down here a bit and then I'll drive."

So what if he'd been awake a solid thirty-six hours? That was nothing. After the outbreak, he'd been awake almost a week, aside from a couple hours here and there where he'd dozed off.

"Look," Bella said softly, gracefully jumping down from the bed, "your uncle told me earlier that you can be stubborn, and I think you need to rest. You've all been so nice to us—I'd like to give something back."

Edward didn't answer because...one, she didn't know him enough to assume what was best for him, and...two, he couldn't really speak at the moment.

The young woman in front of him leaning her hip against the side of the closest chair was fucking delectable. He'd been quick to avert his eyes, but a small glance at her was now etched in his mind for-fucking-ever.

Bella Swan was a voluptuous little thing, and she was only wearing that tight tank top and a pair of...what looked like boxers. She was short and had innocence written all over her face, but her body screamed woman. Tits, hips, ass...

God probably made her knowing she'd be the most gorgeous goddamn cocktease.

"Can I at least make you something to eat?" she asked next, and Edward was pretty sure there was a little frustration in her voice, though she did a good job masking it. "Seth and I have plenty of food—"

"So do we," he grunted.

He needed to leave, but Bella was in the way. Since he knew the water tank in the Sprinter was empty, he'd washed off the night's grime outside, and he'd also changed into a pair of jeans and a wife-beater. He didn't need more than that while inside the van, and they had hours on the road ahead of them. In other words, he didn't have an excuse to go outside.

Well... "I'm gonna get some air." After all, the early mornings in Tampa were sorta pretty. It wasn't too hot yet, and it was quiet. Besides, maybe the fresh air would help him stay awake.

As he took a step toward the door, Bella moved onto one of the seats and Edward was able to get out.

He felt exposed without his guns; Uncle Tony had taken them to clean them out. He'd said it probably wasn't a good idea for Edward to have all those guns in the Sprinter before they'd found a good spot for them. Because earlier, Edward had just kept them spread out on the table or the counter. But that wasn't gonna work with a kid in there. Granted, Edward still had a stash of handguns in the glove box, and Uncle Tony knew that, because as much as adults still wanted to protect children from guns and violence, they lived in a new world.

Regardless, Uncle T saw a difference between a few hidden handguns and an axe with blood and gore.

"Thought you were gonna sleep, bro." That was Alec, and he was sitting in the doorway of his on RV the next spot over. Several guns were laid out on towels on the ground, and Alec was cleaning out his rifle, hands greasy from the gun oil.

Edward didn't reply. Instead he grabbed one of the plastic lawn chairs they'd "borrowed" from Walmart and sat down near his brother. Across the parking lot, he could see Jasper and Jacob guarding the opening in the fence. The last shift before they left.

Looking around him, Edward saw a few people in their group getting ready for departure. Carmen and Esme were taking down clothes that they'd washed from a nylon line strung between two RVs—it reminded him of his own filthy clothes that he kept in a duffle under the Sprinter.

He'd have to bring them in before they left.

"So, you're forty now. Happy birthday." Alec shot him a smirk.

Edward offered a dip of his chin as thanks or...acknowledgment, and lit up a smoke, the last one from the pack. Good thing he'd hidden another twenty cartons under the floorboards in the Sprinter.

"Do you think someone will charge you by the word?" Alec laughed. "You can speak, you know."

"Damn," Edward muttered and slapped his thigh. "You coulda told me sooner."

Alec rolled his eyes. "I swear to Christ, Ed. That's the only language you're fluent in—sarcasm."

"Yeah, *me non hablo Ingles*," Edward chuckled and took a drag from his smoke.

Alec grinned lazily. "Evidently you don't *habla Español*, either."

Edward shrugged and said nothing. The morning was too peaceful to ruin with words. The sun was slowly coming up, painting the sky in purples, pinks, and oranges. The only thing missing was a cup of coffee with a Snickers bar in it.

And maybe that blowjob I wished for.

But he was too tired to make coffee, too lazy to go inside and raid his candy stash, and...he didn't have a woman to get on her knees for him.

Behind him, Edward heard the door to his Sprinter open and close. Before he could even look over his shoulder, the Swan woman appeared and dragged another lawn chair to them. She plopped down with a little huff, causing her tits to jiggle. She was still dressed in those barely-there clothes; only now she had a blanket over her shoulders.

The man whose birthday it was today wouldn't mind a little something from her. Which made him feel like a fucking creeper. She was what, twenty? Twenty-five at the most? Damn, he could've been her father.

"What a pretty sight this morning." Alec winked at her.

Edward scowled.

Bella yawned and pulled up her feet, resting her chin on her knees. "I'd forgotten how hot it gets in an RV. But I suppose opening a window isn't allowed."

No. They generally didn't do that. A walker only carried little over half the strength of a human, but they didn't get tired. They could walk and struggle forever. So, a vehicle was safe, but for how long?

Walkers couldn't climb, either, which meant it was probably okay to crack open the windows in the Sprinter that were higher up, but what happened if there was more than one flesh-eater and they suddenly piled up? That's why they kept all windows closed unless they were driving.

"We'll air out when we leave." Edward stubbed out his smoke and scratched his jaw; he was getting used to the beard, but it still bothered him sometimes. Before the outbreak, he shaved once or twice a week, so he definitely wasn't a stranger to scruff. But he'd have to shave soon, 'cause his beard now was probably half an inch in length. And in the Florida humidity? Forget about it.

"Is there anything I can do?" Bella looked around her. "I feel bad just sitting around doing nothing."

"Maybe you can give our birthday boy here some coffee." Alec slapped his hand down on Edward's shoulder and squeezed. "He's always grumpy, but it's even worse before coffee."

Bella straightened a little and faced Edward. "It's your birthday?"

Edward inclined his head, but as was common, he didn't comment. The smile that lit up Bella's face made him want to, though. 'Cause that was fucking beautiful.

The smile turned wistful, and she sighed. "I used to love birthdays." She was quick to shake the melancholy, then she stood up. "All right. Coffee, the least I can do. How do you like it?"

Edward really fucking wanted that coffee, so he said, "Black with one Snickers bar." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "There's a box in the cabinet next to the fridge. Wait—take a Milky Way instead." Milky Ways were a little sweeter since they didn't have the peanuts, and Edward was in that mood. "And the coffee is over there by the fire." He pointed to the fire closest to the Whitlocks' bus. "There's a pot that says water on the side—just use that one." Edward didn't particularly go for instant coffee, but it was what they had for now.

Bella giggled but didn't question his coffee habits and went to work, and by the time she returned fifteen minutes later, people were starting to leave their RVs.

"Coffee and a Milky Way bar." She handed it to Edward with a small grin on her face.

He nodded in thanks, unwrapped the candy bar, and dipped it in his mug. Meanwhile, Alec and Bella were watching in amusement, which did *not* amuse Edward.

So, he took a walk.

~oOo~

Hours later, they'd been on the road for quite some time, and Bella was biting her tongue to keep from suggesting that Edward should go to bed. She sat in the passenger seat, one eye on the Kindle in her hands, too frustrated to focus fully.

She also wanted to ask if it was okay to plug in the travel charger she'd borrowed, but Edward Cullen intimidated her. She figured it was best to direct that question to someone else.

Esme Platt, a woman in her mid-fifties, was sweeter than sugar. Rose, Esme's seventeen-year-old niece...not so much. Rose was a brat; however, Bella had learned in the span of fifteen minutes last night that Rose was the one you went to when you needed to charge your iStuff...and Kindles. They were Rose's chargers—that she'd stolen from some Radio Shack or whatever it was.

Bella had thrown away her cell phone long ago. It held no photos and it wasn't like there was any reception. Phone lines were down, TVs showed static—if you had electricity—no more internet...they'd literally been thrown back in time. The only juice came from car batteries. And, Bella supposed, those lucky bastards who knew what the whole solar panel business was about probably had electricity, too.

The battery symbol at the upper corner of her Kindle showed that little flash of lightening when she went to pick another book, but she kept quiet. She was already resolved to ask Rose and Esme if she could charge her device in their RV later. They shared one with a woman named Carmen Hernandez; she was in her late-forties, Bella guessed, and was just as nice and motherly as Esme.

Bella smiled ruefully to herself when a message popped up on her Kindle—*Please connect wirelessly to download the latest Special Offers*—if only, huh?

With a soft sigh, she turned off the e-reader and tucked it into a pocket in the car door. She felt restless and unwelcome. Edward sat all casual-like, one arm resting by the open window and one hand on the wheel, eyes forward. He looked sorta relaxed, but Bella could see the way his jaw ticked with tension every now and then, and how his fingers sometimes tightened around the wheel.

Some nice birthday he was having.

Pondering for a while, Bella suddenly had an idea. It could be a peace offering slash birthday gift, and since Alice and Lauren had told her what their journey was all about, Bella knew it was something Edward could find useful. So, she left her seat and quickly located the duffel bag she was after.

"Sis?" Seemed like Seth was waking up overhead.

"Yeah?" Bella rummaged through the duffel and found what she was looking for. In a moment of doubt, she figured the group she was traveling with had already thought of this, but...it would still work better than anything else, right? It was something lasting—something that could give more than once.

"Where are we?" Seth yawned, not leaving the bed. "And, um, can you..." He trailed off, not wanting to reveal anything around Edward, but Bella understood.

"We passed Ocala a while ago," she said softly while she looked for Seth's medicine. "We had to stop and clear the way a couple times, but it went all right."

Near larger car wrecks—often close to exits—there were usually more walkers in search of food, but this had only been a few deserted cars

blocking the road, so there hadn't been any living monsters—just dead ones.

It had *not* been lovely having to dig through the remains of a zombie to find the keys to a car they'd needed to move to clear the way.



Bella had only done it because she'd spotted a key ring in the walker's split mouth. But it had been successful. She'd found the rest of the keys in the walker's stomach after tearing it open with a knife. Then she'd received a high five from Lauren, a look from Alec that said he was impressed, the same expression from Edward—though, he'd been quick to hide it behind a scowl—and...well, some gagging from Alice Whitlock.

After that, it had gone smoothly. Edward and Tony had even located two more sets of keys that walkers had gobbled down.



There hadn't been many monsters to search through, and it went a hell of a lot faster than towing the vehicles, which cost them invaluable gas.

"Here ya go, sweetie." Bella reached up and discreetly gave her little brother the pill bottle. "I'll be in the front if you need me."

With her peace offering in a pencil case, she returned to the passenger seat and tried to work up the guts to speak to the grouch beside her. *Handsome* grouch, she amended internally. Very handsome. Rough around the edges...like some sexy lumberjack. The only thing missing was the flannel shirt, really.

Edward had gruffness in spades. Stubble that was long enough to be considered a beard. He was muscular, too—*very* evident now since he was only wearing jeans and a beater. A tattoo covered his right shoulder—or maybe it was many small tattoos? Some silver at his temples and some in his scruff. Which made Bella wonder just how old he turned today. He was most likely closer to forty than thirty, anyway.

You're scoping out some old dude in the middle of a zombie apocalypse?

Bella made a face at herself and looked out her window.

She wasn't...*scoping* anything. It was just...she missed being close to someone at times. She and her brother had been on the run, just the two of them, since the outbreak, and...God, she was tired. She was *aching* for someone to tell her things were gonna be okay. Even if it was a lie. Someone who'd comfort, support, and help her.

As it was now, she was responsible for Seth's life, and it was taking its toll on her. They had a plan: get back to Kansas City and look for Dad, but it was easier said than done. The world as they knew it had collapsed too fucking quickly, and it was frightening how animalistic everyone became.

More often than not, Bella and Seth found themselves hiding instead of moving forward.

All this chaos in the world made her crave comfort.

Was that so weird?

Doubt you'll find comfort in a man who seems to hate people.

How true. But it wouldn't suck to at least get the man talkin'. Some conversation, even if it was about the damn weather, would lighten Bella's mood. So, it was time to kiss ass, then.

"Um, I got something for you," she said uncomfortably and shifted in her seat. "A...a peace offering, I guess—a thanks for letting me and Seth..." The rest of those words died on her tongue.

Edward slid her a sideways glance, but that was it. The interstate was clear of rubble, not a walker in sight, yet he focused so hard on the road. Well, good for him...or something.

Like pulling teeth.

"Here." Before she lost her nerves, she stuck the pencil case in one of the drink holders under the stereo. "It's just—" she became flustered at the lack of response—"nothing." Her shoulders slumped. "It's nothing." She was giving up way too soon, but she felt vulnerable and she couldn't help it.

The silence dragged on for a while, and she didn't say a word when Edward snatched up the pencil case and placed it on his thigh.

With his left hand grasping the wheel, he used his right one to unzip the case.

He looked through the contents for quite a while, long enough for Bella to regret everything.

Long enough for her to feel the need to explain herself. "I thought it could help you in Alaska. I mean...money isn't exactly the currency anymore, and we don't have any guns left." She was babbling. "I hope water won't be a problem for you to find up there, and I bet there's plenty of wildlife, so..."

That left vegetables and berries. Seeds for growing them, anyway. Bella had stolen tons of little bags in thought of a future. Once she and Seth found their father, they needed to find someplace safe and settle down. If such a place existed.

"I'm sure you guys have already thought of this, but I figured some more couldn't hurt?" Christ, this was painful. So, she shut up. Abruptly. And looked out the window again.

A few beats later, Edward cleared his throat, returned the pencil case to the drink holder, and lit up a cigarette. "Thank you." His voice was quiet.

Bella nodded jerkily, exhaled, and kept her eyes averted.

Seth saved her from more awkwardness shortly after, and the two headed to the dining area instead for some poker. They also pushed in the bed as far as it went to give more space overhead. Bella had already seen how Edward had to duck otherwise.

Halfway into the second game, Uncle Tony's voice filtered through in the walkie, and it was decided to pull over for lunch. Ever since they left Tampa that morning, they'd driven in the same order. First Uncle Tony in a Jeep Wrangler, Liam Dwyer in Edward's truck, the Whitlocks in their bus, Carmen and Esme with her niece in their RV, then this one... Behind them were the McCartys, then the Smiths and Newtons, then Jacob Black in

another Mercedes Sprinter, Royce King in a Land Rover, and lastly, Alec in the last RV. It was one helluva caravan of RVs and other trucks—and the Cullens were strategically spread out to keep track of everybody.

"Can your brother handle a gun?" Edward asked as he pulled over to the side of the road.

"I'm sitting right here," Seth whispered, only for Bella to hear.

The two siblings exchanged quick grins, then Bella said, "Yeah, he's really good, but we don't have any guns left." Only one blade each and Bella's big wrench.

It was a pity, considering their father had taught them to use firearms early. Charlie Swan always preached about the respect you needed, the knowledge, and so on.

Edward didn't say another word, but he did give them two Glockes before he left the vehicle.

"Was that his way of saying he gives a crap?" Seth chuckled.

Bella sighed, a small smirk tugging at her lips. "Nah, too soon for that. Come on—" she stood up, ready to leave the Sprinter for a while "—let's get something to eat. I don't know how they do it around here, so be prepared to share what we have with the group." That said, she grabbed one of the two duffles of food they had and walked out into the sun.

All vehicles stood parked close together at the side of the deserted road, and while Uncle Tony gave out orders to some of the men to stand guard, some of the woman gathered outside the Whitlocks' bus to start lunch.

Camping grills came out; apparently a few of the guys had gone fishing yesterday before Bella and Seth had joined the group, so it was grilled fish and biscuits for lunch.

Bella offered the food she and Seth had, but she was shushed by Lauren and Esme.

"Save that for you and your brother, hon." Lauren squeezed her arm and made room so Bella could help chop up some fruit for later. "We've got plenty of food, and some of it is gonna be bad before we even reach Tennessee."

More than happy to help, Bella sat down next to Lauren and started slicing apples.

"So..." Lauren nudged her. "Everyone's got a story. What's yours?"

"Bella, can I go over there?" Seth wasn't interested in girl talk. He'd rather get to know Liam and Jacob some more, 'cause they were closer to his age. Okay, so they were in their early twenties, but whatever.

"Sure, just make sure you stay close so I can see you." Bella tried to not show her anxiety and focused on Lauren's question instead. She had no intention of turning this into a sob fest, because everyone had lost loved ones in the past two months. "Um, my little sister—Leah—went to college in Tampa." She swallowed past the emotions. "Seth, our mom, and I went down one weekend to visit."

And it had all gone downhill so quickly. It happened on the news first, and nobody really thought it was gonna affect them, but then the lockdown began. Everyone was to stay indoors and the military patrolled the streets. But there was never any real sense of order. People wanted answers; they weren't gonna stay at home without knowing why.

"We lost Mom and Leah when we tried to find food." *And medicine for Seth.* She cleared her throat. "It's been Seth and me since then, and we wanna get back to Dad in Kansas City." If he was still alive. "What about

you?" The only thing she knew was Lauren was Alice Whitlock's cousin. Younger cousin. Bella guessed she was in her late twenties.

"I lived in Orlando," Lauren said. "Jasper and Alice wanted to bring the kids down here—Disney and all..." She rolled her eyes and grinned. "So, they flew down from Dallas, where Jasper's family's from, and..." Yeah. And then it all went straight to hell. "We're lucky, though." Lauren sobered. "I was never close to anyone in my family—neither was Alice—and Jasper's parents died a couple years ago. He's got a brother in Seattle, but that's about it."

Glancing over her shoulder, Bella saw Beth and Alexander, Jasper and Alice's two kids. Beth was the oldest at thirteen, Lauren told her, and Alex was ten.

Emmett and Angela McCarty also had a kid—an eight-year-old daughter named Bree. And as if that wasn't enough, Bella learned that Angela was five months pregnant.

"How're you liking the Cullens?" Lauren asked next, this time quietly and with a knowing smile on her face.

Bella wasn't about to badmouth anyone, so she gave a bullshit answer about the last Cullen. "Uncle Tony's like a badass sweetheart—funny, too—Alec...he's great." She hadn't been around these people for long, so she couldn't exactly go more in-depth at this point. "And Edward...um, he's letting us stay in his RV, so..."

Lauren snorted in amusement. "Yeah, he's a real peach, isn't he?"

Bella's mouth quirked up, but she didn't say anything else on the matter.

~oOo~

A couple days later, they found themselves in a similar situation: on the side of the road, back on the I-75 after being forced out on the smaller roads for a day, and making lunch. Only, now they were in Georgia, and everyone was antsy as fuck.

It had been too easy.

Killing walkers and clearing the way from blocking cars...all that was a given, but there was usually even more: thieves, rapists, murderers... After the outbreak, more people ignored laws.

"Here's your lunch, Edward." Bella held out a plate for the man who insisted on staying awake too much. Yesterday, he had allowed Bella to drive the Sprinter for six hours; it was the only time Bella had seen Edward sleep more than those ridiculous power naps he took every now and then.

Edward didn't accept the plate, though. He was staring into his binoculars, not moving an inch.

Bella was in no mood to deal with Edward's silence today. It was too fucking hot out, not even a small breeze, and they were too close to Atlanta to stop now. They were south of Macon, more accurately, approximately ninety miles outside of Atlanta. And it'd been Alice, Angela, Jess, and Charlotte who'd wanted to stay here for lunch.

Bella was about to turn back, but Edward spoke up then. Quietly. "Tell me what you see." He held out the binoculars for her.

Confused, Bella took them, set down Edward's plate on the ground, and peered into the binoculars.

She saw nothing at first. The heat of the early day was liquid along the road, making everything blurry and wobbly. But the longer she stared, the more distinct the movements became.

"Holy shit," she breathed out.

"I'd say there are over fifty of them," Edward muttered. "Fuckin' herd."

Walkers. Too many of them. Coming this way.



3.

Macon, Georgia

June 22nd, 2013

2 months and 16 days since the outbreak

After quickly talking things through with Uncle Tony and Alec, Edward took Bella aside.

"Do we have everything we need in the Sprinter?" he asked, keeping his voice low. "I mean water, food, guns..."

Bella frowned, confused, but answered nonetheless. "You know we do. I refilled the water tanks this morning."

Edward gave a nod. "Good. Then I suggest you go inside."

"Wait, what?" Bella's eyes widened. "You Cullens are *not* going up against fifty zombies!" she whisper-shouted.

She was pretty sure she'd seen the beginning of a smile on Edward's lips, but he killed it too quickly.

"No. We're not. I'm giving you a head start to take whatever you need and get your ass in that van." He pointed to the Sprinter. "We have to let the rotters pass. We'll lose too much gas if we're gonna drive back and find another way."

"How—" she swallowed her fear "—how long do you think it'll be?"

Edward scratched his beardy jaw and looked up the road, in the direction of the walkers that were heading toward them. "They'll smell us when they get here. They'll probably stick around for a while and chew on everything that carries human scent."

The rest of the day was granted, but what the hell did Edward really know? He didn't like this either, but there were too many to kill and too many to run down. The Wrangler, the Sierra, and the Land Rover were probably good for it, but the Whitlocks' bus? Fuck no.

"Walkers!" somebody shouted.

Edward's head snapped up and he saw that Jasper had alerted everyone. Only, he hadn't alerted them to the walkers up the road; he had warned them about a group of five or six rotters coming up from the woods.

Fuck.

Edward spat out a curse and gripped Bella's arm. "Get inside that van—*now.*" Then he pulled out his axe and his Sig, the gun with a silencer, 'cause the undead chased noise.

"Everybody inside!" Alec bellowed and joined Edward.

One flesh-eater closed in on Edward, snarling and rasping. One of its arms was all but torn off, hanging in shreds.

With a grunt, Edward swung his axe and let it tear into the walker's head.

"Alexander!" Alice shrieked for her son. "Get in here NOW!"

"Seth!" Edward heard Bella shout.

"Your two o'clock, Alec," Edward growled before aiming his Sig at another one.

"Got it," Alec grunted.

"For Christ's sake, Rose!" Bella yelled, and when Edward turned, he saw her at the edge of the woods, ramming that big wrench of hers into the skull of a zombie.

Edward's heart squeezed at the sight of yet another walker advancing, but it was heading toward Rose, who was stupidly moving away from the highway, into the woods. Bella was following, now with a knife in her other hand. And before the woman could give Edward a fucking heart attack, she jammed the knife into the walker's neck and twisted upward, blood gushing out of the rotter's mouth.



She was fucking spectacular, Edward thought, and he *almost* grinned when Bella lashed out at Rose. "If there's a goddamn zombie heading toward you, you do *not* move away from the group, and you do *not* keep your mouth shut!" Bella delivered a final glare at Rose before Esme dragged her freaked-out niece to their RV. "God," Bella muttered as she returned to the highway, "friggin' teenagers."

Worry and amusement spiked through Edward as he turned away again and shot down two walkers near him and Alec.

One by one, the undead dropped and became dead—once and for all.

"Time you head in, boys!" Uncle Tony barked out. "I'll take the dog."

When the two brothers faced their uncle, they saw what he was pointing at. The herd of walkers was getting closer and closer.

Alec and Edward nodded to each other, and then they headed for their RVs.

Bella was waiting for Edward in the doorway of the Sprinter, gun raised, both fear and determination in her eyes, and she quickly backed farther into the vehicle to let Edward enter. First, he placed his bloodied axe on the ground, under the Sprinter, behind a tire. He didn't want it reeking in the van now that they weren't allowed to open any windows.

Speaking of windows...Bella had already covered the three windows in the front. The others were too high up for walkers to look in.

"You okay?" she asked as she washed gore off her hands in the small sink.

Edward had already placed her in the same category as Lauren Brandon. They were strong enough to defend themselves, and they didn't shriek or wail like the other women—at least not without good reason. But...Bella was different; Edward didn't like the way his chest tightened when Bella was the one fighting the rotters.

He nodded once and grabbed a bottle of water. "Where's your brother?"

"With Liam and Jacob." Bella didn't like that, Edward could tell. "He wanted to, and..." She made a face. "I didn't exactly have time to pull him away."

Edward shrugged and sat down in the driver's seat, but he swiveled it around to face the table, and Bella sat down across from him. "He'll be safe with Dwyer and Black."

Seth would probably have more fun there, too. Dwyer and Black were basically kids, and they had dirty magazines, gaming devices, and a candy stash even larger than Edward's.

They were quiet for a while after that, and they listened to Uncle Tony who spoke to everyone through a walkie; he was giving out orders. No one was allowed to leave their vehicles. The walkers could smell a human easily, so all windows were to remain shut. No moving around. Be quiet. Just sit tight.

Bella chewed on her lip, looking worried, and Edward watched as she grabbed the walkie. "Seth?" It crackled some and her brother responded before Bella spoke again. "Do you have everything you need?" She was being cryptic.

"*Yeah, sis.*" Edward was sure he'd heard frustration in Seth's voice. In his opinion, the kid should be grateful his sister gave a fuck. "*I have a few.*"

"*All right, folks,*" Uncle Tony said. "*Radio silence.*"

After double-checking that all doors were locked, Edward kicked off his boots, grabbed his water, a can of lukewarm Pepsi, a couple candy bars, and swiftly pulled out the bed overhead. He dumped his snacks and drinks in one of the side pockets, then rolled out the mattress and got comfortable on it. His plan was to be on the lookout for a bit and then catch some sleep.

"Is there room for one more up there, Grumpy?" Bella asked.

Edward scowled to himself and moved over, keeping his gaze trained on the small window on his side. "You're naming me after one of the fucking dwarfs?" he muttered and narrowed his eyes at the herd of walkers getting closer. It would only be a few minutes until they were here. "Who would that make you—Happy?"

"Sleepy," Bella deadpanned and hopped up. "As in, I'm tired. And could you please lose the jeans? You've got zombie on them."

Edward rolled his eyes, pushed down his jeans, then pulled out a pair of sweats from another side pocket, pulled those on, and dropped the jeans down on the floor below them. Fucking women. It was only a small bloodstain. Christ.

"I'm surprised you know Disney characters," Bella added teasingly.

She talked way too much, and she wasn't even considered chatty by normal standards. However, Edward's standards were different.

"My niece—" Edward stopped abruptly, no desire to go down that road. He glared at nothing. "Never mind. And it's Grimm. Not fucking Disney. Now, shut up."

Bella shut up.

And shortly after that, the crowd of walkers reached their vehicles.

Fifty of them didn't come close. More like seventy-five or a hundred.

"They know we're here," Bella whispered, squeezing her eyes shut. For once, she had her head farthest in, and she was on her back, refusing to look out the tiny window by her feet.

The Sprinter swayed a few inches from side to side as the walkers surrounded them. They heard the moaning and groaning, the clawing and thudding.

"You know that's not true." Edward was watching as a group of walkers tried to climb onto the Wrangler.

Uncle Tony was in that thing, the dog too, but Edward couldn't see for shit. Since the windows were covered and the Jeep had a bunch of protrusions the walkers could use as steps, it didn't take long before it was completely buried under undeads.

"They smell us, but once our scent clears from outside, they'll move on." Leaning over the edge, Edward reached down and snatched up the walkie from the table beneath. "You okay in there, T?" he whispered.

"*We're fine.*" That was a whimpered reply from Alice Whitlock. "*Oh sorry, I thought you meant us.*"

"*Shut up,*" Uncle Tony bitched quietly. "*I'm doing my crossword puzzle.*"

Edward cracked a grin, and it was all he needed to relax. Pulling down the small screen over the window, he rolled over onto his back and hoped the swaying could lull him to sleep.

"You don't look freaked out," Bella whispered in a rush.

Edward didn't open his eyes, too tired. "I'm not."

"Oh." She shifted so she wasn't facing his feet anymore, and she purposely looked away from her own window; instead she settled on Edward's face—not that he knew. "So, there's no reason at all to be afraid?"

"Jesus Christ, you really gotta talk, kid?"

Bella bit her tongue at that remark. *Kid*. For fuck's sake.

Tucking her hands under her head, she closed her eyes and tried not to think about the monsters outside that wanted to eat her. When she'd been alone with Seth, there had been no room for fear, and when she was in the middle of a fight, adrenaline stopped her from freaking out. But now...ugh, she needed to woman up, dammit—show she wasn't a fucking *kid*. She knew the walkers couldn't claw through metal, and since they were pushing at the vehicles from all angles, it wasn't like the Sprinter was about to tip over.

Walkers didn't exactly cooperate or use their brains.

They only ate them.

Eventually, Bella managed to fall asleep, though it was long after Edward had dozed off.

The heat was unbearable, so clothes were kicked off. Bella ended up in a bra and panties, Edward in his boxers, but this was no time for ogling. Whenever Edward was startled awake by a particularly loud snarl from the outside, or a shove to the RV with a little extra force in it, he focused on the window—nothing else. At times, he also checked in with the others, and aside from Jacob Black who needed to take a shit but had nowhere to go, it was all fine.

Bella had woken up when Jacob had voiced his complaint, and Edward had explained to her that their Sprinter didn't have a bathroom. It wasn't like Edward's at all. It was more like a standard van.

Then they'd fallen asleep once more, and it became comfortable when the sun started to set.

~oOo~

Sometime around midnight, Edward came out of the little bathroom after taking a piss, washing up, and brushing his teeth to find Bella curled up in a little ball on the table. He was tired and craving a fucking smoke, so the last thing he wanted to deal with was a scared woman.

He was also wound up tightly, having woken up wrapped around Bella. His cock had been painfully hard against her stomach, and those luscious tits of hers had been pressed to his chest. And with so little clothes between them...

"They're climbing on top of each other out there," Bella whispered, trembling. "They're on the roof."

Edward eyed the small window above them, by Bella's side of the bed, and wondered why the hell she hadn't pulled down the screen if she couldn't handle looking out.

He reached up and pulled it down, glad he'd done the same in the bathroom earlier.

