



Blood & Glory

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Summary

The definition of a mercenary is a soldier for hire. His crew are trained fighting machines. Hers are smart PIs. What happens when they need each other to survive? Canon couples. AH/AU/ Rated M for lots of reasons, including violence and lemons

Chapter 1

A/N... It's always unnerving when I start a new story. So let me tell you a little bit about this one...

Edward Cullen is a soldier for hire that works for his father, Bella Swan is a Private Investigator and the daughter of Carlisle Cullen's best friend, Charlie. When Bella goes missing, Carlisle employs his own band of mercenaries, including his son to find her and protect her. What happens when Bella finds out that her father's business partner and best friend isn't exactly what he said he was? What happens when Bella discovers that the boy she met one time is now an efficient military killing machine? And what happens when she decides that it doesn't matter? But what kind of Bella does Edward find?

This is darker than most of my stories. I wanted to give you fair warning. This has violence, though not rape...but it's still violence against women. This is angsty and dark, but a fight for what's right. If you don't like guns, violence, and talk of war crimes...then this isn't for you. This is rated M for violence, future lemons, foul language, adult situations, sexual innuendo, and a fuck-hot group of gun toting, cursing, and reluctant heroes.

I don't own these characters, SM does. I do own this plot and storyline. I own my own original characters. And I own a kick ass little netbook, that I just freakin' love, 'cause I can drag the damn thing everywhere!

So let's get started...I'll say a little more at the bottom.

~oOo~

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~oOo~

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PROLOGUE...

BELLA

I was twelve years old when I met the most beautiful boy I'd ever seen. He was sweet, kind, funny, and had the most adorable speech impediment. He stuttered. A lot. He was shy - very shy - with crazy hair and a crooked smile, but it was his eyes I remembered the most.

Green. They were piercing green, framed with long, dark eyelashes women would give an appendage for. He had a round face - still somewhere between boyish and teen - and smooth, pale skin.

It was the summer just before I turned thirteen, and my dad, Charlie, was working on the old Camero he'd been restoring for the last few months. I was in my tree house, avoiding being his tool assistant.

~o~

" Bells, where are you?"

" Right here, Dad," I yelled, rolling my eyes and tossing the book I was reading aside. I climbed down from my tree house, scanning our backyard.

" Come here, munchkin, and meet an old friend of mine." Charlie smiled, waving me over.

I wrinkled my nose as the name he called me, but he'd done it since I'd lost my mind over The Wizard of Oz the first time I'd watched it. I'd been four , and the term was getting old.

Standing beside my dad across the yard was a tall man in some sort of dressy military get up. His hat was under his arm, and he stood tall and proud. His blond hair shone in the sun like gold, his smile warm as I ran to join them.

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Just as I was about to reach them, my feet tangled with someone else's, my knees hitting the grass.

" Oh, gosh! I'm s-s-sorry," I heard above me, and a hand appeared in front of my face, so I took it.

" It's cool, 'cause my dad says I'm clumsy to the point of being handicapped," I sighed, brushing off my knees, and finally looked up, my breath catching in my throat.

" N-n-no, I t-totally wasn't l-looking," the cutest boy I'd ever seen sputtered, running a hand through his unruly hair.

" Bells," my dad chuckled, "meet Edward. Edward, this is my daughter, Isabella."

" Bella," I said shyly.

Edward smiled crookedly, nodding and blushing, and ran another hand through his hair. It was such a wonderful shade - dark brown, with mixes of bronze in it - but it was his eyes that were so pretty, so very green, like evergreens in the summer.

" And this is Carlisle Cullen," my dad said, drawing my attention to the very handsome, very tall, blond man in uniform. "You kids don't know this, but we've known each other since we were about your age."

" Wow, that long?" I teased my father, ducking his fingers.

" Yes, we even had pet dinosaurs," Carlisle added, smiling when Edward and I snickered, rolling our eyes.

" Why don't you take Edward inside and see if Jane's finished with that apple pie she's been working on?" Charlie suggested.

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" Sure, okay," I said with a nod. "Come on, Edward. Jane makes the best pie. Ever."

" K-kay," he agreed quietly, but looked up to Carlisle nervously.

I could see that Edward was shy and unsure about being at our house, and it seemed that he was uneasy about leaving Carlisle's side.

" Go ahead, son. Mr. Swan and I need to discuss a few things," Carlisle soothed, with a squeeze to his shoulder.

I waited until Edward finally agreed, and we walked into the back door of my house.

" Miss Bella, is that you?"

" Yeah, Aunt Jane," I called, leading Edward through our living room and into the kitchen.

" Well, who's this?" the elderly lady that lived with us asked.

She was a sweet woman that my father hired after my mother's death. She did the cooking, cleaning, and the taking care of me. I loved her dearly, because she was as close to a mother figure as I could get, but she was also sweet and loving and gentle.

" This is Edward..."

" C-cullen," he said softly, looking up at Jane.

" Yeah," I said with a nod. "His dad is outside with Charlie. He sent us in for pie, Jane..." I grinned, giving her the hint.

She chuckled, shaking her head. "Great timing, as always, Miss Bella, because it's just now ready. Sit down, then. Let's see what we can rummage up for the two of you."

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Edward and I took stools at the kitchen counter, and two plates appeared before us, heavy with pieces of warm apple pie and ice cream.

" Dig in, you two. I'm going to see if Charlie needs anything, and then finish the laundry," Jane said with a warm smile, before leaving out the back door.

" You live in Seattle?" I asked him, noticing we were both swinging our legs at the counter.

" J-just moved from C-cali-f-forn..." he struggled, with a wrinkle to his brow.

" California?"

" Yeah," he sighed, shaking his head in embarrassment. He took a deep breath and started again. "M-my dad just retired from the Air Force. We j-just moved to F-forks?" he said, but it came out like a question.

" Never heard of it," I told him with a mouthful of pie and a shrug. "Where's your mom?" I asked, without thinking.

" D-dead," he sighed, turning another shade of red altogether.

" Oh, sorry. Mine, too," I whispered, blushing profusely.

" I-i-it's..." He huffed, shaking his head again in frustration. "D-dammit..."

I smiled at him, but it was meant to be friendly. I had a friend with a lisp that avoided saying specific words...like specific .

" D-don't laugh...I c-can't help it," he growled.

" I'm not, I swear," I told him. "If I can trip over flat floors, then who am I to judge you?"

" Yeah?" he chuckled, looking over at me.

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"The school gym floor is my enemy," I snorted.

We both looked up when our dads walked in through the back door. They barely looked our way as they headed into my father's home office, my dad talking as they went.

"There are a few new technologies we're working on, Carl. Let me show you..." he said, closing the door behind them.

"Oh, boy," I sighed. "Work. You'd better get comfortable, Edward. Once my dad starts talking about his work, it's going to be a while." I rolled my eyes, picking up my plate and carrying it to the sink.

Edward laughed, setting his fork down. "W-what's he do?"

"He makes...gosh, all sorts of things," I told him, taking his empty plate. "Everything from software to guns. Your dad isn't the first military uniform I've seen." I looked up at him, and he was nodding, but looking around my house. "Let me show you around, and we can decide what we want to do. I'm telling you, they'll be a minute."

He smiled again, and nodded. I noticed that when he didn't have to say anything, he didn't. But then I also wondered if he was still uncomfortable. I was way too outgoing for that. Edward needed to loosen up.

"Hey, I wasn't laughing at you...okay?" I asked, making sure that he heard me. "All my friends have something that makes them different. Trish has a lisp. Jake gets into trouble with his temper. And I could fall down just standing here... If everyone was the same...we'd be boring."

Edward laughed, a true comfortable laugh. "G-got it. Thanks."

He relaxed after that, following me around our house. I showed him the media room, the pool, but we ended up spending the rest of the afternoon in my tree house.

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"Wait, if you're s-so c-clumsy...Why do you have a fort in a tree?" he asked with a chuckle as we climbed up the ladder.

I laughed. "Don't think I haven't fallen out of this thing. It was here when we moved in. I've only just in the last year proven I can climb those steps."

My tree house was my escape. It was pretty big and completely enclosed. It had been built professionally, my father had told me, including working windows and electricity. I loved it. In fact, if I could have slept up there, I would have.

I turned on the stereo, and we sat down. He looked around at all my posters, quietly absorbing my private world.

"I want to travel," I whispered, feeling a little exposed now that he was up there. "Those are places I'd like to see."

"New York...London...Paris...Italy..." he muttered, and I noticed when he was calm, comfortable, the stutter evaporated. "I've been there," he said, pointing to the poster behind me. "San Francisco."

"I want to see Alcatraz," I gushed, smiling at his laugh.

"It's cool, kinda c-creepy."

We looked through magazines, talking about anything and everything. I told him I wanted to join the FBI, to solve mysteries and catch bad guys. He told me he wanted to join the Air Force, like his father. He wanted to be a pilot, fly helicopters. We had so much in common that it was ridiculous. We both were starting middle school the next year, we both liked and read the same books, and we both loved music.

It was too bad he was going to be living in another city. It would have been nice to introduce him to my friends. It would have been nice to get to know him better. He was sweet and funny, once his guard was down. And he was so very cute. I was crushing on him hard by the time we heard...

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" Kids, where are you?"

" Up here, Dad ," I called out, giving Edward an eye roll. "He knows where I disappear to," I muttered. "It's not a state secret..."

" Right," he chuckled, setting his magazine down. " Got a pen?"

I nodded and handed him one.

" My email and cell number...I'll send you pics of Alcatraz," he told me, handing me a slip of paper, before scooting towards the door. He stopped, turning towards me. "Thanks for not laughing...most p-people d-do."

" Thanks for helping me up. "

" I knocked you d-down to b-begin with!" he laughed, opening the hatch leading to the ladder. "It's only fair, B-bella."

~o~

And just like that, he was gone. It was the first and last time we met. We emailed and texted almost daily the whole summer and the first few months into the school year. We traded pictures and music and book titles we were interested in. But just like most young, long distance friendships, we slowly became different people. By the time I'd reached the first year of high school, we weren't talking at all.

The next time I saw Edward Cullen, he was saving my life.

~oOo~

CHAPTER 1

n., pl., **soldiers of fortune:** One who will serve in any army or undertake risky tasks for personal gain or love of adventure.

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Let not the tie be mercenary, though the service is measured in money. Make yourself necessary to somebody. Do not make life hard to any. - Ralph Waldo Emerson.

EDWARD

~o~

"Edward, someone's on your six," I heard in my ear piece as I took the next corner of the burnt down village.

"I know, I know," I grumbled, finding the next niche in the wall to hide behind. I waited, holding my breath, until the crunching of footsteps behind me broke the silence of the night.

Clicking off the safety of my gun, I squeezed my eyes closed, sending up a silent prayer before spinning around the corner. I had to look down to see the face of my enemy, but my breath caught.

"Shit, fuck...she's just a kid," I breathed into my mic. "A fucking little girl!"

I lifted the gun from her forehead, taking a deep breath, but I relaxed too soon, and so did the rest of my team, because they joined us in the broken down desert hovel.

"Damn, Ed," Emmett chuckled, lowering his weapon, but we all froze when the little girl pulled her hand from behind her back.

"Oh hell," Jasper groaned. "Yo, little darlin'?" he crooned, kneeling before her. "Why don't you hand that over to me, huh?"

"Oh, fuck me," Newton breathed, stepping behind the shaking child and shouldering his weapon.

The less than six year old little Iranian girl just shook her head, and most likely had no clue what he was saying. Her little finger curled around the pin of what

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looked like an American grenade.

"Jazz, move," I growled, taking a step back and making sure my sniper was moving away from the child. "All of you...cover...Now!"

Emmett, Jasper, and I all dove behind whatever we could find, at the same time the little girl dropped that grenade and Newton reached for her hand. An explosion ripped through the desert night. My ears were ringing, my face was covered in dust, and my leg was throbbing, but I was alive.

"Ed?" I heard in my ear, the radio communication sparking back to life.

"Fuck," I growled, grabbing my leg when I tried to move. "Check in...everyone. Now!"

There was a large metal piece of shrapnel sticking out of my leg, right at my knee.

"I'm good, Ed," Emmett moaned, landing at my side.

"Jazz?" I asked, sitting up and leaning against the stone wall.

"I'm cool, bro. But we gotta get you outta here," he said, helping me up, with Emmett on my side.

When we turned the corner, the disaster that was a small child was nauseating, because Newton had fallen on her to save us all. It was the third person, the third friend, I'd lost in this God forsaken place.

What the fuck were we doing? What the hell were parents thinking by using their own child as a weapon? And how the hell do we get home?

~o~

I came up out of that memory with a sharp breath, because I'd slammed the hammer down on my own thumb.

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"Dammit," I growled, picking up the rag next to me and wiping my face.

I leaned up against my workbench, downing the rest of my beer and getting another out of my cooler.

The memories never faded. The pain in my leg was gone and the limp was barely visible anymore, but I still carried the scar. It took two long surgeries, before they decided that I wasn't fit for military service, which was fine by me, because that last tour was fucking hell. My chopper had gone down in the dead of night, into a sleepy little village that proved less than safe.

I turned back to my latest project, gliding my hand lightly over the top of the table. Oak was a hard wood to work with, but the end result was always beautiful. What started as a class in high school, turned into my release, my passion. I never made anything I didn't need, and I never charged my friends and family for something they wanted. Building furniture was the one good thing I did.

My other job...made me a monster.

I sighed again, picking up the sander to smooth the top of what was to be my kitchen table. I'd bought my cabin in the back woods of Washington just to get away from...well, everyone. I needed space when I wasn't...traveling. I needed complete and utter silence, because my own mind was loud enough.

I looked up when I heard a car in my very long driveway, grabbing the gun that was nestled at the small of my back in the waistband of my jeans. I set it down under my rag, eying the black BMW 750i that was pulling up in front of me, but I relaxed instantly when I saw who it was.

"New car, Dad?" I asked, showing him my gun and stowing it back to my belt.

"She was tired of the other one," he chuckled, shaking his head. "She said she was just waiting for me to break down. Well, that, and she said that she could hear me a mile away."

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"Tell me you didn't get rid of that old Camaro. You're crazy if you did," I told him, offering him a beer from my cooler.

"No, my old friend is looking after it," he told me, taking a long drink. "This is nice," he said, pointing to my new table. "Oak?"

"Yeah, and it's almost finished. I just have to stain it...maybe tomorrow, if the weather is better," I sighed, looking up at the Washington sky. It was always raining, it seemed.

"I need you to look at something for me." He tossed a manila file folder down in my lap as I sat down in my deck chair.

"I'm on vacation, Dad. I'm not taking another job right now," I growled, handing him back his file. "Hell, the whole team is spread all over the country. Em's in Vegas, and Jasper's in Texas. There's no telling where Mickey ran off to...she met someone," I chuckled, shaking my head.

"Just..." He sighed, his eyes carrying a darkness that I hadn't seen in some time. "...look at it. Tell me what you see."

I opened the folder, flipping through the intelligence that was collected before me.

"He's not a target, is he?" I asked. "He's your friend, right?"

"He's my business partner, too. What else do you see?"

"I see he has unsavory clients." I frowned, flipping through some photos. "He's supplying to King? That's mafia shit, right there."

"He *didn't* supply to King," my dad said, shaking his head. "And therefore, he has a problem."

"Oh."

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I flipped through the pages again, finally closing the file and handing it back to him.

"Keep it," he told me, holding up his hand. "You're going to need it."

"No, I won't. I'm not taking any jobs right now. You know this," I growled, slapping the file down onto my unfinished table and pacing in the open garage door of my workshop.

"This is personal, Edward," he urged. "Cheney called me. King's called for a hit on him."

"King doesn't take out just one person..." I mused, leaning up against my bench and folding my arms across my chest.

"He takes out the whole family, anyone associated with the target, and takes over the business that has... *offended* him," he finished.

"Exactly," I groaned, pinching the bridge of my nose. "Which means you, too...and me...and...fuck, all of us, Dad!"

"Swan thought he was doing the right thing by refusing King, son," my father sighed, falling heavily into a deck chair. "He wanted no part of the underground, but King can be...persuasive. Look at the file again...last page."

I studied my dad with a raised eyebrow and slowly picked up the folder. I flipped to the back page, which was a black and white, eight by ten photo of a young woman.

"Who is she?" I asked, holding it up.

"You met her once," he said, his mouth curling slightly in the corners. "Isabella Swan."

"This?" I asked, cracking a smile. "This is Bella?"

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I looked at the picture again, shaking my head. The little twelve year old, knobby kneed kid was completely gone, leaving a really pretty brunette woman. It seemed like a recon photo; one taken without her permission. She was tucking her hair behind her ear, as she laughed on her cell phone.

I'd met Bella Swan one time, when we were just kids, liking her instantly. She made me feel comfortable, and I'd had a lot in common with her. She was so very nice to me when I'd needed a friend the most, because we were moving from everything I'd ever known, and I'd just lost my mother. We'd lost touch as we got older, but occasionally, I'd hear about her through my father and his connection to Charlie Swan.

"Who took this?" I asked, afraid of the answer.

"Riley Miller," he stated, his eyes growing dark.

"Fuck," I sighed, setting the picture down on top of the folder, breaking my gaze away from her unaware face. "That's...fuck, Dad..." I shook my head, thinking this was bigger than just King. "King isn't in charge...I've heard he has connections to Columbia..."

"Right...but Cheney says the hit is out...Bella's lucky they can't find her, yet," he muttered, rubbing his face in frustration.

"What do you mean, they can't find her?"

"Exactly that, Edward. She's not...close to Charlie anymore," he said, looking up at me as he rested his elbows on his knees. "She used to live with a Jacob Black, but she's moved out since. My...resource says they're not sure where she moved to. And with her work, she's out of town a lot."

"Well, what the hell does she do?" I growled, pulling out my phone.

"Private investigator."

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"They're gonna hate me for this," I sighed as I scrolled through my contacts, dialing Jasper and putting the phone to my ear.

"Yo, Eddie," Jasper sang into the phone.

I could hear all sorts of noise in the background, but I said, "Call everyone. Carlisle needs to us to fall in. Now."

"Oh, damn, what's up?"

"I'll tell you when you get here."

"Aw, Ed...what about vacation?" he whined. "I thought..."

"Me, too. Get your asses in here. Now!" I snapped, finally losing my patience, which was hardly there to begin with, because I didn't want another job, and I damn well didn't want a job where the risks were so high; personal jobs made for dangerous jobs.

"Yes, sir. Be there in twenty-four..." he sighed, hanging up the phone.

My father was laughing by the time I pocketed my phone. "Why do you snap at them like that?"

"Because they're all whiny children," I huffed, fighting my smile. "They'd never get anything done if I didn't."

He nodded, still chuckling. "Twenty-four hours...at the house. I'll see if we can't find Bella in the meantime, but don't get your hopes up. She seems to be in hiding for a reason."

"Kay," I agreed, running a hand through my hair and looking back at the table I'd been working on.

"Hey, Edward," my dad called, just before getting into his car. "You know, my girl's gonna want one of those."

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"We'll see," I chuckled, waving a hand at him. "Give her my love..."

"Sure. See you tomorrow," he called, before pulling away.

~oOo~

BELLA

A flower captured my attention as I sat on the park bench in San Francisco, waiting for my target to finally move. I turned my camera, capturing it perfectly in the early afternoon light, as my Bluetooth beeped in my ear.

"Yeah," I answered, after hitting the button.

"Isabella Marie," Rose growled into the phone. "Why didn't you tell Esme where you'd gone?"

"Because she talks to Jake, Ro," I sighed, shaking my head, but keeping my eye on the idiot across the park. "I can't have him know where I've gone. He's an ass. He'll just show up on your doorstep and beg and plead at all hours... No...just fucking no."

Rose was practically my sister, my best friend, and my connection to my father's company, and at the moment, she was hiding me at her apartment in Seattle. After leaving my boyfriend of too many years to think about, Rose opened her door to me, swearing to hide my whereabouts from everyone.

"She's calling me at work, Bells."

"I'm sure. Did you tell her I'm fine, and just to give me time?"

"Yeah, that's exactly what I told her," she chuckled. "And your dad..."

"Don't, Rose," I snapped. "I'm sure he's just... *fraught* with worry," I said sarcastically with a roll of my eyes.

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"Actually, yeah, he is. There's something going down here, Izzy."

"Well, whatever it is, I'm sure it's karma. He'll survive, I promise. He's good at looking out for number one," I sighed, glancing up at my target. "I gotta go, Ro. I'm following this cheating senator, and his wife is paying big bucks to the lawyer to catch him before their divorce goes through."

"Be safe, Bells. And keep in touch, I've got a funny feeling, okay?"

I watched my target, Senator Alvarez, get up from his perch in the park, check his cell phone, and walk towards the very expensive hotel across the street. I dialed a number quickly.

"Ali's Mortuary...you stab 'em, we slab 'em," my other best friend, and the most incredible hacker and computer expert I'd ever known, said as she answered her phone.

"Ali, please check the Clipper Hotel for its guest list. I need to know what room he's going into," I told her, getting up and slowly following the pig of a senator.

We'd been hired by the law firm representing Mrs. Alvarez, because she *knew* he was seeing other women - younger women, most possessing a talent with a riding crop. Apparently, Senator Alvarez was a bad boy and needed to be beaten - something that I'd be willing to help him with after I'd seen the pictures of his last girlfriend, but the senator wouldn't be happy with how I'd handle the riding crop.

"The wheels on the bus go 'round and 'round... 'round and 'round," she sang into the phone, meaning it was too easy of a task I'd asked of her.

"Shut it, pixie," I chuckled. "I promise to give you something harder the next time."

"Promises, promises," she sighed, but her little giggle could be heard right along with the frenzy of typing keys on her keyboard. "Okay," she said,

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dragging out the word. "No Alvarez, but there's a Montoya...isn't that the senator's mother's maiden name?"

"Yup, sure is," I said with a grin. "What room, my tiny genius?"

"Four fifty three," she said. "And bring the pics...I can't wait to see that man being smacked around."

I laughed, ending the call and walking into the hotel. I made sure that Alvarez was in the hotel bar, before walking to the elevators. I exited onto the fourth floor, slipping the girl at the housekeeping cart a large bill to let me into the room. I slid silently into the closet, leaving the door open enough to allow my camera lens to capture the bed in its view.

It wasn't long, before the jackass was walking through the door, a bouncy young thing at his side. I could have gagged, and I totally felt for Mrs. Alvarez, because it wasn't that his wife wasn't attractive; she was, insanely so. But a pig was a pig. Fortunately for me, this pig was a nice big paycheck.

I snapped the award winning - or case winning, in this situation - photograph, plopping down on the floor to wait out the disturbing sounds that were coming through the closet door.

I sent a text to Alice to tell her it was done, that the photos were in my possession, and another text to Rose, telling her I'd be home tomorrow and that I would call her once I was on the road home.

Home. I took a deep breath, leaning my head back to the wall as I waited in the dark. Home used to be a small house on a quiet street. Home used to be a tall, handsome man with a beautiful smile and dark hair, but not anymore.

I'd known Jake my whole life, it seemed. His father worked with my father. We'd attended schools, parties, and Twilight Tech company functions together. When Jake had decided to work for my father, it was supposed to have been a good thing. It wasn't. At first, it was traveling and late nights that kept Jake from being home. Eventually, it was his personal assistant - Lauren - that did it.

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I wrinkled my nose as I thought of her. Jake and I had talked marriage, kids, and futures, but it came to a halt when I started getting suspicious. Late night texts, phone calls, and emails to my long term boyfriend had a tendency to do that. And I chased cheaters for a living! You'd think he would have been sharper about it, but deep down, I think Jake had wanted to be caught. He'd needed an out.

I gave him one - in the form of a poster sized picture of him taking Lauren on the desk in his office - doggie-style, I might add. I hung it right above the bitch's desk out front in the lobby of my father's company, Twilight Technology.

My father had fired her, but Jake had been livid, telling me what I'd seen was none of my business. Yeah, he was in the hospital for two days. I'd broken his collar bone and given him a concussion.

My father was a different story. His attitude concerning Jake's infidelity had been disheartening for me. He not only allowed my cheating bastard of an ex to continue to work at TT, but he'd tried to get me to reconcile with him, telling me that I was lucky that Jake hadn't pressed charges for assault. That had resulted in a fight that had been a long time coming.

~o~

" You're fucking kidding me, right?" I snapped, pacing in my father's rather large office at TT. "You think it's okay that he was rutting a girl on his desk, only to come home to me?"

" No, Bells, that's not what I'm saying. At all," Charlie snapped back. "But men...they make mistakes. They can't think straight when a beautiful woman is interested."

My mouth fell open at that statement, and suddenly, I put a few puzzle pieces together that had bothered me since I was a child.

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" You bastard!" I growled, pointing at my father. "You cheated on Mom, didn't you? That's why she was sad all the time. That's why she's dead. You broke her!"

" Isabella, that was between your mother and me."

" And me, you ass! She practically faded in front of me. I lost my mother at eight years old, Charlie. And you think it's okay?"

" Bella..." he sighed, looking so busted and guilty that I wanted to hit him.

" No, don't! Don't sit there and tell me it was a mistake. Don't sit there and tell me that what Jake did was okay. You have free will, you have a conscience, and you have a heart. But apparently, Jake's position here means more to you than I do!"

With that, I walked out the door, stopping at Rose's desk. "He's your boss, but I'm your best friend. Where do we stand?"

She looked at me with a raised eyebrow. "So you'll bring home pizza, or shall I?"

I smirked at her, nodding. "I will. Right after I change my phone number and grab some shit from the house...not to mention tell Alice to hide me in the system."

" Good," she sang with a cheesy ass grin. "See you at home, then."

~o~

My eyes opened when the hotel door did. Peering out into the room, I realized the little twisted tryst was over. I gathered my belongings and headed back to my car.

I fell into the driver's seat, dialing my office.

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"Gravity Investigations...Makenna speaking," my secretary answered.

"Hey, Mack," I sighed. "It's done. Call Mrs. Alvarez's lawyer..."

"Spencer..."

"Right, call Marshall Spencer and tell him he'll have his proof by the end of business tomorrow."

"Gotcha, Bells. Anything else?"

"Yeah, you and Ali kick off early tonight. I'm tired, and I know you guys are. We'll make it an early weekend," I told her, rubbing my eyes.

"Thanks," she chuckled. "You should know, though. There are people looking for you."

"Like who? Charlie? Jake?"

"Among the many," she said, and I could hear her typing on her computer. "A...Carlisle Cullen has been asking for you. Isn't he..."

"He is, indeed," I said, smiling in spite of myself.

Carlisle was the reason that my company existed. He was a silent partner, that wasn't as silent as he thought he was. Alice had found that out immediately. It was Carlisle's signature on the paperwork of my company, not my father's. He'd convinced Charlie that owning a PI service would be a money maker and having it at their disposal was beneficial, but my father had stalled long enough that Carlisle had stepped in to finish it with me via long distance, as he was always traveling and never in the office. I think I could count on one hand the times I'd seen Carlisle in person, but I'd spoken to him on the phone many, many times.

Yet, just one more reason the relationship with my father had fallen into a tub of shit. His hesitation to help me start my own business, even though he

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would've benefitted monetarily from it, was another sign that he and I were falling apart.

"Who else?" I asked Mack.

"Esme Platt," she said with a deep sigh. "And you should probably call her first, Bells. She was in tears."

"Fuck, okay," I groaned, shaking my head and finally starting my car. "Anyone else?"

"Umm, a Riley Miller?" she said, making it sound like a question. "He didn't leave a number, but he was rude on the phone, demanding to know where you were. But I told him nothing."

"But you have a number," I chuckled.

"Right. Want it?"

"Nah...I don't know the name. I'll look into it later."

"Kay, bye."

As I pulled out onto the highway, my plan to drive north as long as my eyes would stay open, I called my sweet neighbor from when I'd lived with Jake.

"Isabella Marie," she answered, a deep sigh of relief in her voice.

"You know, that's the second time someone has called me by my full name today. I'm not ten."

She laughed, a beautiful musical sound. "Maybe you deserve it, then."

"Maybe," I chuckled. "I'm sorry I disappeared on you. Work and Jake and..."

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"I know, sweetie. I was just worried. Jake came home, looking like he'd been run over by a herd of elephants, and then he explained *why* he looked that way. Needless to say, I slapped him again, but that was three weeks ago, missy!"

"I know, Esme, I'm sorry. I just...had to go. I'm not speaking to Jake or my father..."

"I know, Bella. I talked to Rose today. And it's going to be okay. I promise. Jake wasn't the one, that's all."

I took a deep breath, nodding stupidly into the phone like she could see me. "Thanks, Esme."

If I could've asked God for a replacement mother, it would have been my now former neighbor, Esme Platt. She was calm, sweet, soothing. She was beautiful and selfless. She had grabbed my heart the minute we'd moved into the little house in the suburbs.

"Are you safe? That's all I need to know, sweetie," she begged, making me feel loved and cared for.

"Yes, ma'am," I sniffled, wiping a tear away that had fallen. "I promise to keep you posted, but I can't until things calm down. I know Jake and Charlie are trying to find me, and I just..."

"Don't want to be found," she finished for me. "It's understandable, Bella. Really. What Jake did...well, that's the highest form of betrayal between a man and a woman. And I don't know what to even say about your father, Isabella. I don't know how a parent can take sides like that. I should give him a piece of my mind."

I chuckled at her protectiveness. "He's not worth it."

"All right," she sighed. "Keep in touch, sweetie. I care about you. A lot. Okay?"

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"Yes, ma'am," I said, ending the call.

I merged onto another highway, still heading north and sighing with utter and total weariness. I wasn't going to make it out of the state of California; I was going to have to stop soon. Staying up all night to follow Alvarez, after driving five hours to get to California, not to mention having to wait through his disgusting rendezvous...I was mentally and physically exhausted.

I found a rather secure hotel after running through a drive-thru for something to eat, and then checked in and lugged my things upstairs. I dropped everything on the bed, finally making one last call.

"Bella," Carlisle said, sounding rather anxious.

"Look, I know that Dad probably bugged you to find me...but..."

"No, he didn't, I promise. Is this line secure, Bells?"

"Yes, sir," I told him, while pulling out my laptop. "My computer tech makes sure it can't be traced."

"She uses a roaming signal, then," he guessed.

"I suppose. She tells me my signal pulls from multiple towers and my texts and email can't be tracked."

"She sounds like she's pretty smart."

"She has a one ninety IQ," I chuckled. "Half the time, I have no idea what she's saying. But Carlisle, I really don't want to talk to my father."

He chuckled and said, "I'm sure, Bella. He's an old fool, really. But I'm not calling for him. I'm calling for you. I need to speak to you, but I'd prefer if it was in person."

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"Sounds very cloak and dagger, Carlisle," I giggled, rolling my eyes. "I know you were military once, but..."

"I'm serious, Bells. Are you somewhere safe you can stay for a few days?"

"I suppose, but Rose is expecting me tomorrow..."

"I'll get a message to her... *without* your father knowing, okay?" he said, sounding more and more anxious.

"What's this about?"

"I'd really rather tell you in person, and I promise to tell you what I can. Hell, knowing you, you probably already know some of it. Tell me your location, and I'll be there tomorrow."

"Kay," I said warily, telling him the name of the hotel, not sure why a man I rarely spoke to needed to see me that badly. "Carlisle, you're worrying me. Is this about Gravity?"

"Not at all, honey. You run that company with an iron fist. It's excellent," he said proudly, sounding more like a dad than my own. "Will you please trust me and do what I tell you?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Good. When you hang up from me...turn off your phone - no email, no texts. Don't even answer the hotel's phone, or your door, for that matter. Until you see my face in the peephole, don't open it for anyone, not even room service. Got me?"

"Yeah, yeah...sure."

"Good. I'll see you tomorrow."

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I had no reason not to trust my father's childhood friend, so when we ended the call, I shut my phone down, put my laptop away, and slid the chain onto the door. With all my forms of communication powered down, I decided to take a shower. I was too tired to think about the things Carlisle had said, too tired to wonder what he'd meant by I probably knew some of it. Emotionally, I'd been running on empty for the three weeks since I'd moved away from Jake. Physically, I'd been working for the last forty eight hours straight.

All my questions and musings would have to wait until Carlisle showed up the next day, until after I'd had one decent night's sleep.

A/N...So lots of info in the first one, but there is more info to come. There's more to Bella than a camera. There's a lot that Carlisle is keeping from everyone... it takes a few chapters for this stuff to unravel...and it unravels in the middle of something that Carlisle wants stopped.

Oh and Charlie...there's more to come about him as well.

Like I said, this is a little darker than I normally write, but for those of you that have read my stories before, I weave in a lot of humor, because that's life...most of us need to laugh at the stupid shit in life in order to not go crazy. That's not to say that there isn't angst, because there is...a little more than I normally use... And before you guys ask...yeah, yeah...I'm sure I'll use music along the way, but not at first, okay?

I hope my regular readers give this a shot...I hope that I see some of you that I consider friends. And for those new to me...well, welcome. And please join us on Twitter...where we so don't behave...and you guys know who you are... LOL

Thanks to JenRar for beta'ing this for me. She's guiding me nicely on something that's a little different, so a huge thanks for that...

Please review. I hope to see how you take this, and I hope you stick around, because the action is just getting started. This will move quickly as far as action goes. Again, for those that know me, I will try to keep my

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normal posting schedule - which is twice a week - but I will usually tell you when the next post day is. I also post it on Twitter as well. SO...let me hear what you think. I'm nervous enough as it is, so no matter what you have to say, I can take it. The next post will most likely be around Tuesday or Wednesday of next week. Until then...Later.

Chapter 2

A/N... I know...this is a lot to take in the first chapter. And like I told you guys, more and more will be revealed as time goes on.

Some of you are already hating on Charlie...some of you don't trust Carlisle...a lot of you like this Bella, especially after she handled her cheating boyfriend. What surprised me was that you liked a smart Alice...well, brace yourselves, because it's going to be a bumpy ride for a few chapters. All of those people come into play...including my very hot, commanding, mostly no nonsense Edward.

I need to explain that my imagination has taken over with some of the technology that I write about...whether it exists or not...we will assume it does in this story. I'm pretty sure with the right equipment, most of this stuff is possible. LOL Anyway, don't judge it, just enjoy it.

Now...meet the crew...meet Carlisle's team...and we'll see how Bella does. And see? This is where I need to remind you about the violence...more towards the end. I need you prepared, because I know most of you...cliffies don't sit well with my regular readers. Just remember I love you. Mm'kay?

CHAPTER 2

EDWARD

I walked into my father's house, wandering quietly through the rooms, until I heard his voice. He was on the phone in his office.

"Will you please trust me and do what I tell you?" he asked exasperatedly into his cell phone.

He motioned for me to sit in the chair in front of his desk, continuing his conversation.

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"Good. When you hang up from me...turn off your phone - no email, no texts. Don't even answer the hotel's phone, or your door, for that matter. Until you see my face in the peephole, don't open it for anyone, not even room service. Got me?" he ranted, physically sagging in his seat with whatever answer he received on the other end. "Good. I'll see you tomorrow."

He set his phone down, rubbing the bridge between his nose, a family character trait, but he didn't say a word when he picked the phone back up, dialing someone else.

"Hey, it's me. Please get a message to Rosalie Hale. Tell her that Bella is safe, and that she will be in touch," he instructed. "No...I'm sure that's not the best way to say it. You're better than me at that shit..."

I chuckled, shaking my head.

"Yes, yes...you, too," he said with a grin. "Bye."

He hung the phone and looked at me.

"Shut up, son," he snorted, rolling his eyes.

I laughed again, but looked up at him. "I take it you've heard from Bella."

"Yes. In fact, as soon as we're done here, I'm heading to see her. She needs to know what she's facing."

I frowned, shaking my head. "Are you sure that's wise? I mean, telling her everything?"

"She's...um, well equipped to handle trouble, Edward," he said cryptically, getting up when we both heard engines in the driveway. "Let's get this started. I want everyone in on this, got me?"