"I swear I'm usually not this whiny, I just..." Bella swallowed hard, and Edward could see the disdain she held for herself. He had witnessed her strength, so he believed her words, but she was still being a pain in the ass right now. A sexy pain in the ass wearing nothing but underwear, for Christ's sake. "I'm sorry—I'm just a tad claustrophobic."

Awesome, Edward thought dryly.

"Do you want a Valium?" he asked.

Then maybe I can call you Dopey.

Since Angela McCarty was so fond of popping pills, even though she was pregnant, the Cullens kept their own stash of meds, and some of them were right here in Edward's Sprinter.

"God—no." Bella scoffed, seemingly at herself. "I'll..." She blew out a breath and made a move to return to the bed. "I'll try to fall asleep or something."

Edward shrugged to himself, and he was done down here, too. He followed Bella, not opposed to get some more sleep as well. Nothing much else to do around here, anyway.

With his head farthest in, he lay down on his back and frowned slightly at the movement on the roof outside. He wasn't worried about anything getting in, but he had been hoping the walkers would've surrendered by now—that the human scent wasn't lingering anymore.

"I could use a distraction," Bella mumbled next to him.

Edward closed his eyes and gritted his teeth.

Will the woman ever shut the fuck up?

She muttered something else, something about "probable rejection," but Edward didn't catch all of it, nor did he give a shit, and then it didn't matter. Because when he opened his eyes next, Bella's face was two inches from his—before there was no distance at all. She lowered her mouth and kissed him, shocking the ever-loving crap outta him; in fact, he was stunned into immobility.

Bella's lips were soft yet firm, and they moved against his with a hint of begging.

His body caved first—too fucking quickly for his own liking—and while his mouth started to respond, his mind shut down.

A distraction, the girl had asked for.

He could probably give her that.

Cock hardening in his boxers, a low groan escaped him and he rolled them over so he was on top. It was a tight fit up here, but he kinda liked the way they were pressed together. All right, all right, "kinda" was a goddamn understatement. Her body was sinful, and right now Edward wanted drive into that sin over and fucking over.

He kissed her hungrily, sliding his tongue with hers, and his hands roamed her sexy body. Without asking, his right hand slipped underneath the flimsy fabric of her panties, and he found her slick and hot. With his other hand, he was quick to flick off her bra.

Fucking hell.

It was dark both in here and outside, but the moonlight filtering through the small cracks in the screens were enough for Edward to see pale skin and generous curves moving under him.

"More," she whimpered quietly.

"Don't get clingy after this." *Whatta gentleman.* Edward nearly cracked a grin at himself. "Christ—so wet."

The hungry kiss turned bruising; he found himself turned on beyond words, needy as fuck, and so hard that the skin around his cock was tighter than ever before.

"Push down my boxers," he muttered into the kiss, outta breath. Perspiration beaded on his forehead, but at least it was cooler now than earlier today. "Oh, yeah." His quiet moan was in response to two things: Bella freeing him from his underwear, and his middle finger sliding deep inside of her.

"Fuck me," she breathed out.

He nodded and dropped his forehead to her shoulder, panting heavily and unable to quit moaning for this young girl. He could say something cheesy, like they were contributing to the Sprinter's swaying, but...Edward didn't use many words unless it was necessary, now did he? Instead he just pulled down her panties, sucked her juices off his finger, then gripped the base of his thick cock and pushed forward.

Good fucking *God*. Being inside her...along with her flavor on his tongue...it was difficult to hold back. She was warm, wet, and deliciously stretched around him. The way she pleaded for more through shallow whispers only fueled his need.

Edward fucked her deeply, hooking her feet together behind his ass. When a loud thump sounded on the roof and Bella stiffened, he only went harder, deeper.

"Focus on me, Bella," he whispered and kissed her. "Nothing else. All right?" He cupped her cheek and nipped at her soft bottom lip. She nodded with a small jerk. "Just my mouth, my fingers, my cock."

He felt the drawn-out shiver that ran through her, felt how she melted into him, and felt how her chest heaved with rapid breaths.

He heard how slick she was whenever he moved; his cock was soaked in her, and it got even wetter when he rubbed her clit. Dipping down, he also paid attention to her tits, and Christ, did he fucking adore those bad boys. They were soft and round, so full—he didn't call himself a breast man for nothing.

"So good," she cried out, then bit his shoulder to muffle her sounds. As much as Edward wanted to hear her—for once—it was probably smart to keep it down.

"Yeah." He breathed in deep through his nose, smelling their combined arousal, then exhaled in a groan. He could already feel his release approaching, his balls tightening and tingling in warning. That same tingling applied to his spine, the way small sensations ran down toward his middle, causing his gut to clench. He closed his eyes, struggling to withhold his climax.

"Tell me when you're close," she gasped, arching into him.

They exchanged a look of understanding and agreement.

No birth control, no protection...

"I fucking am," he grunted.

"Good—roll us over."

He did, not knowing why, though he got his answer right away. With a tight grip on her ass, they both rolled her hips over his stiff cock, and Bella's breaths came out choppy each time his pelvis rubbed against her clit. Jesus, she was sexy.

"Now—you hold back." Bella's mouth latched on to Edward's neck, needy little mewls slipping through her lips, and she fell apart completely.

It was fucking torture for Edward to hold back; she felt too damn amazing when she orgasmed and pulsed around his dick. Goose bumps rose on his skin, and his abs clenched to the max.

When Bella collapsed on top of him, he was desperate.

"Fuck," he growled. "Jack me off, Bella." If she didn't wrap her fingers around his cock soon, he was gonna explode. What he *really* wanted was to come inside her, but they didn't have to tempt fate further.

"No way," she giggled breathlessly and slid down his body. She hummed and settled on her knees next to him, her face close to his rock-hard erection. "Don't you want my mouth instead?"

Edward nodded quickly and held his breath, afraid she was kidding or something cruel like that. But she wasn't. Bella wrapped her soft lips around the head of him before taking him down deeply, and all Edward could do was fist the sheets, bite the inside of his cheek to keep quiet, and hope he didn't scream mid-release.

"Oh, *fuck*," he mouthed and screwed his face together. She was too good. She sucked *hard* and made him all slick, and...*shit, shit, shit*, she was literally sucking off her own arousal from him. "*Close*." The word came out all gritty and hoarse.

His entire body tensed up right before the pleasure unleashed inside—he was a fucking goner. The first stream of come coated the roof of Bella's mouth; then she took him deeper, causing the tip to hit the back of her throat. In a couple more pulses, he released in her mouth, leaving Edward all boneless and spent on the mattress.

He was busy regaining his breath while Bella hummed and kissed her way up his body. She finished their little tryst with a kiss on his lips, then dropped down on her back next to him.

"If you wanna go to the bathroom, do it now," Edward panted up at the ceiling.

"Um, why?" She stretched leisurely beside him, purring like a cat. "God, I needed this. So good."

"Cause I need a smoke."

Bella's shoulders shook with silent laughter. "Is that so clever, though? The walkers..."

"If anything, the smell will mask my fucking humanity."

"Well, I don't need to go, and the smell doesn't really bother me, so..."

Bella trailed off, chuckling tiredly. No fear left in her voice whatsoever, Edward noted. She only sounded thoroughly sated, and he hoped she fell asleep before the freaking out returned. "Goodnight."

By the time Edward got back from the bathroom, Bella was snoring softly.

Edward followed quickly, snoring *not* so softly.

~oOo~

The next morning, Edward and Bella sat extra still as they quietly ate a breakfast of sliced peaches, some water, and a couple Slim Jims. Not the best combination, but Edward didn't have too much in the Sprinter that didn't require preparing or cooking.

"I think we can leave," Uncle T whispered over the walkie. *"As far as I can see, only twenty or something are left."*

Emmett's voice filtered through next. *"We have a couple on the roof here."*

"Shouldn't be too hard to shake 'em," Edward muttered and wiped his forehead. The sun was punishing, even this early, and he'd had enough of just sitting around.

And avoiding the awkwardness in here.

But Edward was pretty sure he was causing it, 'cause Bella was all casual.

He was the one who seemingly couldn't stop thinking about their fuck last night.

It irritated him.

~oOo~

Eventually, they got back on the road.

Edward didn't know how it had happened, but Bella—even as the newcomer—had taken charge. As they drove closer and closer to Atlanta, Bella and Lauren were discussing a hunt over the walkies.

It was already planned that Edward, Alec, Mike, and Peter were heading into the city to find Carlisle—and hopefully stock up on gas. In the meantime, their large group was gonna wait outside the city limits. But apparently that wasn't enough for two ballsy women who claimed that there were plenty of farms in the area, and it shouldn't be too presumptuous to promise chicken for dinner.

Uncle T threw in his two cents over his own walkie. *"Girls, I ain't your father, but I will tell you that you're not going alone. And I can't go with you."*

Edward breathed out in relief, though he was still frowning at the mere thought of their little *hunt*.

But the last thing Uncle Tony had said was also true: he couldn't go with them. 'Cause he was gonna stick around and guard with Emmett, Jake, Jasper, and—

"I can go," Royce offered. *"And we can use my Land Rover."*

"I'll join you." And that was Liam Dwyer.

Bella nodded. "Then it's settled."

Edward was suddenly in a pissy mood.

~oOo~

"Why is your father in Atlanta, anyway?" Bella asked as she strapped a gun to her new ankle holster. Edward had certainly piled plenty of guns on her, which was nice.

They were standing outside the Sprinter, and several in their group were getting ready to leave.

"He insisted on staying when we rolled through last month," Edward answered, handing her another gun. "This one has a silencer."

Bella nodded in thanks, then asked more about Carlisle. Like, why the hell he would want to stay alone in a big city that was more than likely full of zombies.

Edward's mouth twitched. "My old man is pretty resourceful. He told us to head down to Florida to check it out—see if things were better there. In meantime, Pop's been scouring Atlanta for meds and checking the CDC." At Bella's raised brow, he added, "He's a doctor. An old army doc, to boot. Trust me, he's fine."

"How do you know?" Bella had to ask. In her periphery, she could see Lauren getting ready to head over. It was time to go. "How can you be sure that's what he's been doing—that he's still okay?"

After all, it wasn't like they had a way to communicate. And it must've been weeks since they last saw—and heard from—Carlisle.

"Call it a gut feeling." Edward shrugged and stuck his hands in the pockets of his army pants. "My pop and Uncle Tony...they always make it." He offered half a smile.

Bella hoped he was right. She also acknowledged that Edward Cullen was even more gorgeous when he smiled. Half-assed as it was. But she wasn't gonna think about that. Edward had been painfully clear: their little fuck had been a release, nothing else. And Bella could deal with that.

She hoped. 'Cause the last thing she needed now was a fucking crush.

"Where will you find him?"

"Emory University Hospital." Edward took a step back to light a cigarette. "We cleared out one section and barricaded every entrance but two before we left."

"You ready, Bella?" Lauren had reached them.

Bella nodded and pulled her hair back into a high ponytail. "Yep."

"Bring the dog," Edward blurted out quickly. "She's good at guarding."

"Oh. Thanks." Bella squinted at the sun and smiled up at him. She was learning that Edward's way of being nice was to offer things to keep her safe. She liked that. "By the way, does the dog have a name?"

Edward frowned. "No. Is that necessary?"

Um, yes.

Bella snorted a chuckle and headed toward Royce's car with Lauren. The dog should definitely have a name. When she was a kid, her dad had brought home an old mutt from the pound, and they had given him a new name. Now, Bella was gonna make sure the German shepherd had one, too.

"Be safe in Atlanta, Edward!" Bella called over her shoulder, amused by that man. Then she linked her arm with Lauren's and grinned. "Let's go hunting."

4.

Atlanta, Georgia

June 23rd, 2013

2 months and 17 days since the outbreak

An hour into the woods outside of Atlanta, Bella, Lauren, Liam, and Royce encountered a large stud farm. There were no signs of humans or rotters, but Bella could, however, see four horses. They were out in the pasture, and they all looked malnourished.

There were also dead horses. Several amongst the four living, and two in a paddock near the stables.

"Screw chicken," Liam said with a smirk, nodding at a chicken coop near the main house. "Now I want hamburger."

Bella bit her tongue to keep from cursing him out. Chickens and pigs were one thing, but to kill a horse? Hell, no. There was no way she could do that. Horses were...in a way, too close to humans. But Bella knew it was a new world; she wouldn't stop Liam from doing...*that*. He'd just have to do it when she wasn't looking.

"Walker by the house, guys," Lauren said.

Royce stopped the Land Rover near the barn and grabbed his rifle.

"No, let me." Bella climbed out of the car and aimed the gun with a silencer. If there were others, they'd follow the sound of a shot. Standing some fifty feet away, she fired the gun and hit the walker in the head.



"Nice." Royce looked impressed.

Bella shrugged. Handling a gun was a must for a Swan. She may have settled down in Kansas City, but she was born in Washington State and her father had taken her fishing and hunting often—even as a kid. Then they'd left Washington when it had become too much for Charlie.

Sue dying had been awful, but also bittersweet. Bella's dad had only ever given his heart to Renee, Bella's mom, but they were too young to work it out. *At first*. So, when Bella was little, she'd been shipped between Washington and wherever Renee lived. Charlie had met Sue, and...Bella would say her dad and Sue had been best friends. Their love was comfortable and easy. And it resulted in Leah and Seth.

Two years after Sue had died of cancer, Charlie had had it. He needed to live again.

Renee had been living in Kansas City. She had matured. So had Charlie. And they fell in love all over again, Renee taking on the role as a mother to Leah and Seth.

They were a happy family until the outbreak.

Renee and Leah were dead.

Charlie was... *Dad has to be alive.*

Shaking her head, Bella snapped back to the present. They were here to find fresh meat, perhaps a gun or two, and check for gas. She let out a whistle, and the dog joined her.

~oOo~

"Well, this is disturbing," Alec noted and pulled over by the curb. They were safe inside his Wrangler, but the minute they got out... "Pops better be safe in there."

Edward counted at least twenty walkers in the big garden-like park in front of Emory University Hospital.

Driving into Atlanta had been hell. The undead moved in droves, often forcing Alec to pick another route. But at least they hadn't run into humans. They were almost worse, especially since the Wrangler kept the four men safe from walkers.

"If we plan on getting out, we should move now." Edward pointed in a few directions where rotters were slowly heading toward them. "Alec, you'll stay in the car."

Alec frowned. "Since when do you speak that much? And why should I stay—"

"Because by the time we get back, this car will probably be surrounded," Edward said impatiently. "When you see us coming out, drive toward us. Mike and Peter, you're with me."

It was a sound plan, so the three of them checked their guns and left the vehicle.

Alec sulked in silence.

Edward took the lead, moving soundlessly across the park that had seen better days, and Mike and Peter followed.

Not wanting to cause hysteria or make too much noise, they only killed the walkers who got in their paths. They used weapons that killed silently; Edward swung his axe, Mike had two blades, and Peter favored his gun with a silencer.

"Oh, that's fuckin' nasty," Pete muttered, shooting a walker that was reaching for them blindly, as its eyes had been gouged out.

"Hurry up." Edward moved faster, and they soon reached one of the two entrances that weren't barricaded. "Keep an eye out." He opened the heavy door, gun raised and axe accessible, and poked his head into the old, darkened building.

It appeared empty, but one could never be careful. As agreed upon before the Cullens had split up, Edward let out two quick, sharp whistles, adrenaline coursing through him. In the darkness, his senses heightened, and he ordered Peter to guard the door.

The last thing he wanted was to leave a man alone, but they needed the light the outside provided.

Again, he let out two whistles, hoping his father would hear him. Because it would be close to impossible to search the entire hospital wing; they needed Carlisle to come forward instead.

By now, Edward and Mike were farther down the hall, so when Pete patiently told them that more rotters were beginning to gather, the sound echoed down the hallway.

"This is just great," Mike grumbled. "Why couldn't your dad be hiding in a house—or an apartment? It'd be a lot easier to find him."

Edward didn't answer.

In a house or an apartment, Carlisle wouldn't find morphine and antibiotics, end of fucking story.

Making a swift go-faster motion with his finger, Edward headed down the hall toward a set of doors, and that's when he heard a hollow tapping noise. He stopped short and quickly whistled again, to which the tapping sounded once more.

Thank Christ. "That you, Pops?" he asked, cocking his head toward the sound. With the echoes, he didn't know exactly where the tapping had come from, but he guessed it was behind those doors.

"No," a quiet voice replied, causing Edward and Mike to stiffen. It was definitely coming from the other side of the doors, and Edward gripped his gun a little tighter. *"But I can take you to him."*

Heart in his throat, Edward stopped breathing and watched as the door slowly opened, a sliver of candlelight widening to reveal the silhouette of...what the fuck? A fuckin' kid?

He couldn't be more than ten years old.

Said kid tilted his head, curious. "Are you Alec or Edward?"

Edward narrowed his eyes, both relieved to have it confirmed that his pops was alive, and...well, he was prepared for anything. The world was fucked up, and if armies had used kids as bait in the old world, who knew what people were capable of in this one?

"Edward," he grunted eventually, keeping that tight grip on his gun, although he had lowered it. "And I'd prefer it if you brought Carlisle to us."

The kid seemed to consider for a few seconds before he shrugged. "Your call. I'll be right back." Then he let the door close, and Edward and Mike heard his quiet footsteps fading away.

"I'll head back. You wait here." Edward was antsy as fuck, and there were walkers to kill while they waited. Just standing around here would do them no good; besides, Peter could probably use some help right now. So, Edward walked down the dark hall again and joined Peter just as two rotters tried to push past to enter the building.

"Took you long enough," Peter growled.

Edward swung his axe.

~oOo~

The front of the house on that farm had looked just fine, albeit dirty, but the inside was another matter. Bella swallowed past the nausea, now understanding that the façade hadn't exactly been *dirty*, but showed proof of a fire.

Soot covered the walls of the kitchen, and every piece of furniture lay in piles, burnt into charcoal.

There was nothing to find here.

Instead she left the house, the dog following, and walked down to the shed where Royce was looking for tools and whatnot. Meanwhile, Lauren and Liam were checking the animals.

She heard Royce's voice. "Don't come in here, honey—"

Too late.

Bella entered the large shed but was nearly pushed backward by an invisible force. *Oh, God.* On the floor, right there in the middle, she saw

another pile of charcoal, but it wasn't from furniture. It was *people*. She counted at least three bodies.

Bella remembered a scene from *Titanic*, the movie she'd watched on TV as a teenager when she'd needed a good cry, and thought of the old couple who died in each other's arms, in the bed in their suite, as water was rushing in.

If hope was lost, did man just lie down and die?

Had these people given up and set themselves on fire?

Hardening her heart further, Bella took in the rubble surrounding the bones, seeing charcoaled rope, sticks that looked like legs from chairs, and two small tanks that had presumably contained gasoline.

On the wall, it read, "May God forgive us."

"Jesus...to die like that?" Bella squatted down, burning the image of the three bodies into her mind. She needed to remember this—to think about this—and never stop fighting. She'd die struggling for her life. She vowed to herself not to quit.

"I haven't found any ammo at all." Royce sighed. "They could've run out of ways to defend themselves."

Or kill themselves, Bella added internally.

"This is horrible," she whispered.

Royce squeezed her shoulder in comfort but said nothing.



Unfortunately, the silence was short-lived. "Did you hear that?" Royce asked quietly.

Bella stiffened, having heard the telltale raspy snarl of walkers.

The dog crept closer to the shed's opening, teeth bared.

"We need your help out here, guys!" That was Lauren's voice, and she sounded more than a little panicked.

~oOo~

"Damn. It's good to see you, boy." Carlisle hugged Edward tightly, then cupped his son's cheeks. The crinkles around his eyes deepened with his smirk. "Yep—still wearin' the scowl you were born with."

"All right, all right." Edward refrained from rolling his eyes, just barely, and grabbed two of the duffels his father had dumped on the ground. It was fucking fantastic to see Pops again, but they didn't have time for a reunion party right now. About twenty or thirty walkers were currently heading toward them in the park area, and hiding in the building would

only delay the inevitable. They needed to get to the car—now. "Is this everything?" Two crates, two duffels, and one briefcase.

And one kid?

Edward didn't know if the boy was included.

"This is it." Carlisle nodded. "There's plenty of antibiotics, various vaccines, morphine, Aspirin, statins—"

"That's..." Edward waved a hand; he couldn't afford to lose his father to doctor talk at this point. He tapped his watch. "That's great, Dad, but we gotta go."

"Of course, of course. Ben here's coming with us." Carlisle put a hand on the kid's shoulder. "Poor boy lost his parents a couple weeks ago. I found him roaming the aisles in a grocery store."

Edward inclined his head. "All right. What's one more, anyway?" At his father's confused expression, he huffed a chuckle. "Yeah, it's not just us Cullens anymore—you've already met those two." He jerked his chin at Mike and Peter. "You'll meet the rest soon enough. Let's go." Shouldering one duffel and keeping the other in his hand, Edward told Mike and Peter to help out. And to leave one hand free for their guns.

'Cause they were gonna need 'em.

Edward took the lead and fired at every walker that came within a few feet's distance, and when they got closer to the main road, he was getting even more impatient because Alec was nowhere to be seen.

They were sitting ducks out here, so his little brother better fucking hurry.

Eventually, they dumped all the bags and crates on the sidewalk and formed a circle, everyone keeping their backs to each other. Carlisle

ordered Ben to stay in the middle as more of the undead dragged toward them.

"Where the fuck is he?" Edward spat out as he threw his axe through a walker's skull.

"This ain't good," Mike said, winded. And he was right. They were near an intersection, and walkers were coming from every direction. Maybe they were slow, but the humans were severely outnumbered. "We should run back inside."

Edward was about to agree when a bullet whizzed by his head. He ducked, even though the bullet was long gone, and spun around, shocked as hell. But the silent shot hadn't come from anyone in their group.

It was someone else.

All of a sudden, more bullets flew through the air, and Peter shouted, "Take cover!"

~oOo~

"Liam, get the car and drive through the fence!" Royce threw his car keys to Liam before turning back around to help Bella.

Lauren was managing—for now—but there were only two walkers near her. Bella was stuck with three, a fourth one getting close. Aiming his gun, he fired shot after shot, not even wondering where the herd of twenty or so zombies had come from. It didn't matter. The farm was surrounded by woods, and the undead wandered everywhere.

"At your two o'clock, Bella," he warned and drew his knife on one walker that was close enough. They didn't wanna waste the ammo—it was too valuable. "Get ready to run!" The car wasn't far away, and the picket

fence didn't stand a chance, but a handful of walkers stood between them, and more were coming up from the pasture.

Royce was impressed with both women; they were strong and fought fearlessly, but it was Bella he'd been drawn to since the night she and her brother joined their group. She was fucking beautiful, and he admired her protective instincts when it came to Seth.

Settling down wasn't on the menu—not in this world—but Royce couldn't deny that he missed having someone to share things with. Sure, at thirty-five, he had twelve years on Bella, but...maybe it didn't matter.

It couldn't hurt to feel her out a bit, could it?

"Goddammit!" Bella snapped up her elbow into a zombie's chin, then lodged a boot knife between its eyes before it staggered back. "Liam, hurry!"

As if Liam had heard her, the car's engine roared to life, and he drove toward the yard, toward the picket fence.

"Get back!" Royce ordered, and Bella flew backward so he could shoot another motherfucking walker. His shoulder was beginning to hurt in an all-too-familiar way, but he ignored it for now.

"Cover me, guys!" Lauren hollered, pointing at the chicken coop. "I only need one minute to get the food!"

Royce nodded, told Bella to run to the car, then set off to assist Lauren.

~oOo~

In the middle of mayhem on Atlanta's streets, Edward's group split up in search of cover. He saw Mike and Peter running across the large garden

area in front of the hospital; meanwhile, Edward, Carlisle, and Ben ducked down and ran along parked cars.



Hostile humans killed you faster than a walker did. You could outrun and fight those. Bullets, not so much.

Surrounded by buildings, it was impossible to know where the shooter was hiding. The three crouched behind a truck to catch their breaths and reload their weapons; fuck, even the kid had a gun. Something that should've bothered an adult, but...

"We have to stay close." Edward wiped his forehead and looked around himself. Walkers were nearby, but it'd be a minute or two before they got too close. "Alec's supposed to pick us up." For fuck's sake, he was only supposed to keep the car running, maybe circle the blocks, but this was too much. Alec had been out of sight for at least an hour.

"There!" Carlisle pointed west, and Edward turned just as the Wrangler made a screeching sound. Alec was driving fast—too fast—and he wasn't alone. He was being chased by a van.

That explains his absence, Edward thought grimly. "Aim for the van," he muttered, hating it. He fucking *loathed* fighting his own race, but what choice did he have?

It was anarchy—survival of the fittest.

Edward's aim was solid, and Carlisle, an old army doctor who had seen his fair share of battles, was stellar. Together, the two Cullens took out the van, first the tires, then the windshield, and it swerved—taking down a handful of walkers, which was good—before it came to a screeching halt some fifty feet away.

With no time to waste, Edward, Carlisle, and Ben started running again, this time back to where their supplies still waited. Those were more than likely the goal for the motherfuckers who had shot at them.

"Mike! Peter!" Edward shouted as he ran. Ahead of him, Alec was already rushing to stow away the crates and the duffles.

"We gotta get the fuck outta here," Alec barked out. "That goddamn van chased me around in circles—" He cut himself off when they all saw Mike and Peter running for their lives through the park, a herd of walkers following.

At the same time, two people stumbled out of the van down the street.

"No." Edward lowered his brother's gun. "Look at them." The two humans were about to get busy, and not with the Cullens. But with hungry rotters. "They don't stand a chance."

The Wrangler was packed and ready to get out of Atlanta, and Edward told his father and the kid to get in. Then he turned toward Mike and Peter and shot down a few walkers to help out.

But that wasn't enough.

With less than a hundred feet to go, Peter tripped and crashed to the ground, a pained cry escaping him.

Edward's eyes widened, and he started running toward him. "Mike! Turn around and help Peter!" He lifted his gun, but as the shots popped off, he knew it was futile. There were too many of the undead, not only following, but also intercepting from the sides.

The next time Peter cried out, it was when a rotter sank its teeth into his thigh.

It was only a matter of seconds before he was completely buried in walkers that tore him apart.

~oOo~

It was dark when Bella, Lauren, Liam, and Royce returned to their temporary camp, and Edward hadn't gotten back yet, which worried Bella a bit. It shouldn't; he wasn't supposed to mean anything, but it was nothing she had control over.

While several of the women got started on dinner, grilling chicken over a few open fires, Bella checked in on her brother to make sure he was okay, and then she walked over to Royce. He'd injured his shoulder, a muscle or something, earlier when they'd found a second farm where they'd thankfully found gas and canned goods, and Bella knew he was just one of those guys who downplayed discomfort. The macho nothing-is-ever-wrong kinda man.

"How you doin', hon?" Uncle Tony asked as she took her seat on the log by a fire. "Royce told me you and Lauren did good today."

"Well, I'm still alive, so I guess that means something." Bella grinned wryly and turned to Royce. "How's your shoulder?"

The fire's shadows danced across the sharp features of Royce's handsome face, his dark hair nearly as black as the night, and his light blue eyes a big contrast to his natural tan and dark scruff. Laugh lines and just a hint of silver in his hair made him look distinguished; his eyes showed wisdom and strength, and his usual easy smile was refreshing in this day and age. But that smile wasn't there right now. Well, he was trying, but Bella saw through it.

"I'm fine," he lied and took a sip of his water. "Just a strain. It's an old sports injury—I'm used to it, and it'll go away soon."

Uncle Tony lit a cigarette. "We're a little short on ice packs out here, but my nephews have some Icy Hot." Royce waved that off, though, much to Bella's dismay. Stupid men. "So...sports injury?" Tony inquired. "Edward played quarterback in college; Alec was a pitcher, and Garrett pretty much lived in a swimming pool."

A sports family, huh? Bella liked sports, but mostly to watch. She wasn't into participating. Hiking was more her thing. And tinkering with cars. But wait...Garrett? She hadn't heard that name, and she knew Edward and Alec's father's name was Carlisle.

"Football for me, too." Royce nodded with a dip of his chin. "I was decent, but it was more a way to get through college."

Uncle Tony snorted a laugh. "Sounds like Edward. He was good, but he ain't much of a team player. He took the team to the state championships, but the rest of the guys pretty much ignored him unless they were on the field. The boy was always a loner—said people pissed him off."

"That hasn't changed," Bella muttered under her breath, although Tony heard her and laughed in agreement.

All this talk made Bella think even more about Edward, and the worry spiked, too. Shouldn't they be back by now?

Needing a distraction, she went inside the Sprinter and spent the next twenty minutes locating one tub of Icy Hot balm, and she also found a patch version and one stick, but she figured the cream was enough. Then she headed back to the fire where Tony and Royce were now discussing sports they missed.

"I need something to do before I lose my mind," she explained, rolling up the sleeve of Royce's t-shirt without asking. "So, let's pretend I'm doing it solely for my sake."

Royce's mouth quirked up in a lazy smirk. "That's all right, hon. But if we're gonna play pretend, you could at least do it on the shoulder where it hurts."

Oh. Bella smiled sheepishly and moved to the other side of Royce; then his words replayed in her head, and she smirked right back. "Did you just admit that it *does* hurt, Mr. King?"

He made a face—a fake scowl that was pretty fucking cute. "I don't know what you're talkin' about."

Bella giggled, applied some cream to Royce's shoulder, and decided to just humor the men when they wanted to think they were indestructible.

~oOo~

The ride was silent as the men—and one child—left Atlanta behind.

The occasional lonely walker and rubble along the road were the only evidence that reminded them of their new world. Otherwise it was peaceful in the darkness as they drove with windows rolled down.

Tomorrow, they were leaving Georgia behind altogether, and Edward was more than ready.