"Yes, sir," I sighed, giving him a strange look, before following him to the back door.

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My father made his way into the unattached garage as some of our team pulled into the driveway. I smiled as Jasper drove up in his truck, and Emmett practically skidded into his spot, the music thumping so loudly, I could feel it changing the beat of my heart.

"Damn," I growled, shaking Jasper's hand as I watched Emmett hop out of his Jeep. "You do know that's like audible rape, right?" I asked the biggest fucker I'd ever had the pleasure of working with.

"What is?" Emmett asked, looking like a confused child.

"You...forcing people to listen to *your* music," I snapped, rolling my eyes at Jasper's laugh. "It takes away one's choice. Unwanted music *raping* my fucking ears."

"He's right, bro," Jasper laughed, ducking Emmett's swinging arm. "Not everyone wants to hear every song Jay-Z has recorded, man."

"It's not about choice," Emmett reasoned, with a shrug to his huge shoulders. "It's about the fuck-awesome sound system I have in that Jeep."

"You're totally making up for a small package," we heard behind us.

I laughed, spinning around to see Mickey standing there. She stood there with a wry smirk on her face, her arms folded across her chest. She was a tiny thing, with curly dark hair and killer body, but she wouldn't touch the three of us if we were the last three men on earth. Hell, *especially* if we were last three men on earth. Still, there wasn't a lock, door, or safe Mickey couldn't crack.

"That couldn't be further from the truth, *Michelle*," Emmett teased, using her real name, which was equivalent to lighting a stick of dynamite. "Wanna see?" he asked, going for his zipper.

"Bastard, don't call me that! And no, I don't want to see it, 'cause I forgot my magnifying glass," she growled, punching him in the gut on her way by. "Now, what on this God forsaken planet was so fucking important to pull me off the

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beach? Huh?"

"Kiss and tell, Mick," Jasper urged, nudging Mickey with his elbow.

"And add to your jackoff fodder?" She gave a pointed look at him, before turning to glare at Emmett. "Not a chance in hell," she huffed, rolling her eyes.

I laughed, giving her a fist bump at her crass nature. She was tough, smart, and snarky. She'd also loved us all like big brothers since we'd met in Afghanistan. She'd lost her whole world on September 11, 2001 and had joined the Army for revenge and a place to live. She was a picky bitch, only dating non-military men, with a few women thrown in, just to drive Emmett and Jasper crazy.

None of it made a difference to me. Anyone I'd ever worked with was off limits to amorous pursuits, in my mind. I had a tendency to keep my conquests quiet and very short. My job and my past were too much baggage for a long term relationship.

"Yeah, man...why'd you bring us in so early? I thought we were takin' a few months off," Emmett complained, looking at me, but before I could answer, a slam rang through the backyard.

"I'll tell you, if all of you would get your asses in here!" my father snapped from the garage doorway. "Now!"

"Oh, damn," Jasper breathed, looking to me as we all walked into the garage and taking the stairs down to our plans room.

The room was eerily quiet as we all took our seats in front of my father. Files were slapped down in front of us, but I didn't open mine. I had memorized everything that was in the file he'd brought me the day before.

"There's a hit on Charlie Swan? Isn't he your old friend?" Jasper asked, knowing that we got most of our weapons, computer equipment, and surveillance technology from Twilight Tech, compliments of my father being on the board.

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"Yes, since we met in high school. And we stayed in touch throughout the years. He was the source I went to when we brought in those new bombs, just before I retired. He's also how we get all of our equipment. Charlie is a very smart business man, and an even smarter investor, and he thought he was doing the right thing by not agreeing to work with King on a weapons contract."

"He *was* right," I countered. "King's into all sorts of shit. He's the type of guy that would turn around and resell those same weapons to a foreign threat for a higher price, consequences be damned."

"That's true, Edward," Cheney said over the phone. "And we think that's what he's up to."

Ben Cheney was our computer guru, and also our eyes and ears into the FBI. If we were involved in something, he knew it and could hide it fast. If we needed information, he had it at the tips of his fingers.

"King's been rumored to have had meetings with Alistair Corbin...you know, the one we couldn't pin that car bomb on a few years back. Corbin was accused of blowing up the childcare center that an enemy took his kids to. He was let off on some technicality nonsense. Luckily, the kids were absent that day. That enemy...was Senator Alvarez of California, the guy that's single handedly trying to stop the importing of drugs into the US. Since imported illegal drugs are their main source of income, that makes Alvarez public enemy number one.

"Right now, though, Alvarez can't be touched," Cheney continued. "He's in the middle of a very nasty divorce. He's in the media just about every day. That's actually a good thing, because no one can really do anything about him. They have to wait until the divorce is over."

"Weapons, drugs, divorce...a regular day at the office," Mickey muttered, shaking her head. "Who's the girl?" she asked, holding up Bella's picture.

"Charlie Swan's only daughter, Isabella," Cheney answered before Carlisle could. "She's kind of MIA...and that's a problem, because if we can't locate her, then she could be in serious trouble. King is not above using someone's family

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as a negotiating tool."

"Thank you, Ben," Carlisle said coldly. His face was as dark as I've seen it, and for a moment, I wondered if there was more behind his motivation. "I've been in contact with her. I'll keep you posted."

"You'd better hurry," Cheney said, and I heard the clicking of his keyboard in the background. "Riley Miller called the office of Gravity Investigations just this morning."

My father looked at the picture of Bella, and then to me. "I'm asking...no, I'm begging for you guys to consider taking this job. It's not a paying gig, though I will compensate you myself...out of my own pocket. Charlie Swan was like a brother to me in school, and even more so after. His daughter..." He paused, just shaking his head. "She's smart, and she'll figure out some of this blindly. We have two targets...Charlie and Isabella. Both are not to be touched. Both are to go into hiding, and we need to keep them safe."

"Why?" Emmett asked. "Why can't they just hire bodyguards? Not that I won't do it, but I'd like to know what I'm signing myself up for."

"Fair enough," Cheney sighed. "Charlie Swan recorded that meeting with King. For the FBI."

"Oh fuck!" I growled, running a hand through my hair. "He's a walking fucking dead man! And the girl is as good as gone, Dad!"

My father winced, but said nothing.

"No shit," Jasper muttered, shaking his head as he continued to flip through the file.

"Em and Mick...I'd like you to take Charlie. That man doesn't breathe without my say so," my dad said, giving me a warning glance. "And Edward, if you aren't in this, tell me now."

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"I'm in," I snapped. "You're not taking *my* team out on this without me. This will be high risk, and...personal," I said, glaring at him.

It wasn't that I didn't want to help; it wasn't that I wanted out. It was knowing that if emotions played a part in the decisions that my father made, instead of clear-headed thinking, someone could get hurt or killed. I'd been with my team now for almost four years...they were family. I couldn't let that happen.

"Do not forget who's in charge here, Edward! Yes, you run the show out in the field, but I still make every decision," he growled, pointing a finger at me. "You still answer to me. But I will give you the choice. I could really use you on this one. Are you in?"

"Yes," I seethed through gritted teeth. "If only to make sure nothing goes fucking wrong..."

"Good," he said with a stiff nod, turning back to a team that was used to this battle of wills. "Jasper, I'd like you to scope out Gravity Investigations. That's Bella's office. I want to make sure no one gets to them. Especially Riley Miller, got me?"

"Yes, sir," he grunted, tucking the file folder into his inside jacket pocket. "Benny...tell me about Miller..."

"Riley Miller is King's weasel, and he's deadly," Cheney answered without pause. "I'd say he was his muscle, but he doesn't use muscle. He uses the environment around his victim to get rid of them. If the target is a drug addict, they will suddenly have an overdose. If the target has multiple women, he'll make it look like a woman scorned...poison, smother them with a pillow, knife to the throat. He's smart, he's lethal, and he's never been tied to a single murder, but there are plenty that scream his name. King likes to use him specifically when women are involved, because that's part of the... *payment*."

"Aw, you're kidding, right? He gets his kicks outta hurtin' girls?" Mickey growled, cracking her knuckles. "Oh, let me at him! Let him try that shit with me."

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I snorted, but she was right. Miller was nasty. As my gaze fell to the photograph of Bella Swan, my mood darkened even more.

"We have one more issue," Cheney added, again his fingers tapping away in the background. "Isabella Swan may have more than one enemy. She's currently investigating...Senator Alvarez. Apparently, he's a cheating bastard that likes it...rough."

"Fan-fucking-tastic. This shit's gonna hit us from all sides," my father groaned. "Fine," he grumbled, looking around the room. "Any questions?"

We all shook our heads no.

"Good. I've got to hit the road."

"Not without me," I told him, standing up from my seat. "This isn't a job for one person. There's too much aiming her way."

He studied my face and gave a quick nod. "Then let's go."

~oOo~

BELLA

I loved hotel showers. The hot water never ran out. When I lived with Jake, we had what I was sure was the world's smallest water heater. You barely had enough time to get everything done before the warm water ran ice cold. However, hotel showers gave you plenty of time.

I practically drowned myself in the shower - washing, shaving, standing under the spray. I walked back into my room, wearing sweatpants and a tank top, feeling more relaxed than I had in a very long time. I was looking forward to a good night's sleep in clean sheets, snuggled under heavy covers. I was happy to hear utter silence in my room.

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There was too much quiet, though, I noticed as I stopped cold just outside my bathroom door. I made a quick scan of the room, not seeing anything, but that didn't account for the corner to my left - the wall that was beside the bed. I couldn't see anyone, but I could feel the hairs standing up on my arms and the back of my neck.

I looked to the desk by the sliding glass doors, knowing my gun was there in my bag and too far away. I looked for my phone, remembering that I'd set it on one of the nightstands - the nightstand that was right around the same blind corner I couldn't find the courage to turn.

I looked to my right, seeing the door. It was closed, but the chain I'd secured was cut, like someone had cut it with bolt cutters. The two pieces of chain were still swinging, just barely.

Fuck, I thought to myself, not knowing whether I needed to fight for my gun, camera, and phone, because all three things were vital to me, or to take the door to the hotel corridor and try and make it to the lobby. I was fast, but I didn't know what awaited me around the damn corner of the wall.

I made a split second decision to walk casually to the desk in the room. I knew exactly where my gun was, and I hoped that I could get to it, before whoever was in my room made their move.

Rubbing a towel over my wet hair, I walked with purpose to the desk, sensing movement behind me, more than hearing it. I spun, threw my towel at the guy's face, and grabbed my gun from the side pocket of my laptop bag.

"Bitch!" the man growled, throwing down the towel and lunging for me. He knocked my hand into the chair, causing the gun to fall from my hand.

At that point, all hell broke loose. With my knees to his stomach, and his slaps to my face, no one was getting anywhere, but he brought his elbow up at just the right moment, catching my temple hard.

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My vision blurred, and the man got the upper hand, yanking me up by my throat. "If they didn't want you in one piece, bitch, I'd end you now," he growled in my face.

"Try me," I sneered, squeezing my eyes closed as his hand constricted a little more at my neck.

"Brave? Or fucking stupid?" he chuckled darkly.

It was his laugh that pissed me off. I played weak for another few seconds, only to reach up and shove my fingers first into his eye, and then his throat. He let go, and I let all my training - wasted training, according to my father - kick in. I spun a side kick to his head, chest, and balls, smiling when he grunted with each impact.

I tried to grab for my gun one more time, but he was quicker, and I heard the click of the hammer echo loudly in my ear. I froze, breathing heavily as I felt the cold metal against my temple, my fingers mere inches from my own gun.

"Shit," I sighed, slumping back onto my heels. "Who are you?"

"No one you need to fuck with," he said, his own breathing labored. "You're a nosy bitch...someone wants you stopped, and I have a job to do. No hard feelings, honey."

"Right," I said through gritted teeth. "It's not personal, yeah?"

"Exactly," he said, smiling a touch. "Up you get. Let's go. We've got places to go and people to see."

He stood up, spit a mouthful of blood onto the carpet, and gripped my hair, tugging me to my feet.

"Damn, calm the hell down," I snapped, almost stumbling into him. "Will you at least let me put some socks and shoes on?"

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"Yeah, sure...but don't try anything fucking funny," he said, aiming his gun my way, while he picked up mine. With a few simple movements, he had the thing apart on the desk. "Socks. Shoes! Before I change my mind, bitch!"

I nodded, grabbed my bag, and sat down on the bed, my gaze falling to my cell phone that was sitting right there. I took out a pair of sports socks out of my bag, pulling them on. I looked around inside for my sneakers, but they were in the bathroom.

I started to go get them, but he stopped me. "My shoes are in the bathroom," I told him dryly, rolling my eyes. "You get them, then."

He huffed and walked away just long enough for me to pull a gift from Alice out of my phone. I shoved it into my sock, grabbed the hotel's pen and paper, and wrote, "Call Alice." It was all the message I could get to Carlisle, because he wasn't going to make it to me in time. And I damn well didn't know where I was going.

Sneakers plopped down in front of me onto the floor, and I pulled them on, tying the laces tight so that what was hiding in my sock wouldn't come out. I looked up at the man that was about to take me and the gun that was still pointed my way.

"Can you at least tell me who hired you?"

"No. Let's go."

I nodded, looking around the room one more time.

The man shoved me hard towards the door, cursing under his breath.

"Come on, I don't want to have to drive all night," he growled, gripping the back of my neck and leading me down the hallway.

I took a deep breath, but when the elevator doors let us out into the garage, a sharp pain to my head caused everything to go black.

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~oOo~

EDWARD

"I'll drive," I muttered, grabbing a bag out of my locker and tossing it into the trunk of my Challenger. I waited for my father to toss his own bag in the back, and then slammed the lid.

"Where am I going?" I asked, taking the gun from under my seat and securing it in my waistband.

"South...and fast," he sighed, falling into the passenger seat as I cranked my engine.

Goddamn, I loved this car. It was black, sleek, fast, with an engine that rumbled deep within your chest. I backed out, pulling out of my father's driveway.

"South, it is...how far?" I asked, trying not to floor it through the streets of Forks.

"California, just north of San Francisco."

I hit the button on my dash, linking up with Cheney immediately.

"Yeah, Ed..."

"I need clear roads all the way to San Francisco, Benny. Please," I said with a smile, knowing he loved fucking with local law enforcement.

He chuckled, typing away on his computer. "I got your GPS locked; you're good to go. Just...watch out around the Portland area. They don't always listen to FBI warnings. Got me?"

"Loud and clear," I chuckled, finally pulling onto the interstate and flooring it.

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We drove out of Washington and pretty far into Oregon, before my father's phone rang.

"Yeah," he said, but a smile played on his face as he listened. "No, she's a tough cookie. She'll be fine. I've got two heading to Charlie and one to Gravity, so everyone is covered," he told the person on the other end, pausing to listen to them. "I'm on my way now... I know, we're doing our best, I swear. She's a good kid, I know. And she's also strong. Give me a few more hours, and I'll check in again. Okay?" he verified, sighing and closing his eyes. "Yes...me, too."

I never asked about those phone calls, but seeing as how we were trapped in a car, I couldn't stop myself.

"Who is that? Who do you keep checking in with?"

"Patience, son," he sighed wearily.

I grimaced, knowing not to question him, because I trusted him completely, but I wanted to know who else was involved in this situation. Who else was concerned about the Swans?

"Fine," I growled. "But at least tell me what you meant back in your office about Bella. About how she's well equipped to handle this shit. She's a civilian...she takes fucking pictures of cheating assholes. How is she equipped to handle a hit out on her?"

He smiled softly, and I noted, a little sadly. He took a deep breath and turned to me. "Bella didn't want to be a PI, Edward, but she's got a talent for it. She was at Quantico a few years ago, but dropped out of the program. She's...trained..."

My eyebrows shot up, but I remembered a conversation when we'd met that she'd always wanted to be an FBI agent. It bothered me a bit that she didn't get her dream. Kids were supposed to have their dreams come true, especially someone as cool as Bella had been. I'd gotten mine, but my dream of growing up to be just like my dad wasn't all it was cracked up to be. Unfortunately, it

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was too late; my soul was sold.

"Why'd she drop out?"

"Not my story to tell, son. I'm not sure I even know the real answer, honestly. One minute, she's only got a few months to graduate; the next minute, she's back in Seattle. Charlie doesn't speak of it, and I've never asked her, though I have my suspicions."

"Why doesn't she speak to Charlie?" I asked, now dying for information on the girl.

"Why do you want to know?"

"We're going to get her, right?" I asked, unsure myself why the fuck I was so curious about a girl I'd only met one time - at thirteen years old, mind you. "So...I want to know what to expect with this bitch..."

"Call her that again, and I'll break the nose on that pretty face of yours! Show some respect, Edward. I mean it. She's not one of your conquests, and she's not Mickey, who could give two shits how you treat her. She's the daughter of a man I've known my whole life," he growled, his hands balling into fists in his lap. "She's practically family, and she's a good kid."

"Shit, sorry," I sighed, running a hand through my hair as I slowed down the car. "I didn't mean it that way. Bad habit," I mumbled, while keeping my eyes on the road.

He nodded in my peripheral vision and looked out the window. "Charlie is a fool. He was a fool when he was married to Bella's mother, and he's a fool with how he treats his daughter. He spent too much time trying to make his fortune, and not enough time learning to live."

I frowned, looking over at my father. "You sound like you know how that it is."

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"I do," he said, still looking out the window. "I'm sorry you lost your mother, Edward. I'm sorry that I got you into this life..."

"Don't," I sighed, cutting him off. "I'm a big boy, Dad. I've made my own choices."

"A soldier for hire isn't a choice, it's servitude," he said with a low tone to his voice. "You're a slave to the money, the adrenaline, the people who hire you, and it seems like there's no way out."

I snorted a humorless laugh. He was right, but it was who we were. It had taken me years to realize that the minute we'd moved from California to Washington when I was thirteen wasn't because my mother had just passed away from cancer, but because my father needed to be closer to his team.

He'd started a small team of mercenaries right after retiring from the Air Force. He'd hired someone to take care of me, eventually enrolling me in military school. He'd traveled too much to be there for me, but he'd always been in constant contact.

Once I'd graduated, I'd been immediately sent overseas, and that was where I'd met Emmett, Jasper, and eventually, Mickey. We'd made an incredible team, a deadly black-ops force, and once my injury was healed and the Air Force released me, they followed me as soon as they were able. We'd been together for almost four years.

They were my brothers and my sister. They'd taken hits, punches, and bullets for me, and I'd done the same for them. We'd taken down small armies, dictators, and even whole governments, all for an unbelievable paycheck. We lived for the thrill, the adrenaline, and the money.

"It gets old," I sighed, my train of thought coming out of my mouth unfiltered.

"I wanted more for you...take this exit," he said just as we crossed over the California state line. "I want grandkids," he said, turning his head to me and grinning.

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I laughed, shoving his arm. "That may never happen. I can't do this job and leave a wife and kids at home. I'd get killed. They'd be all I could think of. And that's not fair," I admitted to him.

"You're twenty-seven, Edward. You're still young. And it's not like I'd stop you if you wanted to go..."

I nodded, knowing he was right.

"You just need to find the right girl," he chuckled.

"Would you have done this if Mom had lived?" I asked him suddenly, seriously wanting the truth from him.

"Nope, not at all," he sighed, an ancient sadness darkening his features. "I'd have bagged groceries for the rest of my retirement...something safe, something boring. Because your mother...she wasn't boring." He smiled over at me, squeezing my shoulder. "You look just like her."

I chuckled, knowing this. I took a deep breath, but he apparently had more to say.

"One night stands are empty, son. It's the deeper, constant feeling that you want. Think about it."

"The things I've done...that I've *seen*..." I grimaced, shaking my head. "No one understands that shit. Fuck, I don't even understand it."

"The right woman...she'll take that all away," he said sagely.

"Did she for you?"

"Your mother did, yes. After the Gulf War. And yes, I've found solace..." He smiled secretly again. "But that's for another time...pull in over there."

"It's really early. Should we..." I started, but he held up his hand.

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"No, let's just go."

I parked the car along the side where he told me to, popping open the trunk. I opened my bag, grabbed a few clips of ammo for my gun, and slammed the lid.

We walked through the lobby, taking the elevators. Silly ass music played in my ears as we took it to the third floor. I looked down at my feet, frowning at a spot.

I knelt down, touching what looked to be...

"Blood," I whispered, looking up at my father and showing him the bright, red smears on my fingers.

"Shit," he sighed, looking up when the elevator doors slid open.

"What room?"

"Three thirty two," he whispered, his hand already going for his gun.

We ran silently down the hall, and I stood to the side as he knocked, but there was no sound, no answer from the other side.

I looked at the doorknob, running a thumb across the card entry slot. I pulled out my Bluetooth, placing it in my ear. I dialed Cheney.

"Benny, I need a hotel room opened," I told him as quietly as I could.

"Talk to me," he said, typing away as I told him what hotel and what room number.

Carlisle snorted with amusement when the door clicked, the green light shining bright. "Unbelievable," he muttered. "What happened to old fashioned keys?"

"'Old fashioned' is the *key* in that question," I teased him, silently opening the door. "Benny, stand by, bro..."

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"Ten-four," he said in my ear.

The first thing I noticed was the cut chain; the second thing...the entire room was destroyed. The desk chair was turned over, clothes scattered everywhere, and there was a nine millimeter taken apart on the desk. But there was more blood...all over the place.

"Goddamn it!" my father snarled, stalking about the room.

"Speak to me, Ed," Ben begged in my ear. "Tell me what's going on."

"She's not here...and there's been a...struggle?" I said, but it sounded more like a question as I looked to my dad.

"Fuck," Cheney breathed, his fingers flying over his keyboard. "Nothing's been reported. No disturbances in the hotel."

I looked through what seemed to be Bella's things, picking up a bag and rummaging through it. I found a camera, a laptop, and a few items of clothing.

"She did what you told her, Dad," I said softly, because I could see he was about to lose it. "She shut down her laptop, locked the door, and... Where's her phone?" I asked, spinning on the spot.

"Here," he sighed, plopping down on the bed. He turned the smart phone over in his hands, but the cover to the battery was off of it. "Look at this," he said, pointing to the notepad on the hotel nightstand.

"Who's Alice?" I asked him, but it was Ben that answered.

"Alice Brandon," he stated, like he was reading it off the screen. "Arrested at twelve years old for hacking into the New York Stock Exchange, planting a virus that stowed away two-point-five million dollars into an off shore bank account - which, by the way, has never been recovered. She's a member of MENSA, a reject from the NASA program, and currently under the employ of Gravity Investigations as the computer specialist...hmm, I'd like to talk to

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her..." He mumbled the last part.

"She works with Bella," my dad added, but he didn't look at me, because he was currently turning on Bella's phone.

With a few touches to the screen, he made a call that was loud and clear on speaker phone. It rang a few times, before a mumbling, but rather fast talking girl answered.

"Bells, don't you dare renege on an early weekend, you cow! Mack said you gave us today off," she said quickly, shuffling around on the other end of the line.

"Alice, I'm sorry, but it's not Isabella. This is Carlisle Cullen," he said, and there was a squeak and a loud thump on the other end.

"Shit, Mr. Cullen, I'm sorry...hey, this is Bella's phone," she growled. "What the hell?"

"I need your help, Alice," my father said, trying to keep a calm voice. "I was supposed to meet Bella, but all I found was a note to call you..."

"Oh-shit, oh-shit, oh-shit," she chanted, and it sounded like she was running. "Give me a sec. Tell me, Mr. Cullen...was her phone taken apart when you got there?"

"Yes, and her gun," he told her, looking around the room. "And call me Carlisle...I have a feeling we're gonna be talking a lot."

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," she chanted. "If she took apart her phone, then she's wearing the GPS chip I gave her..."

"Thank fuck," I growled, thinking that we may be finding Bella sooner than I'd expected after seeing the room.

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"Not so fast," she sighed, typing furiously on the other end. "I have to decrypt it, and then take the passwords off of it. You'll have to give me time. I'm not at the office."

"We don't have time," Carlisle growled. "She's been taken, Alice."

"Oh, damn! The first twenty four to forty eight hours are critical. I know, I know, I know... Ninety-five percent of kidnappers kill their targets within that time frame," she muttered, but it wasn't like she was talking to us; it was like she was just quoting facts to keep her mind focused. "I need...a few hours...Please."

"I'll talk to her," Cheney said in my ear, "but let me order a cleanup team for that hotel room. Take the girl's things with you."

"Benny, there's blood everywhere...maybe you can..." I started, but apparently, he was on the same train of thought I was.

"I'm hoping we can get a DNA hit...hopefully, Miss Swan got a punch in...or two," he muttered. "But I need you guys out...and soon. And don't forget her fucking camera."

"We've got to go," I told my dad, throwing Bella's things into any bag I could grab and telling him what Cheney's plan was.

"Alice?" my dad said into the phone.

"C-carlisle?" she said, and it was at that moment I could hear her emotions in her voice. "I...I need a few hours...please. I...I'm scared for her..."

"Me, too," he soothed her. "Listen, you're going to get a call from one of my people - Ben Cheney. He's going to try and help you track her. So listen to what he tells you...stay calm for me, okay?"

"What about...I mean," she stopped, sniffing just once. "What the dark hell is going on?"

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"In time, Alice. You might want to get to your office," he told her. "I have another man coming to see you. Do not speak to anyone but my men. Hear me, Alice? A Jasper Whitlock will be stopping by Gravity, and Ben Cheney will be calling you...if someone identifies themselves as someone other than those two men, then call me. Trust *no one else*."

"Yes, sir," she said, but I could tell she was already distracted. She was trying hard to find Bella.

Carlisle ended the call and turned to me. "Let's get out of here before Cheney's cleanup crew shows up."

~oOo~

BELLA

I heard sounds first as I started to come around - scratching to my left, muffled voices above me, and the sound of my own ragged breathing through a blood clogged nose. I tried to swallow, but there was something in my mouth - something dry, like a rag. I squeezed my eyes closed, before opening them to a dark room, the only light coming in from a muted source above me.

I tried to sit up, but my hands were bound behind my back, and my ankles were tied together. With a few tries, I finally sat up, leaning back against a rough wall. Squeezing my eyes again, I opened them, hoping my vision was a little clearer.

I was in some sort of basement, or underground room. The walls were rock, with no windows, and the floor was hard, like concrete. I was still in my tank top and sweatpants, my shoes had been removed, but gratefully, they left me with my socks, because it was damn cold against that wall.

Thinking of my socks reminded me of the GPS chip I'd stowed at my ankle, but I couldn't tell if it was still there or not. I couldn't rub my legs together to check, and I damn well couldn't reach down to feel it.

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I glanced around the room again, still hearing muted voices above me, but my breath caught when I saw what was sitting on the other side of the room. It looked like a hospital bed, without the mattress. Maybe a better description would be a morgue table, because there were drains underneath.

There was a table beside it, but I couldn't see what was on it. I was too low, and the room was just too dark.

Just then, the voices upstairs stopped being muffled and became a loud argument.

"Not my fucking problem, Randy!"

"I need those fucking pictures, Miller," Randy argued.

"Well, maybe you should have thought of that before you left the fucking camera behind. Now...she belongs to me," Miller said, opening the door at the top of the stairs.

"You can't...not until I get those pictures," Randy whined, and I watched as he grabbed at Miller's arm.

It was the last thing he did.

With one swift move, Miller reached out, grabbed Randy by the shirt, and threw him down the steps.

"Don't fucking touch me!" he snarled, walking slowly down the steps as Randy tried to scoot away from him. "I don't care about your fucking pictures. I don't care about Alvarez. I have my own agenda, and I plan..." He paused, looking my way and licking his lips. "...to get paid."

A chill ran up my spine as I looked Miller in the eyes. They were steel blue and cold. He had blond hair and was muscularly built, but he looked like a snake ready to strike. He had a scar across his chin, and as he rubbed his jaw, I saw that he was missing his index finger.

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He broke his gaze away from mine, turning back to a cowering Randy in the corner. He reached down, punching the shit out of the man; he punched and punched and punched. A howl erupted from the man on the floor as Miller continued his beating, but that didn't stop him. Blood splattered all over Randy, Miller, and the walls and floor around them.

Miller stood up, pulled his leg back, and planted one hell of a kick to Randy's midsection. The man on the floor finally fell limp on his side.

I braced myself when Miller finally turned his attention back to me. "Isabella Swan," he crooned, taking his time walking across the room, "I've been looking forward to talking to you. And we have... *tons* to talk about," he said, reaching down to grab the tape on the side of my face.

With one swift jerk, he ripped the tape from my mouth, causing me to cry out.

"Fuck," I growled, spitting out a piece of cloth. "What the hell do you want, motherfucker?" I snapped at him, my voice raspy from not being used for a while.

"All in good time, Miss Swan," he said, roughly picking me up off the floor. "First, though...let's get you over to the table."

He bent down, picking me up over his shoulder, only to suddenly slam me down onto the metal surface. I grunted, my lip curling when I looked up at him.

"Got something to say, Miss Swan?" Miller asked as he secured leather belts across my legs and stomach.

"You will regret this, I promise," I told him through gritted teeth.

He laughed, shaking his head. "Oh, I'm sure I will, but right now, I'm looking forward to all the fun we're about to have," he chuckled darkly, taking off the ropes from my feet and hands. "Now..." he started, turning to the table by his side. "Let's start with the first question, Miss Swan."

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When he turned around to face me, he was holding a small, leather flogger. So quickly that I was barely able to see him move, he brought it down on my bare arm. I cried out again, cursing the tears that leaked from my eyes from the sharp, stinging pain.

"Where's your father, Isabella? Where's Charlie Swan?" he asked, raising his hand again.

"I have no idea," I told him, my eyes closing when he brought the flogger down again on my leg. Despite the cover of my sweatpants, it hurt like hell. "I fucking *swear* that I don't know...we aren't talking!" I yelled at him.

"No, that's not what I meant, bitch," he said, lifting up the bottom of my tank top. "I mean, where does he go when he goes into hiding?"

"I have no idea...it's never happened. If he's not in his office and not at home, then I don't fucking know," I growled.

Miller paused, grabbing my chin roughly. "Don't fucking lie to me," he crooned. His voice was eerily calm, but his grip was fierce.

"I'm not, I swear," I panted, more tears leaking from my eyes when I closed them. "We haven't spoken in over a month."

"He owns that business of yours..."

I looked up at him, and I could see that he didn't believe that I was telling the truth, but his grip still held firm. "I don't know..."

"Fine," he sighed, smiling evilly. "Maybe time will loosen your tongue. Maybe lack of food, water, and the ability to move from this spot will jog your memory..."

He slammed the flogger down on the table and turned away from me. He stopped in front of a still unconscious Randy, looking back up at me.

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"I'll leave you a friend, though," he chuckled, shaking his head at his own joke, because even I could hear the ragged, wet breaths Randy was taking. The young man wasn't long for this world, and soon, I'd be alone with a corpse.

He laughed again, jogging up the stairs and turning off the lights.

Plunged into darkness, I gave way to my tears, and now, despair, because in all honesty, if my father wasn't at work or home, I had no idea where he was, and that lack of knowledge could very well get me killed.

A/N...Yeah...cliffie...I know. Believe me this isn't over.

I need to tell you that this Carlisle is harsher...and I really like him. I saw him this way from the beginning. I know he's got secrets, but give him time.

Edward and the whole crew are a little rough around the edges a bit, but that's okay. They are brilliant at what they do.

Ben Cheney...yes, he works for the FBI and for Carlisle...that will be explained soon, as well.

I wanted to thank JenRar for beta'ing this ... and with a quickness these days! Thanks!

I am posting this earlier than I said, because my RL work schedule is a little screwy this week...so the next post will be Thursday. So review for me! I know you're gonna yell about this one...and that's okay, because I'd probably yell too. Let me hear what you think.

Chapter 3

A/N...Hey guys... Here's what you need to know about this chapter. First of all, it contains a TON of info, like how everyone is connected - Ben Cheney and the FBI and Carlisle and Bella...it's filled with info. Edward's working with his dad, so he's very curious about what his father knows about all of this, but he's also his employee...there's a fine line that must be walked.

It's also...violent and scary. And I want you to prepare yourselves for that. Bella is a tough woman, but she is strapped to a table, so this is where her mental strength comes into play.

We also get to see father and son in action...doing what they do. You'll see the way the team works together just a bit.

Also remember to keep an open mind about technology...it's my imagination most of the time. Even some medical stuff you hear later in this chapter.

Okay...on with it...

CHAPTER 3

EDWARD

"Tell me what you know about Bella," I demanded softly, but my anger was barely under control. My father was holding something back from me, and I damn well wanted the truth. "That Alice b--" I stopped, because my father raised a very dangerous eyebrow at me. "That Alice girl practically had a heart attack when she heard your name," I told him.

He chuckled lightly, nodding a bit. "I imagine Bella can't keep a secret from that one. She's too smart, Alice is." He smiled, picking up the menu of the restaurant we'd decided to stop in, because now we had to wait for information.

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"When Bella left Quantico, she stayed away for a while. She worked out a brilliant business plan to open Gravity. And she presented it to Charlie bravely, but he drug his feet on it."

"Charlie sounds like an ass..."

"He does," my father laughed. "But he's not--or at least, he wasn't always an ass. He's just...misguided. Bella is smarter and braver than her father...and he knows it."

I chuckled, thinking back to the one time I'd met her. She'd seen my old stutter as something that made me, me - not as something to be made fun of. She'd asked about my mother, and when I'd told her that my mother was dead, she looked at me with complete warmth and understanding, because her mom was gone, too. She didn't care that I'd been a shy, stuttering boy that was lost; she'd simply smiled and made me comfortable. And as I learned more and more about the way she was now, I started to really regret losing touch with the girl so very long ago. She sounded...amazing.

"Anyway," my dad continued, "Charlie took such a long time giving Bells an answer on whether or not he'd financially back her that she started to get pissed. I just happened to be in the office the day her patience with him ran out. I told Charlie it was a good idea. Not only was she brilliant, but having a PI at our fingertips would be a good thing. So I did it. I backed her... *with my own money*. That part she doesn't know. She thinks TT owns her, but really, I'm her silent partner."

I smiled, shaking my head. "Why?"

"Oh, I like her and she is my goddaughter," he chuckled. "She's everything Charlie is, and then some. She has a good heart and a strong will. And she's made a considerable profit with that little company. I don't see her as often as I'd liked to, but once I agreed to help her, we began emailing and talking as much as we can. She's got some damn fine ideas."

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"What can I get you guys?" our waitress asked, giving me the once over, before turning back to my father.

I rolled my eyes, and we both ordered, sending the girl away.

"I'm gonna check in with Em," I said, pulling out my phone and calling Emmett.

"Hey, Ed," he answered, "we have the target. And we're about head to the nest."

"Good. Keep me posted...and keep calls to a minimum, okay?"

"Yeah, sure thing. Um...he wants to know about his daughter," he whispered.

"She's still MIA, but this time...it looks like it's against her will. I wouldn't tell him that if I were you, Em. Seriously," I sighed, looking up at my father, who was shaking his head no.

"Aw, hell, so where do you guys stand?" he asked, muttering to Mickey.

"We're currently in a holding pattern. We're waiting for some information to come back to us, so hopefully we'll know which way to turn next. We're still in Cali."

"Mickey says to leave the Cali girls alone, Ed," he chuckled. "She says they're too much for you to handle."

I laughed. "Tell her to mind her own business. If she can't kiss and tell, then I'm not, either."

"Screw you, Cullen," Mickey laughed in the background.

"You wish, Mick," I bit back. "Be safe, and make sure you aren't followed to the nest, got me?"

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"Yes, sir," they both grunted, ending the call.

I looked up when our food was delivered, but ignored the waitress. She was too blonde, too made up for my taste.

"Should we call Jazz?" I asked, picking up a fork.

"Yes, he should be at Gravity by now...and most likely with Alice," he said, taking a huge bite of eggs.

I dialed Jasper's number, and he answered by the second ring.

"Eddie, you're on speaker...I was just about to call you," he said, and I could hear all sorts of commotion in the background.

"What've you got for us?"

"Nothing, as far as the daughter goes, but with this Alice girl...and Cheney, they are doing shit that would blow your mind," he chuckled. "Apparently, Isabella and Alice have set up a plan for this kind of emergency, but they'd never tested it."

"Well, we didn't fucking have to!" I heard Alice snap. "Cheating bastards are pissed, but they never think to hurt anyone other than the person that accused them to begin with...which I don't understand," she babbled. "You cheat on your wife, but you're pissed at her when you get caught. Boys are freakin' dumb!"

I smiled, starting to really like this Alice girl. "Okay...I'll admit most of us think with the other head, Alice, but can you find Bella?"

"That's just it!" she yelled, obviously frustrated. "We hadn't tested this thing. See...Bella checks in with me when she starts a job...when she needs something...and then when she's done with the job, getting somewhere safe. That way I know exactly where to start looking if she doesn't check in the next day. You know?"

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"Sounds smart," I agreed.

"But when she started investigating Alvarez, Bella got a little...squirrely. She said that the guy was too connected and had too many enemies...including his sweet, pretty wife. So she wanted extra protection...just in case," Alice said, and I could hear typing. "So TT was working on these new GPS chips, and I set one up for her. But the problem is...my passwords, algorithms, and logons aren't syncing up. I don't know if something happened to the chip itself, or if I didn't program it correctly, or if she, I mean...what if they found it on her?"

I winced, relaying this information to my father, and he asked for my phone.

"Alice, take down this number. It's for a Greg Rush...he *invented* that GPS chip for TT," he told her, giving her a phone number. "Between you, him, and Ben...you should be able to sync up with it. Okay?" he asked her. He paused for a moment. "No, honey, I can't imagine that you programmed it wrong," he snorted, rolling his eyes. "Do your best, and try to hurry, okay?"

He ended the call and handed back to me. "Fuck," he whispered, looking down at his plate and shaking his head. "They need to get that thing to work," he sighed, sitting back in the booth.

"Who do you think has her? Alvarez, or King?" I asked, thinking it was six in one hand, half a dozen in the other.

His face looked pained as he thought carefully before answering. "We'd better hope that it's Alvarez, because all he wants is pictures. If King is using Riley Miller, then there's no telling what he's doing to her for information on Charlie."

~oOo~

BELLA

I stopped begging and pleading, because it seemed to just feed this asshole. Every time I said, "I swear I don't know," he'd just hurt me that much more.

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The worst had been when he downed an entire bottle of water in front of me. I'd never been so thirsty, so hungry, even though I was pretty sure it had only been a few hours, but that was this guy's plan, I was assuming. To torture my ass in every sense of the word.

Randy had died hours ago, but Miller left him right where he was - at the foot of the stairs that lead to what I now deemed as freedom, though I had no clue as to what was up there. The guy had gasped one last time, leaving this world forever, and I'd cried for him. I'd cried silently, but I'd shed tears, because I truly was alone now.

I must have blacked out at some point, because when I woke up, Randy's body was gone, and Miller was nowhere to be found for some time.

When he came back, he'd been dark and determined. I'd fought Miller for as long as I could, especially when he'd cut my clothes from my body - he even tugged my socks off, and thankfully, he hadn't found what was inside, because he just dropped them to the floor. I didn't want to be raped. I could take hits, cuts, insults, even the taunting of food and water, but I didn't want that man inside of me. It would have been the ultimate in violation, and I think he knew that, because once I was down to just a pair of underwear, a slow, evil smile spread across his scarred face.

"Not yet, Isabella," he threatened, grabbing one of those long, red, fireplace lighters. "All in good time. I need more information from you, before we have... *that* much fun," he chuckled darkly.

I closed my mind, mouth, eyes, and ears when I heard the click of the lighter, completely shutting down mentally. He wanted me to talk, to scream, to beg. And I wasn't going to give him shit.

That had been about an hour ago, and I hadn't seen him since. In fact, I didn't hear anything above me at all. Two thoughts rambled through my mind. I hoped he was gone, but then...he was the only one that knew where I was, because I had no idea if that GPS chip was working...or if Carlisle had found my hotel room and note...or if Alice even knew to look for me, because I'd

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given my girls the next day off.

Tears leaked down my face and into my hair; I felt utterly alone. I didn't even know *why* this guy needed my dad, because I hadn't spoken to Charlie in weeks. I didn't know who he could have possibly pissed off *this much*. And I was afraid I'd never get the chance to ask him.

I jumped, my heart catching in my throat, when the door at the top of the steps slammed open, and Miller rumbled down them at top speed.

Shoving something in my face, he yelled, "Who the *fuck* is this?"

Opening my eyes, I saw it was a picture he was holding up. It was from the security camera at my dad's house - the front door, specifically. There were two people standing there - one really large, muscular man dressed in black cargo pants and a tight black t-shirt, and a girl, dressed in dark pants, a light shirt, and a hooded jacket. The girl was wearing sunglasses on her head, and the guy was smiling as he spoke to someone at the open door.

I shook my head. "I've never seen them before," I rasped, licking my very dry lips and trying to swallow. "No idea."

"You know, Miss Swan, I'm sick to fucking death of that answer from you," Miller snapped, bringing his hand up and backhanding my face, right across my cheek. "These guys show up, and your dad is off the grid...why?"

I hissed at the sting, licking my lip again--only this time, I tasted blood. "Look," I sighed, finally giving up all hope. "I don't know any of this shit you're asking me. I haven't spoken to my father in over three weeks, because he's a chauvinist bastard. I don't know where he would go if he was hiding, because he's never hidden from anything before. And those people...no idea, but it is quite fucking possible that he knows people that I don't fucking know!"

Miller studied me for a long moment, making me nervous, and I flinched when he pulled out his phone, dialing someone.

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"She doesn't know, man," he huffed, walking away towards the stairs. "No...I can make people talk...and I'm telling you. She doesn't fucking know. What do you want me to do? Make the shit up? I can't get info outta someone that doesn't have the info to fucking begin with!"

He stopped at the foot of the stairs, looking at me as he listened to someone else.

"No...Alvarez's man disappeared on me," he said with a chuckle, glancing down at where Randy's lifeless body once lay. "He was an idiot, anyway. I caught him stalking Miss Swan a few days ago and used him for information, but he is no longer...a problem."

I snorted humorlessly at his downplayed description, trying to shift on the table, but every inch of my body hurt.

"Okay...I'll get rid of her, but not before...I get paid," he growled, rumbling back up the stairs. "She's mine now, King," he chuckled, slamming the door behind him.

The last thing I heard before I broke into sobs was, "I'll be taking my time, so don't look for me for a few days..."

~oOo~

EDWARD

I stared out the open car door as my father paced in the parking lot of a rest area. This waiting shit was fucking kicking my ass. I'd participated in stakeouts, stalked targets for weeks on end and helped Jasper scope out a hit from miles away, but at least then there was *something* to do.

My father's patience was waning, his attitude becoming increasingly more moody. Neither one of us were good at waiting for someone else, but we had no choice but to let Cheney sift through all the intelligence with the Feds, to hope that Alice and this Greg Rush guy could hook up to that GPS chip that

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Bella supposedly had on her, and pray that Emmett and Mickey could keep Charlie Swan out of the line of sight for now.

My father had explained that Charlie had turned state's evidence on King, because it wasn't the first time he'd come to him. The last time, he'd bought a shit ton of computer equipment for counterfeiting purposes, and it bit Charlie in the ass years ago, causing him to have to testify in front of the grand jury. He wasn't doing it again, and especially not over weapons. Printing fake checks and money orders was one thing; selling guns to American enemies was another.

I actually respected the man for that, but wondered if he hadn't signed his own death warrant by working with the Feds.

My father said no, because Ben Cheney was overseeing every piece of info on this case. And Cheney could get away with working with us, because his father had been in the Gulf with Carlisle Cullen. When Walter Cheney got home, he joined the FBI; when my father got home, he became a deadly mercenary, but they continued to work... *together*. It was beneficial for both my father and Walter Cheney.

When the Feds couldn't touch a guy for lack of evidence, my father could, and they had no shame in asking. It was quite the relationship. So when my father needed help, Walter offered up his own son - the computer genius that he was - and Ben's been working with us ever since. The FBI says nothing on the matter. It was all very "Band of Brothers" type shit.

"What do you mean, they found Alvarez's man on the side of the road?" my father growled, and my head snapped up from my stereo to look at him.

"Oh, damn," I sighed, pulling myself out of the car.

"Ben, tell me what you know," Carlisle sighed, turning his speakerphone on.

"We just located the body of a Randall Chapel. He's been working with Alvarez for some time now. I'm pretty sure his title is 'Head of Security,' but

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he's more than that. However, he's an idiot...why Alvarez trusts him is beyond me. His rap sheet is a mile long, and then some. But he was found on the side of the road in Oregon - beaten to death."

"And?" my father and I both practically yelled.

"And nothing...can't find a spot of evidence around him, or blood. The body was dumped, but Chapel was heavily into gambling and owed big tough guys a lot of money in Portland...do you see where I'm going with this?"

"Oh, shit...please tell me you mean the leg breakers got to him, and not Riley Miller..." I groaned, knowing this was the fucked up news we'd been dreading.

"I can't. And his blood type...matches the samples we found in Isabella Swan's hotel room."

"Fuck me," Carlisle sighed, shaking his head, his shoulders sagging. "Please tell me Greg is helping you guys find that GPS signal..."

"We've almost got it. And damn, that Alice chick is...brilliant," he said with a light chuckle and a voice full of reverence. "They've opened up the system, but now they just need to break her codes. It was something to do with algorithms cancelling each other out--not that you care, I know. But it won't be long, Carlisle, I swear."

They ended the call, and I ran a hand through my hair. "This waiting shit is for the birds...or Feds. I'd rather sneak in on a motherfucker unarmed, than wait on someone else to fix this shit," I told him, shaking my head and falling back down into the driver's seat.

My father nodded, knowing I was better in the field than on a desk or computer, or even camped out, waiting for a target. Jasper had the temperament to be still for days on end, waiting behind his high powered sniper rifle, hidden in the shrubbery. I didn't. I needed to get the shit over with. I needed to move, make a decision and stick to it. I needed to end the threat - and in this case, Riley Miller was that threat.

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My own phone rang, and it was Emmett. "The baby birds have landed," he said.

"It's the eagle, idiot," I snapped, rolling my eyes.

"But there's more than one of us," he reasoned.

"Whatever," I sighed, not in the mood to deal with him.

He was brilliant with weapons, explosives, and hand to hand combat, but nothing ruffled him. Ever. He took everything in stride, with a smile and a shrug. A job was a job was a job, and once that job was over, Emmett went right back to being...Emmett. He liked football, loud music - mostly rap, despite our complaining - and girls. And Emmett could get a girl quicker than anyone I'd known, because sense of humor was the key with that guy.

With me, the technique was different. The girls came to me. I just chose. They called me quiet and dark, sometimes broody, but they didn't laugh as much with me as they did with Emmett, and sometimes, that bugged me. I envied him. I envied his ability to be happy in any circumstance and how he just let shit go. I wished I could do that, because there were nightmares that still woke me up in a cold sweat.

"Easy, Ed," he grunted on the other end. "I take it there's still no word on the girl, huh?"

"Nah, but they say they're getting closer."

"Have faith in Benny...he can find anyone."

"It's not Benny we're waiting on," I told him, not bothering to explain. "How's Swan holding up? My dad will want to know."

"He's...well, here...talk to Mickey, 'cause I think I scare the guy a bit."

I snorted, shaking my head as he handed the phone over to Mickey.

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"What's up, pretty boy?" she teased.

"How's the man holding up, wild child?" I asked with a chuckle.

"He's scared," she said, her voice changing from teasing to serious. "He's worried he fucked up and it's gonna get his daughter killed. He's spoken to the Feds, and Benny told him to stay with us. He's calm for now, but he's as good as could be expected. What should I tell him?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. We don't know anything anyway, so it's best if he doesn't freak out prematurely," I told her. "Stay low. We'll call you when we know something."

I ended the call, looking over at my dad when he fell into the passenger seat. "Em and Mick arrived at the safe house."

"Good. How's Charlie?"

"Worried."

He nodded, like he'd known as much. "He thought this was some sort of good deed he was doing, that by doing this, he'd do right by his daughter, but..." He stopped, shook his head, and took a deep breath. "I owe him this...I need to find Bella."

"Owe him for what?"

"It was Charlie Swan that helped your mother get pregnant with you," he smiled, looking over at me. "He was working with some brilliant doctors at the time, and they helped Elizabeth with artificial insemination. This was before it was an everyday thing..."

"I was a test tube baby?" I laughed, running a hand through my hair.

"You were, because I couldn't be home, and your mother wanted a child. Charlie worked with her doctors and my doctors on base in Saudi Arabia, and

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made it possible for her to get pregnant with you."

"Why?"

"Your mother was completely afraid I wasn't going to come home from that sandbox," he stated, looking out at the trees through the windshield. "She was so afraid, she became hysterical that she'd never have a family, so I...fixed it...or rather, Charlie fixed it."

"Oh, wow..." I huffed a laugh, never knowing that about my birth. I'd always assumed that my mother had gotten pregnant on one of my father's leaves.

"So you see...I owe him. A child for a child. We have to find her, Edward," he sighed, his head falling back to the head rest.

"We will," I said, but I wasn't sure I believed it. "I'll do what it takes, Pop, I swear. Just tell me what to do."

He turned his head towards me. "We're going to kill Riley Miller. And then...Royce King."

"Done," I said with a nod. "Say no..."

I was cut off, when his phone rang shrilly in the silence of the car.

"Yes, Alice. Tell me what you've got," he commanded into the speakerphone.

"I've got her, I've got her, I've got her," she sang. "You need to head north into Oregon. She's in the national park. Go! I've got your GPS location and hers, so I'll guide you in, okay?"

"You're beautiful, Alice. Don't let anyone tell you different, okay?" he chuckled, motioning for me to go, but I was already peeling out of the parking space.

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"Bella says the same thing," she giggled into the phone. "According to scientific calculations, though, my face does not add up to the 'pretty equation.'"

"Since when does science know what's beautiful?" I scoffed, making my father and Alice laugh.

"Since there are mathematical studies on facial grids, calculating with votes as to who is prettier than the next bitch," Alice snarked back. "So if Angelina Jolie scores a nine point two, that's high...that's *pretty*, but if like Snookie from *Jersey Shore* only scores like five point oh, then she calculates as not pretty. Got me?"

My father snorted, shaking his head as I chuckled. "Directions, Alice," he sighed.

"Yes, sir," she giggled, but Cheney interrupted her.

"Eddie, you're gonna need backup on this shit," he said on the other end. "Miller's place is...insane. I'm not sure two of you will be able to do it."

"Talk to me," I said, shifting gears and hitting the highway at top speed.

"First, it's deep into the woods. Second, he's completely wired, from the entrance of his driveway, all the way to the barn in the back. Nothing moves on that property without an alarm sounding. He's got cameras everywhere. Bullet proof windows, combination locks, and rumor has it...bear traps, man. You need serious help with this shit."

"I can't afford the time, Ben. I'd say have your men relieve Emmett and Mickey," my father countered, "but we'd still have to wait."

"Did you say this guy has CCTV, alarms...all that?" Alice asked, typing away.

"Yeah," Ben answered her, and I realized we were on a three way call. "Why?"

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"Kill his power," she said simply. "Yes, yes, yes...a guy like that would most likely have a battery backup system, but even that needs power. Kill it at the power company, but Carlisle will have to kill the battery backup at the source. In fact, I'd cut it all - water, power, cable, internet, even jam his satellite signal."

"We could do that," Ben mused aloud.

"Where would the backup be?" my father asked.

"The secondary power source would most likely be in the barn," Alice answered, "because that's where I'd put it."

My dad turned to me. "If I can buy you enough time, you could get in and find Isabella."

I nodded in agreement. "Alice...or Ben...or damn, both of you... can you send plans to my phone of this place? Or a satellite image, maybe?"

"On its way now, Ed," Ben answered. "Are you sure you don't want help?"

I looked at my father and saw the same determination to get this shit over with written all over his face.

"No time," we both said.

"Fine, then the directions have been sent to your GPS, Edward. Go...and be careful."

~oOo~

BELLA

I wanted to go home...and I didn't care at this point which home that was. If I closed my eyes for just a moment, I could imagine Rose's apartment, her laugh, and a box filled with cold pizza sitting between us on the sofa as we watched

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crime shows. I could see my house that I'd once shared with Jake - comfortable furniture, warm colors and my old bed - my neighbor, Esme, sitting at my table with a smile on her face. I could even see my dad's house - my old bedroom, still decorated with travel posters and the shelves filled with books.

But mainly...I saw my old tree house.

I saw its sweet little porch that wrapped all the way around it, its white paint and green shutters, and its two small rooms with a pile of pillows in the corner where I used to read by the window.

I was freezing and groggy as I lay on that metal table. I was weak, because Miller had spilled my blood more times than I could count. And I was growing completely and emotionally numb. I had given up hope that anyone was coming.

What if Alice didn't know to look for me? What if Carlisle tried to come and see me at the hotel, but left when I didn't answer? And what if Miller killed me, and no one would ever know what happened?

My eyes burned with tears as they fell from my eyes. The salt in them burned my raw skin around my eyes, stinging as they rolled over open cuts. My body was covered in cuts and bruises. My stomach ached with hunger and thirst, and my bones ached with how cold I was.

I was still only clad in a pair of underwear; Miller had left those for what he'd called, "the best for last." The mere thought caused a sob to escape me. He hadn't raped me, but that didn't mean he hadn't *touched* me. He'd teased, threatened, and been very rough, but he hadn't raped me.

I could hear him moving around upstairs, but hadn't seen him in some time. I could hear the rats he threatened me with scurrying by the walls in the far right corner, and I could hear muffled music.

I knew it was only a matter of time before he returned, but I had a plan. I was going to give in just long enough for him to release me. Give in just enough so

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that Miller would kill me before he got his rocks off on me. It wasn't going to happen, because I'd rather die than to let this asshole get what he wanted.

Pounding steps upstairs walked with a purpose. Music was shut off, water ran through pipes around me, and the door finally slammed open. Miller walked slowly down the stairs, humming a tune I didn't recognize, and he smiled a slow, carnal grin my way.

"Oh, Isabella," he crooned, licking his lips and stopping by the tray that held his "toys." He pushed a few things around and finally turned back to me. "What fun we're going to have."

"Please...just untie me," I whispered, my voice almost useless. "I could make it good for you, too," I told him, almost gagging on the lie.

I was too tired, too beaten to make it sound good enough, because he chuckled at me. "Oh, I don't think so. I need you still for what I'm about to do. I need you... *restrained*."

"Don't do this...please, don't do this...just fucking kill me," I breathed, though I felt it was in my mind, not aloud.

"Not... *yet*," he purred, dragging a sharp object across my face and down my body.

The tears came unabashedly at this point, though I was pretty sure that just made it better for him. It was what he wanted. He wanted to see me broken down to nothing. And I was. I was utterly spent emotionally. I had no more fight, no more will. I was done.

I gasped when the knife slipped slowly underneath the leg of my underwear, slicing through it like it was warm butter. I panted, squeezing my eyes closed and balling up my hands into fists.

"Don't, don't, don't..." I chanted, tears flowing like rivers.

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I had no idea how I could cry, when it seemed like it had been forever since I'd had a drink of anything. In reality - or at least from what my foggy mind could piece together - it had only been just a little over forty eight hours.

A ringing bell caused both of us to jump, and Miller spun on the spot, nicking the skin of my thigh by mistake. I hissed as he dropped the knife on the table next to my hand.

"Don't you go anywhere," he said with a wry smirk. "I have a feeling a deer walked over my sensors again. I'll be right back."

He bolted up the stairs, and I tried in vain to reach the knife that was just out of the reach of my fingertips.

"Fuck!" he growled from upstairs, and his steps became panicked up there, running from one end of the place to the other.

I heard running steps and a door open, but it was a loud boom that made my mind come undone, because suddenly, I was plunged into complete blackness. Miller had turned the lights off on me, but it had never been this dark, because the light from upstairs had always filtered dimly from underneath the door. But this...this was like someone had taped my eyes closed, like I had gone entirely blind. And that scared the shit out of me, because it wasn't so bad when I could see shit coming my way, and now I couldn't.

A flickering flashlight appeared at the top of the stairs, and Miller rumbled ungracefully down them, slapping me when he stopped by my side.

"Who? Who the fuck could've found you, bitch?" he snapped, slapping me again.

Thankfully, I think he'd forgotten that he'd dropped the large knife *right there*.

"I don't know," I lied smoothly this time, because I could see Miller was now frantic. He'd been caught.

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I may not have known *who* had found me, but I was pretty sure that a short little thing in my office had gotten a clue. As far as exactly who was tormenting Miller at that moment, I didn't know. And really, I didn't care, as long as they found me in that basement.

"They won't make it inside this house, Isabella. I'll kill them before they make it to the front yard," he threatened, and then leaned closer to my ear. "And no one will know. We're so far away from civilization that it will be *decades* before your bodies--your burned bodies--are discovered. You understand me, Miss Swan?"

With that said, he spun on the spot, taking the flashlight with him and surrounding me in darkness again. Miller hadn't slammed the door shut this time, but it didn't matter, because suddenly, a rumbling boom rattled the entire structure around me. The table I was lying on shook with the force of whatever had exploded.

Another, smaller, explosion happened right above my head, causing dust to fall onto my face, and I started to struggle under the tight leather straps that Miller had around me. I was going to burn right on that table.

Quieter, yet unsure, footsteps came down the stairs, a flashlight behind them, and I started to hyperventilate. I couldn't breathe, see, or even formulate a clear thought.

"Easy, Bella," a smooth, velvet, but so very calming voice met my ears, and all I knew was that it *wasn't* Miller.

I dissolved into hysterics.

"Shh...it's okay, it's okay," he said, his fingers struggling to slide under the leather straps. "I need to get...something to cover you up..."

"Don't leave me..." I panicked, grabbing at whatever I could get a hold of once my arms were free. "Please...don't..." I cried.

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"Okay, I won't, I swear," he sighed, freeing me from the rest of my restraints. He stepped back just a little, covering me up with what felt like a leather jacket. "Can you hold on?" he asked gently.

I nodded, allowing him to wrap my arms around his shoulders. Warm, strong arms slipped underneath my legs, lifting me up as if I weighed nothing, and I curled into him, unable to stem my tears.

He smelled like leather and comfort and man. He smelled like strength and warmth, and I gave in, because I was too tired, too beaten to fight.

Once he'd carried me up the stairs, I couldn't keep my eyes open any longer.

~oOo~

EDWARD

"You should see a turn off on the right," Alice and Ben said at the same time over the speaker phone.

"Edward, drive past it, and then pull over," my father ordered, jumping out of the car once I'd stopped.

I popped the trunk, and we both snatched our bags open. I was already wearing my black cargo pants, but I tugged my white t-shirt off over my head and put on a black one. I grabbed my black baseball cap, putting it on backwards, and pulled my black leather jacket back on.

"Take plastic explosives with you," I told my dad, handing him a small block of it.

He nodded, putting it in a small bag he was loading with ammo. "Detonators?" he asked, and I slapped them into his hand. "Pull that phone of yours out."

I pulled it out, opening the picture of the layout of Miller's property. We both studied it for a moment.

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"Son, I want you to take the house. Go in along here," he said, pointing to an open field that ran parallel along the dirt drive. "Watch your surroundings, watch for traps, and watch for motion sensors...at least until I can get to that barn back there." He pointed to the large structure behind the main house on the screen. "I'm going to have to go in around this way," he mused, showing me a roundabout way, but he would most likely avoid any detection that way.

He handed me my phone back, and sighed. "Wait until Cheney kills the power before going anywhere near that house. Our priority is Isabella...I want her out. If you happen to kill Miller in the process, then so be it, but she comes first. Got me? No showboating, no heroics...just get to that girl, Edward."

"Yes, sir," I said with a nod, checking my weapon and adding a second one at my waistband. "Here," I grunted, thrusting an earpiece at him. "Constant contact, Dad."

"Yes, sir," he mumbled with a wry smirk, tugging his own black cap on. "At my mark, blow that front door wide open. According to Cheney, this guy likes to work alone, so I can't imagine he has anyone out here."

"Right," I agreed. "Go, Dad. I'll give you a head start."

With one last look my way, he took off north along the road, eventually disappearing into the woods on the right. I turned south, crossing over the entrance to Miller's driveway and finding an entryway into the woods. I settled in just out of the line of sight--not that there was any traffic, but I didn't know what this guy was capable of at this point.

"Edward...check in," his voice crackled in my ear.

"I'm on point, waiting for you."

"Go...you're clear to the edge of the front yard. Get there and wait for my signal."

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I took off, keeping my eyes sharp on the ground and the surrounding tree trunks. I had to make sure that I didn't set off this guy's sensors or step on a trap. It was pitch black as I made my way through the trees. I slowed down once I heard the sound of music floating out from a small cabin directly in front of me. I stayed inside the tree line.

"I'm good. It's on you," I told my dad, turning the safety off of my gun and scanning every window I could see from my viewpoint.

"Ten-four," he panted in my ear.

"Come on, old man," I teased as softly as I could. "Double time. Let's go!"

"I can still kick *your* ass, son. Don't you forget it," he whispered harshly, but I could hear his amusement.

I snorted, shook my head, and continued to wait, watching the slight movement from inside the cabin. Eventually, the music shut off, and silence rang out through the night, but there were still lights on, still power, because an alarm sounded shrilly from somewhere inside the front room.

But not for long.

I tensed when the electricity thumped off heavily, and it was then that a thundering boom echoed through the woods, killing the alarm and every light within sight. Bright orange flames flared up from the other side of the cabin, and I assumed that was my signal, because the barn was no more.

"Go," my father growled in my ear.

I pushed off out of the trees, sprinted across the side yard, and leapt up onto the front porch. I heard footsteps from the other side of the front door, but it was locked. Really locked. The door was steel, as was the frame. Not only was there a keypad, but a heavy duty deadbolt as well.

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Pulling out a bit of plastic explosive, I set up a charge right at the keypad and the deadbolt, diving off of the porch when I set it off. The loud pop shattered the silence, and I was inside the cabin before the door was able to bounce back.

"I'm in," I whispered in to the headset.

"In pursuit," he panted in my ear. "He bolted out the back. Get to Bella."

Gun raised, just for safety, I walked through every room, shining a flashlight in front of me. I entered the kitchen, finding a basement door wide open. I shined the light down the stairs, taking them slowly, but I knew I'd found her, because I her hear her crying, hear her struggling.

I'd seen the prisons in Iraq, I'd seen prisoners of war come back home, and I'd seen victims of torture. I've even been paid to raid and capture back hostages. What I saw at the end of those stairs made me sick. I didn't know if it was because I'd known the girl once, or that my father cared so much about her, or if all this shit was just a little too close to home, but I wanted to vomit. My stomach roiled with nausea as I took in the hellacious conditions in which this guy had kept Bella.

The room was a torture chamber, I realized as I flickered the light around. Rats scurried along the walls, the scent of sweat, tears, and urine hung heavily in the damp air, and there was a table with everything you could possibly think of to hurt someone - whips, chains, knives, even fucking brass knuckles.

But the sobs I heard stopped me cold. She couldn't possibly see me, but she was struggling like hell against some damn thick leather straps, and she looked like death. She was filthy, covered in bruises, and bleeding from small scratches and cuts everywhere. She had a split lip and a black eye, and her hair was matted in what looked like sweat and blood.

She started getting frantic, and I finally stopped her. "Easy, Bella," I said, trying to sound as calm as I could for her sake, because I know she had to be freaking out.

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Bella stopped struggling, but she sobbed, her whole body going limp with exhaustion.

I stepped closer to her, working the leather strap off of her upper body, just noticing that she was practically naked, a torn pair of underwear barely covering her. She continued to cry.

"Shh...It's okay, it's okay," I soothed her, my fingers working as quickly as they could to free her from that God awful table.

Her skin was cold, but tacky with sweat and blood, and I knew any woman wouldn't want to be seen this way. There was no telling what this Miller had done to her.

"I need to get something to cover you up," I told her, starting to run back upstairs, but she completely melted down on me.

Her arms shot out, grabbing at my jacket and t-shirt. "Don't leave me!" She was stronger than I'd expected, practically pulling me over. "Please!" She was barely able to speak clearly.

"Okay, I won't, I swear," I vowed, thinking if my father didn't get a hold of this Miller guy, then I would spend my last days hunting his ass. No one should be treated the way Bella had.

The only thing I could think of was my jacket, so I shrugged out of it and wrapped it around her as best I could with her fingers still clutching my t-shirt.

"Can you hold on?" I asked her softly, and she nodded.

I wrapped her arms around my neck, lifting her by her back and underneath her legs. She was lighter than I'd expected, and she clung to me fiercely, her tears never stopping.

Once her head hit my shoulder, she quieted almost instantly, and I climbed the stairs back up into the kitchen.

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"I got her...she's alive," I told my dad over the headset.

"I lost Miller," he growled back. "Meet me at the car."

"Yes, sir."

I took the most direct path I could back to where my car was parked on the side of the road. My father emerged from the woods just about the same time I did, but he sped up to get to me and the precious cargo I was carrying.

"Bella," he breathed, pushing her hair from her face. "Sweetheart, can you look at me?"

"Carlisle?" she muttered groggily. "Did Alice..."

"Yes, she was brilliant, Bella. We're going to take you someplace safe, okay?"

"Kay." She nodded slowly, finally looking up at me, her very sad and tired eyes locking with mine and closing back again, like she couldn't keep them open.

"Bella, do you remember Edward?" he asked her, opening her eyelids, but they were dilated.

"I know those eyes," she muttered.

He smiled at my chuckle, nodding a bit. "Put her in the car, and let's get out of here," he said, opening the car door for me.

It was when I tried to set Bella down that all hell broke loose. She completely unraveled, clinging to me fiercely, her eyes wild and unseeing.

"No, don't...please...don't," she screamed, fighting with everything that she had left.

"I won't put you down, I promise," I whispered to her, looking up at my father.

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He looked heartbroken as he gazed down at her. "What the fuck did he do to her?"

"You so don't want to know. That place was just..." I couldn't find a word fitting for the horror I'd seen in the basement. "Just...drive," I growled, shaking my head.

I kept Bella in my lap and sat down carefully in the passenger seat. Carlisle Cullen was as pissed as I'd ever seen him as he started my car. His gaze warmed as he tried to tuck Bella's hair behind her ear.

"He's a dead man walking," he muttered as he shifted into gear. "If I get my hands on him again..."

"Get. In. Line," I growled low, shaking my head. "Where are we going?"

"The safe house," he sighed, pulling out his phone. He dialed quickly, stating, "I've got her...she's alive."

I heard a loud voice as he was cut off.

"No, I'm going to need you. Now," he said sadly, pausing to listen for just a moment. "Bring them all with you if you have to, but I need *you*...Bella needs you. I don't think that we can put this off any longer. It was going to come out eventually." He listened some more, nodding in agreement, but continued the call with, "The safe house...and bring your supplies. Yes, me, too."

Bella took a deep, shaky breath, her hand gripping my shirt, never letting up. I looked down at her face, barely recognizing her from the photo in my file, much less the sweet, happy twelve year old I'd met a long time ago. She looked wrecked and vulnerable as she breathed deeply, sleeping for what was probably the first time in days.

I bent to her ear as my father continued speaking softly in his phone. "Sleep, Bella. You're safe now. I promise."

Blood & Glory

A/N...Whew... Now, while the scary part for Bella is over, the angst isn't, so I thought you should know. But she's at least out of that God forsaken basement.

Carlisle and Edward are no one to mess with when they are on a mission, but neither is the rest of the crew. Alice was brilliant as always. And Ben was a huge help.

Okay, so you learned a little bit about the loyalty between Carlisle and Charlie, between Carlisle and Bella. Edward learned that the girl he once knew had become an amazing person, a person his father loves and respects.

Emmett and Mickey have Charlie someplace safe, but he doesn't know that his daughter had been kidnapped.

And finally, you'll get to see who Carlisle has been talking to on the phone, though some of you have figured it out, I think. Coming up in the next chapter, Bella deals with what happened to her and learns about what Carlisle really is...and (and don't think I don't know you're all waiting for this) she meets Edward again...

Okay, review for me, because this was a damn scary chapter to write, and I was nervous posting it. Reviews are better than Edward saving you from the bad guy...okay, not really, but I had to try. I'd love to know what you think...good or bad. The next chapter will most likely post Monday, because thank GOD my schedule has gone back to normal. Until then...Later.

Chapter 4

A/N...I know you're worried about Bella, and I'll let you get to her in a moment. But I just wanted to say thank you for the reviews this last time. I know I have a few new readers this time around, and I want to say welcome...and to feel free to review or yell or whatever. Also I invite you to join us over on Twitter... We have no shame there, really. You know who ya'll are, don't deny it! LOL

I know this is the type of chapter you've been waiting on. We'll see who Carlisle has been talking to...and yes, most of you are right. And Bella will meet Edward again as adults, as conscious adults. I need you guys to keep in mind what she's been through before judging her at the end of this chapter. Nuff said. You that know me, know that I'm a E/B romantic to the very CORE of my being, so have faith. Got me?

On with it...let's check in with our girl, shall we?

CHAPTER 4

BELLA

"Bella?" I heard in the deep, dark, fuzzy parts of my mind. "Bella, can you wake up for me?"

Carlisle.

I took a deep breath, smelling ocean and leather, and opened my eyes slowly, squinting at the bright room.

"Yeah, Carlisle," I rasped, trying to swallow.

He smiled, holding up a bottle of water. "Here, drink this, but go slowly."

Blood & Glory

I choked on the first few gulps, but relished the feeling of the fire in my throat being extinguished, if only for a moment.

I looked around and noticed I was in a bedroom, which was decorated sparsely, but comfortably.

"Where am I?" I rasped, pulling a leather jacket that wasn't mine tighter around me.

"You're safe, Bella. We're in a safe house," he explained, but I didn't understand.

"What happened?" I whispered, tears filling my eyes.

He grimaced, shaking his head and kneeling down beside the bed. "I promise to tell you everything, but there's someone here to see you."

He stood up and walked to the door, peeking out in the hallway. "She's awake," he said, opening the door.

"Esme," I rasped, scrambling off the bed and falling to her arms.

"Oh, Isabella, what did he do to you?" she sobbed, giving me the once over, before pulling me back into a tight hug.

We barely heard Carlisle mutter, "I'll just leave you two to it," as he closed the door behind him.

I started to babble, but I barely made sense to my own ears, so I know she didn't understand a word of it. I told her about my last job and taking pictures. I told her about checking into the hotel after talking to her on the phone, only to turn around and call Carlisle. I told her all the things he told me to do, and that I'd done them, but somehow, someone had broken into my hotel room.

I sat down hard on the edge of the bed, and Esme wrapped a loving arm around me, letting me breathe for just a moment.

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I tried to talk about my time in the basement, but the words wouldn't come out, only tears and hiccuping sobs.

"I...I can't," I sniffled, shaking my head.

"Shh, sweetie. You don't have to," she crooned, rocking me back and forth.

"What are you doing here?" I whispered. "I mean...how did you...you know Carlisle?"

She smiled a brilliantly beautiful smile, shaking my shoulder. "Let's get you cleaned up, and I promise we'll answer all the questions *everyone* has."

As she helped me to my feet, what she'd said finally hit my tired mind. "Everyone?"

She chuckled. "Oh, Miss Bella. You're not the only one that wants to know why I'm here."

"Kay," I sighed, allowing her to sit me down on the closed toilet, so that she could start the shower.

"Hop in," she ordered, pointing to the steamy water. "Everything you'll need will be in there. I'm going to see if I can't rummage up something for you to wear. But when you get out, I'm going to take a look at your wounds, Bella. Okay?"