"Mike." Alec eyed Mike in the rearview as he drove. "You gonna tell Charlotte about Peter, or do you want Uncle T and me to handle—"

"I'll do it." Mike stared out the window, looking a lot older than his thirty-three. "I'll do it." This time the words were quieter, maybe said more to himself.

He and his wife Jessica had shared their RV with Charlotte and Peter; they were pretty close. *Had been—had been close*, Edward amended with a sigh.

Edward had never gotten attached easily, and he wasn't about to start now, but he knew others functioned differently. The Newtons and the Smiths had apparently met shortly after the outbreak at FEMA's sad attempt at building shelters, and they'd become friends.

In the side-view mirror outside his window, he watched as the kid's head lolled over to Carlisle's shoulder; Ben was fast asleep, and evidently the latest stray Edward's father had brought home. Because Alec sure as hell hadn't inherited the need to save the world from their mother. That was all Carlisle. Carlisle "Doc" Cullen with the bleeding heart.

All the Cullen men were men's men—hard workers, strong, and rough around the edges. Additionally, Uncle T was the joker, Carlisle was the fixer—the army doc who'd gone into pediatrics after the Gulf War—Alec was the Mini Doc, although without the MD title and warfare experience, Garrett had been the thinker, the guy who'd thrived in school and loved his job as a math teacher, and Edward...

Edward took after Elizabeth—his mother. Who had in no way been a loner or could've ever been described as cold, but Elizabeth had been a practical

woman. Her heart had beaten for her family, and her circle of friends had always been small. She'd protected and lived for her loved ones fiercely; the rest hadn't mattered as much.

She'd always said, "With love comes a world of pain—rivers of hurt and mountains of happiness. It's all incredibly worth it, but I prefer not to waste it on someone who's not family."

Aside from Garrett's wife, Elizabeth had been alone with all those men, and she'd had them all by the balls.

She was dead now, though.

She'd been attacked by a walker while trying to keep her grandchildren safe.

It hadn't worked.

"Here we are." Alec's quiet voice brought Edward back to the present, and the Wrangler slowed as their camp on the side of the highway came into view. Alec flashed the lights a few times to alert the men guarding that it was only them.

They passed Emmett and Jasper first, both standing guard with shotguns.

Bone-tired and in need of a fucking shower, Edward got outta the vehicle before Alec could even pull over, and he stalked toward his Sprinter, ignoring all the questions about how today had gone.

They never really expected Edward to answer, anyway.

It was when he got closer to three campfires that he saw Bella. The sight of her set off a strange fluttering sensation in his gut, as if he was nervous, but it was replaced with anger when he saw what she was doing.

What the fuck was this—a goddamn spa retreat? Edward saw no fucking reason for Bella to give Royce King a damn shoulder massage.

"Edward, my boy!" Uncle Tony spotted him first and shot up from a log; it alerted Bella to Edward's presence, too, but he turned away from her before he could catch her expression. "It's good to see you, kid."

Right. Because at forty, Edward was a kid. "You too." He nodded once. "Pops and Alec are back there." He jerked his chin over his shoulder. "I'mma wash off."

He walked away—pissed, exhausted, hungry, and...*unsettled*.

The last thing he heard before he entered the Sprinter was Charlotte's cry of despair at losing her husband.

5.

Nashville, Tennessee

June 30th, 2013

2 months and 24 days since the outbreak

The day they finally reached Tennessee, they lost Jacob Black on a supply run in Chattanooga.

He got bitten, and then he shot himself in the head.

Instead of grieving, Bella was upset at the world. She hid it well, and she took her anger out on walkers, but...Christ, it wasn't fair. None of this was. There just wasn't time to mourn, especially not if it wasn't a family member, and Jake had been alone.

His closest friend had been Liam, and he seemed to be dealing with the loss in the same fashion as Bella was. He now volunteered to go out on every run, guard as much as possible—all because it gave him more opportunities to kill rotters.

Jake's death had also caused a logistical issue, because he had been driving the black Sprinter that he'd shared with Liam; meanwhile, Liam used to drive Edward's truck—the Sierra. So, that had to change. Liam had now taken over the black Sprinter, which he unofficially shared with Seth. Bella's little brother still kept most of his stuff in Edward's silver Sprinter, but he ended up spending the night with Liam, viewing him as an older brother.

Bella didn't mind, having seen Liam in action. They were now finding a way around Nashville, a week after getting away from Atlanta, and Liam had more than proved himself in Bella's eyes; he could protect Seth.

And since Liam wasn't driving Edward's truck, Edward himself had to. That left Bella driving the Sprinter, and she often had one of the other Cullens and little Ben as company.

It had definitely tugged at Bella's heartstrings hearing about Ben James. Nine years old, all alone after losing his parents, two aunts, one baby sister, and his grandfather.

It also tugged at Bella's heartstrings that Edward seemed to avoid her. For one moment, it had appeared as if she'd been cracking his surface, getting a glimpse of what was underneath his rough exterior, but it must've been wishful thinking. Edward was more curt than ever, always scowling, always quiet—always the loner.

Sighing, she followed Edward's Sierra as the caravan turned on to a dirt road. It was time for dinner, and they wanted to get that outta the way before they got too close to Nashville. They had plenty of supplies for now, so they weren't entering the city, but too long of a detour would cost them gas.

They ended up in a small clearing in the middle of the woods, and everyone parked so the vehicles formed a circle tight enough for the bumpers to touch.

So far, no RV had broken down, which was awesome, but Bella, ever the mechanic, cringed whenever they hit rough terrain and watched how Jasper drove their bus the same way he'd drive a small car. In other words, it was only a matter of time before Bella would have to replace the fuckin' dampers.

Which wouldn't be easy considering the fact that Bella was used to cars and bikes—not big-ass buses.

"Is anyone going hunting?" Ben asked, pushing his dark hair away from his forehead. When Bella had offered earlier to give it a trim, he'd blushed so adorably. "Edward and Alec gave me a new gun to practice with."

"Of course they did," Bella muttered, refraining from stringing those two men up by the balls. Over and over, she had to remind herself that everything came down to survival. Maybe they tried to keep weapons out of sight when they were in the Sprinter, but they were still there. Just waiting to be used. Seth had two guns, Bella had a handful...now Ben had one, too.

"I taught him how to use one in Atlanta, honey," Doc—as everyone called Carlisle—said and moved toward the door. "He's good. As long as he's with an adult, there's no harm in practicing."

Bella nodded. "I understand." *But I don't like it.* Leaving the driver's seat, she ruffled Ben's hair and smiled at him. "Just promise me you'll listen to whatever Edward and Alec say, sweetie."

She couldn't help it; she felt protective of Ben, and he knew it. Bella guessed that was why Ben often came to her when he had a question. Children needed adults—parental figures. In Bella's case, it was more of a big sister, a role she gladly shouldered.

~oOo~

Hours later, Bella was relieved when Edward, Uncle Tony, and Ben returned from hunting.

Their campground already smelled heavenly from grilled chicken, wild onions, and biscuits, but the two pheasants Edward had strung over his shoulder would add to it. So would the mushrooms Bella had found, but she needed help to identify them before she dared to put them in a pan.

She fought the urge to run to the men, instead settling on casually walking over.

"Any problems?" She already knew the hunt had been successful, but she hoped there hadn't been trouble with walkers.

"Nope." Edward passed her to drop the dead birds with Esme and Carmen.

Bella's shoulder drooped, and she wondered if she'd done anything wrong—anything to upset him.

She reminded herself over and over: *it was just a fuck, nothing else, he treats everyone like dirt, don't get attached.*

Bella was getting attached.

Secretly, she liked the idea of sleeping in the same bed as Edward at night, but that hadn't happened since they'd left Atlanta. Now, Edward was spending his nights in his truck, much to Doc's disapproval, 'cause apparently Edward had lower-back issues, which were getting worse because he didn't sleep in a bed. This obviously frustrated both the doctor and the father in Carlisle.

Watching Edward right now, as he was sitting on the dropped tailgate of his truck, smoking a cigarette and wiping off two knives, Bella could see that he was stiff in his posture, as if he was in pain.

The defeat Bella felt due to Edward brushing her off was soon replaced by annoyance. 'Cause...what the fuck was it with these men? First Royce, now Edward. Was it a macho man motto?

If you find yourself in pain, suffaaa'!

"You been 'shroom huntin', hon?" Uncle Tony jerked his chin to the plastic container she'd filled earlier. "Looks like you've got some good ones."

"Oh." Bella looked down at the mushrooms, then back to Uncle Tony. "My dad taught me a bunch of stuff when we lived in Washington, but I've forgotten most of it—when it comes to mushrooms anyway." She held up the container. "You mind helping me out?"

"Sure thing." He took a step closer as Ben joined the women who were cooking. "My brother's better at it, but I think I can help ya." He hummed and looked through the mix of morels, white mushrooms, and chanterelles. "My sister-in-law...she was even better." He smiled a little to himself, kind of in sadness. "She always said, 'When in doubt, throw it out.'"

Bella was almost too afraid to ask. Almost. "That would be, um, Doc's wife?"

Uncle Tony nodded. "Elizabeth. Edward, Alec, and Garrett's mother."

And she wasn't here. Bella sighed softly, understanding that she hadn't made it. "Garrett...?" she inquired carefully.

"Oh, you don't want this one." He threw one mushroom out. "Might look like a morel, but it's a false one." He paused. "Garrett was Doc's youngest. When the outbreak reached our town in upstate New York, I was with Edward and Alec. They ran a construction business together, and I helped out from time to time." He took on a pensive expression; meanwhile, Bella was soaking up every piece of information. "We managed to get in touch with Doc before the phone lines went down, and we met up to go over to his and Elizabeth's house. It was where we all gathered for Sunday dinners and holidays, so we hoped our family would end up there." A flicker of pain flashed across his features, which was so rare for Uncle Tony. "We got there just as a group of walkers attacked Elizabeth and Garrett's two children. She was tryin'a protect them."

"Christ," Bella whispered. Unfortunately, pretty much everyone had lost family members. One story was just that—one. Amongst millions. "And Garrett?"

"He'd already turned when we found him at the school where he was a teacher," he answered grimly. "His wife also worked there, and she'd met the same fate."

Bella nodded and looked down, remembering how she'd had to kill her mother once she'd started turning. Leah had already been dead, her attack too brutal, but Renee had been bitten in the shoulder.

"I'll always love you, sweetheart. I'm so damn proud of you and blessed to have you as a daughter. Tell Seth and Charlie I love them, too. Now, do it—go through with it, before it's too late."

A shudder of despair and grief rushed down Bella's spine, and she straightened up, pushing those horrible memories aside. There was no place in this world for mourning. Or time.

No longer did anyone say *"I'm sorry for your loss"* or *"I can't even imagine."* Because, one, everyone could imagine. And, two...being sorry for someone else's loss would bury you in grief.

Before the outbreak, there had been a worldwide flu epidemic, and the mortality rate was so high that the vaccine hadn't been tested enough; the governments had been too eager to get it out there. Every news segment was about how many were dying across the world. Scientists were working on the vaccine; everyone was speculating about the source, and people were getting desperate.

It started as a common cold, then morphed into a flu—high fever, dizziness, fluid in your lungs, vomiting...before you died. But then...big news, they'd found a vaccine. Which was distributed at record speed.

Given like a regular flu shot, to both the sick and the healthy—to prevent and cure—people could only guess how many had received the vaccine. But in the US alone, it was millions.

And those who took the vaccine turned into something that was no longer human within forty-eight hours, depending on how strong your immune system was.

By then, Bella, Renee, and Seth were already in Florida to visit Leah at her college.

They'd had appointments to get the vaccine once they returned to Kansas City.

Confusion brought out anger in people, then came panic. Governments didn't want to answer questions they didn't have answers to, so the news stations had nothing to report other than witness reports and rumors. Then, all of a sudden, public transportation was shut down. Then communication.

And now there was no vaccine to turn people into walkers; all one needed was a bite from those infected rotters.

"You okay, hon?" Uncle Tony put a hand on her shoulder. She released a breath, returned to the present, and gave a quick nod. "This looks good." He tapped the container with the mushrooms. "You need any more help, I'll be over there." He pointed to his RV.

"Thanks." Bella smiled weakly, and then she walked over to Esme and Carmen and handed them the mushrooms. *Shake it off, shake it, off, shake it off.* She was here—in this world—and there was nothing she could do about the past. She could, however, try to make the future better. And that friggin' Edward popped into her head, so she decided to go for conversation with him one more time.

She had gained an awesome friend in Lauren—Liam, Royce, and Alec too, not to mention she felt close to Uncle Tony, little Ben, and Doc...so why the hell wasn't that enough? Why was she currently walking over to Edward when she could've done gas inventory with Lauren and Doc? Or she could've sat down with Liam and Seth, who were cleaning weapons.

"Hey..." She reached Edward's Sierra and leaned her hip against the dropped tailgate. To keep her hands occupied, she scratched the dog behind her ears, which reminded her: the dog actually had a name now. "How's your back?"

Edward frowned at her briefly before returning his attention to his knives.

"Um, Doc told me you have problems with your lower back," she clarified, feeling nervous around this man.

He snorted quietly and packed up his sharpening kit. "Of course he did. And lemme guess, now you're here to offer a massage."

"What?" Her brows knitted together.

He smiled wryly, a bit darkly, and jumped down from the truck. "It's what you do, isn't it? Give massages?"

Bella was getting frustrated, but before she could say anything, Edward patted his thigh, a signal for the dog to follow him, and started walking away.

"Wait!" she called.

Edward half-turned and offered a look over his shoulder.

She pointed to the dog. "Her name is Joy."

The scowl was back, and Edward turned to face her fully. "Excuse me?"

"I've named her Joy—after Almond Joy; her eyes are almond-shaped, you love your chocolate, and, let's face it, she's a treat to have around."

"I don't like coconuts," Edward answered matter-of-factly. "Or almonds. Mint is even worse, so don't even go there."

Bella pressed her lips together and fought the urge to glare at the grouchy prick. "Well, *Grumpy*...maybe I should've named her Milk Dud, 'cause her owner sure as fuck is one helluva dud."

Edward raised a brow, not amused.

"Baby Ruth?" Bella threw that out there.

"I ain't callin' the dog Baby," Edward huffed. "Or Ruth—unless she's ninety years old."

Bella gritted her teeth. "Her name is Joy—deal with it!" The man in front of her scoffed and opened his mouth to speak, but Bella was only getting started. "Perhaps I should've named her Cocoa, because your sweet tooth is clearly the only sweet thing about you." She was getting heated, irritated as hell. "But let me guess: you don't like hot chocolate. How about NutRageous? 'Cause I can think of someone who reminds me of an outrageous *fucking* nut." She barely even noticed how her voice had gotten louder, but Edward sure noticed, and so did a few others around them. "Or maybe Riesen? It's dark, and it reminds me of a place I'd like to shove my boot right now—someplace where the sun don't shine! God, you piss me off!" She threw up her hands. "Nothing's ever good enough." She finally stomped off and muttered about how she now craved chocolate.

The German shepherd was once again without a name.

And unbeknownst to Bella, Edward had caught an erection.

She's all fire, ain't she?

~oOo~

"I'll drive the truck when we take off," Pops said, causing Edward to scowl. "And don't argue with me, boy." Pops wagged a finger. "You haven't slept properly in over a week's time."

"I sleep just fine in the truck." Edward threw a chicken bone into the fire and went for a bowl of stew with onions, mushrooms, and herbs. "Where did we get the milk from?" He frowned down at the bowl, sure it was some kind of dairy-based stew—milk, cream, whatever. It was fucking delicious.

"Lauren, Bella, and Esme went out yesterday," Pops answered, grabbing some more chicken. "They came across milk cows, and Esme evidently grew up on a farm." He huffed a chuckle. "Those girls are bloodthirsty, aren't they? They saw 'em, figured they'd kill one for meat, but Esme started milkin' instead."

Edward grunted but said nothing else. Seemed like Bella came up in every goddamn conversation, so he figured he'd just stop talking altogether.

Around them, a low hum of chit-chat surrounded Edward, but he'd managed to find a fairly private spot, near one of the smaller fires. It was dark now, and he found comfort in the sound of chirping birds. If they went quiet, it often meant predators—walkers—were nearby.

The plan was to drive through the night, which was why several of the others were currently sleeping in the RVs, resting up.

Drawn like a magnet, Edward eventually glanced over to where Bella was eating with Seth, Ben, Lauren, Liam, and...and that fucking Royce. Bella was in high spirits, laughing about something with her brother, but Royce was quiet. Staring. Appreciating his view of Bella. *Motherfucker.*

When I told her not to get clingy, maybe I should've told myself the same.

Jealousy burned in his veins, and there was nothing—not a fucking thing—he could do about it. Because this wasn't the time or place to make promises or get attached to someone. Attachment meant there was one more to lose.

Besides, she was way too young for him.

~oOo~

One of the downsides of sharing the Sprinter with Bella was the talking.

Pops and Ben were driving the Sierra, so it was just Edward and Bella in the Sprinter as they got back on the road again.

By general standards, she wasn't chatty at all, but something changed when she was uncomfortable. She *looked* uncomfortable, and Edward did remember her behavior when she'd given him the seeds to grow fruits, berries, and herbs. She'd felt the need to fill the silence then, too.

To shut her up, Edward thought about leaving the passenger's seat to get some sleep; that had been the plan, after all. Pops had already contacted Bella through the walkie and asked why he could see Edward in the rearview of the Sierra. To which Edward had waved that off and kept flipping through the pages of a book about Alaska.

But...he *didn't* leave the passenger's seat to get some sleep.

I'm just not that tired, he thought and stifled a yawn.

"Have you decided on a location in Alaska to settle down?" Bella asked, tapping her fingers on the steering wheel. Even jumpy and fidgety, she could drive like a champ. But Edward was still irritated. "I heard Uncle Tony and Doc mention an island."

Edward nodded absently and flipped another page. The small clip-on reading light that was attached to the frame of the book would need a new battery soon. It kept flickering and becoming dimmer in the dark van.

"There are several unpopulated islands near Juneau." He scratched his cheek, thinking he could use another shave soon. It had been a few days now since last time.

Bella hummed, slowing down just a bit as the Sierra in front of them did the same. Probably some rubble on the road. "You think there's more people up there, too?" she asked. "I mean, it's so sparsely populated; maybe the need for that damn vaccine wasn't so high in the northern parts."

Edward and his family had considered that. There were pros and cons about more people. Good, because...well, humans were a good thing—a good sign. Bad, because the last thing they needed was to run into hostility. That's why they had talked about settling down on an unpopulated island. Create and establish their own little community.

As far as he knew, the only ones who weren't along for the entire ride were the Swans—which he tried not to think about, 'cause that shit made him feel all uneasy—and Charlotte, who had decided to try her luck in St. Louis where she had distant family. Now that Peter was gone, going all the way to Alaska didn't appeal to her.

"Regardless, I bet it's better than Kansas City," he muttered and rolled down his window. Next he lit a smoke and took a deep pull from it. "You and your brother should stay away from bigger cities. More walkers there."

That went without saying, really.

"I know..." Bella sighed. "We just gotta find our dad. Then...I don't know." She let out a nervous chuckle. "Maybe we could join you guys in Alaska...?"

Edward side-eyed her, then shrugged. As if it was no big deal. "You do what you want. Ben's already attached to you—bet he wants you to come up." Closing the book, he took another drag from his smoke and leaned back a bit in his seat. "You sure your pops is there?"

"In Kansas City, you mean?" Bella wondered. "I hope so. It makes sense. He's a practical man, and as much as I'm sure he's itching to come looking for us, he doesn't know where we are. Last time we spoke was right after the military closed down the airports, and we had to leave our hotel. We didn't know where we'd end up, so..." She trailed off for a few seconds, appearing pensive and sad. "We found shelter at another hotel, a smaller one just outside the city, but Dad never found out."

Edward understood the logic. It did make more sense for Bella and Seth to come to him—Charlie, he was pretty sure their father's name was.

"He better be at home—alive and well," Bella whispered. Mostly to herself, it seemed. "I'll kill him otherwise."

Edward couldn't help it; he chuckled.

"Whoa there, Grumpy. Was that a laugh?" Bella asked in disbelief.

That killed Edward's amusement. "No."

"Liar."

"I only laugh when there's something to laugh about."

Bella grinned and rolled her eyes. "Doesn't take a genius to figure out what tickles your fancy, so let me guess. Sarcasm."

How did she know? Edward wondered. "And irony." He flicked the butt of the cigarette out the window and rolled it up.

"Oh, you like irony? Here's something funny for you, then. Before all this, I used to love zombie movies."

Edward snorted and cracked half a smile, then sighed internally, thinking, "*Me too.*" He'd loved horror movies and thrillers of all kinds. Now, though...? He lived in a horror movie.

It was quiet for a while after that, and Uncle Tony, who was driving first, confirmed over the walkie that there was a large car wreck farther ahead, and it was taking time to get past.

"So..."

Edward groaned. "No. Bella, no. You don't gotta talk every fucking minute."

"Oh, shut up!" she snapped, which took him by surprise. "We're finally conversing like two normal people. Let me have this moment." She huffed and focused on the road again. "Now, let's come up with a name for the dog." Edward opened his mouth to shoot down her request, but Bella held up a hand. "If you don't come up with any suggestions, I'll just name her Cocoamint."

Edward pressed his lips together to hide a smirk. Cocoamint—clever. And so not fuckin' happening.

He scratched his jaw and sighed. "Uh...Dog?"

Bella let out a noise of disgust. "You're not serious. Try again. No, wait. It's my turn. Ummm..." She leaned forward to see better and expertly guided the van between three broken-down vehicles. "How about...how about...um, Alaska?"

"No." Edward shook his head. The dog wasn't a fucking Husky. "Give her a normal name. Christ."

"So, suggest one!"

Racking his brain, he moaned miserably. "For God's sake, Bella—she doesn't need a name."

"Yes, she does—" Bella was cut off there by Uncle Tony on the walkie.

"Two problems, people. One, the Whitlock bus ain't getting through farther up ahead. Two, there's a herd of approximately seventy walkers coming our way."

"Friggin' fantastic," Bella muttered. Killing the engine, she grabbed the walkie and asked what the plan was.

"We'll let them pass," Uncle Tony replied. "Our scent can't be strong since we haven't been outside hea', so I doubt they'll linger much. Just sit tight in your vehicles, and once they're gone, we'll tow a few cars up here so the Whitlocks can pass, too."

Edward nodded to himself and reached for the side pocket in his door to retrieve the screen for the windshield. Best to cover it all up.

"Seth, can you hear me?" Bella asked, and the kid's voice came over the crackling walkie. "Do you have everything you need?"

That wasn't the first time she'd asked that, and Edward narrowed his eyes at how vague and cryptic Bella was.

"I have enough for a couple days. It's all good, sis."

"Okay." Bella seemed to relax.

Edward mulled that over as the two worked efficiently to make sure each window was closed and covered. But as they sat down by the table, Edward in the driver's seat and Bella across from him, he had to ask.

"What's up with Seth?" He studied Bella as he opened a bottle of water.

Bella made a face and wrung her hands in her lap. "It's nothing we want to advertize, so can you please be discreet?" Edward's brows furrowed, and he nodded. "He was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis as a newborn, so he can't really function without his meds."

Edward wasn't the doctor in the family—Pops was—so he had no idea what cystic fibrosomething was, but it sounded serious. "And this means...?" He treaded carefully, for once giving a shit about stepping on toes, but he wanted to know.

"It's a genetic disorder." Bella puffed out a breath. "It causes cysts and scarring inside you—mainly in the pancreas, and it also gives you serious lung infections."

"Well, fuck." Edward was taken aback, frowning at the thought of Seth. The kid was always happy and carefree.

"Seth's been lucky," Bella said with a small smile. "He was sick a lot as a child, but he's strong—he got better, and his life is fairly normal today. He does have inhalers for when breathing gets difficult, and he's always on antibiotics to prevent infections. Those are the pills he has to carry with him at all times."

Edward's frown deepened. "Why the fuck haven't you told me to smoke somewhere else?" That actually pissed him off.

"Because Seth hates that," Bella said with a shrug. "He'd rather step outside than let me make a fuss. He doesn't want people to know. But Liam doesn't smoke, and that's where Seth sleeps anyway." She shook

her head, as if getting back on track. "Regardless, he's been lucky, because CF is usually most aggressive to the lungs, but Seth's only used his inhalers a few times in the past six months or so. However, there is something else. He has CFRD—"

"My father would probably understand that," Edward interrupted, "but for me, you gotta dumb it down."

"I was gonna," Bella said, only sorta patiently. "It stands for Cystic Fibrosis-Related Diabetes."

"Shit." What else could Edward say?

Bella nodded. "He does perform SMBG—" She gave him a look before he could butt in again. "Which means he's self-monitoring his blood glucose levels—every day. He has a device for that, and if it's necessary, he takes insulin."

Outside the Sprinter, both Edward and Bella heard that the walkers had reached them, and they acknowledged it with a simple glance at each other. But, thankfully, they were distracted from fear—well, Bella was the one who needed distracting—and they continued thinking about Seth. Edward was processing; Bella was trying to not think about the future.

"What does it mean in the long run?" Edward asked eventually, fiddling with the label of his water bottle. "I take it he has enough meds for now?"

Bella smiled tightly, pain visible in her eyes. "We don't talk about long-term."

That closed the subject.

~oOo~

It took only two hours for the entire herd of walkers to pass, but by then dawn was already approaching.

Since they couldn't leave until a few vehicles had been towed, they waited an additional hour before they stepped outside to assess the situation.

Finally, fresh air, Bella thought and took a deep breath.

"This is why vans are better than castles on wheels," Edward told Jasper irritably, then headed over to his truck to get the tow bar.

Bella eyed Jasper, who looked pissed to have his ego wounded, not that Edward had stuck around to give a crap.

"My wife insisted on a bus," he grumbled to no one.

Bella stifled a laugh. *That line doesn't make you any manlier.* Stretching her arms and letting out a yawn, she peered up the road and saw Doc and Esme walking along the edge of the forest that surrounded them.



Everyone looked tired after so little sleep, but much like Uncle Tony, Doc seemed to have a permanent glint in his eyes that erased some traces of

exhaustion. Despite all the loss, he found life valuable and worth cherishing.

Truth? Doc was a total GILF. Grandfather she'd like to...um okay, one Cullen was enough. Edward took the prize, but Doc, who had to be in his mid-sixties, was very handsome.

Allow me to rephrase; Doc is a GILH. Grandfather I'd Like To Hug.

"Walkers!" Royce suddenly shouted.

Head whipping around, Bella scanned her surroundings, gasping when she saw countless rotters coming up from the woods.

Another fucking herd.

"Everybody, get to safety as fast as you can!" Alec bellowed.

Bella drew her blade and ran for a walker that was coming up behind a hysterically crying Alice. Trying to map out everything and everyone at once, Bella acted on autopilot, slitting the rotter's throat, all while doing a body count. Seth was jumping into his and Liam's Sprinter—*thank God, he's safe*—Edward was fighting two walkers farther up the road, Alec was running to help, but another handful of the undead was intercepting...Royce and Emmett were pushing women and children into vehicles, regardless of whose RVs they were, Mike and Uncle Tony had teamed up to fight more walkers, Lauren—where the fuck was Lauren?

Rose and Angela disappeared into Edward's Sprinter, as it had been closest to them, and Bella breathed a sigh of relief when she finally spotted Lauren near Royce's Land Rover.

"We gotta get inside." Bella started dragging Alice toward the nearest truck—Alec and Uncle Tony's RV.

"But Alexander and Beth!" She cried for her children.

"They're safe!" Bella snapped, then spat a curse when she tried the door to the passenger's side to find it locked. With walkers closing in on them, snarling and dragging their broken limbs, Bella had few choices. "Stay quiet." She hissed and pushed Alice down on the ground to nudge her underneath the RV. "We can panic later."

Once both women were on the ground, Bella slapped a hand over Alice's mouth and held her breath. Heavy feet rasped against the pavement, then stopped. Bella knew the walkers could smell them. The human scent was too fucking strong, too close, to mask.



"Hurry," she whispered, giving Alice another nudge, this time to the other side of the RV. "We gotta try the driver's seat, and if it's locked, we fucking run. You hear me?"

Alice whimpered and nodded.

Bella nodded in return, then grasped her blade tightly as Alice rolled out from underneath the RV. Alice was shakily getting to her feet when Bella followed swiftly and jumped up, only to dive for the door. *Oh, thank you,*

sweet baby Jesus. It was open, and she managed to shove Alice inside, then follow and slam the door shut, with a second to spare.

The locks clicked.

Rotters had the RV surrounded, clawing fruitlessly against the windows.

"Oh God, oh God, oh God," Alice chanted through tears.

High on adrenaline, Bella rummaged through the compartments and located Alec's walkie. "This is Bella; is anyone there?"

Emmett called in, Liam called in, Lauren called in, Uncle Tony called in, Doc called in, and they had several others with them—safe. But Doc had something to add about his sons.

"Edward and Alec are trapped in a school bus," he reported in a rush, sounding outta breath. *"They're about twenty feet away from the Wrangler, but they can't run, and several windows on the bus are broken. They have maybe ten minutes before walkers get in."*

"We need a plan, people!" Uncle Tony said with authority in his voice.

Bella swallowed her heart and her mind started to spin.

Plan, plan, plan.

~oOo~

Edward used all his strength to keep the doors on the old motherfucking school bus closed, and the clock was ticking. "Check the hatch!" He jerked his chin at the roof. "See if we can get up there."

"On it!" Alec jumped over a couple broken seats that blocked the narrow aisle. "Fuckin'..." He stopped to fire his gun at a walker who had almost

successfully managed to climb in through the shattered window in the back. "They're not supposed to be able to climb," he growled.