I nodded stupidly, trusting the woman with every fiber of my being. I could hear her moving around in the bathroom, and I was so tired, I felt the only way to keep myself awake was to talk.

"My dad?" I asked tentatively.

"He's safe, dear."

"What about my girls and Rose?"

Blood & Glory

"Also safe," she said, but there was a little chuckle to her voice.

I sighed a breath of relief. If something happened to Rose, Mack, or Alice because of something I did, or some damn job I'd taken, I'd never forgive myself.

I hissed as the water hit my open cuts, especially the gash on my thigh and the cut above my eye - they seemed to be the worst - as the dirt and blood washed down the drain. Washing my hair had never felt so good, though, and a moan of ecstasy escaped me.

I finally turned off the water, and Esme called from the bedroom. "There's a towel right there, Bella. Just put that on and come here."

I wrapped the fluffy blue towel around me and stepped into the bedroom, memories of walking out of my hotel bathroom making me shake.

"Hey, hey, it's just me in here," she whispered, cupping my face. "No one will touch you against your will again, sweetheart. I promise it. Carlisle promises it. Even Edward swears it."

"Edward?" I asked, looking up at her as she sat me on the edge of the bed.

"You don't remember?" she asked, a wry smile curling up on her face.

I shook my head no.

"It was Edward that pulled you out of that...room...that house," she told me, guiding me to lie on my back and lifting the towel.

I frowned at her, still shaking my head, because I didn't remember any of it, until...

"Eyes...green eyes," I gasped.

Blood & Glory

"That's him," she chuckled. "I thought he was teasing when he said that was all you said to him."

"That was Edward? As in, Carlisle's son, Edward?"

"Yes." She chuckled again. "He was in a state when he saw how you'd been...kept," she explained.

"I should thank him..." I muttered, but she didn't say anything.

She bent down and picked up a black leather bag, finally meeting my confused gaze. "Isabella, I haven't been completely honest with you, but I need you to know that I'm a doctor...a psychiatrist, but I can still take care of these cuts." She paused, still looking me in the eye. "I need your permission, sweetie."

"Yeah, sure," I muttered.

"Good," she sighed, and began prepping a needle. "This one on your leg and on your eye needs stitches..." she told me, looking up at me, and I nodded.

After numbing the skin on my eye and leg, she worked efficiently, humming a soft tune the whole time. She was so gentle that I nodded off a couple of times.

"Next...I need to..." She stopped, tearing up a bit and shaking her head. "I need to know if... I mean...did the guy..."

I shook my head, breaking into a sob. "No."

Her whole body sagged with relief. "Thank God," she sighed, wiping away a tear that had slipped down her cheek.

She pulled me up to a sitting position, giving some other cuts and bruises some attention, but didn't say anything until my stomach gave a fierce growl.

"Here," she chuckled, setting a stack of clothes on the bed. "Put these on, until we can get some things of your own."

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I nodded, asking, "How long am I going to be here?"

She grimaced, shaking her head. "That's a question for Carlisle, dear. I'm sure he's got a plan."

She reached into a plastic bag on the floor and walked back to me.

"I know they aren't the fancy underwear you like," she chuckled, handing me a pack of plain white underwear and a matching bra, "but there wasn't a lot of selection when I stopped for medical supplies."

"It's great, Esme. Thank you."

"Mmhm," she sighed. "I know you're tired, but I'd like you to eat something. And I'm sure Carlisle's itching to talk to you. So when you're dressed, come down to the kitchen."

"Yes, ma'am."

I pulled on a white t-shirt that smelled familiar and a pair of black basketball shorts, rolling them down a bit. The clothes were obviously male, and I wondered if they were Carlisle's.

It was torture trying to work out all the knots that had tangled in my hair the few days that I'd been laying on that metal table, but after a few minutes, my fingers ran through my locks smoothly.

On my way out the door, I grabbed the leather jacket that didn't belong to me, hoping to return it to its correct owner. I had to take the stairs carefully, so as to not rip the stitches in my thigh, but I finally made it to the landing.

The smell of bacon, eggs, and something sweet caught my nose, making my mouth water. I was starving...literally, considering the last real meal had come from a drive-thru a few days ago. I followed my nose, finding the kitchen just to the right of the stairs and across from the living room.

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The kitchen was empty, except for one person that was facing the stove. He looked like he was preparing to feed an army of men, because there were a stack of plates beside him. Lining the counter were platters of scrambled eggs, French toast, and a plate filled with bacon and sausage.

But it was the man my eyes were drawn to. He was wearing the same shorts I was, a backwards black baseball cap, running shoes, and no shirt. He was muscular, but not huge, with lithe muscles that started at his wide shoulders, narrowing to his hips. He had a fantastic ass, I noted.

When I cleared my throat, he spun around, and I knew *exactly* who he was. I hadn't seen him in like fourteen years, but when I was met with a crooked, nervous smile and those oh so very pretty green eyes, I couldn't help but smile back. His face had lost the baby fat, leaving a devastatingly handsome jaw line and cheek bones that said beautiful, but still very masculine. Edward Cullen had gone from so very cute, to damn hot.

"Bella," he said with a smile. "How do you feel? Here...sit," he told me, pulling out a chair at the table.

"Hey, Edward." I sighed, wincing when I sat down. "I feel like road kill," I snorted, holding up the jacket in my hands. "Yours?" I asked, meeting his dark gaze.

"Uh, yeah," he admitted, taking it from me.

"It's um...kinda messed up. I wasn't exactly...I mean...let me have it cleaned..."

"Not a chance," he chuckled, rolling his eyes and tossing the jacket onto a chair. "It's just a jacket."

He turned back to the stove, flipping over some bacon strips and pulling an empty plate from the stack. He made me a huge plate, setting it down in front of me.

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"You don't have to eat it all, but you need to eat something," he said, his voice taking on a different tone, almost like a command, and it caused me to remember my last few minutes in the basement.

"I owe you a thank you," I whispered, picking up a fork. "For...coming to get me..."

"No, you don't," he countered, but his back was facing me. "We were actually too late...my dad and I..." He stopped, shook his head, and changed gears on me. "I'm sure he'll tell you everything soon enough."

I nodded, even though he couldn't see me, and took a bite of eggs. They were the best thing I'd tasted in what seemed like forever.

"So good," I moaned with a chuckle. "Or is it because fast food was the last thing I wolfed down?"

He laughed, turning off the stove, and sitting in the chair across from me. "Maybe."

"Are you expecting to feed an army this early in the morning?" I asked, pointing my fork to the large amount of food on the counter.

"Something like that. My crew can eat, and they're useless in the kitchen," he chuckled. "It's like having kids."

"Crew?"

"Yeah..." he said, looking down at his coffee cup and not my eyes.

I looked him over, noticing his chest this time. He was finely built, with perfect abs and pecs, but my attention was drawn to the tattoo on the left pectoral. It was a blue Air Force ribbon, with a star in the center, something I'd seen before, because Carlisle had the same one on the inside of his forearm. But Edward's was different. His was surrounded by three red stars and the lettering: USAF. It was beautifully done.

Blood & Glory

I was just about to ask him if he'd achieved his dream of flying helicopters, but Carlisle and Esme entered the kitchen together. And I mean... *together* - as in, holding hands.

My eyebrows shot up, and Edward saw my expression, turning to the doorway.

"Are you gonna tell us what the fuck is going on now?" he barked at his dad.

"Put a shirt on...this isn't the barracks. And yes," Carlisle said, giving his son an impatient look. "I'm sure Bella has a few questions, as well."

Edward got up from the table and ran to a room off of the living room as Carlisle sat beside me. Esme pulled two plates from the stack and proceeded to fill them.

"How are you feeling, Bells?" he asked, giving my face the once over.

I knew what it looked like - black eye, split eyebrow with stitches, and a cut lip. I was sure I looked just terrible.

"I know. Please don't," I whispered, looking down at my plate. "I'm sore everywhere. Bruised everywhere, but Esme took care of the worst of it."

I saw him nod out of the corner of my eye, and Edward joined us again, this time wearing a black t-shirt.

"I wanted to talk to just the two of you before some others join us," Carlisle started, thanking Esme for a plate of food. "I think I should start with Charlie..."

As we all sat at the table, Carlisle explained what had happened, filling in some of the blank spots in my memory. He told me that Royce King, who I'd known was in organized crime, had approached my father years ago, and he'd been questioned over it. He explained that King was even more powerful now, and had approached my father again. The first time had been about computer equipment; this time, it was weapons.

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My father didn't want to deal with criminals, so he'd called Carlisle, who had put him in touch with the FBI. My father wore a wire to the meeting with Royce King, and somehow, King had found out.

"But wait," I interrupted, stirring a cup of coffee, trying to stay awake so that I could get some answers. "If Miller worked for King...then who was the other guy that took me...I mean, the actual man that was in my room."

"Alvarez's man," Edward mumbled. "They were both trying to get to you."

"Oh, shit. My girls!" I gasped. "I need to get them..."

"Sweetie, Rose, Mack, and Alice are all safe," Esme told me soothingly.

"I have a man with them now," Carlisle said, and I noticed that he looked just as uncomfortable as when Edward had said the word "crew."

I narrowed my eyes at the two of them, my gaze landing on Carlisle. "What are you? You're not just my father's business partner...or the owner of Gravity..."

"*You* own Gravity," he snarked back. "Never let anyone tell you different. I just...got you started. And yes...there's more you need to know, because we've got a long road ahead of us, I'm afraid."

"Dad...are you sure?" Edward asked, his eyes flickering to me.

"Trust me, son," he sighed, setting his elbows on the table. "Bella, when I retired from the Air Force, I didn't exactly...retire. When I came to see your father all those years ago on my way to Forks - when you and Edward met - I had made a deal with him. I offered to help him out of a financial situation, and he offered all of his...services to me...and my crew."

There was that word again, and I looked to Edward, who was looking darkly at his coffee cup again. His mouth was in a tight line, as he shook his head slowly.

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"Bella, do you know the definition of mercenary?" Carlisle asked, taking a deep breath, like he was waiting for my reaction.

I snorted, nodding. "Yeah...soldier of fortune. I studied them in Virginia..."

Both men's heads snapped up to look at me, but Esme was trying to fight a smile.

"I know that some operations weren't able to be taken care of by American military, so some groups were sent over to Iraq and other places. I know that they get paid to handle...unorthodox situations..." I paused, sipping my coffee. "Well, now I know where those weapons go to on my father's books, because you're not the only 'security company' he deals with," I sighed, looking up at Carlisle. "How many in your crew?"

"Six," Edward answered, and I turned to him.

I nodded, taking a deep breath. "Right," I said with a nod. "If you're expecting me to be all freaked out, don't worry. I knew something was up. I'm just glad you aren't serial killers. I studied them, too."

Edward snorted, but kept his gaze on his hands.

Esme chuckled, giving me a wink. "Good girl," she mouthed across the table.

"What I want to know is...how does my former neighbor fit into all of this?" I asked, looking at Carlisle, but pointing to Esme. "Not that I'm not over the top happy to see her, but I didn't know she was a doctor..."

Edward's mouth fell open, and he turned his attention to Esme. "What the fuck?" he growled, also turning to Carlisle.

His father laughed. "Esme and I met after I moved to Forks," he started. "And it was shortly after the death of my wife, Edward's mother. I'd just started taking paying jobs with a few men I'd retired with, but I'd needed someone to talk to. I had a young teenage son," he said, gesturing to Edward, "and I was

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suddenly a single father and a widower. I was also heavily involved in some dangerous operations. I needed someone to confide in. I also needed someone with military experience. Esme was both of those things. She's a psychiatrist, but she's also familiar with black ops. She's still quite...connected."

Edward and I must have had the same surprised expression, because both Esme and Carlisle chuckled.

"Really?" Edward snorted, looking over at her. "I mean, I knew you were dating, but...not what you are..."

"Okay, fine," I snickered, shaking my head. "But the world is small...not *this* small. How did you end up my neighbor?"

"Um, that's my fault," Carlisle mumbled, wincing. "I knew you were seeing Jacob Black, and I knew that you were looking for a house together. But I don't trust his father, Billy. At all. I wasn't sure if Billy was using his son to get to you...to get to Charlie. I am your godfather, Isabella - a role I take seriously. So I kind of forced your hand on the house."

"Damn," I sighed, setting my coffee down a little too roughly. "That's why those other two houses we were looking at suddenly went off the market. And Jacob isn't like...that. Billy, yes...I think you're spot on, but Jake was just..." I waved the rest of that comment away. "So you moved me in so that your girlfriend could keep an eye on me?" I asked, smiling at Esme's and Edward's chuckles.

"Yeah...kinda," Carlisle answered with a childish shrug.

"Is that everything?" Edward asked.

"Easy, Edward," Esme chided softly, placing a hand on his shoulder. "It was me that your father was checking in with, because I've come to care about Bella. I offered my help after she was taken, so I suppose there are seven in your crew now."

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"Right," he growled. "One more neck to watch out for... So what's the plan with Charlie and Bella? Miller's still on the loose, the Feds want Charlie in protective custody, and Bella is still a threat to Alvarez and a bargaining chip for King. So what now?"

I flinched at the change in Edward's demeanor. He went from passive and having a calm conversation, to brusque and moody. But he had a legitimate question, so I turned my attention to Carlisle.

"We're going to have to keep everyone in hiding. And we'll do it, Edward," he barked at his son. "Cheney wants us to deliver Charlie to them soon. Jasper's on his way in now. We'll stay here for a while. At least until Bella is healed a bit."

I rubbed my head, feeling worn out and wrecked. I squeezed my eyes closed and took a deep breath. "So what? You're now *warring* against the Mafia and a cheating senator? I mean... is that what all this is about? You're just gonna kill 'em all and let God sort it out?" I asked sarcastically, rubbing my eyes as best I could with the stitches there.

"I swore to Charlie that I would keep you safe through this...and I almost failed..." Carlisle huffed, closing his eyes. "Look, I have contacts in the FBI, so I'm offering my services to protect your father. But your captor got away from me, Bells. And the other one was found..."

"Dead, I know," I said without inflection. "I watched him die," I whispered, closing my eyes to Esme's gasp and Edward's growl.

"Riley Miller is not going to stop hunting you," Carlisle told me, trying to use a softer tone. "You've seen him, watched him kill a man in cold blood, he hurt you..."

"I know what he did!" I snapped, my whole body shaking. Esme stood up and walked around the table to wrap an arm around me. "Do you really think he'd try again?"

Blood & Glory

"He can try," Edward and Carlisle said at the same time.

"I'd rather not take that chance, Bella," Carlisle added, taking my hand. "Like I said, I have people in the FBI, and we're going to try to get this done as soon as possible. They've asked for Charlie's help, so that they can arrest King. My contact already warned me that they may want to speak with you about Miller..."

I started shaking my head, but Esme's arm tightened around me. "Shh, Bella...it'll be all right," she whispered in my ear.

If Miller was still out there looking for me and Alvarez still wanted his pictures, then it was only a matter of time before they both found the people that were important to me.

"But what about my girls...and Rose?" I asked, panicking. "Rose is my father's PA...she's just a big of target...Alice and Makenna work for me...they'll be used against me...You have..." I was babbling, losing control of my thoughts and mouth.

"I've got it under control, Bella," Carlisle urged, picking up my hand. "I know who they'd look for..." He stopped, looking up at the door when a commotion echoed through the house.

Carlisle stood up almost too quickly, because his chair rocked back to the floor. "Damn it all to fucking hell, Jasper! What the hell is he doing here?" he growled at a young blond man, who was looking quite irritated.

"Because I didn't feel like putting a bullet in his brain," Jasper snarked back.

"It would have been worth it," I heard two familiar voices say at the same time.

I launched out of the chair so I could see if what I was hearing was true, and sure enough, standing there in the middle of the living room were Alice, Rose, and Makenna.

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"Bella!" they all cried, rushing to me.

I winced at their hugs, my whole body aching from the action, but it was their rush of chatter that was amusing. All three were telling me everything at one time.

"We thought we'd never get that GPS thing to work," Alice growled.

"And then this guy shows up...all GI Joe and shit..." Mack gushed, jerking a thumb back in Jasper's direction.

"And Jasper just should have just shot him," Rose said, her voice menacing.

I spun around to face her, but her gaze was on someone I was in no mood to see.

"Jake," I sneered. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"If you don't want him here, I can still shoot him. He showed up at Gravity...unannounced," Jasper muttered, giving Jake a shove, before coming to stand in front of me. "Jasper Whitlock, ma'am," he said, introducing himself with a sweet Southern accent and a wry smile. He bowed low in front of me, and I liked him instantly. "Glad to see Eddie and Carlisle found you..."

"Bella Swan...and I have no opinion on whether you shoot him or not," I sighed, ignoring the chuckles in the room.

"Bells..." Jake started towards me, looking wary and apologetic.

But it was Carlisle that stopped him, gripping him by the shirt and slamming him into the closest wall. "You won't survive this house if you harass her in any way. Do you understand me?" he snarled in Jake's face. "If it were up to me, I'd have left you in Seattle to fend for yourself."

Even though Jake stood taller than Carlisle at six foot five, he was completely intimidated by the man. Jake nodded tentatively, but said nothing.

Blood & Glory

"Izzy, what happened to you?" Rose asked softly at my side as she eyed my face, arms, and legs.

"I...I don't want to..." I sighed, looking up at her and shaking my head.

Esme took pity on me, wrapping a protective arm around my shoulders. "I think you should get some rest. You only had a few hours when Carlisle woke you up." She turned to the rest of the room. "There's breakfast in the kitchen, and then I'll show you to your rooms."

"Yeah, sure," Rose whispered, looking wounded, but I just didn't have the courage to speak of the basement just yet.

I allowed Esme to steer me from the room and up the stairs, leading me back to my room. She checked my stitches and my eyes, before settling me into bed.

"Sleep as long as you need. I put a bottle of water on the nightstand. If you need anything, I'm the last door on the left at the end of the hallway," she told me, kissing my forehead. She studied my face for a moment. "I know it's difficult to think about what happened at that cabin, sweetie, but you're going to need to talk to someone eventually. It's not healthy to keep it inside."

I nodded, tearing up a little, and she wiped them away as they fell from my eyes. "I know...I just...the things he did..."

She nodded, gently cupping my face. "I know...and when you're ready, come see me."

She stood up, pulled closed the curtains, and turned off the lamp, before turning towards the door.

I was asleep almost instantly, falling into the worst nightmares I'd ever had.

~oOo~

EDWARD

Blood & Glory

Bella slept for almost a solid twenty four hours that first night, and hardly anyone saw her after that. Well, sort of slept. No one wanted to say anything about the cries coming from her room. Her friends, while I'm sure they cared for her greatly, considering how they had bum-rushed her, wanted to help, but Esme had stopped them.

Jacob Black, on the other hand, was proving to be a huge pain in the ass.

On more than one occasion, either Esme, my father, or myself had to stop him from entering Bella's room, the last threat coming from me.

"Lay your hand near this door one more fucking time, and I will personally see to it that your body parts are delivered to your father's front door. Are we clear?" I growled, gripping his throat.

"Yeah," he rasped.

"If she wanted to talk to you, she'd fucking call for you," I sneered, shoving him down the hallway.

He didn't learn.

I knew she got up in the middle of the night, because my room was right beside the back porch. She would sit silently on the porch rail, her sweet, floral, and fruity scent wafting through my open window. The first night I heard her, crying softly by herself, and I actually got up to go to her, but stopped at the French doors.

I didn't want to disturb her, and I know the things she'd been through were more than most people could handle. I felt protective of Bella, doing my best to keep people out of her hair, but I'd been the only one to see what she'd really been through.

Esme said that she still hadn't talked about her time in that fucked up dungeon, but I wasn't sure I'd talk about it, either.

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I had forgotten that I'd packed away Bella's things from the hotel room, so knowing she would be up early one morning, I snuck out to my car to get them, stopping by the laundry on the way by. She didn't need to see the blood on her clothes; she'd been through enough already.

I was lugging her bag through the quiet house, when I stopped in the door way from the kitchen to the back porch. I watched as Bella cringed from Jacob's touch, and I wasn't sure if it had to do with their history, or what she'd been through. Either way, I could tell she didn't want to deal with him at all.

"Jake, I don't know why you're here, but...I..." she started, flinching again when he tried to pick up her hand.

She didn't move from her favorite spot on the rail, but looked like she was about to fall off in order to get away from him.

"Jacob Black," I snapped, causing him to jump and spin towards me. "I'm not an expert on body language, but that doesn't look like an open arm welcome."

"Why?" he asked, turning back to Bella.

"That's her story to tell, Jacob...and it looks like she doesn't want to tell it right this minute," I sneered, stepping closer to him.

"Bells...please let me apologize...I didn't mean it..."

I looked to Bella, who snorted humorlessly and shook her head. "Jake...I know that you're here for protection, because you could be used against me and Charlie, but that doesn't mean I want to talk to you," she growled, hopping down from the rail gracefully and walking towards the beach.

"Nor does she have to," I added, giving Jake a raised eyebrow in warning.

"What happened to her?" he asked, looking wounded, and for the first time, I saw him as man that had screwed up his relationship with his girl. She wasn't his anymore, and he had only himself to blame.

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" *Her* story," I said again, "but I can tell you she didn't get those bruises from tripping, so you can understand if she doesn't want to be fucking touched." I could barely contain my disgust at how I'd found her.

He blanched, nodded, and turned back into the house.

Once I saw that he was inside the house, I followed Bella's footsteps out to the beach. I found her sitting in the sand, digging her toes in. I set her bag down beside her, smiling when she grinned up at me.

"Oh, shit! I thought I'd lost it all," she gushed, pulling the bag to her lap.

"No, we grabbed it before the Feds cleaned the room," I told her. "May I?" I asked, pointing to the spot beside her.

"Yeah, sure." She smiled and went back to her bag, pulling out her nine mil.

She grinned, checked the chamber, and popped out the clip, before putting it all back together with proficient hands.

"You any good with that thing?" I asked, gesturing to her gun.

"Top two percent in my class at Quantico," she stated with a shrug. "I only keep it now, because occasionally I have to track targets into skeevy areas."

I nodded, but couldn't stop myself from asking, "Why didn't you finish?"

She smiled sadly, pulling out her camera, only to just set it in her lap. She took a deep breath and looked up at me.

"Charlie didn't want me to go. He wanted me to go to school for business, take over his company someday... That's not me," she said, tucking her hair behind her ear, and for the first time, I noticed that her bruises were fading, leaving her skin smooth and creamy.

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Her eyes were deep chocolate brown, filling and refilling every second with everything she was feeling at each and every moment. Her smile was genuine when it was deserved, but never reached those expressive eyes when it wasn't.

Her lips were full and red, the bottom just slightly larger than the top, where the split in it was already healing. I could still see the little girl I met a long time ago, but she'd blossomed into a stunning woman - that fucking knew guns.

Bella Swan had become sexy as hell, and I didn't know what to do about that thought, because she deserved better than me...better than Jacob...hell, no one was probably good enough after what she'd been through. She needed someone to take care of her, not to fuck up or leave her alone for months on end.

"Anyway, I was accepted into Quantico, and I busted my ass to graduate," she snickered, shaking her head. "But a few months before graduation, my father called me. He said that my Aunt Jane was sick, and that he was putting her in a home."

"That lady that made us apple pie?" I gasped.

"Yeah," she said with a slow smile. "That's her. And she'd been like a mother to me, Edward. I couldn't just let her waste away in a home, for Christ's sake! So I came home, took care of her...quit the program to do it. My slot filled up, so there was no going back."

That wasn't the reason I was expecting. I thought maybe the pressure was too much, or her grades weren't there, but she'd quit the one thing she'd always wanted in order to take care of someone who at one point had taken care of her.

"That was good pie," I chuckled, shaking my head.

Bella's giggle was like music, something I hadn't heard yet, and I loved the sound instantly.

"It was," she laughed. "She taught me how to make it."

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"No shit? I'll pay you to make one!" I growled.

She laughed again and nodded. "Sure...no problem. You don't have to pay me."

We were quiet for a moment, but she continued her story.

"After she died, I started thinking about all the things I'd learned in Virginia, so I put together a business plan for a private investigation firm. It's been fun..."

I smiled over at her. "And Jacob?"

She groaned, putting her face in her hands. "He cheated on me."

"Wait, is that why he looks so damn guilty?"

She chuckled. "You should have seen him when I caught him. Here," she giggled, picking up her camera and messing with a few buttons. "I caught him red...handed..."

"No fucking way!" I laughed, looking at the picture. Jacob was taking some blonde on what looked like a desk in an office. "I can't believe he'd cheat on someone that catches cheaters for a living," I chuckled, handing her back the camera.

"I know, right?" she snickered, looking out over the water. "What about you?" she asked, turning to look at me.

"What about me?" I sighed, not sure how I felt about talking about myself.

"Did you learn to fly helicopters?"

"Yeah," I said with a nod and a smile. "For like five years," I told her.

"What happened?"

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"I crashed into a village in Iraq, my team was ambushed, and I got hurt enough that they discharged me," I explained, rubbing the old scar on my knee.

"So you came home to work for Carlisle? Do you like fighting that much?" she asked.

I knew it was an innocent question, but I didn't know how to explain it to her, when I didn't know the answer myself.

"No," I said, standing up. "I think we better get back," I snapped, feeling like an ass that I hadn't answered her question.

"Kay," she said, nodding and standing up. "For what it's worth, Edward...whatever brought you into that basement...no matter what you did before it, well, I'm still very grateful." She shrugged one shoulder and picked up her bag, leaving me behind on the beach.

~oOo~

BELLA

My sleep had turned to shit. I knew I was avoiding everyone. Hell, I'd barely seen my girls since they'd arrived. I knew I was avoiding be touched. And I hated it. I wasn't a weak person. I wasn't the type of girl that allowed things to shut her down, but fuck it all if it wasn't happening against my will.

Every damn night, my dreams would assault me. They would start out normal - well, as normal as dreams could be - walking hallways, having strange conversations, and then it would change. It would start out comforting, with soft easy touches by hands that were strong and calloused, but somewhere between being comforting and slightly arousing, those hands would change. They would morph into something sinister, foul. They would not caress, but slap. They would not massage, but grip.

And the eyes. I felt eyes on me all the time, but only when I was alone in the bedroom. It all came bubbling up to the surface a few nights after Edward had

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returned my things that had been left in the hotel room.

Mistake number one was sleeping with my gun under my pillow. Mistake number two, which Edward claimed responsibility for later, was giving me said gun back to begin with. It was too soon, and I was too...fuck, if it wasn't true... *damaged*.

I gasped awake, cold sweat pouring down my face as I sat straight up in bed. My whole body shook with fear and disgust, my hand slipping under my pillow to grab my gun. The hairs stood up on the back of my neck and arms just like they had the night I'd come out of the shower in my hotel room. Someone was fucking watching me.

Despite the fact that the moon shone brightly through my window and I could see everything fairly clearly, I was fucking convinced that someone was looking at me. I didn't know how, but I was damn sure of it.

I bolted to my door, hesitating a shaking hand at the door knob, finally finding the balls to grab it, twist it, and yank it open. I padded silently down the hallway towards the steps, my gun in front of me. Just before the last step, it pressed into a wide chest.

"Jesus, Bells!" Jake gasped, freezing at the sight of my weapon aimed straight at his heart.

"Someone's fucking watching me," I snapped, not even considering that people were trying to sleep and it was close to two in the morning. "Is it you? Are you fucking sneaking in my room, asshole?"

"No, baby, I swear!" he pleaded, his hands extended out in a sign of surrender, but I didn't give a fuck.

"Don't call me that! I'm not your baby...you negated that right as soon as you fucked Lauren, you fucktard! So *why*?" I yelled. "Why are you watching me?"

"I'm not...Bells...please," Jake whispered, sweat breaking out on his brow.

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"He's not watching you," I heard behind me, the same velvet voice that had pulled me from the basement.

"Someone is," I breathed, feeling a warmth behind me, along with the scent of clean ocean air, leather, and just...comfort. "Someone is," I said again.

"No, Bella...I swear they aren't," Edward vowed again, and I could feel him closer behind me.

I cringed, waiting for him to touch me, but he didn't.

"I check on you throughout the night...no one is watching you. No one can get to you," he said again, his voice maintaining a soothing cadence.

"Bells, they take shifts, bab... They walk the perimeter of this place. No one is gonna get to you," Jake urged, his eyes flickering behind me. "There isn't an idiot alive that would cross them at this point..."

"In fact, Jasper's outside now, Bella. Would you like to see?" Edward asked, his arm pointing to the front porch window from behind me.

I followed his hand, seeing Jasper pacing on the front porch in a slow casual walk.

"See?" Jake breathed, squeezing his eyes closed as sweat poured down his face. "She'll kill me...after all I've done...without a second thought."

"No, she won't. Will you, Bella?" Edward asked in my ear.

"Make it stop..." I growled, removing the safety of my gun and pulling back the hammer.

"Oh, fuck," Jake panted. "Bells, please..."

"Bella!" Edward snapped behind me, this time his chest pressing into my back. "Lower your weapon. Now!" he commanded, almost giving me no option.

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"Make it stop," I whispered again, barely hearing my own shaky voice as my arm lowered to my side, the gun pointing to the floor.

"Shit...thank God," Jake sighed, relaxing just a bit.

"Bella," Edward said softly, his voice calm again. "I know you don't want to be touched, but I'm taking that gun from you. Do you understand me?"

I nodded, my tears spilling over and down my face.

"Good girl," he whispered, and I felt his fingers ghost down my arm to my hand, taking my gun gently out of my hand.

With swift movements, he unarmed it, catching me when my knees gave out. "Easy, Bella," he sighed, turning me in front of him. "Come with me."

Just as we turned down the downstairs hallway, I heard Carlisle confront Jake. "I think it's for the best that we turn you over to the Feds for protection, Jacob. When we hand them Charlie, you'll go, too. Got me?"

"Yes, sir," my ex sighed.

I was steered towards a bedroom and guided to a large bed that had the covers pulled back. Edward knelt in front of me, shirtless, with my gun secured in the waistband of his khaki cargo shorts.

"Bella, you have PTSD. Do you know what that is?" he asked softly, but again, his voice left me no room to avoid answering him.

"Yes," I sniffled. "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder."

"I know what Miller put you through is hard to remember, but it's eating at you," he told me, his eyes softening a bit. "It's poisoning you, Bella. You can't let him win."

I nodded dumbly, fidgeting my hands in my lap.

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"Esme wants to talk to you..."

"No!" I sobbed, shaking my head. "She's...she can't hear that shit..."

Edward smiled sadly and nodded. "It's what she does..."

"I know," I sighed, my gaze falling to his tattoo over his left pec.

He followed my staring eyes and smiled sadly up at me. "Do you know what it means?"

"The ribbon is like Carlisle's...Air Force something or other..."

"Yes...but he doesn't have these," he stated, pointing to the red stars - one on top and one on each side.

"No, he doesn't."

I looked at the stars and back to his face.

"They represent people I've lost under my command," he whispered, his eyes glazing over with memories. "Mike Newton...Iraq. Jose Marquez...also Iraq. And Paul Winthrop...Abu Ghraib."

He stopped, looking past me for a moment. "Mike was killed saving our lives - mine, Jasper's, and Emmett's," he explained softly. "Jose was in my last helicopter crash. And Paul died when a prisoner went ballistic during transport." He still didn't look at me for a moment, but when he did, his face showed an old sadness. "I've seen shit I want to forget, too. Don't let the darkness take you. You'll end up a monster like me."

I shook my head, thinking anyone that pulled me as carefully out of that basement as Edward did couldn't possibly be a monster. Someone that could cook like he did, that stopped my ex more times from bothering me than I could count in the short time we'd all been under the same roof, and the same man that stopped me from blowing a hole through a human being couldn't be

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what he was claiming.

"I am, Bella. I can kill an enemy without batting an eye, and take a big check in payment for it. I can do it without feeling and conscience. I can do it, knowing I'll just do it again the next time." He growled low, shaking his head. "I've destroyed whole villages, dropped bombs on hideouts, and taken the lives of many, many people. And the more I've seen, the easier it gets."

"How many lives have you rescued?" I asked, raising an eyebrow at him, because I'd heard Carlisle talking to Rose one night. They hadn't thought I'd been listening just outside on the porch, but I had been.

"Some," he hedged.

"Bullshit," I sighed, calling his bluff. "I heard about that troop being held prisoner in Korea. I heard about Iraq, Edward. You expect me to talk if you can't be honest?"

"You don't know anything," he growled, standing up and pacing.

"I know that Carlisle only takes jobs that the US Military can't do...or it's illegal for them to enter. I know he only helps situations that are right...that saves people that can't save themselves. You were killing bad guys, Edward."

His face darkened as he ran a hand through his hair. He stopped pacing to stand in front of me. "My dad likes to rationalize things..."

"Fuck you," I snapped, launching off the bed, but he stood in front me to block the door. "What do you know what I went through...if you can't tell the truth..."

"I *saw* that fucking dungeon, Bella," he growled, his face in a sneer of disgust as he folded his arms across his chest. "I saw the...weapons he used on you...I saw the blood, smelled the vomit and urine. I saw the fucking table you were strapped to. If you keep it in, then you'll always be in that dungeon. Take it from someone who knows."

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"Go to hell," I snapped, bolting past him and out his door. "Hypocritical asshole," I muttered, running up the stairs and into my room, slamming the door. What I saw on my bed stopped me cold with guilt and shame.

All three of my girls were sitting on my bed in their pajamas, with folded arms and serious expressions.

Rose was the first to speak, and I knew I was in trouble, that it was going to be a long damn night. "Sit the fuck down. We need to chat."

A/N... No...no one was watching Bella. It was in her head, just FYI. I know that you'll ask, and I wanted to clarify that with you first thing.

Yeah, Bella's freaking out a bit, and yeah, Jacob wouldn't be missed (never been Team Jacob, sorry to those that are) but you just caught a glimpse of the chemistry between E and B. It will be fire and ice and bull-headedness. And don't judge Edward, either. He's a tough guy and had seen Bella at her worst, so it's messing with him.

So, yeah...Carlisle is with Esme. She is a doctor, that's used to military situations and they met when she was counseling Carlisle after the death of his wife, Elizabeth. Don't dwell on her connections right now. They will come into play later.

So everyone is at the safe house on the beach, except Mickey and Emmett, who are watching Charlie. In case you're wondering, Edward and the gang have been in the house for about 2 weeks up to this point, okay?

Now...reviews. Reviews are as beautiful as Edward making breakfast shirtless. LMAO... Okay, maybe not, but they come close! Please let me know how this is going for you - good, bad, or indifferent. The next posting will be around Thursday or Friday. So talk to me, please... Until then, Later.

Chapter 5

A/N...Yes, I'm posting ahead of schedule. I'm so far along on this story, that I'd love for you to catch up.

I think the last time we were here, Bella and Edward had just butted heads pretty damn hard. Bella had freaked out a little and almost shot Jacob (yeah, no real loss, but still...) and the girls finally trapped Bella alone...

We also are going to get the first glimpse of Jasper's true personality in this chapter.

This is a tough angsty chapter, but have faith, there isn't much detail. Just a little peek into Bella's mind.

So...on with it...

CHAPTER 5

EDWARD

"Hypocritical asshole," Bella growled, bolting up the stairs.

I sat down hard on my bed, my hands fisting into my hair. "Fuck me," I sighed, squeezing my eyes closed, because I'd just royally fucked that up.

I could see Bella's slow creeping crawl into the black abyss that I'd experienced before. I could see the paranoia and the constant battle with nightmares. But who the fuck was I to tell her to talk about it, when I didn't voice shit myself?

Yep, hypocritical asshole was right.

But fuck, she'd scared the shit out of the whole house when she pointed that gun at Jacob's chest - not that I didn't think that she shouldn't do it, because he

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was a stupid motherfucker for cheating on her. Who did that shit? Who had a woman as beautiful as Bella to come home to, but nailed the secretary on their desk? Moron.

Anyway, I just knew she'd hate herself for pulling that trigger, and I could see the fact that Bella Swan had mentally checked out. The lights were on, but no one was fucking home.

The problem was...she was reliving the same nightmare over and over. Something I knew about. She was avoiding engaging with her friends - or anyone in the house, for that matter. She avoided being touched - which was totally her prerogative - but she wouldn't even let Carlisle and Esme take her hand anymore. She had hardly spoken to Alice, Rose, and Makenna, and they were starting to become hurt, even though I think deep down, they understood.

I didn't want Bella to become callous. I didn't like to see the hollowed-eyed look on her face. She'd only gotten worse since I'd handed her things back to her a few days ago. And her wellbeing was starting to consume me, which in turn, confused the shit out of me.

I wasn't supposed to get this close. I wasn't supposed to get involved with a target. At all. It only led to heartbreak - on her part. I couldn't be good for her. I couldn't treat her right and then turn around and leave her to kill some fucker in another country. I couldn't leave her for weeks or months at a time, go be a killer, and come back to her...or any girl, for that matter. It was why I avoided long term relationships and emotional attachment.

It was too late. The minute I picked Isabella Swan up off that table of torture, I knew I would never be the same. I became protective of her and concerned for her and wanted to see the bright sparkle that I'd seen once when we were kids, when she was telling me about traveling the world and the things she wanted to see.

And that pissed me off, made me defensive, because I didn't know how to make that sweet giggle I'd heard on the beach come back to my ears. I didn't know how to fix this shit...because she was right. What right did I have to ask

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her about her trauma, when I kept my own securely locked away inside?

"You know, I find it a little ironic that the one person that can get Bella to speak more than two words at a time lately is you," Carlisle muttered from my bedroom doorway.

"Not now," I sighed, shaking my head, but he just chuckled.

"She would have killed him, you know."

I snorted. "That may not be a bad thing."

"Why do you care?"

"I don't fucking know," I whispered, looking up at him.

"Yes, you do. Think about it."

Without elaborating, he pushed off the door and left me to my thoughts.

~oOo~

BELLA

"Sit the fuck down. We need to chat," Rose growled, raising a deadly eyebrow at me.

I couldn't sit on the bed with Alice, Mack, and Rose taking up the end, so I opted for the chair in the corner of my room. I sat down, drawing my legs up to my chest and wrapping my arms around them. I looked at them warily, biting at my bottom lip.

I could see Alice shift slightly, her bright blue eyes filled with worry and her hands twitching to come to me, but I shook my head.

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"Okay, okay, okay," Alice sighed, looking wounded, but nodded in submission. "Humans require the sense of touch." She'd begun muttering, quoting facts like she'd just read them out of a book, but knowing her, she'd memorized the book years ago. "Infants can actually fail without it..."

"Bells," Rose started, ignoring Alice's mumbling words. "I know you've been through some shit, but you can't do this. We need you, sweetie. You're so very strong, and you will get through this. I promise."

I nodded, staring at the floor, but stayed silent.

"Yeah, yeah," Makenna whispered. "You've been in fist fights with men, Bellsy...you're the toughest bitch I know..."

"I can't say I'm not disappointed you didn't shoot Jake, but..." Rose shrugged, smiling wryly. "...that's not you, Izzy." She stood up, walking to me, and I cringed. "I won't touch you, sweetie," she said, kneeling in front of me; Mack and Alice joined her.

"We know what you've been through was awful," Alice sighed, looking at her hands, "but we wanted you to know that we're here for you. And that it wasn't your fault."

My head spun to look at her. "What?" I asked.

"I wasn't your fault, Bells," she urged, looking me in the eyes as tears streamed down her face. "You did everything that you were supposed to...I fucked up...I didn't calibrate that GPS chip right. I should've made you test it. I should've found you sooner..."

"Yeah, but you shoulda seen what they did!" Makenna gushed, her eyes wide. "This guy calls her from the FBI, and then they get on the phone with the fucker that actually invented the damn chip...I've never seen anything like it. They were moving satellites in orbit, I swear to fucking God!"

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Rose covered her mouth to keep from laughing, because Mack was our child-like exaggerator. The little sister. Everything was "awesome," or "un-fucking-believable," or "the best thing ever."

I sighed and shook my head, looking to Alice. "I don't blame you."

She frowned, tilting her spiky head at me.

While Rose and I met in high school, I'd met Alice through my father's company. She was working in the IT department, and I flat out stole her, falling in love with her instantly. She meshed with mine and Rose's already established friendship, despite the fact that we were all so different. Makenna just was the icing on the cake, being the baby at twenty-one, while the rest of us were twenty-six or -seven.

They were my girls, and I loved them fiercely, but none of this shit was their fault.

They all watched me, their eyes full of love and patience.

"I...I don't have...words, yet," I sighed, looking away from them.

"We know," Rose said with a sad smile, "but we wanted you to know that there's not a soul in this house that isn't pulling for you. Including that handsome thing that saved you..."

I snorted, fighting my smile at her wiggly eyebrows. I may have been a little out of it, but I wasn't blind. Edward was gorgeous and built like the statue of David. He was also completely driving me crazy, because one minute, it seemed like he cared, and the next, he was pushing me away. I would have loved to have a chat with the stuttering boy I'd seen one time and one time only.

"Ooh, damn, he is one *fine* fucking specimen," Makenna mumbled, turning forty shades of red. "If you don't do something about that God-like thing...I will!"

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I rolled my eyes at her, but an irrational surge of jealousy wracked my insides. I swallowed it down, because Edward...well, he was Edward. There was no telling where he stood on anything, because he kept everything locked away. Despite how fucking sexy he'd become, he was also all over the place, mood-wise. He was a puzzle - a puzzle the recently single girl inside of me was eyeballing on an almost perverted level.

"No...but Jasper, the other hand," Alice giggled, falling over when the girls shoved her.

"You shoulda seen Ali when Jasper walked into Gravity, Bellsy," Mack chortled. "She was all big blue eyes and drool and fumbling fingers."

I snickered, shaking my head, but broke into a wide yawn.

"Get some rest, Izzy," Rose said, standing up. "We love you...we're here when you find those words, 'kay?"

I nodded, waving as they left my room. I got up and fell into bed, pulling the covers up over my head and letting the tears come.

~oOo~

As usual, I was awake before anyone else in the house. Or at least, that's what I thought. I made my way out to the back porch to take in the ocean air, opting for a beautiful wooden rocker, instead of my regular perch on the railing.

What I didn't realize was that I wasn't alone.

"You look better, Miss Bella," Jasper drawled from the porch swing, as he used one toe to sway himself back and forth slowly.

I gasped, but when I saw who it was, I smiled. "Thanks," I sighed, but shrugged one shoulder, looking down at the intricate design on the arm of the rocker I was sitting in.

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"I'm sure your mind is still a little wonky, but you'll get there," he stated, like he was absolutely certain.

"Is wonky a Southern word?" I asked, smirking up at him.

I liked Jasper, because he didn't make any moves that weren't necessary. He didn't yell or get angry, or even force conversation. He just...was.

He broke out into a wide, sweet grin. "Maybe, ma'am, but I can assure you, it's a Whitlock word."

I grinned back, and for the first time in days, I felt the smile to be real.

"Are there any Swan words?" he asked, leaning back in the swing with his arms stretched out along the back.

"My mom used to say *poofus*," I snickered. "I think it was her way of cursing when I was little. She would say, 'Don't be a poofus,' or 'oh poofus,' if something went wrong. Sometimes, if I was cranky, she'd call me poofus."

"Poofus," he said, trying out the word slowly, before breaking out into a big smile. "I like it."

"I did, too," I agreed, huffing a laugh. "It was a silly word, but it was her word, you know?"

"She's gone?"

I nodded, tracing my finger on the rocker again. The design swirled around on itself, with little ivy leaves jutting out here and there.

"She became very sad," I told him, smiling sadly. "She tried every pill and therapy, but in the end, alcohol ended her sadness."

I saw him nod out of the corner of my eye, but he didn't say anything for a while.

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We both turned when we heard a noise in the kitchen. A bed-headed Edward was starting breakfast for everyone. A strange and unwelcomed spark tickled the inside of my stomach as I looked at him. His hair was short on the sides and back, but the top still stuck up like it had when I'd met him so long ago. He was sleep-rumpled and frowning, looking quite cranky. I looked back to the arm of the chair.

"He's not a bad guy, you know," Jasper said softly, letting the swing sway once or twice, before stopping it with his toe. "He's a damn fine leader, a helluva pilot, and the best woodworker I've ever seen...built that chair you're sittin' in."

My head snapped up to stare at Jasper with an open mouth, and then back to the chair.

"I tried to help him with that. It was for his grandfather, just before he passed away, but when Edward starts to build something, he slips into another world. He hardly knew I was there."

I looked at the chair again - really looked at it. It was perfect and comfortable and built solidly. My brow furrowed at how the man that could bark orders, lose his temper at the drop of a hat, and claim to be a monster could create something so beautiful.

"Huh," I huffed, shaking my head.

"He takes things very personally if something goes badly," Jasper stated. "He and Carlisle busted their asses to get to you. They both are feeling pretty messed up at what they actually found, Bella."

I nodded, getting up from the chair to walk out onto the beach.

"Don't go too far, because I think they're bringing your dad by today," Jasper told me, standing up from the swing. "He's been begging Emmett and Mickey to see you before the Feds take him into protective custody. Once they have him, he won't be able to contact you."

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"Kay," I sighed, nodding, and then stepped off the porch.

~oOo~

EDWARD

I looked up from the refrigerator when I heard Jasper come in. From the window, I watched as Bella strolled out towards the beach. Her arms were wrapped around her midsection, like she was trying to hold herself together.

"You should talk to her," Jasper said quietly, leaning against the counter.

"I need to make breakfast. I can't trust you in this kitchen," I snapped back, slamming the fridge door.

He walked past me, opened the freezer, pulled out three boxes of frozen waffles, and then slammed them down onto the counter. "There...breakfast. I'm pretty sure everyone can use a damn toaster," he said with a smug ass smile.

Had Emmett been there, he'd have been laughing his ass off, I was sure of it. Jasper never got rattled, and he never gave an opinion unasked for, so he apparently had something to say.

"What, Jazz? Spill it!" I growled, leaning against the stove.

He studied me for a moment, before taking a deep breath. "Maybe you're too close to this one. Why don't you go home? We can watch out for Bella once the Feds have her father. I'm sure Carlisle would understand..."

"Why would I leave?" I asked, looking out towards the beach, the thought of not watching over Bella suddenly making me feel sick.

I needed to watch over her. I had found her. Me. She was my fucking responsibility, and I'd be damned if I trusted anyone else with her. They hadn't felt her clinging to them in tears. They hadn't pulled her from that room from hell. And they hadn't heard her cry out when she thought I was leaving her,

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even if it was for something to cover her up. No. Hell, no. No one would take her safety as seriously as I did.

"I don't know," he said with a shrug. "I'm just thinking that finding Bella rattled you a bit. No harm in letting the rest of us handle it."

"I'm not rattled." I growled the lie, rolling my eyes, because he had it spot on. Bella had rocked my world. "I just don't know what to say to her. We kill for a living, Jasper. And I'm supposed to comfort her?"

"We save lives for a living," he countered. "It's all about perspective. We rescue hostages the US government can't. We stop dictators from stealing food from people's mouths in villages the Army can't go. And occasionally...yeah, we end a bad guy here and there. But not one of us has shed innocent blood, and you know it."

I took a deep breath, shaking my head.

"And yeah, you can comfort her, because you saw what she'd been through; you pulled her out of it, for Christ's sake. You've seen shit that rocked your mind, Ed. She needs to lance that boil before it becomes infected."

I knew he was right, but I'd just didn't know how.

"Why me?"

"Because you two seem drawn to each other. She doesn't speak for days, but she can call you a hypocritical asshole after handing you your ass verbally. She's waiting for you to make her spill it."

He paused for a moment, opening a package of blueberry waffles. He dropped two in the toaster, pressing the lever down.

"She won't tell Esme a thing, because it's too ugly, and from what her friends say, she loves her like a mother. She won't tell Carlisle, because he's like a father figure and a boss to her. And her friends...they won't get it; they won't

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understand the violence. But you will," he stated, pointing a fork at me. "You'll get it, because you've seen the same ugly shit in the world. You'll get it, because she just needs to say out loud what you saw in that room."

I nodded, knowing I was most likely just going to fuck this up again and piss Bella off, but I started for the door like the idiot I was. I was an idiot, because I couldn't stay away from her, and because I didn't know why.

"Hey, Ed...my mom always told me that hugs are the universal medicine," he said, his back to me as he pulled his waffles from the toaster.

"Thank you, Forrest Gump," I muttered once I was outside. I knew better than to get testy when Jasper talked about his mom. He'd shoot a man for it; Emmett had a scar on his leg to prove it.

I followed Bella's footprints in the sand, finding her leaning against a large rock, staring out over the water. I watched her tense when she saw me, standing up a little straighter, and I felt like a huge asshole, because I never wanted her to feel uncomfortable with me, but after my behavior last night, I couldn't say I blamed her.

"I wasn't going far," she said, looking down at her toes as she dug them into the sand. "Jasper said to stay close..."

"I'm not keeping tabs on you," I told her, frowning and folding my arms across my chest. "I...I owe you an apology for last night."

"You stopped me from killing my ex...though, I think the popular vote is disappointed," she muttered wryly.

"They care for you," I chuckled. "He hurt you...therefore, he's the enemy. He's harmless - a fucking *idiot*, but harmless, all the same." She smirked down at her feet with a slight nod, but I continued. "I'm sorry I upset you."

I grimaced at the political apology that rolled off of my tongue. It ranked up there with, "It's not you, it's me." That was a statement I'd said more times than

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I could count to girls that got too attached, that wanted more from me, and I didn't have it in me to give it to them.

"I am in a constant state of 'upset,' Edward," she sighed, rolling her eyes. "It's not your fault."

"I know...and I'm sorry for that, too."

She nodded, pulling herself up onto the rock and wrapping her arms around her knees. She wasn't yelling at me, yet, and she wasn't sending me away, so I pushed on with her. I decided to do something I'd never done. I decided to tell a girl about why I was so standoffish.

"My last mission..." I started, staring out over the water, but I saw her head snap up. "We were supposed to fly over a small village at night, looking for activity from this very dangerous group of young men that had been rumored to have planted a car bomb in front of the US Embassy. I had Jasper, Emmett, Jose, and Mike with me. As we made the second pass over the village, I didn't see the asshole on the rooftop with a rocket launcher. Fucker had the best aim ever, because he nailed my blades, causing me to crash almost in the middle of the damn village.

"I held it as best I could, trying to set it down, but my controls were useless," I continued, starting to pace. "I landed on some sort of vehicle...truck or some shit. But a piece of metal snapped off and lodged in Jose's chest, killing him instantly."

"I'm so sorry, Edward..."

I shook my head, waving her off. "Mike called in for someone to come get us, but the coordinates they gave us for the pick-up location were on the other side of this town. We had to go through this broken down village, knowing we were basically walking targets," I growled, running a hand through my hair. "We almost made it, but Jasper told me someone was following us. I could hear footsteps running behind me, and I hid behind the broken wall of a destroyed home to wait for the guy." I sighed, squeezing my eyes closed. "It wasn't a

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guy."

"Who was it?" Bella whispered.

"A five year old little girl...with my gun pointed to her head," I growled, my hands balling into fists. "A little girl holding a grenade...that she pulled the pin on us."

"Oh, shit," she sighed.

"Jasper, Emmett, and I dove for cover. Mike? He fell over her in order to smother the impact," I said softly. "I ended up with shrapnel in my knee and down two members of my crew."

"Oh, Edward...I'm sor..."

"No!" I snapped. "I don't need your apologies. I see that little girl every-fucking-night in my sleep. I see Mike and Jose in my dreams. I pay for it every night."

"None of it was your fault," Bella said from her perch on the rock.

"Neither was what happened to you," I countered, stepping closer to her.

She tensed again, but was practically shaking as she stared down at her hands, which were so tightly fisted that her knuckles were white.

"Then...whose fault is it?" she whispered.

"No one's...Miller's...King's...hell, I don't know, but you didn't do anything wrong. We could blame the hotel for not having enough security. You could blame Carlisle and me for not getting there quick enough. You can blame Alice for that GPS thing. You could blame your dad for putting you in danger without telling you about it first. We could just blame it all on fucked up circumstances..."

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"Is that what you've done?" she asked, looking up at me, tears streaming down her face.

I was tired of seeing her cry. I was tired of seeing her eaten up on the inside over the last two weeks we'd been at the safe house. I was overwhelmed with how much we were alike. And I now saw what it did to those around us.

"I didn't do anything about it. I was released from active duty and came home. I thought working with my dad would help, would give me a better outlook, but the more jobs we took, the angrier I got."

She nodded, wiping away her tears. "When you..." She huffed, like she couldn't breathe. "...came to get me... What did you really see?"

I winced, stepping closer. "I saw you struggling against that table. You were crying, dirty, and so very scared."

I had already said things the night before that I regretted. I'd called it a dungeon and mentioned the blood, vomit, urine...not to mention that fucked up table of instruments the fucker had used on her. I was an asshole for spitting those things in her face.

"He..." She began sobbing, shaking from head to toe. "He was going to... Your timing was amazing," she sniffled. "He was just about to..."

I growled, running my hand through my hair. "You don't have to say that part, Bella."

She nodded, looking up at me, and the sadness there killed me, broke my heart. "He asked me questions that I didn't have the answers to, punishing me for it. He...hit me, burned me, cut me. He fucking *touched* me!"

"He won't do it again, Bella," I vowed, reaching for her hand.

She sobbed when I touched her, a small spark zinging through our skin, but she held my hand with a surprisingly strong grip. She needed the contact, whether

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she knew it or not. It was like her skin craved it.

"He...h-he starved me, teasing me with water, only to pour it on me," she continued through hiccupping breaths. "I thought I would drown."

I stepped closer to her, reaching another hand out to her face. She flinched slightly, but didn't pull away. I cupped her face, wiping away the tears with my thumb. She leaned into it, a rush of air escaping her.

"He...told me that we were so far away that no one could find me. He told me that he could make me talk...and that once I told him what he wanted to know, he was going to...to..."

I nodded, knowing what she was trying to say. "I'm sorry, Bella."

"I prayed for death," she whispered, allowing me to tuck her hair behind her ear and wipe more tears away. "I'd rather die than have him...than for him to..."

"Violate you..." I finished for her.

"Yes," she sobbed, looking up at me. "And he'd just...cut my underwear off when the alarm went off, Edward...you have no idea how close you were..."

I winced, finally unable to not give in and hug her. She fought me for nearly ten seconds, finally burying her face in my neck and giving in to her hysterics. Her tears ran hot down my skin, as her little hands clung fiercely to my t-shirt. She shook with every breath she gasped against my neck.

"I promise you, Bella, he won't do it again," I promised her. "I promise you you're safe with me...with all of us. We'll see you through this. You never have to see him again, I swear it."

Over and over, I whispered promises to her about her safety. I told her she was safe, and to let it out, to get it out of her system, because someone as strong as her shouldn't let a man as fucked up as Miller get the best of her. He couldn't have the best of her. He didn't deserve it.

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The more she cried, the more relaxed her body became against me, and I lifted her up off of the rock, carrying her like a child back to the house. She needed to rest, and I wanted to shelter her from it all.

I stepped into the house, and the whole table looked up when I stepped over the threshold. The looks of worry from her friends matched Carlisle's, but Esme's face said she knew that Bella had just let it all out, and that it was about time. Jasper looked concerned, but said nothing.

But it was Jacob's face that was the most interesting. It was filled with regret and jealousy and unbridled hatred. I felt wrong for feeling smug about that. Maybe it was a testosterone thing. Maybe it was knowing he'd fucked up with the amazing girl in my arms. Or maybe it was because it was me she'd clung to since I'd pulled her away from Miller. Whatever it was, defeat was written all over the boy's face.

I shouldn't feel possessive of her, but I did. I shouldn't mentally note that her warmth felt good against me. And I damn well shouldn't think about how she fit against me like a missing piece, because Bella was better than the likes of me. I was a killer, and she was a good person trying to stop people from betraying their significant others. She was smart and snarky, and I was gruff and uneasy with emotional attachment. I'd rather bark orders than say nice things. But I did notice those things, and I felt uneasy about it.

Carlisle started to stand, and I shook my head silently, walking through the kitchen and carrying a now very quiet Bella upstairs to her room.

I set her down on her bed, but she gripped my shirt. "Stay...just for a little while."

"Kay," I said, pulling the chair closer to her bedside and sitting down with my elbows resting on my knees.

She looked empty, yet, she looked relieved as she stared up at me. Her deep brown eyes, though rimmed red from her tears, were more open, a little sweeter.

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"You don't stutter anymore," she said randomly, and I couldn't help but laugh.

"Speech therapy," I told her, still chuckling. "Well, that and military school. There's no room for stuttering there."

She smiled a little, biting at her bottom lip as she rolled to her side to look at me. "Is that where you went? I wondered why the emails stopped."

"Yeah," I sighed, nodding and shrugging. "I got involved with sports, made bad friends, so Carlisle sent me to military school. I was a busy kid...I barely called him, much less checked email."

"I figured," she said with a small smile.

"I've yet to see you trip..." I teased her, remembering that she was so awkward when I met her.

"Ah, no...karate and kick boxing," she replied with a nod. "It helped with balance and self-defense. Well...sort of...it didn't help..."

I grimaced, but interrupted her. "There was more of Randall Chapel's blood in that hotel room than yours, just so you know. You must have fought like hell."

"I did." She nodded and swallowed hard. "But when a gun is pointed at your head, the fight leaves you."

"That's true."

"Miller beat him to death right in front of me, and all he wanted was pictures of Senator Alvarez," she whispered. "Which I need to get to Mrs. Alvarez's lawyer!" She gasped, sitting up straight. "Oh fuck, they have no case without those photos!"

"Easy, Bella," I said, making her lay back down. "Does Alice know what to do?"

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She nodded, settling back down onto her pillow. "Yeah. Just give her my camera...later."

I nodded again, but we both looked up when there was a soft knock on the door.

"Come in," Bella called, smiling when Esme stood in the doorway.

"I made breakfast this morning, despite Jasper's feeble attempt at frozen waffles," she chuckled, holding up two plates. "Figured you two might want something."

"Thanks, Esme," we both told her, taking the plates from her.

"Mhm," she said with a smirk as she turned back to the door, but she stopped just before exiting. "Bella, Carlisle wanted me to tell you that Charlie will be here this evening. We're turning him over to the FBI tomorrow."

"Okay," she sighed, frowning down at her plate.

"You're still angry with him," Esme noted.

"I...yes...no. Hell, I don't know," Bella sputtered. "Yes, because he cheated on my mother, and it took Jacob's indiscretion for me to realize it. Yes, because he didn't defend me...he defended Jake. Yes, because he never had faith in anything I wanted...from my time in Virginia, to opening Gravity. And now...he's decided - without even thinking about what it would do to everyone around him - that he wants to play undercover agent and take down the fucking Mafia."

I snorted, loving that Bella's sharp wit was in full force now, but stopped when Esme raised a dangerous eyebrow at me.

"What?" I asked, shrugging. "She's right. The only person he contacted about this shit was my dad. And I won't even bother talking about that idiot downstairs..."

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"You moved, changed your number, and basically disappeared, Isabella," Esme chided, but Bella was having none of that.

"But my office...that shit was exactly the same. Not once did he call," Bella countered, her brow furrowing. "He could've left a message...emailed me...anything but taking on Royce fucking King without telling me first. He had no idea that I was investigating King's nemesis in California. Alvarez, while he's a sexual pig, has a pretty damn awesome campaign trying to stop the importation of illegal substances, and King is...well, the *king* of illegal shit."

My eyebrows rose high as I listened to her. It seemed now that she had purged her system of Miller's abuse, the true Bella Swan was emerging. And she wasn't just passionate about things; she was knowledgeable and sharp tongued. She was fierce and sexy, and I had to shake my head at the thoughts that were starting to rage in me.

At the moment, I just couldn't deal with those feelings. I had to get away from her. I picked up my plate, standing up from the chair. Both women looked up at me.

"I...I need to see what precautions my dad wants to make about Charlie's arrival," I lied smoothly. "The Feds are pretty good, but King is...resourceful."

I got to the door, but Bella stopped me.

"Edward," she called.

I slowly turned to face her.

"Thank you."

I nodded, knowing she was talking about the beach and everything we'd discussed, but I needed to go. I was supposed to be protecting her, not looking at how sweet those brown eyes were, or how adorable it was when she bit that bottom lip. Shit, we'd only known each other for a couple of weeks, and only after she'd been through some fucked up madness. Looking at her that way

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made me feel gross and dirty.

"Anytime," I said, leaving the room.

~oOo~

BELLA

There was something to be said about handing your problems over to someone else for safekeeping. The release that came with exploding on Edward was like lifting a two ton stone off of my chest.

I knew that he wasn't comfortable with hearing it, but he took it all the same. He took it and not only threw it away, but he set it on fire and stomped on it for me. He made me feel safe. He made me feel like I was better than what had happened in that basement. And he swore it wouldn't happen again.

Hearing Edward's last experience from the Air Force explained so much about his personality, I couldn't even express it in words. He had not only lost two friends, but he'd watched a child used as a weapon. It had to have been just awful to witness. And from the bits and pieces I'd managed to scrounge up about Edward, he held all of it in, only able to find peace when he created furniture.

He was uncomfortable sharing what I assumed he considered a weakness. He was a brave man, taking responsibilities for things that were beyond his control. He was smart and kind, but he thought that the work he did with his father was evil.

I'd heard members of mercenary groups speak at Quantico, and they weren't evil. They just simply got paid for things the official military couldn't or wouldn't do. Charlie had been supplying to these types of groups for years. The fact that Carlisle and Edward, both strong military minded people, ran their own crew didn't bother me one bit.

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What bothered me was just when I was getting Edward to talk, he would shut down on me completely. It was giving me fucking whiplash.

After he'd left my room, Esme was finally able to talk to me about my time down in that basement. I didn't tell her much, especially the more gory details, but I gave her some reasons why I hadn't wanted to be touched, and what my nightmares had been about lately. It seemed harder to tell her than it had been Edward, but maybe it was because he'd seen the room. He'd seen the aftermath, and I could tell that he hated it, hated what he'd seen, because he had expected the worst. He didn't know I hadn't been raped, but I would be willing to bet he assumed it.

As I spoke, she checked my stitches, removing them painlessly, so my father wouldn't see them. I was still a little bruised, but my face had cleared up quite well. When she was finished, I was emotionally spent, falling asleep to the sound of the ocean waves hitting the beach.

I woke up a few hours later to the sun going down, so I decided to clean up in preparation for seeing my father. With a groan, I got up out of bed and padded into the bathroom to take a shower.

Donning clean jeans and a white t-shirt, not even bothering to dry my hair, I finally emerged downstairs, feeling lighter and freer than I had since I'd left my office to tail Senator Alvarez. I couldn't help but smile at the scene in the living room when I entered.

My sweet, brilliant, *freakin' genius* of a pixie computer nerd was working her shameless flirting skills with Jasper, who was eating it up with a spoon. I didn't even want to know why he was showing her a sniper rifle, for God's sake, but most likely, he'd been cleaning it at the coffee table, considering there was a rag and gun oil sitting there.

Rose and Esme were laughing over something on TV, as Jake sat quietly in an armchair, and Makenna's eyes were locked onto whatever sight was in the kitchen.

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"Hey, Bells," Rose and Alice chirped, and I waved at them, smiling as I walked into the kitchen.

My breath caught when I finally saw what little Mack was ogling. Edward was cooking - again, a meal big enough for an entire army - but he was in jeans that hugged everything he had perfectly. He also was just evil enough to wear a plain white wife beater undershirt. Fuck me, even his bare feet were damn hot.

Carlisle was at the table on a laptop, and he looked up at me and smiled. "Ah, the stitches came out," he chuckled, and Edward spun around to look at me, a smile playing on his face.

"Yeah." I laughed. "The damn things itched like hell."

Both men chuckled, and I could see the similarities between father and son. Both were outrageously handsome, with crooked smiles and hearty laughs. While Edward's eyes were a lush, soothing green, with a spark of mischief in them, Carlisle's eyes were dark blue and held wisdom and compassion. Carlisle had dark blond hair, while Edward's was still a deep brown, with the prettiest reddish highlights that I'd ever seen - however, Carlisle's hair was ever so much more tamer than his son's.

While Edward had made me feel safe and comforted about what had happened in the basement, he also made my stomach do flip flops with his crazy hair, his crooked smile, and a damn sexy but rare laugh - never mind what his body looked like, because that was a different kind of teasing altogether.

"Can I help with anything?" I asked Edward, my brow furrowing when a pink flush colored his cheeks.

"Well," he started, biting his lower lip and taking the dish towel off of his shoulder, "I asked Rose what you would need...I mean...o-only if you wanted...and I sent Jazz to the s-store..."

I had to fight my smile, because I'd just heard Edward "GI Joe" Cullen stutter again - all because he wanted apple pie.

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"You want apple pie?" I asked, again fighting my smile.

"Only if you're up to it," he said nonchalantly, but I could see the deep seeded hope rooted in his eyes, suddenly looking like the thirteen year old I'd met so long ago.

"I am, or I wouldn't have asked," I chuckled, walking to the fridge.

Edward had asked the right person about the ingredients, because Rose could eat a whole pie by herself, she loved it so much. She would bring home the stuff to make it, just because she wanted me to bake one.

"We'll need ice cream," I stated, looking in the freezer.

"I got some!" Jasper called from the living room. "Edward said vanilla!"

I laughed then, turning to Edward. "You've been pimping pie all day, huh?"

"No," he huffed, not looking up from the stove. He was such a liar and looked like a pouting child.

"Yes, he has," everyone seemed to say at the same time.

I laughed, shook my head, and got to work.

Edward and I worked flawlessly around each other in the kitchen, and he gave me all the space I needed to roll out the crust, slice the apples, and cut slits in the top. By the time I set the thing in the oven, Edward was almost finished with the most amazing smelling pot roast I'd ever smelled.

"Who taught you to cook?" I asked, picking up the lid and taking a deep sniff of the meal.

"I did," he chuckled. "Dad was never home, and PB and J sandwiches got old."

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"Guilt won't work, son," Carlisle muttered from the table, still engrossed with whatever was on his laptop. "We ordered pizza, too."

Edward grimaced, shaking his head. "No, thanks," he growled, turning back to the stove.

Carlisle laughed. "He got that from his mother. She loved to cook, and the rule was...if you're home, you sit at the table to eat. Fast food, pizza, and frozen dinners were bad words to her."

Edward smiled, nodded, but didn't say anything as he checked his rice.

"Oh, my mother couldn't cook," I chuckled, shaking my head with the memory. "She *experimented*." I grimaced, but laughed at the groans around the kitchen. "Oh, it was bad...the most awful combinations... Did you ever see the movie *Better Off Dead*? Boiled bacon...shit with raisins, just because she felt raisins were called for...it was nasty. Yeah, she was like that."

Carlisle laughed, his forehead hitting his hand. Edward groaned, looking over at me.

"What the hell did you eat?" he asked with a laugh.

"Dad brought home Chinese... *a lot*," I snickered, looking up when the door opened.

The biggest man I'd ever seen walked in the door, looking menacing in all black, huge muscles, and sunglasses. He was loud as he yelled, "The gang's all here...let's get this party started!"

I took two steps back at just his mere presence. He unnerved me just a little.

"Easy, it's just Emmett," Edward whispered, placing a hand on my shoulder. "He looks like an angry bear, but he's really like Snuggles from the commercial." He chuckled softly.

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"Em, calm the hell down," Carlisle barked, rolling his eyes.

"God, I'm so tired of this big fool, I can't stand it," a girl with dark, wavy hair groaned, walking in to stand beside Carlisle. "Don't ever pair me with Fart Blossom over there...ever again! Do you hear me?"

"It's your fault when you get Taco Bell," Emmett laughed heartily.

"Which was way too often, if you ask me," my dad sighed, walking into the kitchen. "Bells," he sighed, looking exhausted, but relieved to see me.

"Dad," I grunted, folding my arms across my chest.

"Introductions, I think," Carlisle boomed, clapping his hands once in order to break the tension.

"Emmett McCarty, Mickey Giovanni...meet Isabella Swan, Rosalie Hale, Alice Brandon, Makenna Coleman, Jacob Black, and Esme Platt," he said, pointing to each and every one of us. "Emmett and Mickey are a part of my team."

He paused long enough for all of us to either wave or shake hands.

"Charlie, you remember my son, Edward?" Carlisle continued, and Edward shook Charlie's hand roughly, looking at him with an unreadable expression. I guessed that was because of everything that he'd started.

"Yes, of course, Edward...how are you?" my father asked, a smile on his face.

"Fine, sir," Edward answered politely, but gave him nothing more.

Carlisle introduced my father to Jasper and Esme, the latter of which got the most reaction out of my father, because she was dating Carlisle, his best friend.

But the whole house came to a standstill when my father, not to be distracted by introductions, turned his gaze back to me. "Isabella, what happened to your face?" he asked, walking towards me.

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My lip curled without my permission, and I turned to Edward.

"He doesn't know, Bella," he said sadly. "We couldn't risk it..."

I nodded, understanding, but maybe it was time for my dad to hear it.

"I was kidnapped, *Charlie*," I growled, stepping closer to him. "Look at the bruises, Dad. You started this. You did this; because you made a fucking rash decision to take on Royce King, he came after me."

"No, munchkin...I never meant...I didn't think," he floundered, shaking his head in denial.

"You didn't think," I huffed, rolling my eyes. "Well, that's nothing new with us, is it?" I snapped. "You didn't bother to find out if I was investigating someone that King hated...it was double the joy that his man got to me. And you didn't think that he might use me for information about you, did you?"

"Bella, what happened?"

I shook my head. "I'm not telling you. Someone else can, but I'm not. Esme can tell you about my injuries. Edward can tell you about the room he kept me in...but I won't. I'm just not. I will tell you this...I've now seen this man, watched him kill someone, and that man is still out there, so now...I'm a target."

"I'm not telling him shit," Edward growled, folding his strong arms across his chest.

"Edward," Carlisle chided, but it was a half-hearted reprimand. He turned to my father, taking a deep breath. "Your working for the FBI set in motion things that spiraled out of control. Isabella was tailing Senator Alvarez, King's nemesis. When you went against King's wishes, he decided to use Bella against you, but at the same time, Alvarez wanted her, too. It was a catastrophic chain of events. Edward and I almost didn't get to her."

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"I didn't have time!" my father yelled. "When King wanted to meet, I only had enough time to get a hold of you...and the man you put me in touch with at the FBI. How was I supposed to know? How did King find out that I was recording him?"

"That's the big question, Charlie," Carlisle sighed. "We don't know. It would have to be someone in your office."

Rose snorted, rolled her eyes, and they landed on Jacob, who had shrunk into a corner of the room.

I laughed humorlessly. "Jake's been too busy, Ro."

She grinned, shaking her head. "Maybe, but his dad sure does like hanging around Charlie's office."

"Don't you dare blame my fucking dad!" Jake snarled, stepping closer to Carlisle, but out of nowhere, four guns were pointed at his face.

Edward, Emmett, Jasper, and Mickey all had dark looks on their faces as they sized up my ex-boyfriend, their guns locked and loaded.

"Whoa!" Alice and Mack breathed, with wide eyes and gaping mouths.

"That's enough," Carlisle said through gritted teeth. "Everyone just calm the fuck down."

I placed a hand on Edward's arm, making him look at me. I just shook my head, and he lowered his glock, placing it at the small of his back, but he wasn't happy about it.

"Billy?" Charlie gasped. "No, I can't imagine he'd..."

"Right," Jake grunted, giving everyone a wary glance, before taking a few steps back.

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"Well, nothing's changed here," I sang sarcastically. "Dinner?" I snorted.

"Bella," Carlisle groaned, but I wasn't having it.