They're not, Edward thought grimly. Which meant there were so many rotters outside that they'd started to pile up on one another.



The folding doors rattled with the monsters outside that were trying to get in, and Edward grunted with the effort to keep it shut. Sweat trickled down his temples, and he cursed. One walker may only hold half the strength of a human, but there were countless of them now.

And Edward and the others hadn't even seen them coming until it was too late.

All those weeks ago—before the Cullens had split up in Atlanta, leaving Pops there to find meds—they had shared their theories on why the rotters so quickly grouped together. Since they were most likely brain-dead, only following the basic need for food, things hadn't added up until they'd realized just how attracted walkers were to noise. Noise meant movement—life...food.

Noise that carried, say a gunshot, would easily be heard by scattered rotters, who then followed the very same noise and eventually ended up in the same place.

"Left side!" Edward shouted. Another walker was about to tumble inside the bus, and Edward couldn't fucking let go of the doors to get his guns.

"This ain't lookin' good, bro." Alec was panting as he fired off several shots. "We can't get to the roof—the hatch won't budge."

Edward growled from exertion and hoped the others would come up with a plan.

Stat.

6.

Carbondale, Illinois

July 1st, 2013

2 months and 25 days since the outbreak

The Wrangler was definitely best equipped to run down walkers, but...no one was actually in it. Therefore, it couldn't be used to save Edward and Alec.

Edward's Sierra and Royce's Land Rover were next, but they were packed with people and supplies; plus, they weren't the nearest.

It turned out that Bella and Alice were, not counting the Whitlock bus that couldn't reach the target.

One rusty yellow school bus.

"This is suicide." Alice wiped her tears and jumped in her seat as a rotter outside banged its head against the window. "We're gonna die, Bella."

"Not today." Bella checked the gas meter, satisfied there was more than half a tank left. Then she spoke into the walkie as she turned the keys in the ignition. "Okay, we're set here."

There was a plan.

Bella was gonna maneuver Uncle Tony and Alec's RV between the wrecked cars that littered the road, and Alice's only job was to open the small hatch in the ceiling. In the meantime, Tony, Emmett, Royce, Liam, Doc, and Mike were gonna cover the women by getting up on the roofs of the higher RVs and kill as many walkers as possible.

Engine running, Bella jerked the sleek RV forward to shake the rotters that were trying to bury the vehicle. Alice squeaked every time it got bumpy, meaning they were running over the undead, but that shit just gave Bella satisfaction.

"That's great, hon," Uncle Tony commented, the sound crackling over the walkie. *"I can see Alec and Edward through my binoculars, and if you can drive up on their right side, it'll be easier for them to get out."*

"Got it." Bella gripped the wheel tighter and jerked forward again. When she gained some space to speed up, she skidded from side to side, shaking off more walkers, then floored it and drove along the side of the road.

~oOo~

"Okay, I got the hatch to open," Alec grunted.

It had taken several shots to blow that fucking hatch up, and they weren't even sure they'd be able to get out that way. Too many walkers were close to getting inside, and with Edward using all his strength to keep the folding doors closed, it was up to Alec to kill the rotters that were on their way in.

"I can't fucking hold it—much longer," Edward gritted out. His arms were burning, shaking, and his thighs throbbed. "Are—are they getting closer?"

They had both seen Alec's RV, which was currently skidding its way through the maze of wrecked cars, and they were guessing Uncle Tony was driving. Or maybe Pops.

"Almost here!" Alec threw a knife across the length of the bus, lodging it in the throat of a walker that was hanging halfway inside. A quick shot to yet another walker followed. "Motherfucker, I'm almost outta ammo."

"I have two guns hea'." Edward growled and rammed his shoulder against the doors, keeping them shut. "Oh, Jesus fucking Christ." This was brutal. Fucking *brutal*.

"Rolling in on our right!" Alec barked out, and they watched as the RV appeared alongside the bus. It was literally flattening walkers to the ground, running them over, crushing them. It was also driving so close to the bus that the screeching sound as it scraped the side was constant. But it was effective. When Uncle Tony reached the front, it was conveniently blocking the doors that Edward had struggled so hard to keep closed.

Leaving his post, Edward ignored the pain in his arms to assist his brother. He raised his gun, firing at any walker that had its head inside the bus, then nudged Alec toward the middle of the bus.

From outside, there were more rotters dropping to the ground, and it took a moment to register the fact that they were getting help from the others.

"We're being covered." Edward jerked his chin at the hatch in the ceiling. "You go first."

~oOo~

With Alice in the passenger's seat frozen in fear, Bella abandoned the wheel as soon as she saw that Edward and Alec had disappeared up onto the school bus's roof. She hurried into the RV's living-space section and pushed the hatch open. Thankfully, the bed had already been rolled in overhead, so there wasn't much else to do to make it easier for the guys.

"Down here, guys!" she shouted.

Her calm started slipping when she heard the first set of boots thumping down on the roof. Her brain already knew the worst was over—that the two Cullens would be safe soon—so she could no longer rely on adrenaline

to keep her steady. Another set of boots touched down on the roof, and her heart started hammering.

Alec was the first one to peer down into the hatch, and he looked shocked to find it was Bella who met his gaze. *Expecting someone else?*

"Watch out, spitfire." He cracked a quick grin, then lowered himself through the fairly small opening. Eventually, he landed on his feet on the floor, just next to the small kitchen table, and pulled Bella in for a hard hug and a firm kiss to her forehead. "You continue to surprise me, Swan." Letting her go, he yelled for Edward to get his ass down here.

Bella was trembling with the need to see Edward now. She hadn't been prepared for this—not at all—but it was fucking forceful.

~oOo~

Edward grunted—*tight goddamn fit*—and finally squirmed his way inside the RV.

The second his feet hit the floor, he closed the hatch and slumped down in one of the seats at the table, his breathing harsh and shallow.

Finding out that it was Bella who had come for them and not Uncle T or Pops was...fuckin' weird. He didn't know what to think about that, so he didn't. Instead he focused on his breathing, and he tried not to whine like a bitch about the scorching pain in his arms.

But, as had been proven a lot lately, it was impossible to keep Bella outta his head for long. And now it was downright impossible, considering how she flew into him, nearly knocking the breath out of him, and locked her arms around his neck.

"Oh, thank fuck you're all right." She clung to him tightly, shaking. "I'll apologize for actin' all needy later."

Edward let out a shaky laugh, overwhelmed by the emotions surging through him. This was...new. And it only took a few seconds before Edward needed her contact as much as she seemed to need his. Fuck, the urgency nearly bowled him over.

"You're okay, you're okay..." She was chanting those two words over and over, much like she had on the night they met; only, then the words had been for Seth. "You're okay, you're okay." Next came the kisses. She peppered his face with them, all while saying he was okay, he was okay.

"I'm okay," he murmured. Once again ignoring the burn in his arms, he reached up to grasp her chin. He leaned close and breathed her in, face tilted, noses and foreheads touching. Her eyes were glistening with tears he knew she would never allow to fall, and he was positive he'd never seen her more beautiful. Not even the one time he'd had her in bed.

Brushing his lips to hers, he set the kiss in motion, as if to ask and permit at the same time, to which Bella made a happy noise and kissed him back a lot harder. She nipped at his bottom lip, and Edward gripped her hips, pulled her closer, and took possession of her mouth.

He had missed her.

To their mutual frustration, the kiss came to an abrupt end when Alec cleared his throat, reminding them they weren't alone.

Of course, there was also the small matter of the herd of walkers surrounding the RV.

Goddamn. Edward scrubbed a hand down his face, breathing heavily, and Bella planted her forehead in his shoulder.

Alec smirked. "Do I get the same greeting, or...?"

Edward glared at him.

~oOo~

Having a feeling that Edward didn't like spectacles, Bella gave him a last kiss on the cheek before getting off his lap. She turned to Alec and Alice, then said, "What happens in the RV..." She raised a brow and put her hands on her hips.

Alec caught on quickly. "Stays in the RV." He nodded in understanding, though the seriousness of the situation was wiped off his face once he turned to his older brother again. "You fuckin' *dog*, bro." He looked...*proud*. "Look at'chu, scorin' with one of the hottest—"

"I think that's enough, Alec." Edward was still glaring at his little brother, but Bella was pretty sure there was a pinch of amusement buried underneath all that ruggedness, too. "Bella and me...it's our business. We clear?"

"Yeah, yeah—I get it." Alec grinned and walked over to thump Edward on the shoulder. "You're my hero."

Edward rolled his eyes.

Bella did the same, but she was giggling, too.

"Can we g-get the hell away from here now?" Alice asked, still frightened.

~oOo~

It took the better part of that day to tow the vehicles that were blocking the road, all while slaying walkers.

But eventually, they got back on the road, everyone drained and quiet.

Doc drove Edward's Sprinter while both Edward and Bella slept in the bed overhead.

A journey that shouldn't take more than an hour or so—from the outskirts of Nashville to Clarksville—instead took them six hours. And it was by then Edward and Bella were waking up.

They set up camp for the night by an old truck stop; those who had slept on the way volunteered to keep watch. Then they all took turns washing up, putting on new clothes, getting something to eat, and checking their weapons.

It remained fairly quiet and subdued, which Bella found odd. After today's battle, a part of her wanted to shout in triumph. She also wanted to latch on to Edward like a Band-Aid, but she held back. She offered a secretive smile whenever they crossed paths, something that made Edward's mouth twitch—*I'll take an almost-smile any day if it means the scowls are gone*—but otherwise, Bella stayed in the background.

They had jobs, and they took them seriously. Guarding and defending came first—way before lovey-dovey.

Bella was an optimistic person, but she was also practical. She wasn't gonna turn away from...well, it felt wrong using the word "love" this soon, but...a love interest? Regardless, she wasn't the kind of person who walked away. But the practical side of her did acknowledge that the timing couldn't be worse.

As long as Edward remained aloof, Bella would keep it casual and maintain her distance. She left it up to him, in other words. But she hoped her little glances and smiles told him she was interested.

~oOo~

Two days later, they were slowly but surely approaching St. Louis. If they were lucky, they'd reach the city tomorrow before nightfall. For now, they

were just outside of Carbondale, Illinois, and they had recently finished breakfast.

After their run-in with walkers outside of Nashville, their supply of ammo wasn't as big as they would've liked it to be, so it was decided a couple men and women were gonna try their luck in town.

Edward, Alec, Lauren, and Uncle Tony volunteered.

Bella had also offered to go, but a few others wanted her to help them learn how to fish, so...

Having grown up with an avid fisherman, Bella had drawn the short straw, and she was stuck with Jessica, Carmen, Mike, and Angela. But at least Seth and Ben were gonna tag along, too. Hopefully, they could liven it up a bit at Crab Orchard Lake.

Heading over to the Wrangler where the guys and Lauren were getting ready to leave, Bella took Edward aside, willing the knot in her stomach to loosen.

"Um...be careful, all right?" She fiddled with the hem of Edward's plaid shirt.

"I'm always careful." Edward frowned. "Is something wrong? You're all...I don't know. Fidgety."

"Sorry." Bella took a step back, feeling stupid.

"Bella!" Royce ran over to them. "I thought I'd join you and the others at the lake."

Edward's frown morphed into one of his famous scowls, but Bella wasn't watching him. She was smiling, albeit tightly, at Royce.

"Sure." She shrugged. "We leave in twenty." Maybe Royce wanted to learn how to fish, too? "So..." She peered up at Edward again, who schooled his features. "I'll see you later, right?"

"Right." Edward forced a polite smile before stalking away.

Bella felt defeated, figuring she'd done something wrong. Again. Edward clearly didn't want her very close.

~oOo~

The lake was peaceful and beautiful, and had it not been for the occasional walker stumbling outta the woods to get to them, it would've been perfect.

After having spent some time teaching the group some basics, Bella walked casually along the waterfront while Seth monitored the fishing. Royce had chosen to go with Bella, and the two took care of the defense.

"I caught another one!" Jessica was excited as she reeled out another largemouth bass. "We're totally gonna have a feast later."

Bella chuckled and looked up to soak in some sun. With her eyes closed, the world was almost back to its old glory. World hunger, wars, and political bullshit notwithstanding. Then again, they had their own wars now, too. And hunger.

No politicians, though.

No. Zombies instead.

Eh...what's the difference?

Well—Bella grinned to herself—politicians hid their greed behind fancy words and promises.



"You're beautiful." Royce tucked a piece of hair behind her ear, effectively making her uncomfortable.

It was becoming abundantly clear that Royce wanted something Bella had no desire to give him. He was handsome, smart, and very nice, but...

"Thanks." She smiled politely and stepped away.

Royce pursed his lips in thought and followed Bella as she started walking again.

"You know..." Royce let out a chuckle a minute later and ran a hand through his dark hair. "I heard something funny last night."

"Oh, yeah?" Bella squatted down and eyed a few plants speculatively, pretty certain they were wild leek, or ramps as they called 'em in the South. All those hours on the road were paying off with each book about the wilderness. The fact that these smelled like garlic sorta confirmed her suspicion. "Can you just hold this?" She held up her rifle, and Royce took it so she could pull up some of the plants. The long leaves were edible, too, so she didn't only save the slim-ish bulbs at the end. "We're totally having a feast tonight," she mimicked Jessica.

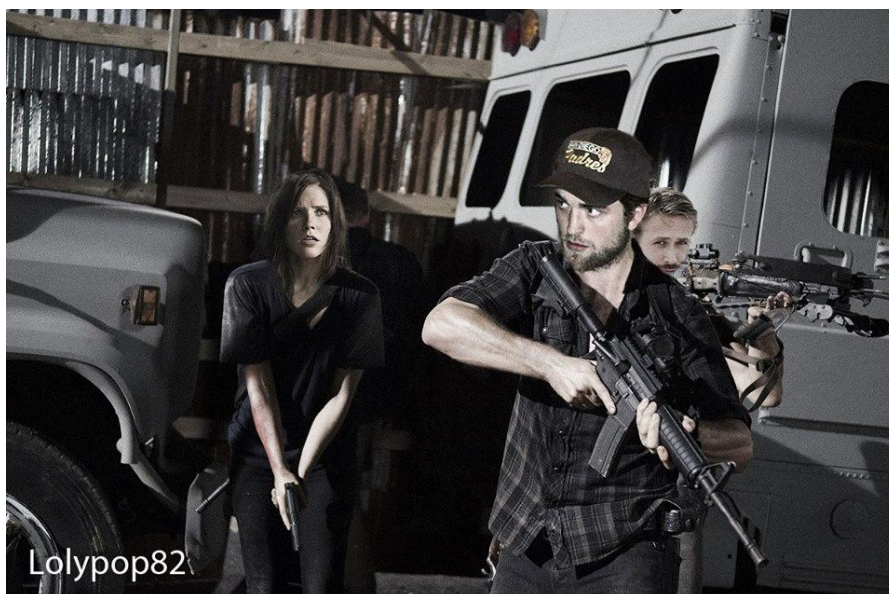
Royce grinned at her as she stood up. "That's great. So, anyway...what I heard last night?"

"Oh. Yeah. Sorry, go on." Bella brushed some dirt off the leeks and held the bunch by the purple stems. "Let's head back to the others." She could see two walkers moving toward Seth and the rest who were fishing, but it'd be a while before the undead even got close. "You were saying?"

"Well..." He puffed out a breath and rubbed the back of his neck. "I heard a few of the others talkin'. Supposedly, you and Cullen—Edward, I mean—are close. That there's something between you two." Bella's eyebrows rose, thinking Alice needed to keep her mouth shut. "He's a good man," Royce went on, "but I don't know. I can't really see it—you two, that is. I figured I'd get the truth from you instead." He gave her a charming smile.

Bella pretended to be scandalized. "Why, Mr. *King*. I didn't take you for a gossip." Turning around to walk backward, she grinned and shook her head at Royce. "For shame, Mr. King. For *shame*." Then she spun again and walked faster, calling an airy, "You shouldn't listen to rumors!" over her shoulder.

~oOo~



"I wanna make this quick." Edward was testy as fuck as Uncle T parked on a small street near the local police station. He was pissed at himself, because instead of focusing on the dozens of walkers nearby, he was thinking about Bella and Royce.

"I agree." Alec checked his guns. "Let's get back to camp before the vein in Edward's forehead pops."

Lauren and Uncle Tony found that funny.

Edward didn't.

"Oh, live a little, boy." T clapped a hand over his nephew's shoulder. "We all know you're sweet on Bella. You know, she's good for you—"

Edward looked incredulously at Uncle T. "Sweet on her? What fuckin' century do you live in?"

"He didn't deny it," Lauren sang and exited the Wrangler. "Come on, guys. Let's find some ammo."

Shaking his head, Edward followed and took the lead while Uncle Tony kept the car running.

Edward, Alec, and Lauren stayed close to objects bigger than their bodies in order to not draw attention to themselves, and they silently killed any walker that crossed their path. So far, it was nice and quiet—no herds, no hysteria. But they all knew how fast that could change.

"How do you know about Edward and Bella?" Lauren whispered—though not too quietly—to Alec.

Edward rolled his eyes but didn't comment, instead picking up speed to get to the police station. The street was littered with trash, broken-down cars, dead people, and held traces of one of those pathetic FEMA shelters.

Like tents surrounded by walls of sandbags would stand in the way of walkers.

FEMA needed to rethink some shit if they had the same protocol for floods as they had for zombie apocalypses.

"What happens in the RV stays in the RV," was Alec's reply. "But how do *you* know about them?"

"Well, that was cryptic," Lauren muttered. "I know because I saw it before we left today. When Bella asked him to stay safe? Please—it was so transparent. And Edward wanted to deck Royce for tagging along on the fishing trip."

"Can you two shut the fuck up?" Edward growled.

But Alec and Lauren didn't shut the fuck up. Not even when they made it inside the station and started rummaging through cabinets and lockers. They kept annoying the shit outta Edward, kept talking, kept speculating.

"But if it's mutual," Lauren was saying as she kicked a door open, "why don't they just get together and be done with it?"

"Because this is my brother we're talking about." Alec tore through an office and found one handgun and one rifle. "He's a loner 'cause he doesn't like people, but...the few he surrounds himself with... Let's just say he doesn't deal with loss very well."

Edward gritted his teeth, busy in the office next door, and tried not to think about the day they lost his mother. He also tried not to think how satisfying it would be to give Alec a swift kick in the nuts.

"That's sweet." Lauren's voice had softened. "But we need loved ones. Being alone is worse. Edward needs to—Edward, you need to go up to Bella, kiss the everloving crap out of her, and tell her she's with you now."

There was no masking the snort. *Christ, what is it with these people?* The world as they knew it had come to an end, and his little brother and Lauren were discussing love? Relationships? Come on.

Did Edward want Bella? Of course he did. He wasn't that good of a liar that he could deny the truth to himself. But the last thing he needed in life was someone to worry over—someone to lose.

Even now...he struggled so fucking hard not to think about where Bella was, what she was doing, and what dangers she might be in.

He knew she was fierce, very capable, and...fuckin' amazing...but not even the Hulk could live forever. Regardless of how strong one person was, what the hell did that mean if there was a herd of rotters coming for you?

Edward didn't do feelings; he hadn't had a real relationship since college, and that had ended when the broad wanted to go out more, be social, and bring Edward to meet her parents. Which had made him feel crowded, like there was a noose around his neck.

After that...? Edward had had the occasional hook-up, and he'd been satisfied with that. The minute the woman wanted to go on dates, he'd made himself unavailable until she got the hint.

This shit with Bella—Edward didn't know what that was. He wasn't born yesterday; he knew feelings had gotten involved on his end, but times were different now. He wasn't miraculously gonna change, either. He still didn't like people in general. He didn't like going on dates. He'd never really tried to impress anyone.

The word "love" itself felt foreign.

Rubbing his chest, Edward made a face and pushed all that bullshit aside. He had a job to do here, and he was gonna put all his energies into it.

Yet, Lauren's word wouldn't leave him alone.

"Edward, you need to go up to Bella, kiss the everloving crap out of her, and tell her she's with you now."

But he couldn't do that, could he?

Being with someone meant commitment, which in turn equaled a relationship, which led to making promises.

There were no promises he could give.

And what the *fuck*? They were like night and day. While Edward was thinking about all this shit, Bella was...some seventeen years younger, and she undoubtedly had "finding a boyfriend" at the bottom of her to-do list. Christ, at her age, Edward was either thinking about work, or he had his dick in his hand.

~oOo~

Bella hissed through clenched teeth as Doc poured the alcohol onto her palm.

The campground smelled of grilled fish, leeks, and mushrooms—*and like a friggin' hospital*—but Bella wasn't hungry. She was gonna eat because she needed sustenance, but she had a feeling it would be tasteless. She was too worried. 'Cause it was getting dark in a few hours and the guys hadn't returned from town yet.

It was messing with her head, distracting her, and so she had managed to cut herself while gutting a fish.

Dad would be so proud. Bella rolled her eyes at herself.

"They're fine, honey." Doc smirked knowingly.

She chuckled self-consciously. "Am I that obvious?"

He inclined his head, his smirk morphing into a smile. "Just a bit." Down on one knee in front of her, he rummaged through his bag. Dammit, it was gonna take stitches. "May I ask who you're worryin' over?"

Bella opened her mouth—Edward's name on the tip of her tongue—and closed it again, then... "Um, all of them, of course."

"Of course, of course." Doc was humoring her, Bella was pretty sure. "But might there be someone you're worryin' a bit more over?"

Yes. Your eldest son.

"Maybe," she admitted.

"Mmhmm." Doc had the suture kit all prepared, and Bella clenched her jaw. She could handle pain, but she fucking hated needles. "A piece of advice about that someone? Don't lose hope."

"Uh-huh." Bella looked around the campground, people scattered about to prepare the food. When Royce met her gaze, she averted her eyes quickly, not wanting to give him the invitation to come over.

She wasn't really listening to Doc.

"They're back!" someone hollered, and Bella's head snapped up.

Shit, even her heart did a little jump.

Not good.

She was supposed to be aloof. Casual. 'Cause Edward didn't like—

"Sit still, Bella." Doc gave her a patient look. "Would you like some local anesthesia?"

She shook her head jerkily and sucked in a breath. "Just get it over with."

She couldn't afford a numb hand out here, anyway. Even if it was her left that had been injured.

It did sting, but Doc was gentle and efficient. His hands were steady, and he exuded a calm that almost had a peaceful effect on Bella. Almost. Not quite. But she could sense it. However, when the Wrangler came into view for her, she didn't care about the stitches, the pain, or...anything else.

Uncle Tony, Alec, Lauren, and Edward exited the vehicle, all looking tired and a little worse for wear. But they were alive, and both Tony and Alec held duffels with guns sticking out.

"We had to find another route outta town," Uncle Tony was saying to Esme and Carmen. "We saw other people when we were leaving, but they didn't see us."

"We think we should still leave here soon," Alec added.

Bella lowered her head a few inches as to not seem stalkerish. Though, judging by Doc's soft chuckle, she hadn't reached subtle just yet.

She watched from the corner of her eye as Edward scanned the camping site, and she found herself holding her breath when he locked his gaze on her. Next she saw how he narrowed his eyes and began to walk over. Briskly.

"What the fuck happened?" he spat out, squatting down next to his father.

He looked upset. Angry.

Bella was just embarrassed. "Stupid accident. It's worse than it looks."

"Five stitches isn't something to play around with in the wild," Doc said mildly. "We don't like open wounds out here." But to appease Edward, he added, "Don't worry, son. I know my job."

"Yeah, whatever." Edward was cleaning his hands with antibacterial gel, and the second Doc was done with the stitches, Edward interjected, "Thanks, Pops. I'll take it from here."

Doc pursed his lips, eyes flicking between Bella and Edward. Then he nodded and smiled faintly. "I suppose you will. I'll be with Ben over there if you need me." He pointed...somewhere.

Edward nodded absently and reached into his father's bag, retrieving some sterile pads, a roll of hospital tape, and a bandage. "Twenty years in construction—I have some experience with cuts and scrapes."

Bella didn't know if he was saying it to her or if he was just muttering to herself, so she stayed silent.

"What did you have to go and hurt yourself for?" he asked irritably.

Bella's brows rose. "Um, I'm sorry?"

Edward made a noise, focused on her palm.

He lacked Doc's bedside manner, that's for sure. But he was still careful. His long fingers were rough, callused, yet they felt like soothing balm when they touched her.

Bella was probably losing her fucking mind over this man.

"I'm fucked," Edward muttered as he ripped off a strip of tape.

"Thoroughly, completely, and utterly fucked."

"You don't have to do this, you know," Bella snapped.

She thought he was pissed at her.

Edward's features softened *slightly*. "Trust me. I do." He worked silently for a minute, making sure the wound was covered up, and started rolling on the bandage. "You're not allowed to hurt yourself," he said quietly after a while. A flash of annoyance in his eyes. Then a sigh, and more of that softness. "It makes me worried, all right?" The irritation was back.

And Bella was surprised. Because...he wasn't so much pissed as he was...worried. About her. Maybe he even *cared* for her.

"Stop smiling." It was Edward's turn to snap.

Bella's smile only widened.

To which Edward's mouth eventually twitched, showing a ghost of a smile. "Christ, girl..." He blew out a breath and folded the end of the bandage into a point, before applying another strip of tape over it to hold it all together. "There. Done." He swiftly zipped up the leather bag, then pulled Bella to her feet. "In a day or two, you can let the wound breathe while we're on the road."

Bella nodded, her eyes trained on Edward's thumb brushing over her knuckles. She wondered if he was gonna notice and let go as if he'd been burned.

"Bella..." Edward took a step closer, the air around them growing thicker with tension. "You're with—"

She peered up at him, looking as vulnerable and hopeful as she felt. He had to see that. Right? Bella knew she was a terrible actress. She had the worst poker face, too.

His jaw ticking, Edward took another step and palmed her cheek. She swallowed hard, and with one glance to the side, she saw they had the attention of a few others.

"You can name the dog whatever-the-hell you want," Edward blurted out.

Then he dipped down and kissed her.

7.

Carbondale, Illinois

July 4th, 2013

2 months and 28 days since the outbreak

It wasn't until Edward had picked Bella up, wrapped her legs around him, carried her inside the Sprinter, and locked the door that Bella found her voice and asked what he was doing.

"Getting you alone," he answered between frantic kisses.

"Oh, okay." Bella started unbuttoning his shirt, her fingers shaking. Was this finally it? Could Edward accept her as a part of his life and include her? God, she wanted it. "I want you—but not just for a simple fuck, Edward."

"Good." Edward took another hard kiss, a deep one that gave Bella the shivers, before he released her to pull out the bed overhead. Then yet another kiss before he climbed up to roll out the mattress. "Get your fine ass up here." He held out a hand for her.

"Fine, huh?" She let him help her up.

He nodded and got busy with her clothes. "The finest." He tore off her shirt, then her tank, as Bella worked on Edward's jeans.

"Ass-man, breast-man, or leg-man?" Bella giggled breathlessly.

She was giddy.

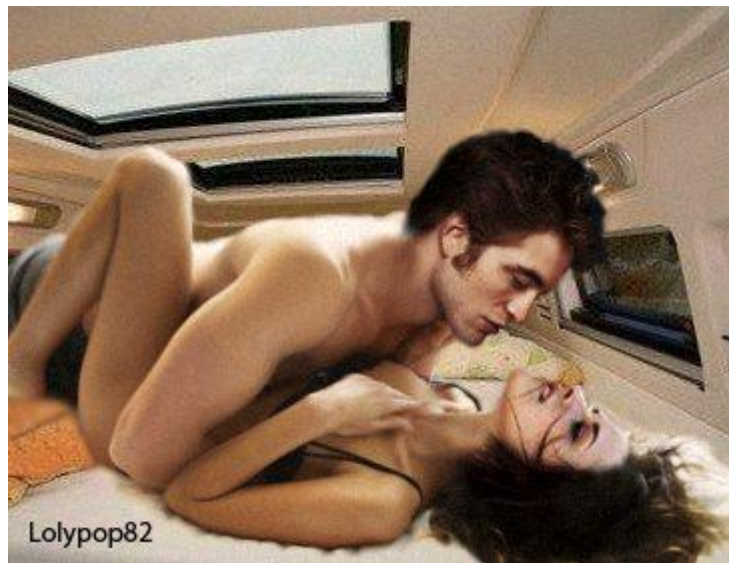
Edward didn't answer verbally, but the hungry expression that appeared on his face when Bella unclasped her bra was enough. Breast-man. Definitely breast-man.

"How's your hand?" he muttered, lowering himself over Bella. "Any pain?"

"No, just...stings a little." She gazed into his dark green eyes, mesmerized. There was so much in them; he wasn't closed off or guarded. Now she could see beyond the lust. Want, longing...surrender. "What—what brought all this on?"

He had avoided her, and now...?

"You." He dipped down and kissed her neck. Slower. Less frantic. More passionate. "You brought this on, Bella." Supporting himself on one elbow, he used his available hand and traced a finger down her collarbone, her chest, the valley between her breasts, her stomach... "I think you know a lot about how I function by now." His voice was quiet, and his eyes followed the line of his finger. "That won't change—except..." One corner of his mouth quirked. "You'll be seeing a lot more of me."



Bella let out a breath and a small laugh. "I hope so." More than he could possibly know. Hell, *she* didn't quite know, but she did know she was developing some serious feelings for Edward, even without *really* knowing him. His past hobbies, likes, dislikes, favorite foods, and what music he preferred.

What she did know about him...he did things to her mind and body she couldn't explain. He set her on fire with that lone finger, that heated gaze, and...his hard cock that was pressing against her thigh. And above that, it was more. How he protected people; he said he didn't like them or care what happened, but his actions said otherwise.

"You might get sick of me."

She shook her head, sincerely doubting that was possible. "No."