"No! I'm done. We'll eat, and he can go play *informant* tomorrow," I yelled. "I have my own problems to deal with. Like avoiding getting killed by a psychopath...stopping a senator from taking his wife for every dime she's got just, because he likes them young and violent...and getting my girls back to their respective homes safely. I think they've been uprooted long enough. The sooner *he* goes, the sooner you get these assholes off my back. Mm'kay?" I asked, pointing to my father.

The whole room was still and silent, except for Rose. She was laughing her ass off quietly at the back of the room.

"Well, thank fucking God and all that's holy," she sighed. "Bella is back."

A/N... First things first...this is just the beginning of Bella's healing. I just need you to know that. One release of emotion isn't enough for what she went through, but it does take the edge off for a while.

However, the true Bella does come out a bit. The strong, snarky, extremely smart woman takes over since her Dad is in the house. She's let go enough of her trauma to become angry instead of sad.

Second, and certainly on a lighter note...how adorable is a stuttering Edward if only for a split second? LOL He wants so hard to be this bad ass, hard guy, but it's impossible when he wants...apple pie. :)

So everyone is under one roof...at least until they turn Charlie over to the Feds. Another battle of wills between Bella and Edward concerning the photos of Alvarez.

Coming up next...Bella sits down with Charlie and Jake before they leave with the Feds. A plan is sorted out in order to get the photos to the law office, if only to get one threat off of Bella's back. And how will everyone

work together?

I want to thank JenRar, who has been a huge cheerleader when it comes to this story. Her beta skills rock the house!

So...since I've been nice enough to post early, then I hope that you review for me, even if it's just a "love it" or "hate it" note. Okay? So let me know what you think... I will post soon...Until then...Later.

Chapter 6

A/N... That was a pretty big response for that last chapter. A lot of you can see that even though Bella got *some* of her experiences off her chest, you can see that it's just the beginning. Bella's smart and snarky and really tough, but some things can shake those foundations of your personality. Edward is feel extremely responsible for her, but he's a pretty tough guy, too. But he's also a 27 year old man that had already discussed with Carlisle that their lives, their jobs get old. They talked about it in the car when they were searching for Bella. And while Edward may be feeling things he's never felt before, feeling responsible for the girl *he* pulled out of hell, he's not quite sure what to do about any of it...but the positive side of Edward is that he doesn't want to see anything bad happen to Bella again. That alone may guide him down the right path or at least point him the right direction, don't you think?

There are conflicts they are both dealing with...and the fact that Edward is such a private person with his crew just adds to it. Bella has her issues, but can't deny her attraction to Edward. Edward on the other hand has *so much* resting on his shoulders...he's in charge of Bella's and her friends' safety, he has to keep his crew in line, and he's used to being in control, but with Bella, he can't quite control anything about her.

Enough of my ramblings...I just wanted to catch you up on things... Now, let's see what they plan to do about the photos of Alvarez, Charlie, Jake...and on and on...

CHAPTER 6

BELLA

I learned something about Edward the very second my father set foot inside the safe house. He was *fiercely* loyal. He didn't care that Charlie was Carlisle's old friend. He didn't care that Charlie was my father. He wouldn't speak one word of my time in that basement, even though I'd given permission.

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He wasn't rude in any way, but he wasn't exactly chatty, either. While Esme had taken my verbal permission to give my father information about what had happened to me, he wasn't spilling *anything*.

Dinner started as an uncomfortably tense situation, because I'd blown up on my only blood relative, but when Makenna asked a simple question, the table broke out into a huge discussion.

"So..." She dragged out the word, with a fork full of pot roast. "What now? I mean, Charlie goes into protective custody tomorrow, but...Bellsy is still in trouble," she said, blushing a bit and shoving her fork into her mouth.

"How much trouble are we talkin'?" Emmett asked, sitting up straighter, and I noticed Rose's eyes watching his every move.

"Enough trouble," Edward grunted, his face dark and serious.

Heads snapped up to look at him, and I noted that when he was in full planning mode, he made people nervous. He radiated calm, cool - almost too cool - and practically uncaring, unsympathetic. I honestly didn't believe that was the case with Edward. I really just think he was good at what he did and took his job very seriously.

"Miller is still out there," Carlisle started, wiping his mouth with a napkin, "so we can't just send you guys back home. There aren't enough of my men...and women..." he snorted, rolling his eyes when Mickey huffed and raised an eyebrow at him, "...to watch you individually. I'd rather keep you together once Cheney has arranged for Charlie's pick-up tomorrow morning."

"It won't take long for King to figure out who's important and who isn't," I stated. "He's most likely gathering information on Gravity and TT right now. He'll figure out who backed my company," I said, pointing to Carlisle. "He'll figure out what law firm is waiting on those photos of Alvarez. He'll dig deep into my girls' lives, because he's got unlimited resources."

"So do we," Emmett countered with a grin, and it was completely contagious.

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Edward was right; the big guy looked like the ultimate killing machine, but he had a boyish sweetness to him.

"I'm just sayin'," Emmett continued with a shrug. "We could take this King down right where he lives. No big loss, really."

"Except now he's being watched by the Feds, Em," Jasper countered. "As soon as Charlie leaves us, King will be watched, if they aren't doing it already. What's Benny say?" he asked Carlisle.

"That they are building their case as we speak," Carlisle answered calmly. "Charlie's testimony and recorded conversation will get them the warrant for King's arrest, but until he's in their presence, they can't do a thing."

"Who's after Bells?" Charlie asked. "Who's this Miller?"

"Riley Miller," Edward said, his voice low, as he looked up from his plate of food. "King's go-to guy..."

"Scar on his chin?" my dad asked, his face paling as he looked to me.

"Yep," I said with no inflection whatsoever. "Blond hair, blue eyes...likes to... *take his time*."

My lip curled again, but I felt a hand on my shoulder. I looked up to see Esme looking at me with warmth and understanding, but with anger there, as well.

"Shit, he was in my office," Charlie breathed, looking down at his plate with a shocked look on his face. "He saw your picture. You know, the one on my desk?"

My nostrils flared, and I inhaled sharply, nodding at him.

"He said you were so pretty, but I hear that a lot, Bells," he whispered, not giving me the courtesy of looking me in the eye. "Said he'd like to meet you... I didn't think anything of it, because King was the most important thing at the

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time."

"No, he wasn't," Edward muttered to himself, but because I was sitting next to him, I heard him loud and clear.

"Well, it's good to know that Miller can decide something and stick to it," I sneered, shaking my head at Emmett's and Rose's humorless chuckles.

"Bells," my dad started, his eyes finally locking with mine. "I'm so sorry."

"It's fine," I sighed, waving it away. "You have your priorities," I muttered, turning my attention to Alice. "Did you send those pics to Marshall Spencer?"

"No," she said, shaking her head as her eyes darted to Carlisle.

"I told her not to, Bella," Carlisle said, setting his fork down. "It would be best if you didn't use any form of communication right now. I'm not sure who can track us."

"They *have* to get delivered. I'm almost three weeks behind in delivering them," I snapped, looking around the table. "Can we get at least *one fucking asshole* off of my back?" I snarled, setting my fork down roughly.

Mickey snorted, smiling up at me. She leaned over to Jasper, whispering, "She's got spunk..."

Jasper chuckled softly, nodding at her. "You haven't seen nothin' yet," he snorted.

"Fine, in person, then," I huffed, folding my arms across my chest. "Someone can come with me, but I damn well need to get Alvarez's wife those pictures. Period."

"No," Edward growled. "You'll be an open target. You said yourself that King will figure out what you're working on. Absolutely not!"

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"You," I said, pointing at him, "don't tell me what to do. I've been dealing with this guy for months, and I finally caught him. His wife inherited her money, and he's trying to take it. He's a cheating asshole that likes to be whipped by young girls, and as much as I'd like to *beat* him myself, he doesn't deserve his soon-to-be ex-wife's money. He's put her through enough already. Got me?"

Edward's eyes darkened, but his face was unreadable. He looked pissed, and I wondered when the last time someone stood up to him, when someone didn't just jump at his every command. His mouth opened to say something, but he snapped it shut.

Mickey chuckled. "Damn, you're right, Jazz."

"Told you," he sang, giving her a fist bump, and then cleared his throat.

"Guys...Eddie?" he started, smiling with so much amusement, it was practically palpable. "We could get her in the law firm and out within minutes, and you know it. We get her in...we get her out...we move safe houses. Place me on a rooftop, have Mickey drive her. You walk in with her. It's easy...done."

"He's got a point, son," Carlisle mused, scratching his chin.

"You know Miller will be watching that firm. He'll realize that Bella hasn't delivered those photos," Edward growled. "She'll be right out there in the open."

"But it could work, dude," Emmett added, leaning back in his chair.

"You know she's right," Jasper continued. "If we can at least end the Alvarez thing, then we can just focus on King...or Miller...or whatever."

Edward was livid, but he said nothing as he got up from the table. We all flinched as his chair shot back across the kitchen floor with a loud scrape. He walked out of the kitchen and around the corner.

"Oooh, pretty boy's pissed," Mickey chuckled. "Don't sweat it, Bella. He just doesn't like it when his plans change..."

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"I don't sweat...anything," I countered, with a raised eyebrow at her, because of what she called him. Pretty boy? What the hell was that about? "I have people of my own to worry about."

"Yes, but it's *your* neck that's on the line," Edward growled, stalking back into the room. He pulled his chair back to the table, handing my gun back over. "If we do this, we go in armed to the fucking teeth. Understand me?"

"Yup," I huffed, taking my gun from him slowly.

"Perfect!" Emmett beamed, rubbing his hands together. "Now we got somethin' to do! So where's this law firm?"

Alice sat up straighter, a grin on her face. "Spencer, Wyatt, and Townsend. They are located in downtown Seattle. Fifteen oh five Clark Street. The coordinates are..."

"Alice...enough," I laughed, shaking my head at the fact that my pixie could remember everything. "The address is fine. We're not landing the mother ship on the roof."

The table chuckled, but my dad snorted. "Can't believe you stole her from me!"

"Nope...she came willingly," I chirped, giving my Alice a wink.

She giggled back, taking a bite of her dinner.

The rest of dinner was spent eating, looking at maps on phones of where the law office was, and getting a plan ready. I was willing to concede my safety to Edward and Jasper, but I wasn't going to back down over finishing something I'd started, considering it was about my job.

When it was over, my dad went out onto the back porch to smoke a cigar, taking Carlisle and Jake with him, while I sliced the pie Edward had wanted so badly.

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"So, pretty boy," Mickey started, and I looked up to watch her grin at him as they sat in the living room. "Did you stay away from those Cali girls like I told ya?"

"I've been busy, Mick," Edward snapped, rolling his eyes. "It's been a little...hectic around here. Not all of us got to watch a boring old man," he bit back.

I snorted to myself, nodding in agreement, but continued my work plating up slices of apple pie.

Makenna walked over to me, whispering, "You don't think he hit that, do you?"

My head snapped around to her, and she winced, but glanced back over to the living room, where Edward and his crew were finalizing how we were going to get into Seattle and where we were going to stay next.

Mickey was sitting next to him, looking over his shoulder. She was athletically built, with dark brown curly hair, honey colored eyes, and an Italian olive complexion. Her smile was beautiful, with white teeth and dimples, and slightly mischievous.

"I wouldn't know, Mack," I snorted, shrugging.

"Don't you *want* to know?"

"Uh...no," I huffed, rolling my eyes.

"Gawd, I'd wanna know. Hell, I'd wanna know everything he was capable of," she purred, biting her fingernail. "I bet he's amazing in..."

"Don't go there," I growled, smacking her hand out of her mouth. "And stop that nasty habit."

"Yeah, but just *look* at him," she whined, gazing at him for a moment as he told Jasper where he was going to set up his sniper.

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"I don't have to, Mack," I snorted. "Will you please rein in your internal horny teenager?"

She grinned, broke into a giggle, and nodding. "You like him."

"We fight like cats and dogs," I countered, not admitting anything. "You saw so yourself at the table."

"No, you're both just passionate about what you do for a living. That will translate to fucking phenomenal fireworks in the sack!" she laughed, her head falling back.

"Unbelievable," I muttered, adding ice cream to the plates. I picked up a few slices of pie and turned to Mack, who was back to ogling Edward.

"Makenna...I'm not kidding," I hissed to her. "Stop drooling over him. He's not a fucking celebrity in one of your magazines!"

She giggled again. "You *do* like him!" she sang, picking up the rest of the pieces and helping me carry them into the living room.

"It doesn't matter," I sang back, glaring at her as she fell down into a chair, giggling and holding a plate under Edward's face as he stared down at a map.

His head shot up, that sweet, crooked smile planted firmly on his face. "Let's see if it's the same."

"It's been fourteen years, Edward," I snorted, rolling my eyes. "How could you possibly remember well enough to compare?"

"It was fucking good pie," he mumbled with a mouthful of ice cream and warm cinnamon apples. "Oh, fuck!" he groaned, his eyes rolling back in his head.

"It's perfect!"

I laughed, but inside, I was swooning. That eye roll and moan made my girlie parts tingle.

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Unfortunately, I still needed to have a conversation with my father before he left in the morning. I turned around, but he stopped me.

"Where are you off to?" he asked, and I wasn't completely blind that everyone was staring at us with wide eyes--especially his crew--as they took bites of their dessert blindly.

"I have to talk to Charlie," I sighed, shrugging as I started to walk away.

"Don't you want to know the plan?" he asked, taking another humongous bite of pie.

"No, I'm fairly certain that you'll bark the orders at me later. I trust you with the plan. I just need to get these photos out of my possession," I said with a smirk.

He rolled his eyes at the chuckles of his crew and my girls. "But we're doing this tomorrow afternoon, once your father leaves," he said, taking another enormous bite.

"Edward, slow down...you're gonna choke, and there isn't much pie left. You should savor it," I snorted, shaking my head.

"Wait, what?" he mumbled with his mouth full, looking at his plate, and then back up at me. "I only get one piece?"

I gestured around the room to everyone that was eating.

"Fuckers," he pouted, scraping the last of his plate with his fork and ignoring the exaggerating mm'ing that everyone was now doing just to piss him off.

I half expected him to lick the plate clean, and if he did...I would have to run from the room. It was bad enough he was sitting there in a tight black t-shirt and jeans that I swear to God were molded to his thighs like a second skin. If I saw his tongue, I may not be able to speak for hours.

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"I'll make another one, but as far as tomorrow goes, just plan it...I'm good with whatever. Okay?" I asked, internally wincing when my voice cracked just as he licked the fork clean.

"Kay," he huffed, setting his now empty plate down on the coffee table with a frown on his face. He went right back to the map in front of him.

I turned to see Makenna smirking at me, but I raised an eyebrow at her, and she cleared her throat, fighting her smile.

I was just about to the door, when I heard Edward growl, "That next pie is mine!"

I walked out the back door onto the porch, locking eyes with Carlisle. "There's pie on the kitchen counter."

"*The* pie my son has been obsessed with all day?" he chuckled.

"That very pie," I snickered. "Go get it, before he realizes there's an unattended piece."

"I'm on it," he laughed, hopping up from the rocking chair and leaving me with my father and my ex. My father was on the swing, and Jake was sitting on the porch rail.

"You made Jane's apple, didn't you?" Charlie chuckled. "Woman should have sold those things for a living!"

"I did," I sighed, sitting down in the rocking chair that Carlisle had just vacated. "And she would have been a millionaire."

"No kidding," Jake snorted, shaking his head.

I took a deep breath, because I needed them to listen to me. "We should talk," I said, looking at my father.

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He grimaced, and Jake started to get up.

"No, you, too," I told him, holding up a hand. "In fact, you first, Jake," I sighed, bending my knees up in the rocker and wrapping my arms around them. "Jacob, I know why you showed up at my office, getting dragged here. I know that your dad is probably worried sick about you being out of contact for almost three weeks. There isn't anything that you could say to me that would make what you did - however much you apologize - okay with me. Ever. There's no *us* anymore."

Jacob looked down at his hands, nodding slowly. "For what it's worth, Bells. It didn't mean anything. You should..."

"See?" I chuckled humorlessly, pointing at him. "There's the problem. I know it didn't mean anything to *you*. What about Lauren? Did it mean anything to her? Did it mean anything when it took two of you to do it, and *she* was the only one that got fired?" I asked that last question with a raised eyebrow at my father, who at least had the decency to look ashamed.

Neither one of them said anything, so I continued.

"You two seemed to have formed the 'He-man Woman Haters Club,' and I'm not having it. Yes, Jake and I have known each other for a long time. It's over now. Yes, I know that you want me to work for you, Dad. Not happening. I know that you wanted Jake and me together, because his father is some sort of accounting genius, and our pairing would be a royal coupling in your little corporate world, but not a chance. I'm not a princess.

"I need you both to go tomorrow, and I need you both to be safe, and *do the right thing*. For once, just do the right thing. Dad, it's commendable that you want to catch this guy, though I wish you had discussed it with me. Jake...you need to stay low, stay with my father, and keep him safe. Act as his assistant, if you have to, but you must promise me."

Jake nodded fervently, and said, "I will, Bella. I promise."

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Charlie looked up at Jake and jerked his head towards the French doors. Jake slipped off the rail, walked to me, and placed a long kiss to my forehead.

"I am *really* sorry," he whispered. "I've loved you my whole life, and I took that for granted."

I looked up at the guy I'd been dating for the last few years, but known forever, and nodded. "I know, Jakey."

He looked up when a loud laugh echoed through the closed doors. I watched my ex size up Edward. He grimaced, shook his head, and looked back down at me. "He'd better take care of you. He had better keep you safe."

"He's saved my life once already," I stated, "and seems hell bent to continue, so..." I shrugged one shoulder, not knowing what else to say.

"That's not what I meant, Bells," Jake sighed, rolling his eyes.

"Jake," I growled, gritting my teeth in anger. "He pulled me from a room about thirty seconds before a man was about to rape and kill me. He saw the room, saw the bruises and cuts. He stopped me from killing *you*!"

My father and Jake winced at my candor, but Jake just nodded, kissed my forehead again, and went inside.

Once the door clicked closed, Charlie sat forward, looking up at me. "We will be apart for a while, Bells," he started, looking down at his hands and back up at me. "And I know that I started this shit storm, and I'm sorry for not telling you. I'm sorry that we...drifted apart. But I want you to know that I love you. I just have a shitty way of showing it."

I snorted, rolling my eyes. I loved my father, even though he wasn't perfect, but his timing was fucked up. He chose the most impossible time to tell me these things.

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"I put you in danger, and I had no idea how close I came to losing you, until Carlisle told me everything. I'm a fool, Bells. I tried to mold you into what I thought you needed to be, instead of letting you just...become. I forced Jake on you, I didn't help you with Gravity, and I thought the FBI wasn't for you. I was wrong...about all of it."

"Dad..."

"No, let me finish," he whispered, holding up his hand. "I want you to listen to everything Carlisle tells you...his group is strong and smart. They'll keep you safe, and when this is over, we'll start over, sweetie. We'll take some time together, okay?" he asked, and I frowned at the tightness in his voice.

"Kay, daddy," I breathed, a little shocked at seeing him this way.

"But I want you to promise me something, Bells," he continued, looking up at me, his eyes fierce and determined.

I nodded. "Yeah...whatever you want."

"If something happens to me, if for some reason, I don't make it through this..." He held up his hand when I opened my mouth to say something to negate where this conversation was going. "I left something for you in the tree house, baby. Okay?"

I nodded, my brow furrowing. "What?"

He shook his head, waving the question away. "Just promise me..."

"I promise, Daddy..." I said, standing up.

He stood, too, and pulled me into a fierce hug, whispering, "Jake doesn't deserve you, munchkin. You're too good to put up with fucked up mistakes. I'm sorry I didn't kick his ass, Bella."

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Tears filled my eyes as I finally heard the words I'd needed to hear the day I'd caught Jake cheating. I hugged him harder, inhaling the scent that was my dad - Old Spice, cigars, and mints.

"Your mother would have been proud of you, because I know I am." He kissed the top of my head, pulling back and kissing my cheek.

"I love you, Dad. Please be safe...please do what they tell you, okay?"

"I love you, too, munchkin. I'm sorry I didn't show it very well, but I swear to you that I did," he whispered against the top of my head, placing one more kiss, before going inside.

I fell back onto the swing, pulling my knees back up and sending a silent prayer up to anyone that would listen that my father would come home to me.

~oOo~

EDWARD

My mood darkened as I watched Bella join her father and Jacob outside, my own father leaving them. For two people that claimed to care for her, Charlie and Jacob sure as hell hadn't shown it lately. Charlie Swan's statement about King being the most important thing at the time had pissed me the fuck off. No man should forget that his family came first. I didn't even have words for the douche bag that Jacob was for cheating on her. After seeing the picture that Bella had taken of the actual act, I *really* didn't understand, because the girl in the picture had nothing on Bella.

The fact that she'd caught them was one thing, but to print out that picture, blow it up to movie poster size, and hang it in the front lobby of a respected business...well, my respect for Isabella Swan increased tenfold.

I looked back down at the map in front of me, making a mark where Jasper was to set up his sniper location. "Jazz, you'll set up here..." I started, looking up to meet Mickey's amused stare. "What?"

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"What...was...that?" she asked, giving the back door a glance, before looking back to me.

I wasn't completely unaware that Rose, Alice, and Makenna were watching me, but I had no desire to have a Dr. Phil moment in front of everyone. No fucking way.

"Concentrate!" I snapped, jamming my finger into the map. "I won't get my ass shot because you don't know the plan! I need you to drop us off *here*," I growled, pointing to the intersection of Clark and State on the map, "and pick us up in the same fucking spot! Do you think you can keep up, Mick?"

"Sir," she sighed, nodding, and looked over to Jasper.

"Everyone will wear a radio, including Bella," I growled. I rolled my eyes at the tension I'd now caused to enter the room, but I couldn't have mistakes. I couldn't have anything go wrong when it came down to Bella's safety and this mission.

I knew I was being an asshole, but really, it was none of their business. None of them. I knew they were curious, but even I didn't know what was happening between Bella and me. Her standing up to me at the table, telling me that I didn't get to tell her what to do, had to have been the single most irritating and sexy thing I'd ever seen. She'd been so pissed, her eyes blazing with fury as we had tried to tell her that turning those photos over to the law office was dangerous. She was passionate about her job, her friends' safety, and the fact that she was well aware that doing this one act would at least end some of the shit that was chasing after her.

My father leaned into the doorway to hear our plan, holding a plate of Bella's amazing apple pie.

"Wait, there's more?" I growled, watching with envy as he shoved a huge bite into his mouth.

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He chuckled, shaking his head. "There are two more slices, but I'm not sure those aren't for Charlie and Jake..."

"Their loss," I growled, launching up off of the sofa and stalking into the kitchen, where Esme was leaning against the counter.

"Stop," she said, holding up her hand. "Those aren't for you."

"I don't care," I laughed, reaching for a plate, but she smacked at my hand.

"Ow, damn! What the hell?" I snorted, rubbing the sting away.

The whole house exploded into laughter, which didn't help my mood. I wanted that damn dessert. I had asked Bella to make it, and she had. It was mine, damn it.

Jacob walked in the back door at just that moment, looking like someone had just stolen his puppy, or shattered his heart. Either way, he looked completely wrecked.

"Jacob, do you want some?" Esme offered politely, holding out a plate to him.

He shook his head, looking up at me. "If Edward wants it...he can have it..." he muttered, giving me a pointed look, and I had a feeling he wasn't talking about pie. "I need to get my things together, before we leave in the morning," he sighed, nodding slightly.

He walked to my father, holding out his hand, and shook it when my father responded in kind. "You didn't have to watch over me these last few weeks," he started, "but you did, and I thank you. Bella has asked me to go with Charlie to keep him safe. Do you think they'll let me? She said something about going as his assistant or some shit..."

"I'll make sure they know, Jacob," my dad told him with a firm nod.

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Once he was around the corner and heading up the stairs, I snatched the plate out of Esme's hand. "His loss," I muttered, rolling my eyes at her giggle.

I heated it up briefly in the microwave, adding vanilla ice cream to it. I turned around, to see Esme smirking at me.

"Don't judge me! It's damn good," I growled through a mouthful.

She chuckled, raising her hands in surrender. "I wouldn't dare, but I'm curious... Is it the dessert, or who made it that makes you so attached to it?"

"I don't know, Dr. Freud," I grumbled, "but can we have one night without you analyzing everything?"

She grinned, never offended, because I'm sure I was similar to my father in some way. "Sure, Edward. Whatever you say," she sang, and we both looked up at the door when it opened.

Charlie walked in, looking no better than Jacob had, and I wondered what Bella had said to them, because Charlie looked like he'd been crying, though I was sure he would never admit it. He stopped when he saw that most of us were hanging around the kitchen, but he looked to my dad.

"You *swear* to me that she makes it," he growled, pointing his thumb behind him. "You swear to me on your life that you'll watch my little girl."

"She's my goddaughter, Charlie," my father replied, looking at his best friend like he'd lost his mind. "We've done all we can, and we'll continue to do more. Until King and Miller are in jail or dead...she's with us."

"Whatever it takes, I'll cover it, Carl," he whispered, shaking his head. "You can take it out of the business account. I don't give a fuck, but I can't let her down. I've done that too much already..."

"The expenses of this mission are covered," my father stated. "This is my responsibility, Charlie. I owe you this. And my crew will handle this," he

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vowed, motioning to all of us around the room.

Charlie looked around at all of us, and Jasper, Emmett, and Mickey nodded in agreement, but his eyes landed on me. I stood up straighter and set my plate down as he walked towards me.

"My Bells told me what you did...what you saved her from," he whispered. "I owe you one, son. And I mean it."

I shook his hand, and I could see the pain, the disgust on his face. He was sick with what she'd evidently told him. I didn't know exactly what he knew, so I didn't say anything, just nodding silently instead.

"She's a tough cookie. She's had to be, living with just me all these years, so she can spot bullshit a mile away," he chuckled. "She trusts you and Carlisle. Please...don't let her down."

"No, sir," I promised, shaking my head. "I won't, sir."

That seemed to placate Charlie, and he turned to my father. "Come tell me what to expect tomorrow, Carl...while I get my things together."

They both left the room, and I turned to look out onto the porch. I grimaced, catching sight of Bella swinging slowly on the porch swing, her knees drawn up to her chin. She looked like a little girl, a lost little girl.

I picked up my plate and opened the door. I closed it softly behind me, leaning back against it. She looked up at me and smiled.

"Tell me you didn't shoot anyone for another piece," she giggled.

"They deserved it," I chuckled, loving that sound from her. "You okay?"

"Yeah," she sighed, setting her chin on her arms and looking up at me. "That felt...like goodbye," she stated with a grimace and a wrinkle to her nose.

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I sat down beside her on the swing, looking over at her. "He's worried about you."

"I know." She nodded, but smiled when I took another bite. "I will make another one, Edward."

I grinned, licking my lips. "You'd better make two next time. I want one of my own."

"Get me through tomorrow, and I promise, you'll get a whole one," she said, but the humor was gone out of her voice and face.

"It's a simple plan, Bella. Mickey will drive us, dropping us off. Emmett will be in the lobby. Jasper is on the roof across the street."

"Jasper's a sniper, yes?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And Emmett and Mickey?"

"Emmett is really good with weapons and explosives. Mickey can break into or out of anything."

"And you?"

"I'm good on the ground...better in the air," I said, smiling smugly. "I can handle emergencies, if the plan goes wrong."

She nodded, taking a deep breath. "And you'll be with me?"

"Yeah, and we'll both be wearing radios."

"Okay," she said, sitting up straighter. "And are we changing safe houses?"

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"I need to ask my dad. That's his call," I told her, setting my now sadly empty plate on the little table beside me. "Why?"

"Well, I'm wondering if we shouldn't set Alice up somewhere with her computer system," she mused aloud. She looked up at me. "She's amazing help when you have to get out of tight situations."

"We have Ben," I countered.

"The guy at the FBI, right?" she asked, and I nodded. "I'd rather he watch my dad and Jake."

I thought about it for the moment. "We can't go to your office," I told her.

"I don't think she needs to. I'd be willing to bet she brought like two laptops with her, and she'll use mine, too."

I smiled, nodded, and got up, cracking the door open. "Alice," I called, and her head shot up from her conversation with Jasper. "Come out here when you get a second."

"Kay," she sang, standing up.

I turned back to Bella. "Your computer specialist is flirting with my sniper."

She laughed, covering her face. "I know. I can't get her to stop!"

She was breathtakingly beautiful at that moment, in full, blushing, happy laughter. Her chocolate brown eyes sparkled, her nose wrinkled adorably, and she tucked her hair behind her ear gracefully. Bella was stunning when she was happy.

"He's not complaining, Bella," I chuckled, shaking my head to clear it.

"I know that, too," she sighed happily, wiping tears from the corners of her eyes. "I'm sure none of you boys are lacking in female company," she

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chuckled, rolling her eyes.

"I...we...I mean..." I was just about to negate that statement from her, but I couldn't. It would have been a blatant lie, and Alice popped out the back door just in time.

"What's up?" she chirped, smiling at the both of us.

"Ali, what would you need to set up for this thing tomorrow?" Bella asked her. "If I needed you online and accessible?"

"Um...WIFI access, both mine and your laptops, and some sort of communication to you," she answered immediately. "If you're wondering, there's a net café right around the corner from that law office. I could be in a car parked close by; that way we can roll when it's over."

Bella looked up at me. "That requires a driver - one more person involved."

I grimaced, shaking my head, but I held up a finger. "My father is tailing the FBI to follow your dad. Mickey is driving us, Emmett is in the lobby, and Jasper is on the roof. I don't..."

"Rose can drive," Alice and Bella said at the same time.

"She's ridden with me before on stakeouts," Bella explained with a shrug. "What cars do we have access to?"

"Mickey's driving my father's BMW. Emmett and Jasper are taking separate vehicles - Jasper's truck, and my car."

"That leaves that Jeep out there," Bella pointed out.

I sighed, running a hand through my hair. "This could really get ugly, Bella. Are you sure you want to involve them?" I asked.

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"We're already involved," Alice answered instead. "We all have the same goal, right? We all want this over and done with...safely. We want to keep this asshole from Bella. If you aren't aware, we all have talents that could be put to use. There's not one of us that isn't willing to get to work, Edward."

"Makenna?" I scoffed, not completely unaware that the girl stared at me. She seemed young and a touch silly.

"Do *not* let that girl fool you," Bella chuckled, shaking her head. "She may be fan-girling over you, but I didn't hire her for her amazing phone answering capabilities," she snorted. "That girl can remember people's faces and draw them to portrait like quality."

"Oh. Wait...fan-girling?" I asked, completely clueless as to what that meant.

Both girls laughed, but didn't say anything more about it.

"In fact, I'd put Mack with Jasper with a pair of binoculars," Alice suggested. "She'll be able to spot Miller, or any other member of King's 'family,' because she's been studying the FBI's file on him."

"Actually, I could put her up there with a long distance lens on my camera," Bella mused. "I've been teaching her how to use it. She's caught on damn quick."

"Oh, damn," I sighed. "Well, that changes things a bit."

I paced, running another hand through my hair, but stopped in front of Bella. "Okay," I nodded. "It makes me nervous working with people I've never worked with before, but...I really don't think we have a choice..." I mused, looking to Alice.

"You just improved your odds by eleven percent," she said, shrugging. "That's a good thing, right?"

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I snorted. "You...scare me," I growled teasingly, pointing to the short thing they all called a pixie.

"Don't worry...she scares a lot of people," Bella muttered wryly, ducking Alice's tiny balled up fist.

"Well, let's go tell everyone about these changes," I grumbled, not sure how my crew was going to take it. "This ought to be interesting."

~oOo~

"This is some fucked up shit," Mickey muttered at my side, as I kept an eye on Jake and Bella.

The Feds had driven up a few minutes ago, and Bella was telling her father and Jacob goodbye. Ben Cheney had ridden with them, as a personal favor to my father. He wanted someone he knew in the car with Charlie Swan. Cheney had also explained to Bella how Charlie would be out of contact for some time, along with Jake. He told her once they issued the warrant for King's arrest, that was when things would get hairy, because King's men would start hunting for Charlie and anyone associated with this whole mess.

"It's bad enough we have to babysit your girlfriend over there, but..." she sniped, folding her arms across her chest, like a fucking pouting child.

"Enough!" I snapped, turning to her. I had heard enough of her bitching the night before. She seemed to be the only one that had a problem with the extra support Bella's team was providing.

Emmett had laughed, teasing Rose about "driving his stick," and she'd taken it coolly, smirking at him and telling him, that "no one could drive a *stick* like she could." It was flirty and funny, and a touch scary all at the same time, because it looked like Emmett had met his match when it came to being crass. Rose held him back brilliantly.

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Jasper, though concerned more about Makenna's age and experience more than anything, had no problem with it. In fact, he'd immediately started telling her how it would be on that rooftop, and she'd listened to every word he said.

No, the girls weren't stupid, because Bella expected them to pull their weight, to have her back at the drop of a moment's notice. They may be catching cheaters, or finding lost relatives, or even just making sure that a college student was attending classes, because his mother was worried he was flunking out, but they took it seriously, acted professionally, and made sure each and every one of them were safe. Even Rose, who admittedly said that she didn't always work with Bella - except on special occasions or when she needed the extra money - told us that she always felt safe when she went on a job with Bella. Safety came first, because the girls said they never knew what target would snap if they knew they were being followed. A caught cheater could get violent if it meant being exposed.

"If you've got a problem with this mission today, *Michelle*, I need to know *right fucking now*," I sneered in her face.

Mickey was a damn fine member of my team, but I couldn't have someone going into a mission half-assed. I needed a hundred percent, or they could stay the fuck behind.

"Nancy Drew and her sisters are gonna get us all killed," she growled, adding a sarcastic, " *sir*," onto the end, which I was sure was in retribution because I'd called her by her real name.

"Tell me, Mickey... Is it Bella that bothers you, or working with people you don't know? Are you jealous?"

"You wish, pretty boy. I just think these greenies know nothing about what they're facing."

"I assure you that Bella is well aware of what she's facing," I growled low. "She experienced it firsthand. I will leave you behind if you aren't backing us on this. I can alter the plan right now."

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"Don't get me wrong...she's got you pussy whipped already. I get it, because she's hot, Ed, but damn...don't let a piece of tail get us killed."

"That's enough!" my dad growled, stepping between us, because I was just about to either hit her or shoot her, I wasn't sure which. "You will do exactly what Edward tells you out there today, to the letter, Mickey. Do we understand each other?"

"Yes, sir," she sneered, her eyes never leaving mine.

"I won't have dissension amongst my crew. Are we clear?" he snapped.

"Yes, sir," she sighed in defeat.

"Speak of Bella that way again, and I'll send you back to New York," I growled low. "Maybe you could rob banks for a living..."

"I know, I know," Mickey muttered. "You don't kiss and tell," she snorted, rolling her eyes and walking away.

I started after her, but my father's arm caught me in the chest.

"Let her go, son. She's just nervous about today. New people in the mix aren't easy to trust."

"That gives her no right..."

"That's true, but you'd better keep your calm, or you'll lose their respect," he told me, raising an eyebrow. "I commend you on putting this mission together, working with Bella's girls. They're good girls, smart, quick. They won't let you down. Go in knowing that, and the boys and Mickey will see it, too, in the end. Make sense?"

"Sir," I sighed, nodding.

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He looked up when one of the Feds called him and nodded. "Get your crew together, get your plan airtight, and I'll see you at the new safe house tonight."

"Esme?" I asked, because we'd all decided a new location was best. The beach house had served its purpose, but I wasn't sure if Esme was going with us.

"She's there now. She left before the sun rose this morning," he told me, and before I could ask, he continued. "She's safe and already checked in with me, and will do so throughout the day."

"Yes, sir," I sighed in relief, because even though I hadn't known just how connected Esme was, I liked her. I liked her for my father, because she seemed to make him happy, something that I knew he wasn't for a long time after the death of my mother.