Edward ignored that and kept talking, all while that digit crept farther down her stomach. "I like my space—I like peace and quiet and uncomplicated." He paused to circle her belly button. "I want you in my space, though. You..." He chuckled under his breath, as if he had cracked a joke to himself and she wasn't privy to it. "You don't piss me off as much as the others do."

Bella couldn't help it; she snorted. "Only a little?"

He inclined his head, then got lower to kiss the top of her left breast. "Mostly because you have me on edge whenever you go out to play warrior." The other breast. "That frustrates the shit outta me."

Bella chose her words carefully, weaving her fingers through his hair. He evidently liked that, so she gently massaged his scalp. "Do you...do you want me to stay back more?"

She wouldn't like that, but it'd be stupid to make any risk greater by worrying Edward while *he* was out there, thus causing him to slip up.

Mistakes weren't allowed anymore.

"Yes and no." Edward lowered his gaze as he slipped his fingers inside the waistband of her pants. "We can talk about *that* later—and trust me, I wanna discuss it." Bella sucked in a breath and lifted her hips. "But this,

about us?" His eyes searched hers, all while sliding down her pants and underwear. "I'd like to have that shit over with right now. Rules—whatever. I'm no good at..." He made a face and refocused on her lower body. "Fuck, I don't know—relationships?"

"I, uh..." Bella swallowed and tried to concentrate on the conversation, which wasn't easy. Friggin' hell...of all times, *now* he wanted to talk? "I think it's pretty easy. We kiss when we feel like it, there might be hand-holding involved, I get to tease you when you get grumpier than usual—" Edward grunted at that, but Bella chose to only acknowledge that there was one of his rare almost-smiles on his lips. "Sometimes, I'll bring you coffee in the mornings with a chocolate bar in it." That earned a noise of approval, a soft hum. And a kiss to her hipbone. "I get to take care of you, be a little needy, when you return from a supply run or whatever."

"I can deal with that," he murmured, kissing lower. "Go on."

Bella licked her lips. "Um." Go on, go on. Shit. Uh. "We'll have lots of sex."

She was pretty sure she got a grin at that. "Agreed—"

"Wait." Bella pushed herself up as much as possible, stopping Edward who was just about to kiss her pussy. As much as she wanted that... "I'd hate to kill the mood, but can you go down on me when I feel less..." Dirty was the wrong word, but she hadn't showered properly in almost two days.

The washes she gave her private areas as often as she could didn't count.

A shave wouldn't hurt, either.

"Are you fucking serious?"

She nodded and bit her lip.

"Bella, I'm practically salivating here. You have nothing to worry about—"

"Please?"

Edward sighed. "Is this another thing I gotta put up with? Woman issues—insecurities and shit?"

She hid her amusement and simply nodded again. But she wasn't insecure; she just wouldn't be comfortable and enjoy it right now.

"Fine." He seemed reluctant as he kissed his way up her body again, but Bella had a feeling she could turn that frown upside down. "Anything else?"

"Well..." Bella welcomed him into her arms and kissed his shoulder. God, she just loved how big and muscular he was. Not like a bodybuilder, but like a man who knew his way around manual labor. "What about your own expectations? Anything *you* wanna say?"

His brow furrowed in thought, and his hands started doing magical things to her body again. He caressed and stroked like an expert; for being so rough around the edges, he was attentive.

"One thing about the, uh...future, I guess you could say." He brushed some hair away from her forehead, his gaze soft. "The way we live now, Bella..." He sighed and pressed their noses together. "I can never promise you tomorrow, but I can give you all the todays I have left. Does that make any sense?"

"Oh, Jesus." Bella's eyes welled up, an unexpected current of emotions gripping her. "That was—oh, Edward." At a loss for words, she threw her arms around his neck and hugged him tightly.

Those words were perfect—sweet, romantic, and words Bella would cling to for as long as she could.

"I don't do well with tears," Edward said uncomfortably. "Especially when it's you."

Bella sniffled. "Tough shit."

"No..." Edward blew out a frustrated breath, deliberated for a beat, then evidently decided to distract her with something more pleasurable. His fingers and mouth teased her mercilessly, and the first scrape of his teeth along her neck put a stop to Bella's internal rant of how sweet Edward "Grumpy" Cullen could be. In his own way.

"*Ohhh.*" She arched her back, closed her eyes, and exposed her neck. Warmth spread through her like the sun claimed fields and cities when it rose every morning. Slow, steady, sure. Heating her up.

Edward's middle finger disappeared into her pussy as his tongue invaded her mouth. He kissed her with so much passion that it made her head spin. She grew wetter and wetter, needier and needier.

"Isn't this—" she gasped as his thumb came down on her clit, and she parted her legs some more "—isn't this where you tell me not to get clingy afterward?"

Edward chuckled—a low and husky sound—and settled between her thighs. Next he gathered her hands in his left and pinned them to the mattress above her head. His fingers withdrew from her pussy, eliciting a whimper from Bella. *More. I want more, more, more.* But her disappointment only lasted the short time it took Edward to guide his cock to her entrance.

Without a word beforehand, he thrust forward and groaned against her cheek.

"Oh, my *God*..." Bella moaned, long and breathy, and when she opened her eyes again, she saw that he was pulling out the pad of his thumb from his mouth.

A smirk played on his lips. "I want more of that. From the source next time."

She didn't reply; instead she lifted her head to look between them, needing to see his long, thick cock sliding in and out of her, stretching her just like he'd done their first time.

He wasn't just having sex with her. He was staking his claim, and the man was doing it thoroughly. Bella felt it in every move, every kiss, and every grab of his hands.

He didn't say the word, but Bella knew it was all around them. She could sense it.

Mine.

Mine.

Mine.

It spurred her on; they moved faster. She lifted her hips, and he slammed in. She clawed at his back with her good hand, and he groaned and kissed her harder. She whimpered his name, and he cursed.

The buildup made Bella feverish, her breaths coming out rapid and shallow. At the same time, she couldn't be bothered to slow down in order to breathe easier. She wanted it all, and she wanted it now.

"Almost..." She cried out and bit down on his shoulder, earning herself a particularly hard thrust and a growl from Edward. "Don't forget—" She

gasped as her orgasm began tingling its way down her spine. "Don't forget, no protection."

"I won't." Edward kissed the spot between her brows. "Come on, Bella. Let me feel you."

She was already gone.

~oOo~

Edward gritted his teeth, every muscle in his body tense, and watched as Bella rode out her orgasm. It was too much, felt too good, was too fucking beautiful to see, but just as he thought he'd lose it too soon, Bella returned to the present and aimed all her attention on him.

"Fuck." He swallowed, mouth dry. Outta breath. Pulling out of her tight pussy, he hovered over his girl and jacked his slicked-up cock, but Bella quickly took over. Between kisses and strokes, she pushed him over the edge quickly.

"Come on me," she whispered.

A gritty moan escaped him, and he screwed his eyes shut as his climax took over. In three pulses, he soaked Bella's pussy with his release, something that made him feel feral and possessive.

The mind-blowing sex combined with the exhaustion from today's supply run had him panting and collapsing next to Bella; meanwhile, Bella was already on her feet, on her way down to the little bathroom to clean up.

When she returned, she insisted on some cuddling—for at *least* ten minutes, she said—but Edward didn't find it as bad as he thought he would. In fact, being wrapped around Bella like that meant she was completely safe and out of harm's way.

He knew he'd feel protective of Bella, not to mention responsible for, and by extension, also Seth...and even Ben, who Bella was playing big sister to these days, as well.

It was okay, though. He wanted Bella, the little warrior in his arms, and even if he now risked losing more, he'd shoulder the responsibility that came with a relationship.

Edward was by no means old-fashioned; women could pull their weight too, but...if he talked to Bella about these things, he had a feeling she would be even less old-fashioned. Bella wouldn't want him to feel responsible for her, but, like she'd said earlier: tough shit. He couldn't exactly control that.

"You want the cuddling to be over, don't you?" Bella faked a pout and gave him a puppy-dog look. But the smile tugging at her irresistible lips erased any trace of the sadness she was trying to express.

That smile also relieved Edward, because it meant she really understood him. She wasn't pissed or sad that he wasn't the most affectionate guy in the world. Instead, he had a feeling that she knew he showed his affection in other ways.

"As long as you're naked and pressed up against me, as you are now..." Edward raised a brow as his hand roamed down her back to her sexy ass. "No, I don't want the, uh, *cuddling* to be over." He chuckled quietly and kissed her nose. "But if we're getting back on the road tomorrow morning, we should probably get a move on."

They had supplies to stow away, and Edward was starving. Bella had to be, too.

"There better be some food left," he muttered.

"Ooh! Is this where I get to feed my man?" Bella did a little shimmy, then ended up on top of him. Her hair fanned out like a curtain around them. Which...fuck, it was beautiful.

"You can feed me any time." Edward smirked and lifted his head to get close to the set of tits currently resting on his chest. Christ, whatta sight. "Especially in front of Royce."

Bella snorted, slapped his arm, and rolled off him. "Men." She shook her head while trying to hide her mirth. "Figured you'd noticed that."

"I'm not fucking blind." He pushed himself up on his elbows and looked incredulously at Bella, who was leaving the bed again. "All I'm saying is now that we're—you know..." He shrugged. "He better step off."

Bella laughed. "Now that we're—you *know*?" She winked and disappeared outta sight. "Way to stake a claim."

The comment didn't mean a thing, 'cause Edward knew... He fucking knew he'd done a spectacular job at showing Bella to whom she belonged.

"I didn't hear you complaining twenty minutes ago." Edward got down from the bed too, and started pulling on a pair of jeans. He was gonna shower later, so he didn't bother with underwear.

"I was only teasing you, honey." Bella grinned up at him and snaked her arms around his midsection. "Consider your territory marked."

Edward grunted in *hell yeah*, then cocked a brow as an afterthought. "Now I'm honey?"

He could live with that, too.

"Well, yeah..." Bella suddenly looked shy. "Or is that too much?"

"Sweet as honey." Edward couldn't help but laugh at the irony. "Yeah—that's me."

"Oh, shut up." Bella bit her lip and gave him that puppy-dog look again. "You *can* be sweet, you know. Like, what you said earlier about giving me all your todays? That was definitely sweet."

Edward offered a one-shouldered shrug and released her bottom lip from her teeth. "I didn't say it to be sweet. It's facts." Leaning back so he was half-sitting on the table, he brought Bella with him to stand between his legs. "You remember you told me my sweet tooth was the only sweet thing about me?" Bella nodded. "That's not correct." Edward was going for cheesy now, and he had to struggle to keep his laughs at bay. "*You* are the sweetest thing about me."

Bella cracked up. "Edward!" She poked his ribs, causing Edward to finally laugh, too.

"So, come on, my *sweet*—" he waggled his eyebrows "—let's get something to eat." Still chuckling, he stuck his feet into his boots, grabbed a hoodie, and opened the door.

"Now he rhymes, too." Bella giggled and stepped outside. "What has the world come to?"

Edward was grinning when he pulled the hoodie over his head and joined Bella outside. But that amusement was gone when he met the smirks of Pop, Uncle Tony, Alec, and hell, even Lauren.

Back to reality.

"Looks like youse made up," Uncle T said.

Pop smacked the back of T's head. "We don't talk like that anymore. Proper fuckin' English, little brother."

Uncle Tony scowled and hit back. "You can take the man outta Queens, but you can't take Queens outta the man."

Edward rolled his eyes and sparked up a smoke before leaving his bickering father and uncle behind. Bella had already sat down by one of the fires for some grub, and that suited Edward a lot better than listening to Pop and Uncle Tony arguing about what was English and not. Trust, they'd been going at it for the past forty years—well, since they left Queens behind for Warrensburg.

When he reached the fire where Bella was seated, she wordlessly held up a plastic bowl with grilled fish, all while carrying on her conversation with Carmen and Charlotte about St. Louis.

"We'll have to hope for the best," Bella was saying, and Edward sat down on the log behind her, to which she leaned back against him.

The whole thing confused Edward; it felt too easy, too, too, too...well, like they'd done it a hundred times before. As he started eating in silence, he focused on Bella, how she used his knee as a table for her own plate, how she absently played with the shoelaces of his right boot, and how she offered him a bottle of water without his even asking for it.

"Where in St. Louis does your family live?" Bella asked Charlotte. "I'm not familiar with the area, but is it smack-dab in the middle, or a suburb?"

"Near Flynn Park, so it's unfortunately pretty much in the middle of it." Charlotte made a face as she picked at her dinner. "I don't even know if they're alive, but with Peter gone—" She choked up and shook her head.

Edward sure as hell had nothing to say, so he diverted his attention to their surroundings. It was completely dark out, and he didn't trust the men who were currently on guard duty. Emmett, Jasper, and Mike hadn't proved themselves in Edward's eyes yet, and whenever one of those guys

looked away from their post to chat with anyone who passed them, that distrust grew tenfold.

"Edward...?" Ben walked over and tapped Edward on the shoulder. "Can we go hunting tomorrow?"

"I don't think so, kid." Edward shoveled some fish and mushrooms into his mouth. "We'll be drivin' all day."

The boy wasn't a complete nuisance; Edward had to give him that. Ben liked to learn, and not just when it came to shooting a gun. Edward had already caught him reading books about the wilderness, so that was good.

"Oh." Ben nodded and shifted on his feet. "Um...can I ride with you?"

Edward shrugged. "Sure. Let my father know, yeah?" He knew Pop was protective of Ben, always keeping an eye on the kid. "You gonna sleep in my van, too?"

"If it's okay."

Bella didn't say anything, still speaking to Charlotte and Carmen, but she was listening. Edward knew because she gently squeezed his leg. However, did that squeeze mean yes or no? How the fuck could he tell, right?

"Uh, yeah." He nodded, figuring they could turn the dining area into a small bed for Ben. And judging by the quick kiss Bella gave the inside of Edward's leg, it was the right answer.

"Cool!" Ben's eyes lit up, and then he ran over to Pops and Uncle Tony.

Edward's gaze followed until he caught sight of Royce. The man was just about to enter his Land Rover, and he was lookin' none-too-happy.

Edward *really* didn't give a shit.

For no reason at all—at least he told himself that—he dipped down and kissed Bella's neck.

The driver's door to Royce's SUV slammed shut.

~oOo~

Bella woke up the next morning when a shot went off outside, but it was quickly followed by Emmett's voice shouting out, "It's okay! It was only one!"

Edward groaned sleepily and hugged Bella closer, his face buried in her hair.

She could get used to this. Or...ah, fuck it. She already loved this.

Had the Sprinter been larger, she would've wanted Seth to sleep here, too. But at least he liked sharing the black Sprinter with Liam. The two guys had grown close, and as stated before, Bella trusted Liam.

Ben was here, though. She liked that, as well.

"I wanna say five more minutes." Edward yawned and pressed his morning wood against Bella's stomach. "Fuck."

"But you won't," Bella sang and sat up— "Ouch." Would she ever get used to how low the ceiling was? Christ.

"Did'ju hit your head?"

"Yeah." Bella rubbed her head, then scooted farther down the bed until she could reach the top of one of the seats to put her foot on. With Ben sleeping peacefully on the makeshift bed that stretched across the dining area, she had to be careful when she jumped down.

"Is anyone up yet?" Edward yawned again, and Bella could hear him stretching. "Other than Emmett, Jasper, and Mike."

Peeking out the window, Bella saw Esme, Doc, Alec, and Lauren preparing coffee and biscuits. "Yup." Breakfast wasn't gonna be elaborate, though. The plan was to get back on the road as soon as possible. "I'm gonna take a quick shower."

Edward rumbled a tired chuckle from overhead. "Does that mean I can go down on—"

Bella made a noise, torn between amusement and disbelief. "You do know that Ben is here, right?"

"Shit."

"Uh-huh." Bella rolled her eyes and giggled. "I'm surprised he's not awake yet."

"I am." Ben rolled over and pulled his blanket over his head.

"Crap. I'm sorry, sweetie." Bella felt like an idiot. She should've kept her voice down. "Do you think you can go back to sleep again? We have food here in the Sprinter, so you don't have to go out for breakfast."

"Okay." Ben sounded half-asleep already.

~oOo~

After her shower, Bella got dressed in comfy clothes since they'd spend the day driving. Of course, she still grabbed a gun when she went outside—'cause only a fool wouldn't—but it looked kinda funny with a gun sticking out of the pocket of her sweatpants.

Ben was fast asleep as she closed the door and joined a few of the others. Edward was there, too, smoking a cigarette with his brother.

"Mornin', hon." Alec jerked his chin at her.

She smiled and plopped down on Edward's lap. "Good morning."

"Relationship territory?" Edward wondered, offering one of his half-smiles.

"Definitely." Bella grinned. "Are you complaining?"

Edward shook his head no, that small smile still there. But Bella noticed he smiled more with his eyes than his lips. That was information she tucked away in her Edward folder in her head. *Good to know*. His reactions were visible in his eyes.

"So...you guys are official now?" Alec inquired, grinning like Uncle Tony usually did.

It was funny how all the other Cullens differed from Edward.

"Yes, we are." Bella nodded, feeling oddly proud. Maybe because she'd managed to land the untouchable loner in the group. "We should mark yesterday's date on the calendar as miraculous."

"Shut up," Edward chuckled.

Doc, seated on the other side of the fire, started flipping through a small book. Narrowing her eyes, Bella noticed it was a day planner.

Doc frowned. "Well, hell."

"What's up?" Bella asked as the dog moseyed over, having spent the night in the Wrangler with Doc. "I'm totally giving you a name soon." She gave the girl a smooch. "I just gotta come up with something that pleases Daddy, too."

That earned herself a huff from Edward.

The dog licked Bella's cheek.

"It was the Fourth of July yesterday," Doc said quietly.

That shut everyone up.

Had the world changed so much that they forgot their own Independence Day?

Once upon a time, it had been a day the Swans looked forward to. Everyone loved getting together for a big barbeque with the neighbors, and then the women would fuss and wince and complain when it was time for their men to get ready for the fireworks. "Don't get too close!" Bella's mom would say. And Charlie would go, "Honey, I can't shoot fireworks if I don't get close enough to light the fuses."

Damn, Bella missed her parents.

If Dad wasn't alive... She sighed heavily, willing the ache in her chest to ease up.

"You okay?" Edward murmured, only for her to hear.

She blew out a breath and nodded, because even if she wasn't okay that second, what would it help to whine and bitch about it?

They had to leave the past behind them. Looking too far into the future was off the table, too, but for the next week or so, everyone knew what was happening. First, they were heading to St. Louis to drop off Charlotte—if anyone in her family was still alive—and then it was time for Kansas City.

After that...?

Well, Bella wasn't ditching the Cullens. Hell no. She'd convince Dad that Alaska was the place to go. Miles and miles of untouched land,

unpopulated islands, a climate that prevented bacteria from spreading too easily, and...and Edward.

"You, uh...want a hug or something?" Edward kept his voice low. "It's okay if you do."

Bella let out a shaky laugh, thinking he was too fucking cute sometimes, and twisted her body so she was sideways on his lap. That way, she could rest her cheek on his shoulder.

"Hey, Edward?" she asked softly.

"Yeah?"

She sniffled and cleared her throat. "When Seth and I leave to find our dad, do you think you can come with us?"

To her surprise, he chuckled. "You honestly believe I'd let the two of you head to Kansas City on your own?"

"Oh." Warmth tingled down Bella's spine, lightening her mood. "Thanks."

"Don't thank me. I'm not exactly giving you a choice." He kissed the top of her head. "Pretty sure my brother will wanna come, too. He's kinda protective of you."

It was official. Bella wasn't just infatuated with Edward; she was falling for the entire Cullen family.

"You done being needy for now?" he asked. "I like holding you, but I gotta take a piss."

"I'm sorry." Bella laughed and stood up, and when she looked down at Edward, she saw, for the very first time, a genuine smile. Not a smirk, not a grin, not a half-assed little tug of his lips, but a real smile. "Grumpy, you're smiling." She was awed.

"Savor it." He grunted as he got to his feet.

I will, Bella thought. Then she decided to prepare Edward's coffee with a chocolate bar before he got back "from taking a piss."

8.

Kansas City, Missouri

July 6th, 2013

3 months since the outbreak

Charlotte caught a lucky break when they arrived in St. Louis to find her distant family alive. Well, not all of them, but a few second cousins and her aunt's husband's family.

It made Bella hopeful, because Kansas City and the search for Charlie were up next.

A group of seven, including Bella and Edward, said goodbye to Charlotte, then maneuvered their way out of the city again to meet up with the others.

In bad horror movies, someone always said, "Let's split up." So, when they convened outside the city limits and Tony suggested the largest part of the group should continue driving while a smaller group headed for Kansas City, there was a big mix of opinions on the matter.

"I think it's best they just wait outside'a town." Edward folded his arms across his chest. "Alec and I will go with Bella and Seth, and then we'll meet up afterward."

Bella thought that was a good plan, considering they never knew the road conditions beforehand. What if the larger group had to take another route? They'd all lose track of each other.

"Why are we even talking about splitting up?" Alec frowned.

Doc, who was on his brother's side, answered. "We checked the maps, and we know there's an old Air Force station in Iowa—outside of Des

Moines. It's the state headquarters for their police academy and National Guard."

"There might be people," Tony pointed out. "Or at the very least, weapons."

"We'd simply drive ahead," Doc clarified. "Then we'd all meet up there. And considering we're a bigger group—" he eyed the Whitlocks' pain-in-the-ass bus—"chances are we'll arrive at the same time."

Bella watched as Edward and Alec stared at each other, the two brothers silently weighing the options and calculating the risks.

"We need two vehicles," Alec said pensively. "In case one breaks down."

Edward nodded and scratched his jaw. "We got lucky in St. Louis. We're good with a gun, but we might wanna bring one more. Kansas City isn't some small town."

Alec shifted his gaze to Lauren and raised a brow. *You in, hon?* It would be an Alec thing to say, Bella decided with a small smile on her face. She was pretty sure there was mutual attraction between the two that went deeper than a casual hookup. Lauren nodded, her eyes lingering. *I'm in.*

"Can I go with you, too?" Ben asked, looking between Edward and Bella.

Bella wanted to say yes right away, but she turned to Edward first.

Doc started to speak up. "I'm not sure that's a—"

But Edward cut him off. "Sure, kid." He faced his dad. "No offense, Pops, but I'd be more comfortable if he went with us. I know you and Uncle T are capable, but you have the rest of the group to babysit."

"Hey." Jasper and Emmett got defensive.

"We're not completely useless, you know," Royce drawled.

Edward's mouth twitched. "No...not completely, I suppose."

"Easy there, tiger." Bella pinched Edward's arm.

She got a ghost of a smile in return, Edward's green eyes glimmering with possessiveness and cockiness.

"So, we're good?" Tony asked. "We'll meet up in Iowa?"

Edward shrugged. Alec nodded, adding, "Let's check the map for a few spots to meet up. If one happens to be overrun or destroyed, I'd prefer to have a couple alternatives."

That was that.

~oOo~

Bella gasped as they entered Kansas City. On the road sign welcoming them to K.C., Dad had spray-painted the words, *"Come home, Swans. I'm waiting for you. Charlie."*

"He's alive," she said firmly.

She could see that Edward wanted to caution her and maybe say that her dad could've written that and died later, but she was thankful the words never left Edward's mouth.

The roads were, as always, littered with debris and death, but hope kept Bella focused. She didn't worry when they had to take several detours to get to their neighborhood, and she didn't so much as wince when they reached their street and saw at least twenty walkers stumbling around aimlessly.

"Seth," Bella called as she strapped two guns to her leg. A handful of knives were next. "Time to wake up! We're home."

Overhead, Seth and Ben were slowly rousing from sleep.

"Don't do anything reckless now, Bella," Edward said quietly as he parked the Sprinter. "We'll deal with the rotters that are close, then we go in together. Okay?"

But Bella wasn't listening. It was incredibly stupid, but after losing so much of her family, she desperately needed Dad to be alive. So, she rushed out of the van, one gun and one knife held high, and killed the four walkers that crossed her path.

"Goddammit, Bella!" she heard Edward growl.

The door was locked, but it was nothing Bella's Glock couldn't handle.

With that out of the way, she ran into her dad's house and yelled his name.

She had her gun raised just in case as someone came down the stairs, but she wouldn't need to use it.

Tears filled her eyes. Tears of joy.

"Bella!" It was Dad, and he hurried toward her to crush her in a bear hug. "Oh, Bella," he choked out.

He's alive, he's alive, he's alive. Bella chanted those words in her head over and over, unable to speak. She was frantic, overjoyed, and freaking the fuck out. The emotions were just too strong.

The whole house looked like a bunker. The windows were boarded shut, rifles were lined up along the wall, and there were shelves upon shelves with canned goods and instant coffee. But underneath the smell of

destruction and apocalypse lingered the familiar sense of home and the scent of motor oil, Old Spice, and Mom's perfume.

"I knew you'd make it here, baby girl." Dad kissed the top of her head and hugged her harder. "I knew you'd make it."



"Dad!" Seth rushed into the house too, followed by Edward.

It's all gonna be okay, Bella thought. It was gonna break her heart all over again to tell Dad about Mom and Leah, but at least they had each other. Two Swans in heaven, three right here.

~oOo~

They'd been on the road for hours when Edward and Alec agreed it was time to take a break. Seth and Ben were asleep in the overhead bed, Bella was asleep in the passenger seat, Lauren was apparently asleep too—in Alec's van—and the two Cullen brothers were both tired and starving.

Something was brushing up against his elbow, so Edward peered between the two seats to see the dog looking back at him.

"Bet you wanna take a leak, huh?" He scratched the dog behind her ears, then grabbed the walkie to tell Alec there was a rest stop five miles ahead. "We can stop there."

"*Sounds good,*" Alec said.

It was time to wake up Bella, but Edward didn't want to. She was obviously having a good dream, judging by the smile on her face. She looked...relaxed. Which was hard to come by in this world.

"Bella." He reached for her hand and brought it to his mouth, brushing a few kisses over her knuckles. *Because I can do that now.* "Time to wake up."

"Mmph...?" Bella stirred underneath her blanket.

"We're gonna stop to eat," he murmured.

"Oh." Bella sat up a little and rubbed her eyes, and Edward frowned, sure he saw sadness flitting across her face. "Crap," she whispered.

"What's wrong?"

Bella bit her lip and her eyes glistened. She shook her head, not answering. Then she got up from her seat and lifted Edward's arm so she could sit down sideways on his lap. Good thing the vehicle was roomy.

"Just hold me for a minute?"

His brow knitted together, but he nodded and kept driving. He could wait a little while to get his answers.

But he didn't have to wait many seconds before Bella's quiet voice broke the silence. "Dad was alive—in my dream, he was alive. We found him."

Shit. No wonder she got sad when she woke up. "If Alice Whitlock can make it, so can your pops." He didn't know what else to say. He'd never comforted anyone before. Not really. "Tell me about him." He kissed her forehead as he maneuvered his way around a dozen abandoned cars on the road. "You ran a garage with him, right?"

Having a girl who was a mechanic was pretty damn hot.

He felt Bella's small nod against his shoulder. "He lives for cars and fishing. When we left Washington, he thought about selling his fishing gear—he didn't think about the fact that the Missouri runs through the city." She chuckled softly. "He got so excited when Mom reminded him there were plenty of fishing spots."

Edward could relate. He and Uncle Tony used to go fishing together in the past. There was nothing more peaceful than getting on a boat at four in the morning with a thermos, Ma's breakfast, and a couple chocolate bars for the coffee. The fish weren't even the best part of fishing; it was everything that came with it. Although, it was pretty fucking sweet coming home with a big catch and eating it for supper.

"He's gonna like you." Bella brushed a quick peck to his neck.

Edward chuckled wryly. "Uh-huh." He sincerely doubted it. *And here's why:* "How old is he?"

"My dad?" Bella lifted her head, confused. "He's forty-four."

Jesus.

Charlie Swan was only four years older than Edward. That sure put shit in another perspective.

"Oh, come on." Bella finally understood where he was going with this. "I can't believe you're comparing yourself with—ugh. I mean, Dad is *old*, and you're—"

"Old?" Edward repeated incredulously, then laughed and shook his head. "You're giving me an age complex. I'm only a few years younger than him." He snorted. "Old. Only a twenty-three-year-old would say that."

"Shut up." Bella was trying not to grin and failing miserably. "And for your information, I'll be twenty-four in September. September thirteenth—I'll be expecting a cake. And a jumbo pack of condoms."

Edward nodded. "I'll be sure to ask your pops where I can find any."

Bella laughed. Mission complete, Edward figured.

~oOo~

In reality, there was no spray-painted message on the "Welcome to the city of Kansas City" sign.

The drive that should've taken less than four hours had taken all day long, and by the time they entered the city, it was close to midnight and Bella was on edge. She was also uneasy and nervous as hell.

There were walkers all over, and like all the other cities, they moved around in herds. Slowly. Without direction. One block could be empty, only for the next to be literally *full* of the flesh-eating monsters.

Aside from Edward and Alec exchanging a few words over the walkies, everyone was quiet. Edward had already gotten the directions to Bella and Seth's dad's house, and now it was just a waiting game. A detour here, a dead end there. A smaller herd feasting on a body. A vehicle on fire, providing more light than the moon. Shattered store windows. Piles of bodies and severed limbs. Decay.

Bella had to remind herself to breathe when they reached her old neighborhood. People she'd known had lived here. Were they still alive? Old Mr. Banks, was he still looking out his window every morning to see if anyone was gonna steal his paper? The Sanders, would they ever try to invite the neighbors to one of their hideous barbeques again?

It was surreal knowing she'd been here just a few months ago.