Esme just *fit* with us. She added a softer element to our crew. And I had to admit, it was nice having a mom looking out for me, for us again.

"Get your girl and get going," my father chuckled when my head shot up.

"Don't," I growled.

"You've assumed the role of her protector, Edward. She's your responsibility. She trusts you," he said, raising an eyebrow at me. "And it doesn't hurt that she can shove back just as hard as you do." He laughed, shaking his head.

"Whatever," I sighed. "She's stubborn as hell."

"And smart as shit," he said, continuing to laugh. "Don't let her reaction to her experience in that basement fool you. She's out for revenge now. Trust me. She's on the same page as we are."

"Miller would deserve whatever she decided to do to him," I mumbled, my eyes drifting to Bella as she hugged her father goodbye.

"I hope she gets the chance. I gotta go, son. Contact me when you're through."

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"Will do."

~oOo~

BELLA

The tension in the BMW was palpable as we pulled away from the beach house. I'd seen the altercation between Edward and Mickey earlier, Carlisle having to step between them, and I was pretty sure it was concerning me, because neither Edward nor Mickey would quite meet my eyes.

I took a deep breath and looked out the window. There was a part of me that was going to miss that place. I would miss the soothing sound of the ocean, that was for sure.

The closer we got to Seattle, the more nervous I became. I tapped the envelope, which contained the photographs of Senator Alvarez and a young woman on a thumb drive, against my thigh. They were disturbingly funny, once Alice had brought them up on her computer. We kept a backup set on her hard drive, filed under the Alvarez case.

"What did you catch him doing?" Edward asked softly beside me, a crooked smile of amusement on his face.

I grinned, biting my lip. "It's so disturbing."

"Spill it," he chuckled. "You said he liked violence?"

I laughed, shaking my head. "The senator likes to be spanked...by girls barely eighteen."

"How'd you get them?" Mickey snorted from up front.

"I paid a housekeeper at the hotel to let me in. I hid in the closet," I chuckled, grinning proudly.

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They both laughed and groaned at the same time.

"There's nothing more annoying than listening to someone else have loud, ugly sex," Mickey laughed, shaking her head and taking an exit. She was following Rose into the city.

"I tuned it out," I snorted, looking back out the window. "I suppose I'm used to it."

"Sounds gross..." she mumbled, and I chuckled at her wrinkled nose in the rearview mirror.

"It can be. And it can be dangerous," I sighed.

"How?" Edward asked, turning my way and pocketing his phone.

"I was hired one time by the wife of this really rich man to find her child. She'd been awarded custody, but the husband had stashed the kid someplace. The police couldn't find them, she couldn't get him to answer her calls or email, and it was ugly. That much money, they could be anywhere, you know?" I asked, and they both nodded.

"The problem was, the man had...ulterior motives to keeping the little girl. See...the reason that the mother was awarded custody was because her husband was molesting his own daughter."

"Motherfucker," Mickey growled. "How old was she?"

"Four," I sighed, tucking my hair behind my ear. "So very cute...big blue eyes and dark curls. She looked like a little doll, I swear."

"Tell me you found her," Edward urged, running a hand through his hair.

"I did, but it wasn't easy. I knew the guy had been flagged a sexual predator, so he couldn't leave the country without being noticed, but I had Alice watch the border alerts. I also knew that the guy was diabetic - an insulin bound diabetic,

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at that - so we started looking at pharmacies around places that we knew he owned, like apartment buildings, strip malls, that sort of thing. Alice--God bless her--hacked into the security videos of a few pharmacies, and we got lucky. He not only didn't even bother to disguise himself, but he had stayed in Seattle the whole time."

"Idiot," Edward muttered.

"Rose and I planted ourselves around the area. She was on vacation, and I put her to work." I chuckled. "She's a tough woman, and she took this case personally...probably because it was kid.

"She found him at the store, followed him back to his place, but he caught her tailing him - waited for her in the stairwell and pulled a gun. She'd already texted me her location, so I was already on my way. I heard them up there, so I took the elevator up a floor higher, taking the stairs down to come up right behind him. Bastard fought like hell," I sighed, but smiled at the memory. "His gun went off in the struggle."

"No way!" they both gasped.

"Yup," I said with a nod, lifting the sleeve of my shirt where the bullet had barely grazed my skin, leaving a faint scar on my bicep.

"Anyway," I chuckled, "I delivered the little girl back to her mom a few hours later."

"We're here," Mickey stated from up front as she pulled the car over.

I looked up to Edward, and he placed his earpiece in his ear, as I did the same.

He turned to me, taking a deep breath, checking the weapon hidden in the waistband at his back. My gun was in the same place, the waistband of my jeans.

"You ready?" he asked, placing his hand on the door.

"Ready as I'll ever be," I sighed, nodding. "Let's do this."

A/N...So...Bella doesn't want to be bossed around, but she's totally willing to work *with* Edward. Everyone will be involved in this little photo drop-off. And that will take over the next chapter.

Hmm...and Mickey...let's see...your reactions to her should be interesting. Is it nerves working with people they don't know? Or is it something else? She's awful angry...

So, Charlie apologized, Bella put Jake in his place, because she could see that he kind of thought he still had a chance... No way. Charlie, though, is a different story. Bella put him in his place, but he will always be her father. Parents have a tendency to push their children to be things they don't want to be, and that was Charlie's problem. He also didn't see the up-close picture when it came to Jake and Bella. Just because he wanted them together, didn't mean she was gonna put up with shit. But at least he left his daughter, not only in good hands, but with some sort of promise to be a better dad.

So we'll see how *everyone* reacts under pressure in the next chapter. Should be an interesting reaction from some of you.

I want to thank JenRar for beta'ing this...

And since my internet is sparse and iffy, I'm posting this, but cannot say when the next post will be, but I assure you that it's soon. So review for me. Let me hear what you think of everything... remember, I'll take either "Love it" or "Hate it"... I just want to know where you stand. But your theories and fave lines are my fave to read. Until the next time... Later.

Chapter 7

A/N...So it's time for the mission to drop off the pictures. Let's see how our girls from Gravity investigations work with Edward and his gang. This pretty action packed and a touch violent, just wanted to give you the heads up.

But it's yours to read... I'll see you at the bottom for a few things...

CHAPTER 7

EDWARD

"Damn, she couldn't get any closer?" I complained as we walked up the sidewalk.

"She's mad at you," Bella said softly as we avoided a group of business women walking together down the street. "This is punishment..."

"Mickey's..." I sighed, not knowing how to put it, without revealing what her outburst contained that morning.

"Mickey doesn't trust me," she said simply with a shrug. "I'll either earn it, or I won't."

I snorted, rolling my eyes. Bella's dad was right. That girl could spot bullshit a mile away, because her next statement blew my mind.

"Besides," she chuckled. "You can't actually be pussy whipped, unless you are *getting* said pussy."

My feet tripped over a nonexistent crack in the sidewalk, and I came to a stop in the middle of the sidewalk.

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"You heard her," I whispered when Bella turned around, her face more amused than I was expecting.

"My job is to be observant, even though my attention is supposedly focused elsewhere, Edward," she chuckled, tugging on my sleeve to keep us going. "There's not much Jake could say that I'm going to listen to at this point, unless it's about my father. And when you were nose to nose with her, it was hard to ignore."

I thought back to the morning, and she had been with Jacob when Mickey's temper had gotten the best of her. I was embarrassed where my reaction was concerned, but even more embarrassed over what Mickey had actually said.

"She won't talk about you like that anymore," I vowed. "She can be very...crass."

"She's a member of your team, Edward, so it's understandable she doesn't trust me...or my girls," Bella stated with a shrug. "Besides, jealousy can do funny things to people..." She trailed off, allowing me to open the door of the office building, like a decent gentleman.

"Jealousy?" I scoffed, rolling my eyes and shaking my head. "It's not like that, Bella."

We both saw Emmett sitting in one of the waiting room chairs, but said nothing to him or made any eye contact. He was there inside the building in case something went wrong, and I needed him to get to me quickly.

I pressed the button for the thirtieth floor once we were in the elevator, leaning back against the wall.

Bella chuckled, looking up at me. "It may not be that way for you, but women don't respond that strongly about another woman, unless there are feelings there... *pretty boy*," she snickered.

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I winced, still shaking my head in denial. "She's like a sister, Bella. That's a joke...Emmett and Jasper live to hear her tell stories about her...amorous achievements. I try not to listen...and they call me that, because they say I'm too good to...kiss and tell."

I felt like an ass having this conversation with Bella - in an elevator, of all places.

Bella laughed, looking up at me. "Whatever, Edward. It's none of my business, really. I'm just telling you that no woman gets that upset without jealousy playing a part. I see it at work... *every day*."

"Bella..."

She chuckled, stopping just as we stepped out of the elevator doors on the floor we needed to be.

"Look, it's just been you and your team for a long time. And here I show up, and you help me out of a really awful situation. You've been kind to me, but she sees that as a threat, Edward. I'm not sure what she knows about my...experience in that basement, because I don't know what you've told your crew, but she sees me as an intruder. It's really quite understandable. She sees your...obligation to help me as something more..."

With that said, she turned away from me, leaving me speechless. She thought I was only helping her out of obligation? Was I?

"Fuck," I sighed to myself, running a hand through my hair.

I clenched my teeth, because I didn't know the answer. Was she just another job? Did I just feel protective of her, because of the way I found her? Was it because she meant so much to my father? Or because I'd met her once when we were kids?

My nostrils flared in anger, because I didn't have a fucking clue, and that pissed me off. I was warring inside with the conflict. I never wanted anything to

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happen to Bella. I wanted to stop King and Miller, as well as whoever else had it in for her. She drove me fucking crazy, with her temper and her strong will and her mere presence. She was beautiful when she laughed, and she was even more stunning when she turned that same strong will and temper on me.

"Check in!" I barked as quietly as I could into the radio.

"You have two eyes in the sky," Jasper blipped in, meaning he and Makenna were in place on the roof across the street.

"You already saw my awesomeness on level one," Emmett chortled.

"We're in place," Alice added.

"Mickey?" I growled, shaking my head. I was still fairly pissed at her outburst from this morning, despite Bella's theory.

"I'm around the corner, making round two," she muttered.

I stared at the floor as I listened to them check in, but when I lifted my head, Bella was waiting patiently for me.

"All okay?" she asked.

I nodded, gesturing for her to lead the way to the law office.

As we walked down the hall, I told her, "We need to get this done and get out, okay? No gossiping with the secretary about who's dating who..."

Okay, so maybe I deserved what came next.

Bella's eyes flared with her temper. "First of all...you sexist asshole...they aren't secretaries anymore. They're *personal assistants* - just ask Rose. Call her a secretary, and you'll lose a testicle. Second, I'm sure you're used to vacuous women, whose main concern is the color of their fucking nail polish, but forgive me, I have bigger things to deal with than who's fucking dating who,"

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she growled low, her hand still on the door handle of the office.

She yanked open the door, breezing past me and giving me one last ire-filled glare.

I huffed a deep breath, shaking my head, and followed her inside to the waiting area for Spencer, Wyatt, and Townsend. She was already speaking with the sec...receptionist...what-the-fuck-ever.

"Bella!" the pretty blonde behind the counter chirped.

"Hey, Tanya. Could you please let Marshall Spencer know I'm here?" she sighed, smiling up at the woman, whose eyes slid to me.

I did what any pissed off man that had gotten his ass handed to him thirty seconds prior and who apparently had a fucking death wish would do.

I flirted - with a smile, a nod of my head and a lean on the counter, like I was at a bar.

Tanya flushed a deep red, picking up the phone. She spoke quickly and quietly to someone on the other end, giving me a flickering glance, before speaking to Bella.

"He said to go on back, Bella," Tanya told her, hanging up the receiver.

"Great," Bella said, looking to me. "I'll be right back."

"Sure," I said with a smile at Tanya. "I'm sure I'm in good hands, until you get back..."

She snorted, rolled her eyes, giving me a disgusted look. Suddenly, I felt like a real jerk. "I'm sure," she mumbled, moving through a door on the side.

"Tanya," the girl behind the counter purred, holding out her hand.

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"Edward," I muttered, not sure now what I'd been thinking, but I shook her hand anyway, because it wasn't Tanya's fault that I was a selfish bastard that couldn't figure out why the little brunette that just disappeared through the side door was making me crazy.

I smiled politely, taking a step back from the counter. "I'm just gonna wait...over here," I sputtered, pointing to a cluster of chairs by the wall of windows overlooking Seattle.

"Sure thing," Tanya chirped, smiling widely.

She was an attractive girl, but a strange feeling came over me. She wasn't Bella. She had blue eyes, not warm expressive brown ones. She had shorter blonde hair, not long dark curls. And she was tall, curvy, and even though I was sure she had a great body underneath that professional suit, she wasn't the short, spunky thing that seemed to fit like a puzzle piece next to me.

I sighed, fell down into a chair, looking out over the skyline. "Jazz and Mack, what do you see?" I said softly into my earpiece.

"Bella's in an office, handing over the thumb drive," Jasper answered immediately. "And you have a hot fucking blonde coming up beside you..." he chuckled.

"Damn," I groaned, looking to my left.

"Coffee, Edward?" Tanya asked.

"No, thank you," I said kindly, smiling a little.

"Hot damn, Eddie," Jasper cheered in my ear, and I could hear chuckles ring in from everyone's radios, including Bella's.

"Enough!" I snapped in a hissing whisper. "Radio silence, unless it's necessary."

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"Sir," my team answered with a click in my ear.

I watched Tanya send a wink my way when she greeted someone else. She smiled when she answered the phones, and she walked over to me, placing a slip of paper into my hand. Her phone number.

I smiled politely, giving her a brusque nod, but gripped the slip of paper in my hand when Jasper crackled into my ear.

"That's the hottest one yet," he chuckled.

"I fucking said...radio silence," I seethed.

"Um, Edward?" I heard Makenna start nervously.

"Go ahead," I sighed, facing the window.

"There's talk that King has a mistress. He's married to a woman named Mary, but there are rumors of a woman named Victoria...Vicki... She's a red head...and I think she's inside that office. I think she's seen Bella."

"You *think*, or you *know*?" I asked, my heart now kicking into overdrive.

"I'm pretty damn certain," she answered. "I've seen pics of her..."

"Bella, get your ass out of there ASAP!" I ordered into the radio.

"She took her earpiece out, Ed," Jasper stated, "but that redhead...she's on the phone..."

"Shit...Goddammit!" I spat to myself.

I looked up at Tanya, who thankfully was busy on the phone and had missed my unusual outburst. She glanced up and smiled, but I turned back to the window. We needed to get the hell out of there.

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"She's walking out now...she's walking with a guy..."

"Everyone on alert. We'll need to move when she's out. Mickey, get into position..."

"Sir," she grunted in answer.

The side door opened, and a giggling, smiling Bella walked out, followed by a young man in an impeccable suit. He was handsome, I supposed, and he was totally checking her ass out as she walked ahead of him.

"Bella, I've got some more work for you..." he said, holding his hand out to shake hers, but instead of just shaking it, he lifted her hand and placed a kiss on the back of it.

What the...?

"I'm not taking anything right now, Liam," she crooned up at him, smiling sweetly. "I'm taking a sabbatical of sorts."

"You deserve it, beautiful," he said with such sickening charm that I wanted to gag. "Well, you call me when you come back, okay?" he asked, slipping a business card into her front pocket.

That was it!

"Bella, we have to go, *sweetheart*," I whispered in her ear, stepping up behind her. "We have to meet your parents for lunch, *baby*."

Her head spun like it was on a swivel, and I knew I'd pay for that act of testosterone-ism, but I needed her out of that fucking building. Like thirty seconds ago.

"Ed," Emmett growled in my earpiece. "You've got two in the elevator...armed heavily. They're carrying in a shoulder harness. Take the stairs. Garage, not the front door, because you've got two on the street just like them."

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"We have to *go*," I urged, giving her waist a squeeze. "Now. Or we won't make that reservation."

Bella's eyes grew wide, and she nodded, turning back to Liam. "He's so right," she chuckled nervously, taking my hand. "Liam, I'll be in touch when we're back in my office."

"Sure thing, sweetness," he crooned, but gave me a wary glance, holding out his hand. "Liam Cornell."

"Edward Masen," I grunted my not-so-real name, taking his hand in the most Neanderthal of fashions, smiling when he flinched.

"Let's go," I said to Bella, turning her away.

"Edward," Tanya called from the reception counter, and I looked up at her. "Call me."

"Dear Lord," Bella snorted, shaking her head. "Talk about vacuous."

"Enough, *sweetness*," I growled, taking her elbow and leading her out of the office doors and into the corridor. "You've been spotted..."

"Oh, shit, by whom?" she gasped, diving into the stairway when I opened the door.

"King's lover..." I told her. "The redhead in there. Go...all the way to the garage," I commanded. "Em spotted two armed men heading up the elevators."

We threw ourselves into running down each flight, and we both came to a standstill when we heard a door slam above us.

"Why'd you take your earpiece out?" I snapped, looking up the stairs and then back down to her.

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"I couldn't hear Marshall telling me about the case, Edward...I'm sorry," she panted from our trek down the first five floors, looking up at me.

"Well, maybe if you weren't flirting with every man in there..." I snapped, knowing that was wrong, but pushing her to keep going when we heard another door slam above us. "Just...go!"

"Fuck you, Edward," she snapped, turning the corner. "Make sure you tell Tanya hello from me when you call her."

"I'm not calling her," I said in shock, but grimaced when Bella's hand grabbed my wrist, pulling our hands up between us. Tanya's slip of paper was still crushed in my grip.

"I heard Jasper," she snorted, rolling her eyes.

I couldn't take it anymore. I couldn't take that look of disgust when I didn't deserve it. I pushed her against the wall, panting above her. "Really? Do you want to go there, Isabella?" I sneered, reaching into the pocket that Liam had so kindly tucked his business card in.

Bella gasped when my hand reached inside of her pocket, and I pulled out the card and held it between our faces.

"He gives me work," she whispered, but it didn't quite sound convincing to me. "He uses Gravity for divorce cases..."

"Try again," I growled low, stepping closer. "You're a single girl now...Jake's gone..."

"No," she groaned, shaking her head. "It's not like that, Edward. Sometimes, a woman has to flirt in the business world. Unlike you, where you'd take a second look at anything that smiles your way."

Bella's eyes were dark with her temper, and it didn't help that I was in her face. Her fists were balled up at her sides.

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I picked up Tanya's phone number, shredding it into a dozen pieces and letting them flutter to the stairwell floor. "I wasn't going to call her..."

"I don't care..." Bella growled, trying to push past me, but I held firm. "Do what you want..."

What I wanted was to kiss Bella senseless. What I wanted was to run the fuck away from her as quickly as possible. What I wanted was to breathe in that sweet and floral scent that wafted in through my bedroom window at the beach house. There was a pull that I was feeling, and it wasn't deniable any more. I wanted her.

"You think you have me figured out, Bella. You don't," I whispered, stepping even closer to her, so that our bodies were flush. "If *you're* the jealous one, just say it..." I purred, leaning even closer so that my nose grazed across her cheek.

Bella's breathing sped up, but she didn't move. "I'm not jealous," she said, but it sounded awfully weak to me.

"Liar," I growled, pulling back to look her in the eyes, but she was staring at the wall behind me. "I'll admit that I've had my needs and they've been taken care of, but I wasn't going to call Tanya..."

"I so don't fucking care," Bella snapped, but she stood her ground, looking up at me. "What's the matter? Tall, busty, blondes aren't your type, *pretty boy*?"

"Actually...they aren't," I seethed, slamming my palms against the wall on either side of her head. "You drive me crazy, Bella. Why can't you do what you're told? Why can't you follow the plan?"

"I couldn't hear the lawyer, it wasn't out of malice...and I don't answer to you. No one controls me," she growled, placing her hands against my chest, but I wouldn't budge.

"While I'm responsible for your safety, you *do* fucking answer to me. Hell, you could use some control," I told her with a voice that sounded husky and needy,

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and I hated it. "Your buddy Liam is more than willing to try. Loved your ass, he did - stared at it the whole time you walked in front of him."

"I can't help it if they look," she hissed, pushing at me. "Tell me, does it make you feel like a god when you get ogled, Edward? Does it build your ego when you've got Mickey jealous, Makenna staring, and Tanya licking her chops for just a taste of you?"

I closed my eyes and shook my head, because I just hadn't seen any of that shit. How had she?

"How does your head fit through the door, GI Joe?" Bella asked, pushing at me, but I wasn't moving.

"Shut up," I barked, shaking my head at her. "You don't know anything..."

"Make me, or let's go, Edward..." she challenged, and I was done.

I was done, because she was fucking panting and pissed off. She was gorgeous and practically shocking me with her hands on my chest. She was shaking and breathless, and she smelled like fucking heaven - like flowers and sugar and all fucking warm, sexy girl.

My mouth dove for hers, and it was angry and commanding, but as soon as I felt her relax into the kiss, I knew it was all over. I'd thought that pulling her out of that fucking dungeon had ruined me, but actually tasting her was a different level of torture altogether. She slipped her hands up my chest, gripping my hair hard, and I couldn't stop the groan that rumbled through my body.

My own hands, which were completely out of my control, pushed off the wall and grabbed her. One shot to her waist, pulling her hips flush to mine, and the other moved to the base of her neck, turning her head to finally let me slide my tongue in.

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A whimper gushed against my cheek out of Bella, and she grasped my hair harder. I found myself leaning into her, pressing her into the wall of that stairwell, completely and stupidly oblivious that we should be getting our asses out of that goddamn building.

I massaged her tongue with mine, knowing I was most likely going to regret this action, but I couldn't stop myself. She was so fucking frustrating and beautiful and wild, and I wanted to tame her, but I was slipping ever so much more away from what was right and falling right into what I wanted. And her body fit against mine so perfectly that I was about to lose my mind completely.

The door on the level above us slammed, and we both jumped. I took two quick steps away from her, running a hand through my hair nervously.

"Feel better?" she whispered, diving for the stairs quickly.

"Shut you up, didn't it?" I snarked back, shaking my head to clear it.

"Fuck you, Edward," she spit out, taking the next level down.

"You wish, *sweetness*," I growled, rolling my eyes.

This shit had gotten *way* the fuck out of hand. And I only had myself to blame. Bella made my brain stop working, made my only focus zoom in on her and her only. Maybe it was saving her from that room, but I wasn't so sure about that. In fact, I wasn't sure about anything anymore.

We reached the first floor, and I stopped Bella from going out into the lobby.

"Don't; we've got company on the street," I whispered, pointing to another door that led out into the parking garage. "Emmett's covering us in here," I panted, opening the door and hitting the button on my radio. "Em, where?"

"Straight out, watch your back..." he stated, and Bella, who had now finally placed her earpiece back into her ear, nodded.

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The garage, despite the fact that it was in the middle of the afternoon, was dark, due to its being underground. I tapped Bella on the shoulder, whispering, "Weapons out, Bella..."

She nodded, reached to the small of her back, and took out her nine mil at the same time I pulled my glock out.

"Ed, I'm stuck at an accident. I'm at the garage entrance," Mickey checked in.

"Stay there," I told her, "and we'll come to you. Got me?"

"Ten-four," she replied, sounding frustrated as hell.

Up ahead, two shadows crossed in front of us, and I pulled Bella behind a minivan.

"Twelve o'clock, I know," she panted, leaning against the van and flipping the safety off on her gun. She looked up at me, her eyes flickering towards the opposite row of cars. "I've got the front, you got my back?"

"Yeah, definitely," I answered, tugging her sleeve before she could shoot across the row. "I'm sorry..."

"Later," she snorted, rolling her eyes. "You can defend your barbaric behavior once we get out of here..."

"Right," I huffed, nodding. I looked through the windows of the minivan, seeing shadows moving again. "Up and at two o'clock, Bella."

She nodded, took a deep breath, and whispered, "Ready...go."

We ran across the aisle, diving behind an SUV when shots pinged off of the concrete floor near us.

"Shit," she growled, looking through the window. "Where's Emmett?"

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"Coming to you," he growled, and I could hear him running. "I'm on the level below you guys."

"Ed," Jasper said in our ears, "if you can lead them up a level, I've got a shot on the south side of the garage. It's a separate building. And that's on your way up to the exit."

"I'm at the exit, Ed," Mickey called out.

"Good. Everyone, stand by for my command. Em, hurry your ass up here!" I growled, turning to Bella. "Take that wall right there," I told her, pointing to the space between car bumpers and the wall of the outside of the garage. "Look," I said, pulling her enough that she could just barely see, "it leads to the stairs for the next level...the *ground* level. Got me?"

"Yeah," she said, nodding, and locked her arms before taking off in the direction that I showed her.

I followed her watching her back. We got about halfway to the stairs, when shots rang out again.

Bella turned, aimed, and shot, a grunt echoing through the cement structure. A perfect fucking shot, she was.

"Nice," I praised, turning around and firing at a goon coming up behind us. He fell to a heap beside a red car. "Go, go, go," I urged, pushing her along.

She slammed into the door to the stairs, yanking it open and diving inside, tugging me with her as shots ricocheted off the metal door's surface with a pinging sound.

"Fuck, that was close," she breathed, looking up at me. "You must really want that pie," she said with a slight smile.

"I do." I snorted, helping her up and ushering her up the steps. "You have no idea," I whispered to her.

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"Shameless," she sighed, taking two steps at a time at a run. "You're earning it, I suppose," she grunted, finally reaching the next door. She paused for just a second, turning her head slightly my way with her hand on the knob. "Ready?"

"Jasper, we're at the next level. Any movement?"

"Yuppers, Ed. You got three working their way to you. They just got out of a sedan at the exit."

"Em?" I growled.

"I'm cleaning up what you left on the last level," he grunted, and we both flinched at the sound of gunshots fired.

"Watch it, Em," I told him, giving Bella the go-ahead nod. "Go, Bella."

She took a deep breath, creaking the door open to peek out. "Jasper's right. There are three. Scattering on the left and right and...left again."

"Take the two on the left. I'll take the right and your back," I told her, and we were out of the door like a shot, guns raised.

It was amazing to me that King's men, or anyone connected to organized crime, for that matter, could move in suits. I found them to be restrictive and uncomfortable, but hell, what did I know?

I shot at the guy on the right, pivoting once we made it to an open air window.

"I've got you in sight, Ed," Jasper called over the radio. "Move to the east...the goon in front of you will step out."

"Go, Bella," I urged her, but she was already on it.

Sure enough, a guy in a gray suit stepped from behind a truck, but Jasper's shot pierced his head, shattering it everywhere.

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"Thanks, Jasper," Bella and I sighed together.

Bella took the opportunity to haul ass up the aisle, and I could see that her goal was the daylight at the end. I followed her, keeping watch for the last guy, but a call over the radio from Jasper told me he saved our asses.

Bella and I spun to see another man collapse to the ground, his head practically gone.

"That's it," I heard Jasper say, "so get the fuck outta there!"

"On it," I said, grabbing Bella's arm.

We bolted out onto the street, catching sight of my father's BMW where the back door was already swinging open for us.

Bella dove into the car, and I practically fell in on top of her. "Go, Mick, go!"

"You guys okay?" Mickey asked, peeling out of her spot and taking off into downtown Seattle.

"Yeah," we both sighed, situating ourselves correctly in our seats.

"Everyone...check in," I breathed into the radio.

"Leaving our perch now," Jasper grunted. "See you at the landing sight."

"Yup. Alice?" I called out.

"You need to keep going. You've got another car accident up on the next intersection," she babbled into our ears. "And then a road block for construction on your way to the highway. Take Third Avenue, State Street...and then the highway...yes?"

"Thanks, Alice," Mickey muttered, shaking her head as she avoided the accident that Alice had mentioned first. "Girls know what the hell they're

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doin'," she mumbled, turning away from the traffic jam.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Alice answered back. "We're leaving WIFI territory."

"Emmett?" I growled.

"I'm out of the garage, no one on my tail. See you at the nest..."

"Good, radios off as of now!" I snapped, tugging the damn ear piece out of my ear and throwing it to the floor. There was a part of me that wanted to crush it under my foot, but I knew Emmett would have my ass for breaking equipment.

Bella did the same, her head falling back to the headrest.

"Hey," I said, and she turned her head my way. "Well done."

She nodded, still breathing heavily.

"And by the way," I said with a smirk. "GI Joe...he's Army. I'm Air Force..."

"Shut. Up!" she snapped, rolling her eyes, but I could see the smile on her face. "I still don't see how your head fits through normal doors, ass."

I laughed, shaking my head as I looked out the window. Even after my horrid behavior, she was still teasing, so I followed her lead.

"Mickey, we'll need to make a stop," I said, looking over at Bella. "Bella has some cooking to do tonight..."

Bella's laugh echoed through the car, but she just turned her head to the window.

As I looked over at her, I thought about the kiss. I shouldn't have done that. At least, not in that way. I'm pretty sure my punishment was far from over.

~oOo~

BELLA

"Where are we?" I yawned, jerking awake when the car came to a stop.

"Technically, it's called Trinity," Edward answered softly. "Welcome to Glacier Peak Wilderness."

"So we went from the ocean to the mountains," I mumbled, rubbing my face, before opening the car door. "What's next, the jungle?" I joked, standing up out of the car and stretching.

"Maybe," Edward chuckled, shrugging one shoulder. "This is my dad's place, though," he said, jerking his chin towards the house.

"Wow," I gasped softly, looking up at the most gorgeous mountain cabin I'd ever seen. "That's so pretty..."

It peaked in the middle, with an A-framed roof. The front part of the house was open, with large glass windows, and a deck wrapped around the whole way. It sat against a backdrop of green covered mountains, and the lawn looked amazing, like a natural meadow with wild flowers clustering here and there.

"Yeah, we used to stay here sometimes when I was really young," he muttered, a dark look crossing his face. "My mother would bring me here in the summer when my father was away. He'd meet us if he had leave."

I nodded, knowing that his mother was a touchy subject.

"Not bad, pretty boy," Mickey snorted, popping the trunk of the car so we could get our bags out. "Your mom had good taste."

"She did," he said, but his voice had taken on a cold tenor, almost menacing, and I wondered if he saw her jealousy yet, because I could.

She stepped between us when we went to get our bags out and stayed between us as we made our way up to the house. It wasn't that I blamed her, because it

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was obvious that Edward and his team were close friends. I tried to see her side, and I could imagine she hero worshipped him. He was strong, brave, smart - never backing down from danger. He was confident and so very handsome, he was almost pretty. Yeah, I got it.

"My mother hated camping," I snorted, looking around the back of the house and catching a glimpse of what looked like a lake, "even if it was a cabin. She required people close by. Civilization, she called it."

Edward chuckled, looking over at me, but we all turned when we heard Esme's voice.

"Thank God, you're all safe," she gushed, rushing through the front door and wrapping me in a hug, followed by Edward, and even a surprised Mickey. "You have no idea how bad the news made downtown Seattle sound," she huffed, rolling her eyes, but cupping my face again. "Is it done?"

"They have their pictures," I sighed, shrugging. "King found us there..."

"I heard," she said, wrapping an arm around my shoulders and guiding me inside the house. "Ben called, said that they made it look like a drug thing gone wrong..." she muttered, eying me out of the corner of her eye. "They reported five people shot dead..."

"I imagine they did," Edward grumbled. "When assholes shoot at me, I have a tendency to shoot back, though I hardly had to, because Bella is a damn good shot."

I chuckled, smiling over at him, but it faltered when he shot me a wink. Flashes of his mouth on mine, his hands gripping me, and his body pressing me into the wall of the stairwell flew through my mind, making my heart beat faster and my breath catch.

"Your father is on his way, Edward," Esme said, changing the subject and breaking the tension. "He said to make yourselves comfortable, that there is plenty of room for everyone, though I think we'll have to double up."

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"I have my own room," Edward snorted, rolling his eyes. "I'm not *bunking* with anybody," he growled playfully when she smacked at him.

"Whatever, Prince Cullen," Esme yelled at him, as he walked away laughing. She turned back to me and Mickey. "Come, I'll show you the rooms; you two can pick the one you want."

The front door slammed open, and five very loud, very celebratory people shuffled in, led by Emmett, who was beaming from ear to ear.

"Now *that* was fucking awesome!" he laughed, holding his fist out to Mickey, and then me.

"No shit," Jasper chimed in with his big grin. "Nice job, Bella. It was a little sketchy there for a minute in the garage, huh?"

I snorted, but nodded. "Thanks for your help, Jasper."

"Sure, no problem." He smiled, but his cheeks tinged pink, much to Alice's amusement.

"This place is beautiful," Rose whispered, looking around.

Inside the cabin was just as pretty as the outside. The plan was open, the living room sunken a bit on the left side of the room, the kitchen towards the back. The hallway jutted off to the right.

"Yup, but we have to double up this time," Mickey muttered, looking embarrassed.

"I'll bunk with you," Makenna chirped, causing Mickey's head to snap up. "Come on."

We all made our way down the hall. Emmett and Jasper found a room with two twin beds, claiming it for their own and stating that the cots at the barracks held them, so twin beds would, too. Mickey and Makenna found a room with a twin

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bed and a pull out sofa, and they took that without shame.

"I have no shame in sleeping with you two," Rose snorted to me and Alice as we eyed the last room.

It was a pretty decent sized room, with a large king size bed in the center.

"Yeah, that works for me," I sighed, tossing my bag onto the floor, before falling back onto the bed. "But no spooning!"

"Damn," Alice whined, giving me a wink when I laughed. "There go my plans tonight."

"You wish, pixie. Bella is mine," Rose chuckled, falling down beside me.

Alice pattered around the room, even scoping out the bathroom, before sitting between me and Rose.

I sat up, looking at the both of them.

"Was it scary today?" Alice asked.

"A little," I sighed, but then shrugged. "I wasn't alone. I had you in my ears."

They both smiled and nodded, but Rose chuckled. "And you had Edward."

"I did," I said, getting off of the bed. "He's a pretty good shot. And stayed damn cool under pressure."

"Mhm," they both hummed, and I raised an eyebrow at them.

"And Tanya?" Rose sneered, because she hated that poor girl. She found her to be dumb and slutty, but I'd known Tanya for some time, and she wasn't. She was just flirty and lonely.

"What about her?" I asked, turning to my bag to find a place to put my clothes.

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"You know we heard it all on the radio, Bella. We heard Jasper call her hot, heard that she gave Edward her digits..." Alice said, tilting her head at me, but I knew that look - she knew more than she was letting on.

"He's free to do what he wants," I shrugged, "and Tanya's pretty..."

"Except that he tore the number up," Rose said wryly, watching my reaction like a hawk.

"How did... Who told... That was in the stairwell," I growled. "How did you know that?"

"Are you forgetting my job, missy?" Alice huffed, hopping down from the bed and tugging her laptop out of her bag.

"You didn't..." I breathed, my stomach sinking.

"The way I saw it," Alice explained, making Rose chuckle softly, "you needed eyes inside that office building. It started with Emmett walking in. We wanted to make sure he was on point. Then, we needed to see all routes leading in and out of the building. It didn't take much to hack into the security system of that building, Bella," she concluded, like she was giving a fucking report.

She turned her laptop around, and there we were in the stairwell. Thankfully, there was no sound, so they had no idea what was being said between us. Edward and I were nose to nose, fierce, angry looks on our faces. I saw as he pulled the card Liam had piggishly tucked into my pocket out. I saw Edward tear up Tanya's phone number.

I didn't have to hear the conversation to recognize when I told Edward to make me shut up, because he did. Thoroughly. He kissed me stupid. He kissed me with anger and desperation, with frustration and so much heat. He kissed me with such talented lips that I could still feel their sting.

And it was all playing out *right there*.

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I groaned, blushing, and turned away from them.

"That was one helluva kiss there, sweetpea," Rose snorted into a guffawing laugh.

I groaned again, putting my face in my hands. "Please erase that," I begged, but the newly single, and now newly kissed girl inside of me threw a tantrum at the thought of losing that sight.