Soon enough, Edward pulled over. Dad's house was right there. But unlike in her dream, Bella didn't rush out. There were no walkers in sight here, either. However, there *were* signs of post-apocalyptic life. Her heart stuttered as she studied the boarded-up windows, the picket fence that had been decorated with barbed wire, and the basins on the overgrown lawn that were probably there to collect water when it rained.

"You ready, sweets?" Edward asked quietly.

Bella released a breath and noted that he couldn't have picked a worse time to test the first term of endearment—ever. To him, it probably wasn't a big deal, and maybe he was playing off the cheesy joke from when he told her she was the sweetest thing about him, but... Dammit, it meant a great deal to Bella, and now she couldn't be a girl about it and smother him with kisses.

Maybe that's why he decided to do it now.

Or maybe Bella was stalling by overanalyzing something insignificant in her head.

"Yeah," she mumbled eventually and unbuckled her seat belt. At the same time, she heard Seth and Ben getting ready to go outside, too. "Are Alec and Lauren here yet?"

Edward gave a nod at the side mirror. Yes, they were parked behind them. "I'll go first, all right?"

"Okay." Bella exhaled shakily, then shook her head. *Where're your balls, girl? You're stronger than this.* "Let's do this."

~oOo~

While Alec and Lauren stayed outside to keep watch—not to mention make sure Ben remained in the Sprinter with the dog—Edward took the lead and opened the low gate to the Swans' house. Bella and Seth were behind him.

Edward was steeling himself for the worst, but fuck, Charlie had to be alive. Edward knew firsthand how it was to lose a parent—and a brother, a sister-in-law, their kids... Bella had already lost a mother and sister. She had single-handedly taken care of Seth, but not before she'd been forced to end her mom's life.

Climbing up the low porch, Edward moved toward the kitchen window and peered inside, between the wooden boards, but the glass was too dirty for the flashlight to offer a clear view.

He could sense Bella standing right behind him, waiting for him to say something—anything—but he had nothing. Not a thing. Instead he avoided eye contact and went for the door. He twisted the doorknob and found it locked. That was a good sign, he hoped.

"Edward," Alec called.

Edward turned to see his brother pointing down the street. Walkers. A small herd of maybe ten. Nothing they couldn't handle, but there could be others.

"Just shoot the lock," Bella said quietly, impatience lacing her voice.

Edward lifted his silenced Sig, and a muted shot popped off, destroying the lock. Three more shots at the hinges, and he was able to kick down the door.

It was quiet inside. Didn't smell too bad, but not exactly good either.

"Dad?" Bella called carefully.

Edward made sure the coast was clear and walked farther in, entering the living room. He immediately noticed a first-aid kit on the coffee table, and the gray carpet was stained with blood.

Don't say the man was bitten.

He diverted his flashlight from the carpet. "Seth, go help Alec and Lauren."

"But—"

"Now," Edward insisted. He didn't wanna be a prick, but if Charlie had been bitten, it was more than likely the house was either empty, or...they were about to encounter a Charlie who wasn't really Charlie anymore.

Seth sulked and left the house.

"Did you hear that?" Bella whispered suddenly. "I heard a noise from the back."

She tried to step around Edward, but he held her back. Walking soundlessly down a hallway, they passed the stairs, countless photos on the walls—photos of Bella and her family—and Edward decided to take one or two later.

Bella gestured at a door and whispered that it led to the backyard. The door was ajar, and Edward shifted his finger to brush against the trigger

on his gun. With his other hand, he raised the flashlight and gave the door a light push.

The moon provided plenty of light, so he pocketed the little lamp and scanned the square-shaped area. The lawn was overgrown and clothes hung on rope strung up between several trees. From the other side of the house, Edward could hear Alec, Lauren, and Seth working as quietly as they could to kill rotters.

"There," Bella squeaked and pointed to a corner. "In Mom's garden. Dad! Oh my God, Dad! You're alive!"

Edward quickly grabbed her by the waist and clamped a hand over her mouth. Jesus fucking Christ, his heart was pounding. He saw the shape of a man who was squatting down over something, and Edward watched with his heart in his throat as the man slowly stood up and turned around.

It's not Charlie, it's not Charlie.

Bella sucked in a sharp breath.

"Say it's not him," Edward hissed in her ear.

Because the man dragging himself closer wasn't human anymore. It was a fucking walker, and it'd been feasting on a dead animal. Blood stained his battered face, his skin pale and nearly ash gray. Bloodshot eyes with those mucus green irises. Dirty, holey clothes. The green hoodie was completely torn off across one of its shoulders, and that arm was loose, hanging lower.

Bella's gut-wrenching wail as she thrashed in Edward's arms told him everything he didn't wanna know.

Edward pressed his lips to her temple and squeezed his eyes shut for two seconds. "I'm sorry, Bella." His throat felt raw, but in this world they'd all

learned to push away grief and hurt. He straightened and released Bella, letting her collapse to the ground.

There was no time to comfort her.

The walker stumbled closer and closer, and Edward aimed.

"Nooo!" Bella sobbed and shoved his arm away. "Don't—don't shoot him!"

"*Bella*." He grabbed her by her shoulders, stopping her from going further. "He's already gone. You *know* that."

She nodded jerkily, crying heavily, and hiccupped. "I-I know, b-but..." She shuddered. "I have to do it." A whimper of grief escaped her, and she turned to face Edward, her eyes pleading for him to get it. "I don't want to hold it against y-you. I don't want to hate you."

Edward understood but wasn't satisfied. "I'd rather you hate me than yourself." The walker—he couldn't call it by name—was too close by now, so he swiftly stepped forward and sent the rotter flying backward with a boot to its chest. "There's no time," he told Bella.

"I have to do it!" she screamed. With a shaky hand, she raised her own gun. "I-I have to. Please understand." The walker got up on his feet again, and Bella's hand twitched. "I'm gonna need you, Edward," she whimpered. "I can't resent you even for a minute."

Edward frowned deeply and stared at her, wondering if she could really do this. Fuck, he wanted to shield her from shit like this, something he knew was impossible. But he did understand her reason. If someone else outside his immediate family had shot his mother, he wasn't sure he'd ever be able to forgive that person.

He gave her a stiff nod and took one step back.

For a beat, he was sure Bella was gonna cave and allow Edward to do it. Her hand lowered, her face falling, but then determination took over, and her gun was pointed directly at the walker.

She fired.

The second the walker dropped to the ground, Seth came running out to the backyard, probably having heard Bella's scream earlier.

The two siblings watched each other in a heavy silence.

Seth swallowed hard and wiped at his cheeks, then walked over to his sister and hugged her.

Alec and Lauren were next to join them, but Edward quickly shook his head and gestured for them to head back inside. He followed, knowing the two Swans would need a minute.

"He'd turned," he said quietly, which was all the explanation Alec and Lauren needed. "How's the front?"

Lauren looked down.

"More coming," Alec said, massaging his forehead. "It's a fucking mess, bro. We gotta get outta here."

Edward dipped his chin. "Lauren, you keep an eye on Bella and Seth. Alec, you go out front and wait for us." Then he left and opened doors as he went, in search of bedrooms.

He found one downstairs, but it was evidently a guest room, empty of personal belongings. So, he ran up the stairs instead, and he found what he assumed was Bella's old room. It looked frozen in time, as if she hadn't lived here in a few years. There were posters of rock bands, singer-songwriters, vintage cars, and family photos.

Spotting an old sports bag, he started to throw stuff in. Photos, a certificate for a spelling bee, old notebooks, a small trophy from a ballet recital, and some clothes.

A crash made him look out the window, and he saw Alec backing the Sprinter up against the house. *Smart*. It would be easier to get away. Which gave Edward another minute—or rather, he decided to take one. He closed the bag and continued to the next room. Seth's, and he clearly still lived at home. Would be kinda weird otherwise, considering he was only fifteen.

That said, it was something Edward had to remind himself of, 'cause Seth didn't act like a teenager. He wasn't a kid. Not anymore. Childhoods went out the window when the world as they knew it had morphed into a horror movie.

Another bag filled, this time with Seth's stuff, Edward tried the last three remaining doors. One led to a bathroom, one to Leah's old room, and the other one had been Charlie and Renee's. Inside, Edward found more photos, a couple t-shirts, journals, a jewelry box, and a small box labeled "Washington."

With three filled bags, Edward jogged down the stairs again and hauled the duffels into the Sprinter before he hurried through the house again to get Bella and Seth.

On the way, he stopped at a photo of Bella when she was a toddler. All dressed in a frilly dress—pink, naturally, since she was a girl—the baby girl looked less than thrilled. Edward's mouth twisted upward at the corners, and he snatched the photo for himself. There was also a smaller picture from Bella's high school graduation. *Cute. Tomboyish*. Edward could see the beginnings of the gorgeous woman she'd turned in to. He removed the frames of both photos and rolled them up, then put them in his pocket and headed outside.

"I'll take it from here," he told Lauren, who nodded and left. Bella and Seth were in the same spot as before, and Edward knew there was no use in trying to talk to them now. Hell, he wouldn't know what to say anyway. "We gotta go." He kissed the top of Bella's head and squeezed Seth's shoulder.

Bella sniffled and nodded, her shoulders shaking. In fact, her entire body was trembling. For now, Seth seemed to be holding it together—somewhat—for his sister's sake, but Bella was inconsolable. So, Edward did what felt right. He picked her up and nodded for Seth to go first. Then they left the house behind them in the nick of time. Alec had done a great job, pushing himself to his limits to kill walkers while the Swans had their minute.

While Edward got in behind the wheel, Bella and Seth sat in the back. Ben joined Edward at the front as they drove off.

~oOo~

It was almost morning when Edward woke up because of Bella's stirring next to him. They'd all stopped a few hours ago to refill the gas and get something to eat, and now Lauren was driving the Sprinter. Alec was in the other van along with Seth and Ben, doing what he did best: lightening the mood.

"Who's driving?" Bella whispered, her voice raspy from all the crying.

"How long have I been asleep?"

Edward blinked drowsily and checked his old watch that he kept in a side pocket by the bed. "Only a few hours. Lauren took the wheel after we stopped to eat." It reminded him that Bella hadn't eaten anything; she'd opted to head straight to bed instead. "You hungry?" He gathered her closer and pressed his nose to her hair. He was worried about her, but he also knew she'd pull through. It was what Bella did.

She shook her head minutely and melted into his arms, a heavy breath escaping her. "I'm sorry for being all—"

"Don't even..." Edward made a noise. "Stop. Sleep, eat, stay here—do whatever, but don't apologize for anythin'." He hugged her harder and wondered if maybe she felt the need to apologize because they were always half-joking about his dislike for romance and clinginess. But Bella needed to learn the difference between being clingy and just needing some damn comfort.

A woman who always needed constant validation and demanded that every second was spent together...*that* was clingy. That was fucking awful. But Bella was so far from needy. And if Edward had to be honest...

Being needed by Bella made him feel ten feet tall.

"I want you in my space, remember?" he murmured into her hair. "Did you ever think that maybe I wanna fuss over you, too?"

Bella lifted her head and scrunched her nose. Her dark eyes brimmed with sadness and confusion. "You do?"

"For the love of..." He rumbled a lazy chuckle and grasped her chin. "Of course I do, Bella. You've lost your father—what kind of man would I be if I didn't give a shit? Huh?"

She shrugged vaguely. "I like you being all...you."

"Well, that's good." He gently pressed his forehead to hers. "But as antisocial and grumpy as I can be, I take care of my own. Okay?"

She nodded and seemed to relax. More sadness appeared on her beautiful face, but in a way, it was a good thing. She could be comfortable enough now to focus fully on her loss. Which was all that mattered right now.

Bella would have to move on soon enough as it was, because there were too many dangers in life these days.

"I'm outta words now, though." Edward yawned. "But if you wanna talk, lemme know, all right? I can listen."

Bella chuckled through her tears, gave him a soft kiss, then rested her head on his chest. "Maybe later. I'm not in the mood to talk." She got all snuggly under the thin blanket and hiked up her leg over his thigh. "I think I'm all cried out. I feel kinda...empty."

Edward hummed as he absently stroked her lower back. He had a feeling she was far from cried out, but he knew it came and went. And when the worst was over, he'd show her the stuff he'd grabbed from her house, knowing she'd appreciate it—if not right away, then later. Because Edward was definitely glad Pops had grabbed a bunch of personal crap before they'd left New York.

Wherever they settled in Alaska, they'd have a piece of home in their new one.

"I should check in with Seth," Bella whispered after a few minutes.

"Later." Edward was gonna keep an eye on Seth for Bella's sake. His gut told him Seth wouldn't show weakness until Bella felt better. Maybe Seth was the baby in the family, but he was also the only man in the family now. That meant something to guys, and Bella would have to suck it up and let her little brother care for her. In return, Edward would make sure Seth had someone to fall back on as well—when he was ready.

Caring for people made shit so fucking complicated, but before Edward dozed off again, he admitted that it was worth it. It was worth every hassle, every headache, and every risk.

9.

Regina, Saskatchewan

July 20th, 2013

3 months and 2 weeks since the outbreak

Two weeks later, Bella was finally coming out of the fog she'd been lost in after losing her dad. She'd functioned on autopilot, always alert and ready for danger, but she hadn't been able to shake the depression until they left the States.

Now they had crossed the borders in North Dakota and had settled down for a few days of taking it easy in a provincial park outside of Regina in Canada.

In Iowa, Tony and Doc hadn't found another community, but they had, as predicted, found weapons and ammo. They'd also managed to stock up on gas and canned goods by the time Bella, Edward, Alec, Lauren, Seth, and Ben had met up with them outside Des Moines.

Tonight they were having a big barbecue over open fires to celebrate that they'd come this far. The States was like a chapter they'd just finished. Over and done with. Sure, Alaska was a state, but it was also a new world. At least they hoped it would be.

Behind her, the door to the tiny bathroom opened, and Edward stepped out with only a towel around his hips. Bella had showered while he'd been out hunting with Tony. Alec and Lauren were still out there, but Bella had a feeling it had little to do with hunting.

Dicing the last of the apples, Bella poured them all into a bowl and set the knife aside. She'd be outside with the other women if it weren't for Alice's bitching about bugs.

"I'll refill the tank if you want a shower," Edward said, grabbing a pair of clean boxer briefs and a t-shirt.

"I've already showered." Bella snuck past Edward to close the door. Then she stepped up to him and hugged his middle. The man had been incredibly patient while she dealt with her demons. He'd grown closer to Seth too, which meant so much to Bella.

"What's this for?" Edward tilted up her chin. "You okay?"

"Yeah..." Bella offered a small smile when she realized it was actually the truth. She *was* okay. "I feel better."

Edward watched her in silence for a beat, his hand sliding up her jaw. "Glad to hear it," he finally murmured, then dipped down and kissed her. His fingers weaved through her hair until he cupped her neck. The kiss was soft, more like several sweet busses, but Bella wanted more.

She craved it.

It had been weeks.

And unlike the few boyfriends Bella'd had in the past, Edward hadn't bitched or complained about not getting his rocks off. Bella had actually mentioned it to Edward, wondering why there was no elaborate speech about a man and his needs.

Edward had laughed and shaken his head, then asked, *"Do you think men are horny all the time? If I could go without sex for over a year before meeting you, I think I can go without for two weeks, too."*

Bella sighed in contentment and kissed Edward's neck, loving the feeling of falling in love. It outshone any other feeling, and especially with Edward, it was so intense and wonderful and consuming. She loved that

he was his own person—no one else could change him. He was set. Mature and opinionated.

"Right now?" He gripped her hips and pressed his thickening cock against her lower stomach.

"Yes." Locking her arms around his neck, Bella hoisted herself up to sit on the small counter. "Right now, right here."

While she unfastened his towel and spent some time eye-fucking her sexy man, the man in question got rid of her tank top and yoga pants. Lastly, her panties and bra.

Bella grasped his cock and rubbed the head along her slit, spreading the wetness and making Edward's breaths come out all heavy. Then she wrapped her legs around his hips and pulled him inside her. Both groaned between deep kisses.

"We gotta get those condoms," Edward muttered, staring between them as he pushed in, withdrew, and slammed in again. "Fuck, I wanna come inside you."

Bella wanted that, too. She'd just finished her period the day before yesterday, so they should be safe. At least as safe as the pull-out method.

She whimpered and leaned back. "Yesss." With both hands on the counter, she could pull herself up and roll her hips each time he thrust. "Harder."

"Wait." Edward picked her up, his cock slipping out, and he turned her around. "Gotta get a better grip. Hold on."

Bella's heart thundered; she was so fucking turned on. "Fuck me." Her hands found the edge of the counter, and she leaned forward and stuck out her ass. "Please fuck me."

Edward hissed a curse and rammed into her from behind.

Bella nearly choked on a breath.

The new position brought him so damn *deep*.

Edward dropped his forehead to her shoulder, one arm strapped over her tits and one hand sliding down her stomach to cup her pussy. He groaned and kissed the spot behind her ear.

He fucked her at the same pace as he rubbed her clit. When he pushed in, he applied pressure with his finger; when he pulled out, he circled her clit softly, drawing out shivers and whimpers from Bella. But as the need grew, they went faster and harder, both chasing their orgasms.

"Let go, Bella." He moved one hand to her jaw and tilted it back, capturing her mouth with his. "I need you."

He stole her breath, her heart, her kiss, and threw her into a forceful orgasm.

"Come," she gasped, which morphed into a long moan. Edward was close—she could tell—and when he tried to pull out, she didn't let him. Instead she reached behind them and squeezed one of the firm cheeks of his ass. *Stay put, Cullen*. "Please..." Then she was lost.

"Bella—" Edward groaned. He shuddered and surrendered.

~oOo~

Before Edward collapsed in a chair, he pulled on the pair of boxer briefs and his jeans. Then he grabbed his woman, irritated with her, pissed with himself, and blissfully sated.

"That was so good." Bella blew out a breath and nuzzled his neck. "Screw dinner tonight—I need a nap."

"Bella—" He stopped, swiped his smokes from the table, and lit one up.

"Lemme just open the door." Bella stood up and put on her panties and one of Edward's t-shirts, then opened the door to the Sprinter. "Now you can smoke." She grinned cheekily and sat down in his lap again.

"What we did was idiotic," he told her. *And fucking glorious.* "The last thing we need is an unexpected pregnancy."

Edward cursed himself. He fucking knew better. He was a grown man, yet it hadn't taken him more than a second or two to give in to Bella's plea. Fuck, he'd wanted it. He still wanted it—to do it over and over again, but it was stupid and reckless. They'd have to wait 'til they went for another supply run; condoms couldn't be that hard to track down.

"My period, remember?" Bella raised a brow. "It just ended. I mean, it's not foolproof, but neither is pulling out." She shrugged, then looked down. "I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking."

Edward frowned. He'd always lived alone, and there had never been many women in his family. Therefore, his knowledge of how women...worked...was limited. But he'd heard something about that back when Garrett and his wife had started trying for a baby. Crap about when women were fertile.

"It's okay," he muttered eventually. "I forgot about the, uh..." He waved a hand. "Period thing." He felt comfortable enough around women's issues, but he'd still stopped short when he'd seen one of Bella's boxes of pads or whatever they were. "So, we're safe?"

"As safe as we've been all along."

Which wasn't a hundred percent, or even the ninety-nine the condom packaging promised. But okay. They hadn't taken a greater risk today. He hoped.

In the end, he cracked a small smile and kissed Bella's temple. "Sorry I freaked."

She waved it off dismissively, then got a teasing glint in her eyes. "I suppose I shouldn't try to trap you with a kid, huh?"

Edward chuckled and took a drag. He looked outside, seeing a handful of the women by the fires, some men standing guard. All the vehicles formed a circle, providing some comfort. "First of all, I don't see why you'd ever wanna trap me." He smirked as his gaze slid back to Bella. "I'm right here, and I ain't going anywhere. Second of all, no thanks." He let out a low laugh at the mere thought.

"Wow. You're serious." Bella's smile was careful and hesitant, which set off warning bells in Edward's head. "You don't want kids? Ever?"

Uh. Well...

It wasn't really about wanting. After college, he'd never had a long-term relationship, and so the baby issue had never come up. He'd never given it a thought. And to think about it today, when the world had gone to shit, seemed stupid.

"Do you?" Easier to just hear her answer. And now, hell, he wanted to know.

"Of course," Bella said with an easy grin. "Someday, yeah."

Someday. "Yeah?" Edward exhaled some smoke and rubbed the back of his neck. "Huh. Like...ten years from now? Five, two, eight?"

Bella shrugged and stood up to pull on her yoga pants. "I don't know. Haven't really thought about a time frame. It's more about when...you know, when you've met the right guy—stuff like that. When you're financially independent." After grabbing a soda from the non-working

fridge, she sat down again, but this time in the passenger seat that was turned around to face the table. "I've always pictured having at least one kid."

Edward was fairly positive Bella was speaking in general terms, considering her casual approach and talk about financial independence. The latter was hardly an issue anymore, but walking corpses that ate people were.

Also, general speaking or not, Edward wanted to know what this meant for him. But was it too soon? Was this one of those subjects people needed to tiptoe around? He had no fucking clue.

What he did know was that Bella could have a kid in ten years when she was thirty-three. But in ten years, Edward...well, he wouldn't be in his thirties, that's for sure.

If he couldn't promise a single tomorrow, how could he even begin to worry about ten years?

"You look like you're trying to solve an equation." The grin had returned to small and careful. "I shouldn't have said anything. I'm sorry."

Edward shook his head, his brow furrowed. "No..." He flicked away some ash into the plastic coffee mug on the table. "I was just thinking."

Bella had painted a picture of a future that probably wouldn't exist, and Edward had never complained before, but now he saw the appeal. Though, he'd want safety for that. He'd never be able to relax if... Sigh. So many ifs.

"Walkers!" someone outside shouted.

No. Kids weren't for him, Edward decided right then and there. He wouldn't be able to take it if something happened to Bella or their kid.

Stubbing out the smoke, he quickly pulled on his boots and grabbed a hoodie. Bella put on a pair of jeans too, but couldn't find her belt, so she tied a flannel shirt around her waist and stuck guns and knives down there instead. Lastly, Edward grabbed his axe, a knife, and his two favorite guns.

"Find Ben," he said, stole a hard kiss, then ran outside.

Everyone was alert as they saw Lauren and Alec stumbling into the clearing.



Edward and Doc ran forward at the same time, seeing that Alec had been hurt. Thankfully, Alec was quick to say he'd just sprained an ankle while fending off walkers.

"We have maybe a minute," Alec panted, leaning heavily on Lauren.

"Twenty of 'em."

"Shit—over there!" Royce growled, and everybody turned. In the space between two vans, they could see several rotters closing in. And judging by the shock on Lauren's and Alec's faces, these weren't the walkers they'd seen. Hell, they'd been in the opposite direction of where Royce had pointed.

So, lots of walkers heading this way.

"Get the children inside the fucking vans!" Tony barked out.

"Jessica and a few others went to pick mushrooms," Mike said, frantic.

Someone else had to volunteer, 'cause Edward was already heading over to start killing rotters. Royce, Emmett, and Liam joined him.

~oOo~

Bella ran out into the mayhem and followed a sobbing Alice who said that her son had gone with Esme, Seth, and a few others to find mushrooms.

Alice pointed to the woods, so Bella grabbed her arm and started heading out of their little circle. "Are you armed?"

Alice wiped her cheeks and shook her head. "I can't use one."

Bella almost rolled her eyes, but she was too busy shooting walkers.

"Here." She pushed one of her guns against Alice's chest. "You aim, you fucking fire. I'll cover us—you start walking toward where the others are. Is Ben there, too?"

"I-I think so," Alice stuttered. Her hand was shaking as she tried to fire the gun.

"I'll join you, girls." Doc jogged toward them. Barely giving a rotter a glance, Doc lifted his arm and pulled the trigger. Army doc, indeed. Guess they had military training, too? "I know where they went."

Bella felt a lot safer with Doc, so she wasn't gonna complain. The three moved as fast as they could, all while killing walkers that crossed their paths. Those who got close enough fell victim to Bella's knife or Doc's axe.

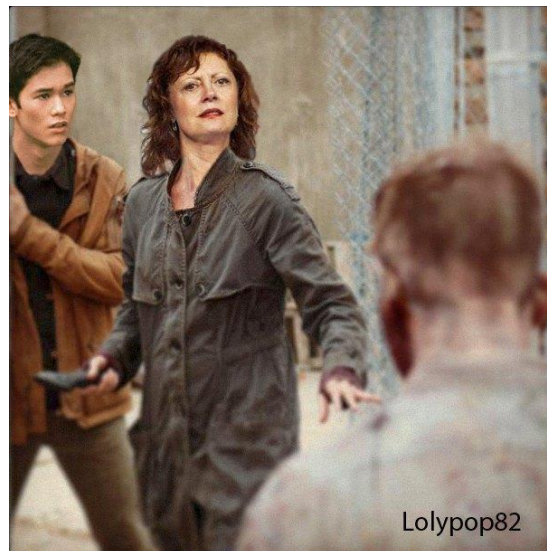
Like father, like son? Edward favored his axe, too.

Once they got farther away from camp, there were fewer walkers around, and they picked up speed and started to run.

In the distance, over a hill, they could hear Esme and Seth shouting directions. "Behind you, Jessica!" Esme yelled, while Seth barked out an order for Angela to duck.

A loud scream followed that gave Bella chills.

When Bella, Doc, and Alice finally crossed the hill and ran down toward a lake, they saw Esme, Seth, Jessica, Angela, Ben, and Alexander—Alice's son—all surrounded by approximately ten walkers.



It looked like Angela had been injured. She was on the ground, wailing and clutching her side.

"Bella!" Seth shouted.

"Watch out!" Bella shouted back. She aimed to the sides of the group, not trusting herself to fire at the walkers that stood directly between her and the others. Bella and Doc reached the water's edge first and got to work with their knives and guns. It appeared as if only Esme and Seth were armed, which was fucking crazy.

"Ben, Alexander—run out into the water!" Doc directed, swinging his axe. The walkers could move in the shallow water, too, but they'd be even slower. That's what mattered, and Bella was relieved to see Ben acting quickly. He grabbed Alexander's hand and took the lead even though Alexander was a year or two older than Ben's nine.

"Jessica!" Alice cried.

Bella spun around, only to see a walker sinking its teeth into Jessica's shoulder.

Bella ran over and drove a knife into the rotter's eye, and it dropped to the ground.

"Lemme look—cover for me," Doc panted.

Bella stepped aside as Doc kneeled down in front of a screaming Jessica. There was no time to panic now; using your gun was more important than staring at death. Perhaps it was cold to think that way, but Jessica wouldn't make it.

After the last walker dropped to the ground, Bella squatted down next to Esme, who was consoling Angela. When Angela's hand shifted from her side, a big bite mark was revealed. Hell, a chunk of flesh was missing, and blood was steadily seeping out. She'd been bitten in her arm, too.

Angela whimpered between rapid breaths. "My baby."

Bella cupped Angela's cheek, ignoring the way her heart cracked. God, the woman was six months pregnant, and there was nothing they could do.

"You'll be fine, sweetie," she said, nodding with her lie.

"Definitely," Esme agreed and blinked back tears. "You and your baby will both be fine."



"Emmett—" Bella stopped herself and looked up instead. Things seemed safe for now, and they needed to get Emmett here. She turned back to Angela again. "We'll get your husband for you, okay?"

Angela nodded jerkily, her teeth clattering. "Not Bree, not our daughter. She c-can't s-see this."

Bella understood. So did Doc when she told him she was heading back to get Emmett.

"I'll find Mike, too," Bella whispered, knowing Jessica didn't have much time left, either.

"Boys!" Alice yelled for Alexander and Ben. "Come back here now!" She faced Bella. "We're coming with you."

"I'll stay here with Doc and Esme, sis," Seth offered.

"Okay." Bella reached for Ben's hand as he and Alexander joined them. They were wet up to their thighs because of the lake; thankfully it was warm outside. "Let's go." After handing over an extra gun to Seth, she took off with Ben, Alice, and Alexander.

~oOo~

Edward holstered his gun as the final rotter had been killed and looked around at the destruction.

The campsite was destroyed, blood and gore everywhere.

They'd lost Mike and Rose in the mayhem.

Uncle T had taken a stray bullet in his arm, but—thank the Lord—it was only a flesh wound.

Edward, Royce, Liam, and Emmett nodded at each other, silent. The aftermath was next, where the women got emotional, where spouses grieved, where Esme cried over her niece. They'd only have to find Esme and the others first. All Edward knew was that Pops and Bella had gone after them.

One who had surprised Edward during the bloodshed was Emmett. The mountain of a man had stepped up and fought well.

Alec limped over to Edward and asked if he wanted company as they headed toward the lake, to which Edward nodded.

"You up for it, though?" Edward jerked his chin at his brother's ankle.

"I'll be fine."

All right, then. Edward wiped his sweaty forehead and accepted a water bottle from Carmen. Not knowing exactly where Bella was—not to mention Seth and Ben—was already painful, so Edward planned to head out right away, and he could use a hand.

"Pops wouldn't let anything happen to her," Alec said, as if he knew what Edward was worrying about.

"He's human, isn't he?" Edward chugged some water. By the fires, Carmen and Lauren were throwing rags into water to boil. Everyone

except for the two kids, Beth Whitlock and Bree McCarty, were covered in blood and sweat. "I'm not counting on anybody else to take care of her but myself." He didn't *trust* anyone else to do it, either.

Alec looked up at the darkening sky, then squinted back at Edward. "You love her, huh?"

It had only been a month since the Swans came in to Edward's life, but enough challenges had been thrown at Edward for him to know the answer.

"It'd kill me to lose her, so yeah, I'd say that's a fair assumption." He shrugged and downed the rest of the water. "Haven't really thought about it." Wiping his mouth, he looked over to where Royce and Liam were piling up walkers. "Royce! Liam!" The two men looked up. "One'a you wanna come with me to find Bella and the others?"

Royce looked to Liam, who nodded and said, "I can go."

Edward thought it was weird King didn't throw himself at the chance to play hero and find Bella, but then he realized Royce had avoided Edward and Bella a lot lately. Trying to get over his crush? Maybe.

That suited Edward just fine.

Soon, Edward, Alec, and Liam were geared up to go, and they left Emmett and Royce in charge while Jasper helped Uncle T with his bullet wound.

After today's shitstorm, Edward decided to show Bella the personal belongings he'd brought from her dad's house. He figured they'd all need some downtime, and making Bella smile would do the trick for Edward. Granted, it could get emotional, too, but...he would deal.

"They're down by the lake, right?" Liam asked.

Edward inclined his head, more focused on his surroundings.

"That's what Carmen said, anyway." Alec stepped over a large rock and winced at the pain in his foot. "They're probably on their way back. It's been what, two, three hours now?"

Something like that, and it only took about fifteen minutes to get to the lake.

Up ahead, they heard some rustling in the leaves that covered the ground, and the three men became more alert. They moved swiftly between the trees, guns held high, and soon encountered a walker behind a boulder.

Alec was about to shoot it when Liam hissed and nodded at the walker with a pointed look. Edward narrowed his eyes, not getting it. The walker was chewing on something—shit. Okay, it was chewing on a bloodied arm.

"Jesus Christ," Alec spat out.

Edward gritted his teeth and popped a bullet in the walker's head, then the three took off in a run. Now they were worried that the others had run into trouble they couldn't handle. Pops, Bella, and Seth were assets in battle, but the others?

"It doesn't have to be anyone we know," Liam reasoned, breathing heavily. "It's not impossible for other humans to be here."

That was certainly true, but it didn't exactly ease Edward's fears.

"Son of a bitch," Alec growled in pain. "I'm a goddamn liability out here."

"Quit bitching," Edward snapped. "You're not going back alone." End of fucking story. Alec was gonna have to suck it up; he'd had worse.

A while later, they finally reached the lake, and Edward ran over to Pops.

"Edward, Alec?" Pops looked confused, wiping his bloodied hands on his thighs. Edward offered the dead woman on the ground—Jessica—one glance, eyeing the bullet wound in her forehead, then the bite mark along her shoulder.

At least we don't have to tell her that Mike didn't make it.

"Shit, is that Angela?" Alec pointed.

Another woman lay on the ground farther away, and Esme appeared to be praying.

Pops nodded once. There was nothing else to say.

"Where's Bella?" Edward asked, getting impatient. "And Seth—" Just then, he spotted Seth down by the water. All right. All right. That was good.

"Ben?" His gaze shifted back to his father, who frowned.

"They're not with you?" he wondered. "Bella left with Alice, Ben, and Alexander almost an hour ago."

Edward pressed a fist to his mouth as his blood ran cold.

10.

Saskatchewan, Canada

July 25th, 2013

3 months and 19 days since the outbreak

Edward slept fitfully, twisting and turning, soaked in sweat. Nightmares haunted him, and Bella and Ben always remained out of reach. Walkers kept them separated from Edward.

In every nightmare, he saw them, ran for them...

"Help!" Bella's voice echoed across the parking lot. *"Help us, Edward!"*

The space between them grew as if someone was stretching out the asphalt. Yet, Edward kept running. He kept fighting the walkers in his path.

"Goddammit!" he growled. They were too many. The rotters crowded him. His arms and legs burned from exertion.

Two walkers rammed into him, sending him to the ground. He fought, cursed, and tried to see where Bella and Ben were. He grew dizzy, desperate. He couldn't see them. Walkers everywhere.



Edward jolted awake just as two rotters sank their teeth into his chest.

He panted. His eyes stung. The sheets were damp with sweat.

That's what you get for growing attached.

He shook his head, refusing to believe it. For the first time since the outbreak, he refused to believe in defeat. Bella and Ben were alive out there. Somewhere. He had to believe that.

Even though it had been five days.

Stomping down the heartache, he left the overhead bed, pulled on a pair of army greens, a t-shirt, his boots, and left the Sprinter as he tucked a gun into his belt.

The dog trailed after him.

The sun was about to rise, and only Daryl was up so far.

He was a new addition. They'd found him in the woods three days ago, beaten up badly. Daryl, who was Edward's age, had been robbed blind by hostile humans. They'd taken his truck, his guns, and killed his brother.

Leave it to Alec to bring home another stray.

Although, I doubt you'll fall in love with this one.

No...not likely.

Edward, Alec, and Seth had trekked back to camp with Daryl, which had taken several hours longer due to Daryl's broken leg and bruised ribs. Stumbling into the clearing where they had their RVs, Doc had taken over, and Daryl seemed to be recovering quickly.



"Mornin'." Daryl had a southern drawl, though he rarely spoke at all. He seemed nice enough, quiet and keeping to himself, yet still helpful. But if Edward had never felt the need to get to know someone new before, he sure as hell didn't feel it now. Not when Bella and Ben were missing.

He nodded with a dip of his chin and checked one of the pots over the fire to find hot water there. The last search had ended at around three this morning, which meant Edward had only slept for two hours, and this water was probably what was left from when they'd gotten back and needed caffeine in their systems.

He poured the water into a mug and added some instant coffee, and then he took a hard blow to his heart as he wished for Bella to flash him her smile and bring him a chocolate bar.

He'd fallen harder than he'd expected—or thought was possible.

With his coffee in hand, he walked over to his Sierra and dropped the tailgate. The maps were still there, and he spent some time going over their search areas.

The entire lake had been covered, as had the forest surrounding it. But the park was big—lots of places to hide and get lost in.

A niggling suspicion told Edward that maybe Bella and Ben had left the provincial park. Maybe they'd failed to find their way back to the camp and had decided to seek shelter in Moose Jaw. The city was only some twenty miles away, and if you had a car...

But...searching for them there would be like finding a needle in a haystack, even though the city wasn't very big at all.

Still, shelter came first. Bella wasn't only looking after Ben, but also Alice Whitlock and her son. Alice couldn't protect herself worth a damn, and Bella would need a safe place.

"Good morning." Lauren stepped out of Alec's RV and strolled over, already geared up for another search party. Edward was thankful. "Who's going today?"

Well, Uncle T had gone with them yesterday, but it had been too soon. He was still recovering from getting shot in his arm. Which sounded worse than it was, but out here they couldn't risk infection. A flesh wound could kill you if it got infected.

Pops was still trying to convince T to take more antibiotics, but Edward's uncle was stubborn. He'd stopped after two days, claiming he was just fine.

"You goin'?" Edward lit up a smoke, and Lauren nodded. "Then...me, Seth, Alec, Pops, Royce, Emmett, and you."

Daryl limped closer. "I'll help out, too," he said quietly.

Edward eyed the man's leg, then shook his head. "You can't run with that leg."

Daryl squinted at the forest surrounding them, debating something, before he looked back to Edward. "Anythin' I *can* do?"

Edward shrugged, only focused on the search. He hadn't spared more than a single thought for Emmett who had lost his wife and unborn child, Esme who had lost her seventeen-year-old niece, and Mike and Jessica who had lost each other. He didn't care about who cooked or who did laundry, either. Or about the fact that Jasper was losing his mind worrying over Alice and Alexander.

"Liam mentioned going fishing today," Lauren told Daryl, offering the newcomer a small smile. "Maybe you could go with him?"

Edward tuned them out to memorize the map instead. There was a winter resort northwest of the park; if Bella had managed to make it that far, perhaps she'd sought cover there. If it were Edward, he'd try to find a vehicle as fast as possible. There were bound to be abandoned vehicles near the resort.

He decided the resort was on today's to-do list, so he got started on stocking up the Wrangler and his Sierra.

~oOo~

Bella pushed herself to the limits and ran for her life.

It wasn't so much the ten walkers behind her that were bothering her as it was the countless others that were trying to intercept. Fucking hell, they came from every direction, every goddamn street corner and alley.

Five days of being on the run. No more guns for protection. Barely any food and water. Heartbreak.

When she could barely breathe any longer, she threw herself into a car and locked the doors.

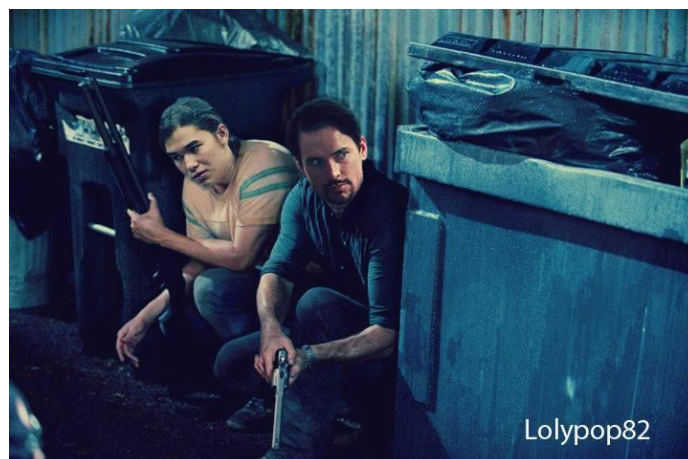


Maybe I can jump-start it.

She panted heavily as zombies surrounded the ancient Volvo.

~oOo~

Royce crouched behind a Dumpster with Seth, wryly wondering if *all* the Cullens had military training. Edward, Alec, and Doc were spread out, staying low in their own hiding spots, yet they could communicate without difficulty. Using hand gestures Royce had only seen in war movies, the Cullens debated whether it was best to move around the dozen walkers that stumbled around in front of the ski resort's main cabin, or if it was best to kill them.



Doc made a circle, indicating they should go around, then motioned to his gun, and Royce was pretty sure Doc was referring to the lack of silencer. As in, they could attract more walkers if they just walked up there and started shooting.

Edward agreed with an impatient expression, and Alec was defeated.

The summer sun shone brightly, which only made the revolting stench of decay worse, and there was no way Royce could stick around much longer. Ironically, the Dumpster was fine. The rotters, however...?

He'd already lost Bella to another man; he didn't need to lose his stomach or his life, too.

"We're going." Seth nudged Royce and stood up.

Tightening his grip on his shotgun, Royce walked first—well, after the Cullens and Emmett—and they stayed near the walls of a smaller cabin, slowly moving toward the bigger one. Lauren snuck up to Alec, and the two ran swiftly across a small road and disappeared behind another cabin.

Next, Edward and Doc gestured for Royce and Seth to follow.

Ten minutes later, they had all made it inside, and Alec and Emmett barricaded the door while Edward wasted no time searching the first floor. Royce and Doc covered for him, taking down what had once been a receptionist and one janitor.

"She has to be here," Edward whispered to himself.

~oOo~

The sun was setting when Bella finally found the store she'd been looking for. It had taken hours of sitting still and pretending she didn't have to

pee while the walkers slowly but surely forgot about her existence in that car with a dead battery.

She entered the shop through a shattered window and raised the crowbar she'd found. It was all she had, aside from a small butterfly knife.

Glass crunched under her boots.

Her stomach snarled and tightened.

She'd raided a couple corner stores on the way, but there hadn't been much left. Canned fruit, some wheat crackers, and a few cans of Canada Dry—and Bella didn't even like ginger ale. *Whatta feast*. Naturally, the shelves of water had been emptied long ago.

She'd have to wait to eat, though. It would be completely dark soon, and Bella had more pressing matters than eating canned peaches.

~oOo~

"Bella!" Edward shouted.

His voice carried, bouncing off the walls of the cabins outside.

They'd been looking for Bella, Ben, Alice, and Alexander all day. This resort had nothing but walking corpses.

"We have to get going, son," Pops said impatiently. "There're walkers comin'."

Edward barely resisted the urge to glare at him. "Bella!" He scanned the woods, the mountains, the houses...

She's not here, Cullen.

~oOo~

"Oh, thank fuck." Bella breathed a sigh of relief when she finally found a car that wasn't completely dead. Time was running out, but now she would be able to get to the city limits faster.

That was, unless she ran outta gas.

She groaned and slammed her hands against the wheel as she saw the little light already blinking red.

Flicking her gaze to Ben's shoestring, her new bracelet, she steeled herself, hardened her heart further, willed herself not to cry, and pressed down on the gas.

She'd come too far to give up now.

~oOo~

"I wanna head into Moose Jaw tomorrow." Edward took a drag from his smoke and pointed at the map. They'd been back at camp for an hour or two now, and he was gathered with his brother, uncle, and father by the hood of Royce's car. The map they had of Moose Jaw only showed the bigger streets, but it was enough for Edward. "We'll take the highway—" he traced the yellow line on the map that went between the provincial park and the city "—and we'll take this exit here, onto Main Street. It's the shortest route."

When no one answered him, he looked up from the map to find his family staring at him with pity in their expressions.

Fury blazed through him, their silence saying plenty.

It's been five days, son.

Two women, two children...without proper means to defend themselves...and you think they made it to a city over twenty miles from here...?

We don't even know that they found a car, bro. What we do know is there isn't a lot of shelter in this park.

"Don't you fucking dare," Edward threatened in a low voice. "She's alive."

~oOo~

The car ran out of gas, just like the others had, and Bella had to walk the last mile.

Thankfully there were no walkers on the highway.

Silver-fucking-lining.

Her arms and legs ached with every step, and the bags she carried were heavy. She'd gone nuts in that store earlier today, grabbing everything she could carry. Because she had a feeling she'd only get one chance.

A sob of relief caught in her throat when she saw the first road sign she could actually reach. She wouldn't be able to find a larger place to leave a message, and this was why she'd come here.

Unzipping one of the bags, she located the bright red spray-paint.

~oOo~

Edward sat by the fire as the others headed off to bed one by one, leaving only the few who had volunteered to keep watch.

And Uncle T.

Edward ignored him, though. Instead he leaned forward and paid attention to the dog. She came to sit between his legs, letting out a *hmph*, and rested her head on his knee.

The German shepherd looked as sad as Edward felt, but he knew dogs took after their owners. If he was excited, so was the dog. If he was torn up and upset, so was the dog.

"Edward?" Seth poked his head out of the Sprinter. After Bella had gone missing, Seth had spent most nights in Edward's RV, which actually made him feel better. He felt responsible for Seth now, and he wanted the kid close. "You gonna sleep at all?"

Edward shook his head and scratched the dog behind her ears. "Nah. You take the bed." He'd hopefully catch a couple hours of sleep later, but he slept just fine in a chair. "Get some rest, kid."

Seth looked as if he wanted to argue, but he never did.

Yesterday, Edward had given Seth the bag of stuff he'd collected from Seth's room back in Kansas City. It had been a welcome surprise, although it had left Seth wistful. He missed his sister. He *needed* his sister.

So did Edward.

"I'm sorry about before, Edward," Tony said quietly, sparking up a smoke. He sat on the other side of the fire, watching Edward pensively. There was understanding and remorse, too. "The odds got the best of me."

Well, Edward didn't give a flying fuck about the odds. Bella and Ben were alive. End of story. "She's resourceful." His focus remained on the dog, petting her, scratching her, thinking that Bella was right; the dog did need a name. "She's strong and stubborn."

"She is." Tony agreed, but he was also leaving things unsaid. Things Edward didn't wanna hear. "I'll be there tomorrow, too."

Edward nodded in thanks.

~oOo~

Knowing there were so many walkers in the city center, Bella had already scoped out a building near the edge of town, and when she reached the right street, she was all but dead on her feet.

The tiny alarm clock she'd stolen from a convenience store ticked away in her pocket, showing it was way past midnight. *They better not be asleep yet.* Or worse...had they left the area?

Bella wouldn't blame them if they had. Five days was a long time.

She spotted a few rotters ahead, so she slipped her arms into one of the duffels' handles, carrying it as a backpack, and prepared to use the other duffel as a weapon. In her free hand, she had a tight grip on the crowbar.

Tears of exhaustion blurred her vision, but she blinked to see clearer. The building was only a couple hundred feet away. Four walkers weren't gonna bring her down now.

Initially, she'd thought about doing this out on the highway—near the Moose Jaw sign—but she'd be a sitting duck on the road. So, she'd settled for an apartment building.

She walked briskly, not even bothering with the first walker, because it was too slow, limping with a completely crushed leg. But the second came at her, snarling and rasping, and Bella grunted as she swung the crowbar against the rotter's head. The gore splattered and made sloshing sounds, and even more as the walker fell to the ground, its head smashing against the pavement.

"Christ..." Bella felt sick. The summer brought heat, and heat made the rotters smell something fierce. It was strong, strong enough to make your nostrils burn and your eyes well up.

With a churning stomach, she flung her duffel into the third one, sending the zombie to the ground a few feet away. It would get up again, but Bella was already picking up speed. She jogged the last distance, and when the fourth walker came at her, she spat out a curse and drove the end of the bloody crowbar straight through its head.

Bella gagged but managed to hold whatever she had left in her stomach where it belonged. Then she lifted the wooden beam she'd used yesterday when she'd secured the hallways in the building and entered. *Gotta love stairs.* An elevator would've been a godsend, but she wasn't exactly religious.

As she started the trek up to top floor, she could hear the thumps and moans from walkers trapped inside several of the apartments. But as long as they couldn't get out, Bella didn't worry. When she'd been here yesterday, she'd taken care of the seven walkers she'd encountered in the stairwell, and that was all that mattered.

Every floor brought her to a new level of exhaustion, and had she not been thinking about the people she loved, she would've quit a long time ago. Hell yeah, she was a strong chick. Bella didn't surrender easily—never had—but even she had limits. And right now, she was holding on to the small shred of hope. Hope to be reunited with Seth and Edward.

"Fuck," she whimpered as her thighs throbbed from the workout. Every now and then, a dizzy spell took over, forcing her to take a break. But after some ten minutes, she pushed a door open and ended up on the roof.

A breeze fanned out her hair and sent a shiver down her spine. It was still warm, but it wasn't unbearable anymore.

It was a clear night. Millions of stars.

When she'd been a kid, her mom used to tell her that every star represented a good deed.

A ten-year-old Bella had later asked, *"But, Mom...when a star falls, does that mean a person has done something stupid?"*

Mom had been stumped for a bit, and then Dad had swooped in with, *"Actually, it's not good deeds. Every star represents a fish I've caught."*

"You've caught a gazillion fish, Daddy?" Bella had been awed. And gullible.

"I sure have, baby girl. I mean, if you include fish eggs."

Shaking the sense of loss that had her in a vise grip, Bella dumped her two duffels on the ground and got started. She had what felt like miles and miles of thin rope made out of hemp, and it took her the better part of an hour to orchestrate everything to perfection.

With all the fireworks in position, she retrieved the small bottle of gasoline to soak the hemp. The entire roof looked like a playground for pyromaniacs, and Bella had the fireworks all connected by the long fuse. If she was correct in her estimates, at least five minutes would pass between each explosion. Which meant there were fireworks for approximately two hours.

She was a few weeks late for Canada Day, but better late than never, right?

"Please let this work," she whispered to herself as she lit the fuse.

She was fully aware that this would attract walkers, but she also hoped it would attract the attention of the man she couldn't live without anymore.

Several things were working against Bella, such as the distance. Over twenty miles. But she remembered her mom's tales from her backpacking days in Europe. "We stood there in Calais, and we could see all the way across the English Channel to Dover—twenty-one miles away!"

But even if it was possible to see the fireworks from that distance, Bella knew the campsite was in the middle of a forest. The trees would likely shield the view, but if she got lucky, the added elevation of the campsite would help at least a little.

One by one, with—as she'd hoped—four or five minutes in between, the fireworks lit up the night sky.

She looked up, only to close her eyes.

Please find me, Edward.

~oOo~

"You sure you shouldn't try to catch some sleep?" Uncle T asked, rising from the log he'd been sitting on. "It's past one AM, you know."

Oh, Edward knew very well that he *should* sleep. *Could* was another matter.

"Still got some coffee here." He tipped his mug and took a sip. Lukewarm, nasty. "Good night."

Uncle Tony sighed and turned toward his RV at the edge of the clearing. But he stopped suddenly and cocked his head, his back to Edward, who assumed his uncle was hearing the sounds of walkers.

Standing up, Edward joined T and raised a brow.

"There." Tony pointed to something in the forest. "Between the trees, near the tops." Edward frowned and followed his uncle's gaze. "I don't know, but...looks a little like a flare."

11.

Saskatchewan, Canada

July 25th, 2013

3 months and 19 days since the outbreak

The garbage and debris that littered the road didn't stand a chance as Edward drove the Wrangler toward Moose Jaw in the middle of the night. It was a bumpy ride, but with their goal in sight, everything else just faded away.

Another round of fireworks lit up the night sky.

"Same time?" Edward side-eyed Uncle Tony in the passenger seat, then paid attention to the highway again.

"Yep." T nodded, focused on his watch. "About four minutes apart."

Someone wanted to be seen, Edward was sure of it. The fireworks went off in intervals, and it had been about an hour now since Tony had spotted the first one.

Edward had wanted to take off that very minute, but T had smacked some sense into him and convinced Edward to wake up at least a couple others. Which was why Liam and Alec were in the backseat, and Emmett and Daryl were back at the camp keeping watch.

"Edward." Liam tapped Edward's shoulder, then pointed at something farther ahead. "The sign."

Narrowing his eyes as they drove closer, Edward slowed down enough to read the road sign, but then he stopped altogether. It had been covered in red spray paint, as a background for the message delivered in white.

Grumpy,

Gooseberry pie isn't my thing. I prefer Mayberry.

On the outside, Edward was on edge and quiet. But on the inside...? He was near hysterical, frantic, and fucking desperate. *Bella*. It was Bella. There was no doubt—not a single one. Because no one else would give Edward a fucking Snow White riddle.

He'd told Bella that he used to read *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* to his niece, who'd been obsessed with the fairy tale. Edward had loathed it—Christ, reading for kids? But for some reason, he'd never been able to say no to little Chelsea.

At the bottom corner of the large road sign, there was a circle with something stuck to the metal surface. Without even thinking about it, Edward opened the door, leaving the engine running, and jogged over to the sign.

"What does it mean?" Liam hollered.

Edward ignored him and approached the road sign, seeing that Bella had attached a map of the town to it. Fuck, he wanted to fall to his knees and weep like a baby. But he didn't. Instead he unfolded the map with trembling fingers, then looked back to the message.

Gooseberry. The pie Snow White made.

Mayberry...

"That doesn't really make sense, bro," Alec commented, a frown in his voice. "But it's gotta be Bella, right? She calls you Grumpy."

Liam spoke up again. "Why didn't she just write out where we can find her?"

That was easy. Bella didn't want to attract the wrong crowd—be found by just anybody. This had been a precaution, a genius one.

Edward scanned the map in the darkness. Emotions, stronger than he'd ever felt, flew around inside him in a whirlwind. Anticipation, relief, need, pride, impatience.

"Maybery Crescent," he whispered to himself. It was a street. Maybery Crescent. The spelling was a little off from what Bella had written, but this had to be it.

He didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"I'll be damned." Tony got it. He knew the references as well as Edward did, and now he was without doubt, too. "You told Bella about Chelsea?"

Edward nodded tightly, too wound up to do much else, and jogged back to the Wrangler with the map. "Maybery Crescent—that's where we're going." He got behind the wheel, and the others followed suit, shutting all doors.

Ten minutes later, they'd gotten off the highway and were officially in the city center. Car dealerships were lined up along Main Street, but it soon morphed into office buildings and apartment buildings.

It had been a while since they'd seen the last of the fireworks, but one thing was clear: Maybery Crescent wasn't nearby. From the looks of it, the building where Bella had lit the fireworks was near Main Street, the middle, front row and center. But Maybery Crescent was farther out west.

~oOo~

Bella had been on the run for half an hour when she ducked into another abandoned car to catch her breath.

It had been hell getting away from the building where she'd lit the fireworks. Walkers all over, following every noise and sign of life. And if this didn't work, she had to go back tomorrow and do it all over again. But with every day that passed, she knew the odds got worse. For all she knew, Edward and the others had moved on.

Before the outbreak, it would've been unthinkable to just walk out. But now? One simply didn't survive out here for long.

"Okay..." She breathed out and checked the street for walkers, relieved that she didn't see any. She had to get to Maybery Crescent. There was no time to waste.

Despite the added risks of being out and about like this, she was still glad she hadn't lit the fireworks closer to Maybery. It would've attracted too many rotters.

~oOo~

Maybery Crescent was quiet.

Edward got out of the Wrangler and eyed the two-story homes. What had once been an idyllic family street was now an image frozen in time, showing the haste and chaos in which people had left it.

Skid marks on the asphalt, boarded-shut windows, run-down mailboxes, leftover luggage that hadn't made the cut, overgrown lawns, and garage doors wide open.

Edward stepped on something, and he looked down to see a doll covered in dried blood.

"You think they're here?" Alec came up next to him and squinted at the houses.

Edward followed suit and tried to see if there was a house that looked safer than the others. "If they're not, they will be." He was dead set on waiting here for Bella. "But it's no use in looking for them." Because his girl was smart. In case anyone else would understand the message left on that road sign, Bella and the others would remain hidden nearby. She would come out when she saw it was Edward. "We'll stay here," he said, facing his brother. "In plain sight."

"Boys." Uncle T nodded at something down the street.

Edward turned to see a lone walker.

Alec dealt with it.

Then they stood there in silence. Just waiting.

The occasional rotter stumbled out of the shadows every now and then, but they were taken care of easily. Having faced herds in major cities, one here and there was nothing to these men.

"Risky move, wasn't it?" Tony looked thoughtful. "None of this would've happened if we hadn't seen that sign out on the highway. We wouldn't be here."

Edward shrugged, slowly scanning his surroundings for the umpteenth time the past twenty minutes. "Are there any safe moves these days?"

He had a point.

"*Jesus*—Edward," Alec whispered, and Edward whipped around.

There.

His heart all but stopped when he spotted a woman coming out between two cars. *Bella*. She was at least a hundred feet away, but the moonlight revealed the truth to Edward. It was Bella.

His lips formed her name, but no sounds came out. After taking one hesitant step, each one that followed came with more and more speed until he was running.

Bella dropped the crowbar she'd been holding.

She looked beyond exhausted, but she was *alive*. With blurry vision, Edward took in her matted hair, the smudges on her cheeks, her dirty clothes, and noted that she'd lost weight. In just five days, her health had taken a nosedive, and it nearly broke Edward.

When he was close enough, he heard her choppy breaths as she started crying. He didn't stop until he wrapped his arms around her and picked her up. Another second and it looked as if she'd collapse.

The relief was so great that it rendered Edward speechless.

"You found me," Bella whimpered.

Edward swallowed hard, choking up, and tightened his hold on her. He wanted to shake his head and say *no, you led me here*. But he couldn't. He was completely overcome with love, relief, and pride.

Where's Ben, though? Alexander? Alice?

On shaky legs, he turned and walked toward the others. Bella's legs and arms were wrapped around him tightly, but he could sense that she was functioning on sheer will now. There was no energy left in his girl.

"Bring her here," Tony murmured, holding on to the door to the backseat of the Wrangler. "Alec? Get her some water and a chocolate bar. She's gonna need sugar."

Edward slid into the backseat, Bella seated in his lap. His need to check for any kind of damage overtook him soon enough, so he cupped her

cheeks and brushed his thumbs over the steady flow of silent tears. God, he admired her.

"Any cuts and scrapes?" he whispered hoarsely. Fuck, even mere inches away, she was too far. He squeezed her to him and shuddered. All the things that could've gone wrong...yet here she was.

In response to his question, Bella just shook her head and tried to get closer to him. She didn't make a single move when Alec held out the water bottle and two Snickers, so Edward eased up on the bear hug and took them.

"C'mon, sweets." He gently grasped Bella's chin, tilting her head to face him. "When was the last time you ate?"

She blinked, causing two teardrops to trickle down her cheeks. "I..." Her brows knitted together, and she let out a breath. "I found some canned peaches." Edward nodded her along. "They're at the hiding spot. I forgot to bring them."

The despondence in her voice worried Edward. She sounded like a lost little girl, and now he wished his father had been here. Pops would've known exactly how to handle this situation.

"Do you have food?" she whispered.

He frowned and nodded. "Of course." Holding up the water and the chocolate, he was relieved when Bella took the bottle and began to drink. She didn't gulp it down. She sipped steadily, slowly, and unwrapped the candy bar with her free hand.

"I..." She panted and wiped her mouth. "I gotta get food for Ben and Alice."

The air in Edward's lungs left him in a whoosh at the sound of Ben's name. *The kid's alive*. Christ, Edward had been worried. Growing attached to that kid had happened without his even knowing it.

"Where are they?" Edward accepted a small rag that Tony had soaked in water, and he carefully wiped some grime off Bella's face. "Is the other kid there, too? Alexander?"

Pain flitted across Bella's face, and her chin wrinkled as a new round of tears welled up in her eyes. "We lost him," she whimpered. "I didn't see the walker coming at us—"

"Shh, shh..." Edward hugged her to him again and rocked her slowly. If Bella blamed herself, he'd do whatever it took for her to let that go.

The only one who was responsible for Alexander was Alice. And Jasper, but he wasn't here, nor had he been present when they disappeared.

"I gotta see Ben." Bella withdrew from the hug and stumbled out of the car.

Knowing it was no use to tell her to take it easy, Edward followed silently, prepared for anything. Tony and Liam went along, leaving Alec to keep watch on the street.

Rounding one of the houses, they ended up in a backyard. Bella crossed the lawn, then jumped over a picket fence, and once in a backyard that belonged to homes on the next street, she came to a stop at a door in the ground. A cellar?

She bent down and knocked four times, then pulled the latch free and opened the door. Edward was quick to assist her, and he insisted on going down first. He retrieved a small flashlight, the smell of stale air, mildew, and urine hitting him.

"Bella?" someone—Ben—rasped in the darkness. "Edward!"

"I'm here, sweetie." Bella hurried past Edward, and by the time the flashlight lit up the small basement, he saw Bella on the stone floor hugging Ben.

Alice was huddled in a corner.

Liam ran over to her and covered her in a blanket before he picked her up and carried her outside.

She cried for her son.

Tony ushered Bella and Ben outside too, and Edward aimed the light, spotting a bucket, a few empty ginger ale cans, a couple candy bar wrappers, one blanket, and Ben's shoes.

Edward picked the shoes up and left the cellar behind.

Outside, he strode over to Bella and Ben, squatted down, and enveloped them both.

He realized he was probably in shock.



While the relief lingered, some parts of him stayed numb. Maybe the cynic in him was waiting for him to wake up and realize all this was a dream.

"We can go to Alaska now?" Ben cried.

Edward nodded and kissed his forehead, once again too choked up to speak.

"You saved us." Bella threw her arms around Edward, Ben not complaining one bit about being trapped between them. "You saved us."

"Stop it." Edward cleared his throat and wiped away his tears. Next he palmed Bella's cheek and rested their foreheads together. "You're so fucking brave, Bella."

That earned him a real smile, a genuine one that almost made Edward forget the destruction around him.

Almost.

"Come on." He stood up and grabbed Ben's hand. "We have water and snacks in the car—food back at the camp." He wrapped his free arm around Bella's shoulders, kissed her temple, and began the short trek back to the Wrangler.

"Bella went out for hours every day to find us food," Ben said softly, sniffing. "I was afraid she wouldn't come back."

Edward didn't wanna think about it, unless he wanted to give himself an ulcer. Or a heart attack.

"Hey, I had this for good luck, remember?" Bella showed Ben her wrist, revealing a...what? "His shoestring," she clarified quietly.

Ben nodded and wiped his nose. "My grampa—he did that. When I played soccer, he tied a shoestring around my wrist. For good luck. And I always

scored!" Edward managed a small smile, thinking that Ben had lost too much in this world. His entire family. Left all alone, until Pops found him in a store back in Atlanta.

Ben was a fucking miracle.

~oOo~

"We should get back here tomorrow for a supply run," Bella croaked.

Her tears just wouldn't stop falling, and it irritated her. There was no more energy, no more adrenaline, no more strength. She was liquid in Edward's arms, both of them huddled in the backseat with Ben next to them, then Alec. Uncle T drove, Liam sat in the front, and he had Alice in his lap.

Alice was...not really here. She'd shut down five days ago when they'd lost Alexander. She cried for him or just sat there, emotionally detached.

"What do you mean?" Edward brushed his thumbs over her cheeks. He'd been doing that a lot in the past half hour.

Bella offered a one-shouldered shrug and bit off a small piece of chocolate. "There's a Dodge dealership on Main Street. We need a few spare parts."

Bella had also found a gun store, but she hadn't been able to enter. The windows were barred, and she hadn't carried a gun to shoot the lock. Which...God, it had sucked. She'd found the store the first day they'd arrived in Moose Jaw, and she'd nearly had a breakdown when she hadn't been able to get in.

"It's gonna be light in a few hours," Uncle T noted. "We could always stop right here, catch some shut-eye, then head over to Dodge tomorrow morning before we head back."

Edward was already shaking his head. "Bella and Ben haven't eaten properly in days—"

"Hey." Bella nudged him and gave him a small grin. She loved his protective side, but she knew herself and what she could handle. "We have all the water we can drink, snacks, and a safe place." The Wrangler was a fort compared to some other places. "A few more hours won't kill us." She tilted her head to face Ben. "What do you think, sweetie?"

He shrugged, too busy polishing off his second apple. "I can sleep here." Next he unwrapped a chocolate bar and shoved half of it into his mouth.

Bella chuckled—*still fucking crying*—and offered him a water bottle.

It was decided. They'd stay. And tomorrow, they'd return to camp with all the car parts they needed, and then Bella was gonna hug her brother half to death.

~oOo~

"Can't sleep?" Edward murmured, shifting Bella's hair from her face. Her eyes were closed, lashes damp with tears.

"Can't stop crying," she whispered. "It's annoying."

From the front, Uncle Tony chuckled drowsily.

Liam and Alec were snoring.

Alice was silent. If she was asleep or awake, Edward didn't know. Nor did he give a fuck. Truth be told, he had no compassion whatsoever for that woman. She'd lost her *son*, which was a pain Edward didn't know. But had Alice ever been helpful? Had she worked as hard as Bella to keep them all safe? No. No, only Bella had risked her life to protect and provide.

"Is Seth okay?" she rasped, lifting her head from Edward's shoulder. "I haven't been the best sister lately—"

"Don't even go there." Edward threw her a look. "He's fine. He's worried sick, but he's fine, and he'll see you in a few hours."

Uncle T spoke up. "What my nephew doesn't mention is that he's been lookin' out for Seth. Don't worry, honey."

Bella smiled at Edward and bumped her forehead to his chin. "So modest."

Edward cupped her cheek and kissed her softly. "Rest."

"No..." Bella's smile fell, and she shuddered. "I don't want the nightmares."

Neither did Edward. He'd had them since Bella disappeared. Which reminded him... "What happened?" he whispered. "Pops said you and Alice were on your way back to camp with Ben and Alexander."

Resting her head on his shoulder again, Bella burrowed herself impossibly closer and swallowed hard. "We got intercepted." Her voice was quiet and near breaking point, but she continued. "There were fix or six walkers, and I couldn't keep them all away." And Alice couldn't help out, Edward added internally. "One bit into Alexander," she croaked. "His entire arm..."

Edward's eyes flashed to the rearview where he met Uncle T's gaze.

It explained the walker Edward had seen with Liam and Alec.

"Alice got him free and picked him up," Bella went on, sniffing. "We ran as fast as we could, but he bled out. And we didn't know where we were any longer." She paused for a minute, and Edward let his lips linger on her forehead. "We tried to find our way back, but it got dark. We had to find

shelter, so we just kept going in...I don't even know what direction, but we got to the edge of the park, and we found a car there."

Edward made her take a break there to drink some water and calm down. As eager as he was to get answers, he couldn't stand seeing her this upset. It was like when she'd lost her father. He hated feeling so helpless.

"Thanks." Bella sniffled some more and twisted the cap back on the bottle. "The day after, I tried to circle back—find the camp, the road we used to get there, but I failed and there wasn't much gas in the tank." She shivered and let out a breath. "I figured it would be easier to regroup and find a new vehicle in a town."

So, they'd headed to Moose Jaw.

"I hated it," she cried into her hands. "There were dealerships and fucking gun shops, but I couldn't break in. We didn't have any ammo left, and we're not exactly strong enough to break those windows. We tried, but...there were so many walkers..."

"It's okay," Edward whispered into her hair. "You did great, Bella. I'm so proud of you."

Bella cried herself to sleep.

~oOo~

When she woke up only a couple hours later, she was bleary-eyed and drained.

Edward, Alec, and Tony were talking quietly. Tony was holding a map—the one she'd attached to the road sign.

"What—" That didn't work. Too hoarse. She cleared her throat and tried again. "What're you talkin' 'bout?"

Edward smiled carefully, maybe checking to see if she was gonna fall apart again. "How you feelin', sweets?"

Bella shrugged, not sure, and shifted on Edward's lap. His legs had to be numb by now, but he didn't complain. "I'll survive." She smiled ruefully. It was the best answer she could give right now. "What were you discussing?"

Edward nodded at the front. "Uncle T mentioned that we can never have too many guns, and you mentioned gun shops?"

"You happen to remember the streets, hon?" Tony asked.

Bella nodded. "One was only a sports fishing store, but they oughta have some stuff, right? Anyway." Leaning forward, between the two front seats, she checked the map and pointed to where she'd found the real gun shop. "There. The windows are barred, though. And the back of the building was blocked."

She knew getting in wouldn't be much of a problem *now*, of course. The men carried guns.

"We'll be quick," Edward said. "Then we'll meet up at the dealership?"

Alec was nodding; Bella frowned. "Wait, what?" Her head whipped around to face Edward. "We're splitting up?"

That was a *stupid* plan. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

"I've already been out," Alec explained, pointing at something across the alley they were parked in. "I found us wheels, and we have extra gas in the back."

"In the meantime, Uncle T and Liam will take you to the Dodge dealership," Edward murmured. "We'll join you there soon."

Bella pressed her lips together and pushed down her anxiety. They took off in smaller groups during supply runs all the time; today would be no different. But after being separated from Edward the past five days, it wasn't gonna be easy.

"If you don't come back, I'll fucking kill you," she whispered.

Edward didn't smile, thank God. Instead he nodded and stole a quick kiss.

"Yes, ma'am."

Never in her life had she been ma'am'd before.

Weirdo.

~oOo~

"Ya gotta be fucking kidding me!" Alec growled.

Edward glared out the passenger side window and saw the herd of walkers getting closer and closer. Now would be a great time to have a mechanic in the car. Not that Bella would have enough time to fix whatever had killed the engine.

It had gone too smoothly back at the gun store; this was the price.

"It's only a mile—we're running, little brother." Edward opened the door and got out, only to open the one in the back and retrieve the two black bags they'd filled with guns and ammo. "How's that ankle of yours?"

Alec grunted and kicked the door shut, then spat at the car. Piece of shit Honda. "Fuckin' peachy," he muttered. "Let's go."

Well, there was nothing like starting off your morning with a run.

~oOo~

"These are all good to go. They just need gas." Bella shrugged and closed the hood of the showroom car. The brand new Dodges were glimmering in the sunlight that shone through the shattered window of the dealership. Why take spare parts from a new car and bring them to an older car when you could just keep the new one?

With so many losses, an RV or two had to be left behind, but, at the same time, they had to think about the future. Perhaps it would be more difficult finding cars in Alaska. That's why they needed to act now and take what they could find.

Royce's Land Rover was also acting up, and it was electrical. Wasn't much Bella could do about that unless she could find a new alternator that fit his type of car. After all, they were going with long-lasting here. A cheaper brand would only delay the inevitable.

"We have enough gas in the Wrangler for two more trucks," Tony said. "At least so we can make it back to camp."

Bella nodded and smiled absently at Ben who was pretending to drive one of the trucks. His head was barely visible above the wheel.

"I found oil." Liam appeared from the back, holding up two bottles. "They have more cars in the back, too."

"Any tools?" Bella asked curiously.

She needed something to do—anything to keep her from worrying herself to death over Edward and Alec.

"Damn. Didn't think of that." He set the oil down on the hood of one car. "I'll go check."

"I'll break some of that glass off—" Tony pointed at the large window frame "—so we can just drive these babies outta hea'."

Good thing there was no wall in the way, Bella mused. The entire front of the dealership was made out of glass, and it had taken six rounds of shooting for Liam and Tony to break one section.

"Which truck do you like most, Ben?" Bella walked over to him and rested her forearms on the rolled-down window.

He grinned tiredly. "This one. Are we gonna get it?"

"Definitely." Bella nodded.

After a while, Tony returned, and this time with two extra cans of spare gas.

As he filled the tanks, Bella asked if Alice was okay in the Wrangler. She could see the Jeep farther down the street, but she couldn't see Alice.

"She's...quiet," Tony said, moving to the other truck. "I hope seeing Jasper and Beth will help."

Bella hoped so, too.

Just thinking about it...how Alexander died...

To occupy her thoughts, Bella snatched up the car keys Tony had located and got behind the wheel of the truck Ben wasn't sitting in. It was a tight fit between the vehicles, but with some skill, Bella maneuvered herself between them and drove out of the showroom, across the little lawn, and parked on the street.

No walkers around—miracle.

With the second truck, Bella pulled a Britney Spears and let Ben sit on her lap while she drove. But Ben wasn't a baby, and Bella wasn't exactly breaking any speed limits.

It made Ben chuckle, though.

They walked back inside hand in hand—

"Fuck!" she heard Liam shout. "We need cover, guys!"

Bella swallowed her heart and ran the last bit, making sure not to let go of Ben. Tony handed her a gun, and then they followed Liam to the back of the dealership, where he pointed down the back street.

"Oh, God." Bella's eyes widened as she saw Edward running toward them with at least twenty rotters following.



~oOo~

Edward was thankful for the cover fire, but he'd be even more thankful the minute they got outta this fucking town.

"Get inside," he panted reaching the garage bay behind the Dodge dealership. "Get in, get in."

Liam slid the heavy door shut while Uncle Tony fired off questions about Alec, to which Edward said everything was okay. Alec had taken the other way, and he was probably in front of the dealership right now. After giving

Bella a quick but hard squeeze, he pulled off his shirt, leaving his t-shirt on, and used it to wipe his forehead. Fuckin' hell, he was soaked in sweat.

"We gotta get going." He swallowed against the dryness in his throat. Water would be nice, but that would have to wait.

"Everything's set here." Tony nodded.

"You're lucky you didn't get hurt," Bella snapped at him. Then she grabbed Ben's hand and started leading him out.

Edward was half amused by her attitude; the other half was just fucking tired. But, regardless, he ran ahead just as Alec entered the dealership through a broken window and told them to get a goddamn move on.

Uncle Tony and Liam ran for the Wrangler.

Alec got the keys to a black Dodge.

Bella held the keys to a dark blue one.

New wheels, huh?



Lolypop82

"Can't wait to get outta here." Bella got in behind the wheel while Edward picked up Ben and got seated on the passenger side. "So much for taking it easy for a few days in sparsely populated Canada." She spat out the words and turned the key in the ignition.

Edward just smirked, still breathing heavily from his run.

Ben seemed a little shaken up, but it eased up as they started driving away.

Bella side-eyed them both. "Ben, tell Edward he's not allowed to worry us."

Ben scrunched his nose. "I think he heard you."

"Smart kid." Edward chuckled. For the first time in...days, several long fucking days, he felt good. There would be setbacks, more risks, and fears, but right in this moment, he silenced his inner cynic and reveled.

He had his Bella back. Ben was safe. They were on their way again.

"Hey..." Edward reached over and tugged on a few strands of Bella's hair. "I have two things to tell you."

"Yeah?" Bella was still a bit ticked off. She glanced in the rearview, keeping an eye on the others behind them. "You're planning another supply run already and this time you're going all alone?" She snorted. "Men."

Edward stifled a grin. "No..." Okay, a chuckle slipped out. He couldn't help it. She was being too fucking cute. "One, you gotta name that dog soon. Two, I love you."

Bella nearly slammed down on the brakes. She made a noise and threw Edward a look, incredulous.

"What! You—" Bella Swan had finally been rendered speechless. Well, for a little while. Maybe ten seconds. Then she sniffled, and her next side-eye came with a softer expression. "I love you too, Grumpy."

Edward already knew that being needed by Bella made him feel ten feet tall.

As it turned out, being loved by Bella made him feel even taller.

12.

Juneau, Alaska

August 4th, 2013

3 months and 29 days since the outbreak

According to simple math, it shouldn't take more than two days of nonstop driving to get from Saskatchewan to Anchorage, Alaska, but that was back when highways weren't blocked with serial car wrecks, when herds of walkers didn't exist, when a supply run was more commonly referred to a quick trip to the grocery store, and when gas never ran out.

As it was now, it had taken ten days, and they were a still a half-day's drive away from Juneau. But at least it was Alaska.

The silence in the Sprinter was relaxed and easy. A sense of accomplishment and relief blanketed them in comfort. Ben was busy reading one of the books on Alaskan fishing that Edward had found—stolen from a library, whatever—along the way, Edward was studying the state's weather, Seth... Well. Bella exhaled and told herself not to worry.

Seth was *driving*.

Before the outbreak, he hadn't even started taking lessons, and now he was speeding along the friggin' highway with Edward as his coach.

Shaking her head, Bella refocused on the little scrapbook Mom had made her when Bella had been in kindergarten.

Finding out that Edward had saved several personal belongings from her parents' house in K.C. had been overwhelming to epic proportions. Bella had probably made Edward uncomfortable with the attention, but he hadn't said a word.

God, she loved him.

For the first time in a very long time, she had faith. She believed with all her heart that they were gonna make it.

It was simply a good day.

Earlier when they'd paused to make lunch, Alec had marched up to Lauren and kissed the ever-loving crap out of her.

Bella had also spotted Doc and Esme talking, the two having bonded over loss and grief. Both had lost their spouses during the outbreak; additionally, Doc had lost a son and two grandchildren, and Esme had lost her niece, Rosalie.

Even Tony and Carmen had grown close. One boisterous man and one quiet, soft-spoken woman. Although, Carmen wasn't a pushover. When push came to shove, she...well, she pushed and shoved.

Of course, sadness laced the air on a daily basis, too.

After losing their son, there was a rift between Jasper and Alice. No hostility, but...they were stuck in their heads. They made time for their daughter, though that was about it. They'd grown quiet, distracted, and detached.

Emmett was now alone with his daughter, Bree.

There was also worry—mainly about Seth. Without modern medicine and machines, there wasn't much they could do. Doc was constantly going over textbooks he'd looted, wanting to experiment with antibiotics. But they didn't have enough to play around with. Luckily, Seth's condition was just fine for now. His glucose levels were good, he hardly ever used his inhaler, and he wasn't in pain.

Bella had to believe in a brighter future, where they lived to the fullest.

~oOo~

The day after, they all came to a stop a few miles north of Juneau.

They looked out over the water in silence.

Edward breathed in the fresh ocean air.

Plenty of islands nearby.

They hadn't encountered any people, which Edward actually was relieved about. Walkers, they could handle. And they existed here, too. But so far, they hadn't run into any herds.

He hadn't expected this feeling of...safety. But it was there—he felt it. Dangers lurked, but so did the knowledge of creating their own community on a small island where they were left alone. Fighting walkers would be reserved for supply runs.

Maybe he *could* promise Bella a tomorrow in the world to come.

Stubbing out his smoke, he glanced around at the people he'd traveled five thousand miles with. Everyone facing the water—thinking, reminiscing, praying, wanting closure, maybe some having gotten it.

Daryl, the newcomer, had turned out to be an excellent hunter, much like Edward and Uncle Tony. He was a good addition, and like the others, Daryl's hope had been to find safety in a colder climate.

Bella came up behind Edward and snuck her arms around his waist. He felt her forehead between his shoulder blades, grabbed her hand, and brought it to his lips.

"I believe in us, Edward," she said softly. "In all of this."

Edward hummed and pressed another kiss to her knuckles. Then he turned around and gave her a squeeze, dipping down to breathe in her hair. It was still a little damp from her shower, but what made Edward savor the moment even more was the fact that Bella was slowly but surely putting on the weight she'd lost during her time in Moose Jaw.

"I'm getting there," he murmured against the top of her head. "Wanna shack up with me once we get settled?" He smiled when Bella giggled. "I'm afraid I don't have a lock of hair or a class ring to give you."

Bella snorted and peered up at him, grinning. "How very ancient of you, honey. But a Post-it with the question 'Will you move in with me?' and two boxes for yes and no will suffice."

It was Edward's turn to snort. "Fuck the 'no' box. I'll just go straight to calling you Cullen and chain you to my bed instead."

"Wow." Bella laughed and widened her eyes, feigning shock. "Did I just miss my own wedding?"

"Guess so." Edward smirked a little, for once enjoying their banter with all his heart. "It was a great shindig. Nobody talked to me."

That earned him a playful slap on the chest. "You know, something like that is supposed to be said with sadness."

Eh. Edward had never gone for "supposed to."

"So." Mischief appeared in Bella's dark eyes. Man, was she beautiful. "I hope I didn't miss our wedding night."

"You're in luck." Edward's mouth curled into a slow grin, and he dipped down to kiss her. "It might be tonight."

The construction worker in Edward was already planning ahead—plans he knew Alec and Uncle Tony would share with him—and he hoped their own little community would look more like a cabin resort than...a trailer park.

They'd live in their RVs and vans for now, but with time... Christ, look at him. He was thinking about the future. The cynic must be in hibernation.

"Are you gonna talk dirty to me and call me your old ball and chain?" Bella had her eyes closed and lips puckered.

He chuckled and gave her a smooch. "Would me calling you that turn you on?"

Bella shrugged, failing at hiding her grin. "According to some, I have a thing for old balls."

"You—" His eyes grew large, and he shook his head. "You fuckin' brat." Reaching behind her, he pinched her ass and bent low to whisper in her ear. "I think we've established that my balls work just fine."

She squeaked at the pinch, then giggled. "Oh, I know. Maybe I wasn't talking about yours—" But she amended that statement pretty fucking quickly when Edward pinched harder and poked her ribs. "Okay! Okay, okay. Your balls are my only balls."

Damn straight.

"You know..." The mirth faded from Bella's eyes, nervousness taking over. Edward raised a brow as she bit her lip. "Maybe they're so good that I'll be tempted to stick a hole in the condoms we've found. One of these days," she was quick to add. "Like, not tomorrow or anything."

The first thing Edward realized was that he didn't seize up in panic. *Good sign.* And he'd already acknowledged the fact that the future—one like that—held great appeal to him.

It was only a glimpse so far, but it was a possibility Edward kind of wanted.

Bella must've given this some thought.

It wasn't about being ready for Edward. It was a safety issue. Had this been in the old world...okay, they hadn't been a couple for very long, but still...in the old world, if he and Bella had been this close, this settled, this confident about each other, he probably wouldn't hesitate.

Right now, he found himself not wanting to hesitate. But the doubt lingered...

However, he chose right then and there to at least not eliminate the possibility. He wanted it; Bella clearly wanted it, so it would be something for him to fight for.

"Maybe..." He spoke slowly, choosing his words carefully. "Maybe one of these days, I'll let you."

He smiled at the happiness in Bella's features.

"I'd never rush you," she said, throwing her arms around his neck, "but I love knowing there's gonna be a 'someday,' Edward. Thank you."

She had no reason to thank him, in Edward's opinion. If anything, he should be thanking her. She'd given him a lot to fight for.

To *live* for.

~oOo~

It took them three days to find a boat big enough to fit a single RV on board, not to mention a specific ramp to drive vehicles on to boats. In the meantime, they camped near the water, some went hunting, they wrote lists of things they'd need in order to build their own settlement, and they

kept track of the guesstimated population of rotters. So far, they were loners, former townsfolk that wandered around aimlessly.

It went without saying that there would be more rotters inside the cities, but it was nice knowing Alaska had been a good idea.

The island they'd chosen was close to the mainland and big enough that they felt confident there were hunting grounds. It had a minor forest, a small lake—there was even a tiny freshwater spring, which was a good start—and most importantly, a dock. Otherwise it would've been impossible to unload the RVs, and they couldn't afford to leave them behind.

The Wrangler made the cut to get to the island too; three other trucks remained on the mainland for future supply runs. They'd hidden them at three different locations, without their batteries and no gas in the tanks.

Whenever they planned a larger run, like if they'd be gone for weeks, they could bring the Wrangler, as it was the most reliable vehicle in the terrain, but for shorter supply runs, the other three were just fine.

First priority once on the island was to make sure it was safe. There were a few fishing huts by the dock, but that was about it. No permanent homes.

Yet.

Edward, Bella, Alec, Lauren, Liam, and Royce did a good job at sweeping the island for walkers. Judging by the clothes on the only two they found, they'd been fishermen.

And now...when they built a fire at their camp, they built it to last.

At night, they ate dinner together around the fire and talked about things they needed—and things they *wanted*. For months, it had been about surviving and needing. Now they could afford living and wanting, too.

"Livestock wouldn't hurt," Tony commented.

"We already have a bull in you, little brother." Doc knocked on Tony's noggin.

Bella chuckled and leaned in to Edward.

"We can't milk a bull, though." Liam smirked at the women, eyeing them suggestively in a joking manner.

"I'd volunteer Lauren if I wasn't territorial." Alec grinned and draped an arm around his new girlfriend's shoulders. "But she's all mine."

Lauren snorted. "You're so fucking romantic, babe."

"What?" Alec clearly thought he'd been smooth. "I said I'm not volunteering you to be a milk cow."

"Just...Christ." Edward winced and shook his head at his brother. "Don't dig yourself deeper."

"Edward!" Ben came running out of the Sprinter with his latest book. It was another one about fishing. "Can you teach me how to fish tomorrow? I wanna catch one of these." He plopped down, sitting on one of Edward's thighs and one of Bella's, and he pointed at an image of a halibut in the book.

Bella loved seeing the little kid reappearing in Ben again.

"Uh, maybe..." Edward smiled patiently and scratched his head. "Alec and I are gonna start drawing up blueprints—"

"Don't think he knows what a blueprint is," Bella whispered with a wink.

"Right." Edward frowned. "Well, I'm sure we can make some time."

But Ben wasn't listening anymore. He prattled on about other types of fish and what bait was best to catch them.



Bella sighed contentedly and tilted up her face to kiss Edward's jaw.

He smiled down at her.

Yeah, Bella thought, we're gonna be just fine here.

There were several trips planned: to get material for building, tools, more medicine, fuel was always needed, fishing gear, and...the list was long, and they had to get a lot done before winter. But if they had a safe home to return to, maybe the dangers of the outside world were easier dealt with.

There would be no more exhaustion, the food wasn't gonna run out, and they had each other. Maybe they'd find more people someday. Maybe not.

Regardless, Bella was ready for her tomorrows.

Epilogue

Juneau, Alaska

November 5th, 2015

2 years and 4 months since the outbreak

"How happy are you that you're not Lauren right now?" Edward drew the plush covers over their heads and pulled Bella's naked body against his.

The fire crackled and sizzled in the main room, but in the dead of winter, they kept all doors open in the cabin so the heat could reach every nook and cranny.

The cabin wasn't large by any means, but it was enough for them. Edward and Bella had their own little bedroom on the first floor—next to the front room where they cooked, ate, and spent time together—and Ben had a small room upstairs. Another room next to his stood empty. For now.

Seth had lived there until he moved in with Liam this past summer. Seth would always look up to both Bella and Edward, but he'd found a big brother in Liam.

"Words can't even describe." Bella slid her cold feet up Edward's warm calves, and he hissed. "It's times like these electricity and running water wouldn't hurt."

Edward chuckled drowsily and kissed her shoulder. "Kinda fun watching Alec helping her to the outhouse every hour of the day, though."

Lauren was eight months pregnant. Which couldn't have been more poorly planned.

Alaska wasn't just cold in the winter; it was fucking freezing. Dark nights, dark days, blizzards, and harsh winds.

Edward was looking forward a spring baby instead.

Yeah...

He was as freaked out and excited as any father-to-be, but whenever he thought of the boy who was asleep upstairs, he remembered that he'd been a dad for the past two years already.

Hopefully it wouldn't be as difficult to name the nugget in Bella's belly as it had been to name their dog.

"We're gonna look in to solar panels this spring," he murmured sleepily. It was past midnight, but with Lauren's hormones bringing her voice to a high-fucking-pitch, Edward and Bella could hear her constantly. Which kinda made Edward regret building the cabins wall-to-wall.

Then again, it provided shelter from the winds, and everyone liked how the cabins formed a circle.

So far, Pops and Uncle T were sharing their cabin across the yard, but that would probably change soon. T had been together with Carmen for several months, and it looked like Pops and Esme were finally ready to move on— together.

"Before or after Vancouver?" Bella asked, absently playing with his fingers.

Edward hummed. "Probably after." At least once a year—well, this would be the second time—they took a longer trip. Juneau was completely deserted, aside from the occasional walker, and they hadn't ventured up to Anchorage.

Seth was running low on antibiotics again, and there was no way Bella and Edward would risk his health. The kid was lucky that he hardly ever used his inhaler, which would expire soon anyway, but that was thanks to

his antibiotics and his manic way of eating perfectly and checking his glucose levels.

Bella had gone with them last year, but she'd be close to full-term by the time Edward, Pops, Alec, and Royce were scheduled to return. They'd be gone for at least three weeks, and they couldn't go sooner because of the unpredictable weather. They couldn't go later either, because Edward planned on taking a supply-run break once the baby was born around April.

There would always be risks—so long as rotters walked the earth—but they'd learned to get through it. They took every precaution there was, and only the experienced were allowed to venture off the island.

Meaning, no one had to babysit Alice Whitlock out there.

Edward could hardly stand the woman, and he didn't understand what Jasper saw in her, but...she wasn't completely useless, Edward supposed. Now she was in charge of education. She'd been a teacher before the outbreak, and the kids needed structure. Toting a gun was valuable, but it wasn't everything.

"I hope you'll meet friendly people again," Bella whispered.

Edward didn't exactly have the same wish. Yes, it had been a relief to come across people who weren't out to kill them, but he preferred the small community they had here on the island.

Bella was thinking about the future, though. There was strength in numbers, and that was why she'd been glad when Daryl had met a woman last year, who now also lived here. Aside from Maggie, there was Jane, too. How she'd survived all alone for a year in the Canadian wilderness, Edward didn't understand, but...of course Alec had brought her home with them.

Bella had been all annoying, though Edward could be amused about it *now*, but when Jane had first joined them, Bella had wondered who she'd pick. Royce, Emmett, Liam...?

Edward chuckled at the memory of Bella's face when she learned that Jane was gay. He'd almost been able to read Bella's mind. It would've sounded something like, *"Well, shit! Now I gotta find Jane a girlfriend, too?"*

Because...apparently everyone had to be in love.

Women.

"What's so funny?" Bella yawned.

It made Edward yawn, too. "You."

"Yeah...I'm a friggin' riot."

"A tired riot." He pressed a kiss to her temple. "Sleep."

Edward was tired of talking, anyway. His quota for the day was full.

"Okay..." Bella was half asleep already. "I love you..."

"Love you." He placed his palm over her stomach, slowly drifting off to sleep, too.

If Bella wanted to talk, there was always tomorrow.

The End