"Not a chance," Alice giggled. "What does that mean?"

"It means..." I huffed, shaking my head. "It means...fuck, I don't know..."

"Damn, her brain is still kiss-scrambled," Rose chuckled. "Relax, Bells. We're only teasing. Was it at least a *good* kiss?"

"Oh ho," I groaned, giving them a pleading look. "You have no idea..."

They cheered, giving each other a fist bump and falling back onto the bed in a heap. "I'm glad this amuses you two," I sighed, falling onto the edge of the bed.

"What's wrong?" Alice asked, her face serious as she wiped tears from the corners of her eyes. "You aren't happy?"

"Happy?" I scoffed, shrugging. "You didn't hear the shit that surrounded that kiss," I started, looking down at my hands. "That kiss was adrenaline, jealousy, and just...anger." I turned to look at them, and they were both listening intently, completely serious. "We fight, we argue, but there are moments...really good moments, when he's sweet. But sometimes, I want to ring his neck," I growled, my hands curling into claws.

"That ought to make for fabulous sex, Bells," Rose noted, a wry smile playing on her face.

"You sound like Mack. Do you want a poster of him on your wall, too?" I teased.

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She laughed, shoving my shoulder a bit. "No way...but one of Emmett on the other hand..."

I grinned at her. "Next, Alice will say Jasper..."

Alice looked away, shrugging nonchalantly. "No poster. Hell, I want the real thing."

Rose and I exchanged a grin, but we all looked up when Esme called us for dinner.

Dinner was loud and happy and served outside on the deck overlooking a small, but very beautiful, lake, but I stayed quiet. Carlisle told me that he was separated from my father and Jake, because even he wasn't allowed to know where they were going. Jasper and Emmett were excited that everyone had come out of the office building alive.

Makenna still hadn't wound down from being on the roof with Jasper, because apparently, he'd talked her through the whole thing, and Edward had even praised her for recognizing Vicki, King's girlfriend. If she was crushing on Edward before, she was over the moon for him now.

Mickey wanted to know all about Tanya, of course, to which Edward said nothing, giving me an uncomfortable look. She pestered him so badly that he finally barked, "Enough!"

Carlisle was glad that the mission was done, that we'd all come back safely. He said to treat the cabin like home, because we didn't know how long we'd be there.

Emmett and Jasper wanted a fire, so the two of them built one just off the deck on the shore of the lake, with everyone joining them but me. I could hear them laughing, my girls flirting with the guys shamelessly, but I didn't feel like joining in.

I walked into the kitchen, looking up to see Esme wiping down the counters.

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She smiled, opened the fridge, and held out a beer to me. "Want one?"

"Hell, yes," I sighed, cracking it open and taking a long draw on it.

"You aren't...celebrating?" she asked with a smirk, pointing her beer towards the lake.

"I killed two men today," I growled, "so no. I'm not feeling that festive."

"And the fact that there's... *something* different between you and Edward...I don't suppose you don't want to talk about that," she mused, always the observant one.

"No, I don't," I growled, frowning down at the bottle in my hands as I started to peel the label. "But I owe the jerk a freakin' apple pie," I snorted, shaking my head.

"Want some help?" she asked, her face lighting up. "You could teach me..."

"Yeah," I said with a growing grin. "That'd be great. We'll just prep them for tomorrow, because there are a lot of steps. Okay?"

"Of course," she snickered, "because anything that good is worth the wait, right?"

My head shot up to look at her, and I saw that she *knew*. She knew something had changed, but she didn't say it out loud. I don't know how she knew, because my girls would never say anything, unless I gave permission.

"Right," I told her with a slight nod. "I guess."

As if fate had it out for me, the back door opened and in walked Edward. His eyes locked with mine immediately, a small tentative smile curling the corners of his mouth.

"You're not coming out?" he asked, leaning on the counter.

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"No," I smirked, taking a sip of my beer. "I have pies to get ready for tomorrow."

He grinned and nodded, and he looked delicious. He was dressed in jeans and black shirt, with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows.

"That's right, you do," he chuckled, raising an eyebrow at me.

Esme snorted, grabbing another beer and handing it to him. "Bella was just about to teach me how to make it. Perhaps you can join us, Edward..."

My head swiveled to face her, but she didn't even flinch, the wicked woman, but Edward did. I watched in amazement as the cocky, obnoxious, Tanya-flirting, command barking, moody man melted away, and the sweet stuttering boy emerged, causing my heart to skip a beat.

"Really? Y-you'll teach us?" he asked, his eyes now a sweet evergreen.

"Yeah, I'll teach you," I sighed with a smile, because I couldn't help it when his face relaxed and my favorite crooked grin crossed his handsome face.

"Excellent!" he gushed, rubbing his hands together and walking around to the other side of the counter.

I chuckled at his excitement, taking another sip of my beer, before joining them. Esme beamed, reaching into the fridge for all the ingredients and setting them on the counter.

I looked over everything, making sure it was all there, and looked up at him. He was so very cute - not sexy, not lethally hot, not commanding - just very fucking cute, waiting for my next word, and I wondered if that Edward could come out more often, because if he did, then I was done for. The hot, sexy, commanding thing that he usually was drove my hormones crazy, but the one waiting patiently for me to teach him how to make apple pie was pulling me to him just as much.

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I snorted, nodded, and took a deep breath, my next words meaning more than just that moment. "Okay, let's get to work."

A/N... Okay...so it's getting hot in the kitchen, yeah? Edward just kinda...snapped. The mission went down a little ugly, but the job got done. Everyone worked well together...well, except the two hot-heads. LOL

But...I need to say this again, Bella isn't just all of a sudden better. She's doing okay, but there will be ups and downs. This...was an up. Are you getting me? I hope so, because there will be a touch of a roller coaster type feeling for a little while.

And I love this Esme. She's a sharp shit, you know that? LOL

Coming up, we'll see the repercussions of that hot as hell kiss... we'll see how our hot-headed couple deals with it. And they get settled in to a new safe house. We'll hear from the always wise Jasper...and some news comes in...

Thanks to JenRar for always working quickly and I love ya for it!

Okay, so since I'm posting way earlier than I expected...my internet being as whacky as it has been lately...then REVIEW for me! I want to hear it all... even the "keep it coming" and the "hurry the hell up" LOL Or...you can review because Thursday is my BIRTHDAY! :) I'll take reviews as my present! So, let me know what you're thinking with this one. I will post pretty soon...most likely Sat or Sun... Until then, Later...

Chapter 8

A/N... Wow! Huge response to that last chapter. Apparently a jealous, angry, just gotta have a kiss Edward is just your style. LOL Not that I blame you one bit, because that in charge, order barking, temper flaring Edward is just...hot.

This is the point where I need to remind you again, that Bella isn't...healed. And though Edward is...confused, he's *trying*.

But let's continue, shall we? Stick around at the bottom...I'm sure I'll have more to say...

CHAPTER 8

EDWARD

I gasped awake, sitting straight up in bed. A trickle of sweat ran down my neck and forehead. Running my hand through my hair, I got my breathing under control as I looked around my room. The sun wasn't up yet; even the crickets were still chirping their song outside my window.

I was used to fucked up dreams. I was used to reliving mistakes and loss of life and gunshots and explosions. I was used to seeing prisoners decaying while still alive in cells that were technically just holes in the ground. I was even used to seeing Emmett, Jasper, Mickey, and my father in these dreams. I was used to failing in missions.

I'd grown numb to the muzzle of my gun pointed directly at a child's forehead, but when that child's face morphed into the face of Isabella Swan, and I still pulled the trigger, I snapped awake, because as many times as I'd relived *that* particular dream, I'd never pulled the fucking trigger.

"Fuck," I breathed, rubbing my face and swinging my legs over the side of the bed.

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It was time to get my ass up anyway. I was supposed to relieve Jasper on his rounds around the cabin. I got up, showered quickly, and pulled on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, stowing my gun at the small of my back.

I was still a little shaky as I poured a cup of coffee and stepped out on to the deck.

"You look like hell," Jasper noted quietly with his trademark smirk in place, "and I'm the one that's been up all night."

"Thanks," I sighed, sitting down in the deck chair beside him.

He studied my face, but didn't say anything for a minute or two. "I've seen you wake up from nightmares before, but you're white as a sheet, dude," he stated, sitting forward and resting his elbows on his knees.

I snorted humorlessly. "This...was different," I muttered, looking out over the lake as the sun tried its damndest to peek up over the mountains. "Just...different."

As close as I was to my father, and even Emmett, Jasper never made me feel self-conscious about my nightmares. Emmett didn't get it, because I'm sure he'd never had one. And my father wasn't always easy to talk to about personal stuff. Jasper was - not because we always talked about personal things, but because he'd never betrayed my confidence, and he never judged me.

Jasper continued to stare at me, patiently waiting for me to tell him, but I wasn't sure that I could say it. The dream had scared me. Really fucking scared me.

"The girl?" he asked, knowing about the recurring dream from Iraq.

"Yeah, but she changed into someone else."

His nose wrinkled, and he nodded, looking down at his hands. "Your priorities are changing," he said softly, meeting my curious gaze. "I don't have to ask,

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Ed. Your face says it all. Bella was in that dream."

I nodded, looking down at my coffee cup, before bringing it up to my lips.

"You're different with her," he noted, leaning back in his chair and kicking his feet up on the ottoman. " *More*...with her. Careful, easy. That's not necessarily a bad thing, my friend." He chuckled when I glared at him. "She's good for you - strong, smart, just as...resourceful as you are."

I snorted, but nodded. He was right; Bella was all those things. The question in my head, though, was: Was I good for her?

"You're a good man, Edward," Jasper said, answering my unasked question. "Just because we have a strange job, doesn't mean we can't be good people. Your dad tries to beat that into our heads all the time. It's why he takes the jobs he does. There are 'security companies' out there that are nothing but hired hitmen. That's not us. You know that. We stop the world's bullies, bro."

I smiled, shaking my head. That was, indeed, how my father and my teammates saw our jobs, but I couldn't see past the wreckage from my days and missions in Iraq. Abu Ghraib was the best example of that, because how could we say that we were the better nation, when we were holding men for information against their will in their own country?

"How could I possibly make it work, Jasper?" I growled, running a hand through my hair. "I have no experience with relationships. She's constantly telling me I'm too bossy. And our worlds are completely different..."

"Are they?" he countered with a chuckle. "Different, I mean. From what I gather, she's just as bad ass as you are."

I laughed, remembering how calm she was in the garage, how she'd killed in defense of the two of us without batting an eye. "She's...something else," I snorted, rolling my eyes at him.

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"She's making you reevaluate everything, Edward. That's not a bad thing, either."

"She makes me crazy," I grumbled, tugging at my hair.

"Why?" he laughed. "Because she makes you feel something?"

"I don't know," I sighed, looking back out over the lake.

"I'm not saying you're not an ass, Ed. You can be...most of the time," he chuckled, shoving my shoulder, "but something is different about you since you pulled her out of that fucked up basement."

"You didn't *see* it!" I growled, turning to him, but he raised his hands in surrender.

"And judging by that reaction, I'm pretty sure I'm glad I didn't," he replied, frowning. "Carlisle says you met as kids. What was she like?"

I smiled, looking over at him. My crew had no idea about my old stutter, and they weren't going to know, but I still couldn't help but smile. "It was only the one time, you know. We were just kids."

"Yeah..."

"She was...just like she is now, but a little awkward; not that I wasn't," I laughed, and he joined me. "I'd just lost my mother, my dad was moving us to another state, but he had to stop by Charlie's on the way. I found out later it was then that he'd financially backed Swan and made a deal for weapons and stuff for his first crew. But I was thirteen then, so I knew nothing of that shit. Our dads kinda threw us together for the afternoon, and she was so...outgoing and easy to chill with."

Jasper smiled and nodded. "She's like that now."

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"She is," I agreed. "But she'd lost her mom, too. Like when she was eight or some shit, and she made it...okay. She made me completely comfortable in less than thirty seconds." I huffed a laugh at the memory, but it was true.

"And now?"

I shrugged, not knowing how to answer, because she made me feel everything - all at once. She made me feel like that kid again, like I had no control over anything. She made me feel protective and crazed. She made me want to kiss the shit out of her *and* tape her mouth closed.

Jasper nodded, stood up, and gave my shoulder a squeeze. "Right...you don't kiss and tell," he snorted.

My head shot up, and I glared at him in frustration and anger. He couldn't possibly know what had happened in that stairwell. It wasn't one of my finest moments, because I'd been angry at what Bella had said about only being an obligation, about Mickey being jealous, and with watching that suit tuck his card into Bella's jeans pocket. All of it combined made me uncomfortable, uneasy, and excruciatingly possessive - and I had no right to be that way with her. She'd been held captive for almost three days, tortured, beaten, and she sure as hell didn't need me sinking to Miller's level.

"I've never enjoyed that shit," I mumbled, shaking my head.

It was the truth, because I never understood why they compared notes on conquests. My personal life was my own, but maybe it was because I didn't do long term. Every member of my crew had been in a long term relationship at some point, but I hadn't. Jasper had dated a woman named Maria for some time, but she'd cheated once while he was on a mission. Emmett saw a funny little thing for like a year, but she'd won a scholarship for medical school, and their relationship didn't survive her studies and Emmett's traveling. Mickey dated two people for a bit - a woman and a man - but she'd broken up with them, stating irreconcilable differences.

"And you sound like Mickey," I added, looking up at him.

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He chuckled. "She's so jealous of Bella that it's taken on it's own personality. It walks, talks, lives, breathes."

"No way," I growled, standing up. "Mick's not like that."

"You're so blind, Ed. That girl has been aiming for your attention since she sat down with us the first time in the mess tent in Afghanistan. Really? You didn't know?"

I shook my head, muttering, "There's no way! All those...stories. All that talk about guys she was dating, the girls..."

"Attention!" he sang with a laugh. "She flirted at first, but then decided to become one of the guys..."

"Oh fuck," I groaned, gripping a fistful of hair. "Bella was right..."

"Bella sees that shit for a living. Of course she saw it. But it's not the type of jealousy you're thinking," he said, shaking his head. "Maybe at first, she crushed on you, but now she just idolizes you..."

"Yeah, 'cause I'm such a great example," I snorted, looking up at him when he laughed.

"I didn't say she was sane..."

I grinned, giving him a fist bump, but his attention was drawn into the house. "Ed...you should go inside..."

My head snapped around, and I watched as Bella plopped down on the sofa, her face pale, and her eyes red from crying.

"The hell?" I breathed, getting up from the lounge chair.

"Looks like you aren't the only one with nightmares..." Jasper muttered, looking over at me. "Alice says it's every night..."

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I winced, but nodded. "Looks like..."

"I'm hittin' the sack, bro. I'll see you in a few hours, okay?"

I nodded absentmindedly and went on inside. Her sobs were quiet, like she was fighting them, but her little body was shaking from head to toe, I noticed as I approached her.

"Bella?" I said softly, not wanting to scare her, but she seemed oblivious to my presence, like she didn't hear Jasper and me come in from the deck.

She looked up at me, and my heart shattered for her. "He won't leave me alone," she hiccuped softly. "He's everyone and everything in my nightmares."

I nodded, kneeling before her, but she didn't have to tell me who she was talking about. Miller.

"I'll never be normal again," she muttered, hastily swiping at her face, and I couldn't stop myself from reaching out to do the job for her.

"Normal is a state of mind," I told her, smiling when she sniffled a small laugh, but she rolled her eyes.

"He ruined me," she said, shaking her head. "I see him everywhere..."

I sighed, hating that fucker, Miller, more and more.

"You're not ruined," I whispered, wiping more tears away with my thumbs.

"You're a good person that a really fucking shitty thing happened to. That doesn't make you ruined."

She cried harder, nodding, but started rambling, "I thought I was okay. I thought I was past this shit...it fucking sucks that I can't just...move on. I still panic when someone tries to touch me."

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"You didn't panic yesterday," I teased, hoping for a smile, but I was rewarded with a sniffling giggle. I grinned, chuckling. "In fact, you just about kicked my ass."

"You were being a jerk," she countered.

"I was, and I'm sorry," I sighed, running a hand through my hair and looking up at her. "You're letting me touch you now, Bella. That's got to count for something."

She nodded again, more tears coursing down her face like two tiny rivers. As I tried in vain to wipe them away, I suddenly realized the panic of my own nightmare had faded, but the meaning of it was crystal fucking clear. I couldn't stay away from Bella any longer, because for some strange reason, she needed me - only me - and I felt honored. She didn't take this shit to her friends, or Carlisle, or even Esme; she handed it to me. In fact, it was probably mine from the second I unbuckled the first strap on that fucking table.

I sat down on the sofa next to her, taking a deep breath at that revelation, but tried not to over think it right then.

"Come here," I whispered, and she turned her head slowly to see my arms were open.

Shifting a little, she fell into my arms, the dam completely breaking open on her emotions. I wrapped my arms around her, letting her heated face burrow its way into my neck. Her strong hands gripped my t-shirt, like I would slip away.

"You're not weak, or abnormal, or wrong, or any of that, Bella," I whispered against her ear. "In fact, I'm in awe you've come this far. Most people wouldn't be able to function after something like that."

"I've heard about you, you know," I chuckled. "Your friends were bragging about you at the fire last night..."

She groaned, and I couldn't help but smile against her shoulder.

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"They told stories about how strong you are, how you stood up for what was right when it came to Jake and your dad," I continued, rubbing her back as she calmed a little. "They said most women they knew would've hid after they found out their boyfriend of so long had cheated, but not you. You left, changed your phone, and kept going.

"And you're totally unafraid of standing up to me," I chuckled against her cheek. "You're stubborn and snarky, and it pisses me off when all you do is smile when I'm trying to get something done."

She huffed a laugh against my neck, taking a deep breath. "Your way isn't always the best way, Edward," she mumbled against my skin.

I smiled, nodded, and said, "That's very true, but that doesn't mean it doesn't drive me crazy, *sweetness*."

She chuckled and sniffled again, her tears calming down even more.

"I'm...not easy to deal with, and my job makes me...bossy, Bella. I know I can be mean, and uncaring, and cold, and demanding - I don't know any other way. I just...ever since I found you in that room, I feel... *protective* of you," I admitted softly, hoping she knew that this wasn't easy for me to say. "I can't think of anything happening to you..."

She slowly pulled back, and I reached up to wipe away the rest of her tears.

"I don't know what it means, or what I'm doing," I whispered, my brow wrinkling as I frowned in contemplation.

"You're not uncaring," she whispered back, shaking her head. And as if for emphasis, she looked how we were sitting - with her in my lap, and my arms around her - and her eyes met mine again.

"I shouldn't have kissed you like that yesterday," I told her, shaking my head in shame.

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I watched in confusion when her face reddened, and she hung her head, playing with a string hanging from her shirt.

"I shouldn't have violated your space, Bella," I added, and her head snapped up, her eyes meeting my gaze. "You've had that power taken away before, and I just...forced myself on you."

"I didn't fight it," she said with a wry smile curling the corners of her mouth. "I wasn't violated..."

"I'm no better than Miller for kissing you without permission," I groaned, looking up at her, but my eyes betrayed me, because they fell to her mouth and that amazing bottom lip of hers, wanting permission this time.

"Please...don't you ever say that, Edward," she whispered, tears welling up in her eyes. " *You* aren't *him*."

"I should've asked," I breathed, licking my bottom lip and looking back into her eyes. "Not taken."

"I gave," she said, leaning in closer, and my heart twisted with what she was about to do. "Freely," she added, brushing her lips over mine with the lightest of kisses, only to pull back. "We weren't in the frame of mind to be polite, Edward..."

"And now?" I panted, my whole body aching to taste her again, to take away her tears, her fears, her self-doubt.

The anticipation was excruciating, as she reached up to touch my face. With feather light caresses, she traced her fingers over my eyebrow, down my jaw to my chin, her eyes following their path. Even with the dark circles under her red-rimmed eyes, her sleep messy hair, and her teeth biting her bottom lip, she was fucking gorgeous - just beautiful.

She said one word, and I lost all coherent thought.

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"Please..."

I closed the remaining space between us, covering her mouth with my own, and two deep moans echoed in harmony in my ears - hers and mine. I took her bottom lip as her fingers slipped into my hair, before switching to her top lip. She tasted of mint and salty tears and the same sweet taste that I'd savored against the wall the day before. But this time, instead of fighting me, her lips were soft and warm and pliant.

One of my hands gripped the back of her t-shirt, while the other cupped her face, slowly slipping into her dark curls at the base of her neck.

"More?" I asked against her lips, my breathing ragged.

"Yes," she panted, this time turning her head and diving for my mouth. "Don't stop..."

~oOo~

BELLA

"Don't stop," I breathed into his mouth as his fingers gripped my hair just a little more to turn my head, and my stomach clenched at the sound of his groan.

Kissing Edward the day before had been one thing - all heat, and anger, and primal. But at that moment, I could have melted into him, and I did.

When our tongues tentatively met, both of us seeking entrance at the same time, I pressed into him, shifting so that I was shamelessly straddling him. My taste buds ignited when I relished the flavor of him, and coffee, and just everything no other kiss was.

And suddenly, we lost all control. My hips rolled over him, feeling the promise of something... *big*. One of my hands slid under his t-shirt just to revel in the feeling of those perfect muscles clenching under my touch, while the other

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hand slipped into his sleeve. I moaned when his bicep flexed into a solid rock against my hand.

Edward gasped, breaking away from my mouth, trailing his lips and tongue down my jaw to my neck, only to suckle the flesh just below my ear.

I felt his hand release my shirt, his fingers ghosting under it along the skin of my back. His hands were soft, and warm, and surprisingly calloused, but that wasn't necessarily a bad thing, because it felt so good to have his skin against mine.

Until he trailed down to the small of my back and around to my stomach, and I completely tensed, gripping his upper arm. My midsection pulled back, my mind remembering not so nice touches being there the last time.

"Baby, we should stop," he groaned against my skin, but placed the softest, sweetest kiss to my cheek. "You're not ready for this..."

"I know," I sighed, my forehead hitting his, and I couldn't help the tears that welled up in defeat, and at the fact that his voice was so very kind when he called me baby.

"Hey," he whispered, placing both hands on the side of my face. "It's okay. It's just too much, too soon."

"Ruined." I sniffled the reminder, giving him a one shouldered shrug and a sad smile. "Not normal," I muttered, pulling back a bit.

His eyes held a sadness, with an underlying anger, and I started to climb off of his lap, but he held firm.

"Not ruined, Bella. *Bruised*," he urged softly, kissing my lips with barely a brush of his mouth. "I may not always show it, but I can be... *very* patient for something I want," he said, his voice deep and husky, and his eyes dark with heat and want as he looked up at me through his long eyelashes.

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"I will *never* take away your choice again," he vowed, looking ashamed. "But I also will protect you, even if it's from myself." He tilted his head at me in acknowledgment.

I frowned at that last statement, taking a deep breath, because I wasn't sure where we stood. "I'm not weak..." I managed to say at barely a whisper.

"Oh, I know that," he replied quickly. "I would never think that."

I nodded, because he sounded so very sincere. I looked up into his eyes - those green eyes I'd first seen coming out of that hideous basement. They were lighter, calmer now that we were talking and not kissing.

"You want this," I stated, but it was more a question. "You really want to deal with this shit?" I snorted.

I watched as his face broke into the shy, crooked grin that I liked so much. He nodded slowly, whispering, "Yes."

"Me, too," I breathed with relief that I wasn't feeling all of this alone. "But I...I just don't..."

"Shh, baby," he said, cupping my face again. "There's not any rush, because I'd prefer you... *wanting* my touch, Bella."

I could only nod, because his voice was deep, sexy, filled with what sounded like carnal promises - promises that I wanted him to keep, but I knew I wasn't ready. I could stand some forms of touching, like hugs and hand holding, even Edward's hands on my back were fine, but when it came to any place Miller had hit me, burned me, or left a bruise, my skin crawled with the memories.

I took a deep breath, but it caused a wide yawn.

Edward chuckled, but sobered up quickly. "Did you get any sleep?"

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"Not really," I sighed, shaking my head. "Every time one of the girls moved, I moved in order not to be touched. And then my dreams," I groaned, wincing at the memory. "Now if I go back, I'll wake them..."

Without saying anything, Edward stood up, keeping me in his arms. "I can fix that..." he said with a wide, sweet smile.

He walked straight to his room, kicking the door closed behind him with his foot. He pulled back the covers, settling me in and covering me up.

"You know, for someone who says they don't know what they're doing, Edward,"--I yawned again--"you sure fooled me."

He laughed softly, shaking his head. "I don't know what I'm doing. All I do know is that I can't stay away from you anymore," he whispered, his brow wrinkling as he frowned a little. "I *should*, but I *can't*."

I reached up, tracing his sharp jaw line with my finger tips. "Then *don't*."

I sounded so sure when I said those last two words, but I wondered if Edward would grow tired of waiting for me. I worried that he would lose patience, lose his temper.

"I'm not going anywhere," he said, like he was reading my mind. "I'm going to check the grounds and make some breakfast. Sleep as long as you want, okay?"

"Kay," I sighed, snuggling into the most delicious smelling sheets I'd ever come in contact with.

He grinned. "See? I've got you in my bed already."

I giggled, pushing him away, and he stood up with a chuckle. Leaning over, he placed the softest of chaste kisses to my lips, pulling away too soon.

I closed my eyes, burrowing in farther to the bed, and was asleep before he'd probably made his first trek around the house.

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~oOo~

Hands. They were always in my dreams. They would start out warm, and calloused, and comforting, but would slowly morph into clammy and small, and those *hurt*. Once they changed, I couldn't get away from them, but one voice pulled me back, pulled me up and away.

"Bella," Edward said softly, and I felt the bed shift beside me.

I came up out of sleep with a stretch and a yawn, blinking back the sunlight streaming in through the windows. I squeezed my eyes closed, and then opened them to see him watching me.

"Dream?" he asked.

"Yeah," I sighed, sitting up and crossing my legs. "But you woke me up just in time."

"At least I'm good for something," he chuckled, shrugging one shoulder.

We both turned to his bedroom door when we heard loud laughs and conversation down the hallway.

I looked up at him, asking, "Do they know where I am?"

"Yeah, I told them you had a nightmare and that I was getting up, so I gave you my room," he said, shrugging again, but he looked embarrassed. "What we are is none of their business, Bella."

I could see now how they could tease him about keeping things to himself - about not kissing and telling. He didn't tell them anything more than he had to. It didn't make him better than they were - just private. He told everyone about my dreams, because that was public knowledge, but when it came to anything else that had transpired between us, he kept it to himself, because it wasn't totally his to share. Edward was a loyal person.

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"And what are we?" I asked, pushing and pulling at him until he mirrored my position, our knees touching.

"Confused?" he chuckled.

"That we are," I giggled, and I watched as his hand lifted, hovering above the covers, before he set it back down.

I scooted closer, shaking my head. "Don't do that," I told him, picking up his hand. "Don't be afraid to touch me, Edward. You've touched me before, and it was fine - *kissing* is fine. Can you trust me to tell you when it's *not* fine?"

He nodded, reaching up to cup my face, his own relieved. "I d-don't want to hurt you," he said, his sweet stutter spilling out into the air. "But I'm d-drawn to you..."

"And me to you," I told him, running my fingers through his hair. Edward closed his eyes and leaned into my touch. "You say you don't know what you're doing. Tell me why you think that."

He sighed, looking down at his lap before speaking. "My last long term...relationship was in high school, Bella."

I studied his face, and I could imagine that was true. He was shipped out overseas just after graduation, staying there for a few years. After that, he came home to a job that required a lot of travel, and it was damned dangerous. Not many women could put up with that; they would be a nervous wreck. I could imagine Edward kept women at arms length, just to prevent the inevitable fight.

"Jake didn't want me to go to Quantico. Did he tell you?" I asked suddenly, but Edward shook his head no. "He and my father thought the job was too dangerous. And when I came home, they were over the top happy. But when I turned around and started talking about opening Gravity, Jake was pissed. He hated my job. He hated that I left for days, that I carried a gun, that I could get hurt.

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"It was coming home from being gone a week that I found him cheating," I continued. "At first, he said that it was none of my business, and after he got out of the hospital..."

Edward laughed, his head falling back, and God, if he wasn't beautifully sexy when he laughed.

"When he got out of the hospital," I chuckled, "he told me that he couldn't stand that I wasn't there, that he could lose me at anytime. He was putting walls up, protecting himself, I'm sure. Is that what you're afraid of, Edward?"

He nodded slowly, his brow wrinkling a bit.

"You're afraid that a girl can't handle what you are?" I asked.

He took a deep breath, looking out the window, instead of at me. "Most can't. I imagine most military wives feel that way. So after a while, I just didn't allow relationships to continue past a certain point."

Past a certain point. I smirked at his phrasing, because I knew what he was saying. "I'm not a one night stand, Edward..."

"No," he snapped back, his mouth hanging open in shock or embarrassment. "That's not...I didn't mean..."

"I know," I sighed, taking his hands and playing with his fingers. I could see callouses from his gun, because I had ones just like them. But I could also see different callouses, most likely from building things, making furniture. "But I'm not even...whole. I don't know if...it's worth your time. You make me feel safe, but I won't use you..."

"I want you to feel safe with me," he whispered, pulling me to his lap. "Is this okay?" he asked, looking in my eyes as I settled against him with a nod. "I want...more, Bella. I want you to tell me what you need. I want...you to guide me, because I'm..."

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I reached up and touched my fingers to his lips. "So we're trying?" I asked, scared shitless about this whole thing as I looked at him.

He was handsome and independent. He didn't need to do much to get women - hell, there were two in the house, besides myself, that were crushing on him *hard* - so I worried that his patience would run out with me. What if he could never touch me - the way we both seemed to want?

"I want to," he admitted softly, his eyes so sincere, so very green as his long eyelashes closed slowly, and then opened again.

"Okay," I said, my voice a little shaky, but I nodded anyway. "Then kiss me again, Edward."

~oOo~

EDWARD

"Then kiss me again, Edward," she commanded, and I couldn't help but smile at her.

She was so confident in some areas, but still very fragile in others. It was why I'd been afraid to reach out and touch her when she'd first woken up all sweet and giggly and sleepy-cute. And the sight of her in my bed was no help.

I knew I was supposed to be waking her up, telling her to get ready, because the whole lot of them decided a trip into the small town of Trinity was absolutely fucking necessary - that we couldn't move on in our lives until we'd gone to fucking Wal-mart - but Bella made me forget everything but her.

I leaned in, remembering that my hands on her back had been okay, and I pulled her to me. As soon as our lips met, I was overcome with a sense of *right*. I didn't always kiss the girls I'd been with, at least not this much, but I found that I wanted to kiss Bella. I found that I wanted to get to know her, learn about her, and in turn, let her teach me what was okay, what I was supposed to do.

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It seemed that every time our mouths met, we lost control, and I swear to God, I tried to maintain my hands in one place, but the urge to pull, push, and grip her was killing me.

I broke away from her mouth, skimming my lips across her cheek and down to her neck. "I want to touch you so fucking bad," I breathed against her warm skin. "Tell me where, baby..."

That term of endearment would be my undoing, because she was precious to me, fragile to me - like a child. And the more I used it, the more I felt my control and my walls just slip away. It scared the holy hell out of me.

Bella pulled back, her face pained just a bit, and her breathing ragged. She took my hands in hers. "You were fine on my back," she whispered, her voice shaky, and I realized that this made her nervous.

There was determination on her face, too, though. Her eyes were dark, her lids heavy, but her hands trembled against my own. And I hated that Miller had made her this way, because I'd be willing to bet that before her kidnapping, Bella Swan had been a beautiful, sexual creature - enough to bring any man to his knees just to be able to touch her.

"He...he hurt my front...more than anything," she said, her voice still soft and tentative. "I'm okay with this," she told me, taking my hands along the outside of her thighs towards her bottom, but not quite. "This is fine," she said, looking me in the eyes as she let me touch her sides, back, and finally, to her ass, which was firmly planted on my lap.

I nodded in understanding, pulling my hands from her grasp. "What about here?" I asked, reaching slowly up to her neck and collar bones, tracing them both with my finger tips.

"It's fine..." she said with a nod. "My shoulders, my arms...that's okay."

I nodded again, reveling that we could figure this out, that I could touch her in some way. I started at her shoulders, and she stayed so very still as I glided my

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hands softly down her arms, picking up her hands and kissing her fingers. I reached around to her back, tracing down her spine, smirking when she shivered.

"Too much?" I asked.

"Tickles," she giggled, biting her bottom lip.

I chuckled, happy that I'd gotten her to make that sound again. "Sorry."

"I'm not."

I grinned again, leaning my forehead to hers when my hands finally came into contact with her ass. I groaned when I could feel her muscles, her strength, but also how plump and firm it was. I'd seen it jeans and shorts, but to touch it, to massage it, was phenomenal. It made me realize just how much I wanted her, as well as my arousal that was starting to make itself be known.

"I'm glad this is okay," I said with a half smile.

She laughed again, leaning in to press her lips to mine. "Are you an ass man, Edward?" she snorted as she kissed down my jaw.

"I'm...an everything man," I answered honestly, but it caused her to truly laugh against my neck.

"Nice," she said wryly, but groaned when I squeezed her cheeks a bit, and the act caused her hips to roll against me.

"Shit..." I hissed at the sensation of friction over my cock, my head falling to her shoulder. "Oh, baby...you're..."

"I'm sorry," she said, pulling my face back. "This is hell..."

I grimaced, because in some form it was - my erection was now throbbing for attention that I knew it wouldn't get just yet - but this was her show. This was

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about what she could handle.

"Don't be," I said, leaning into kiss her as my hands moved down her thighs. " *I* can handle anything, Bella. *You* have to tell *me*, okay?" I whispered against her lips.

God, I fucking wanted to devour this girl, which was such a new sensation for me. I wanted to be consumed by her, and it made me feel helpless and out of control, but sort of pleased that she felt the same way; she just had a hurdle to overcome.

"Ed, what the hell, man?" I heard Emmett boom from just outside the bedroom door.

We both jumped, looking up at each other. Our breathing was heavy, and Bella's face was flushed pink and embarrassed.

"If you were still asleep, I'd have shot him for that, for disturbing you," I told her in her ear.

She snorted into the cutest, deepest laugh, burying her face in her hands.
"Edward, they're gonna figure this out..."

"Let 'em," I sighed, rolling my eyes.

"Esme thinks she knows," she stated, extricating herself from my lap, and I felt the loss of her instantly.

"We'll deal with whatever they dish out," I told her, shrugging when she looked at me.

"We don't have to tell them..." she started, her brow wrinkling as she stood up from the bed. "I know you're a private person..."

"I've never told them anything about my...personal business," I stated, standing up in front of her. "Jasper kinda figured me out..."

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She chuckled, nodded, and stretched up on her toes to kiss my cheek. "You're in for a shock with Mickey, Edward. Mark my words."

"That's what Jasper said." I groaned, shaking my head, but I wrapped my arms around her waist. "I will handle it..." I told her with a raised eyebrow.

"Anyway...I was *supposed* to wake you, because everyone wanted to go into the little town. They *swear* they need to go shopping for supplies."

"What supplies?" she snorted.

"I don't know...I've never been so outnumbered by women, Bella," I whined, rolling my eyes. "I heard something about bathing suits, and movies to watch, and girly things that made my skin crawl."

Bella laughed, pushing away from me. "We're all going?"

"Yes... it's a fucking field trip," I grumbled. "Everyone is going..."

She giggled again, shaking her head. "Okay, I'll go get ready." She stepped towards the door, but stopped just before opening it. "Thanks for the use of your bed."

I smiled and nodded. "Sure...anytime, baby..."

~oOo~

"I'll take care of whatever you need, Mack," Bella urged, "but you can't use your credit card, sweetie."

Apparently, Bella had stashed some cash in her bag that I'd found in the hotel room, because she was right. Carlisle had received a call from Cheney, telling him to stay low, stay hidden, because Rose's, Alice's, and Makenna's homes had been ransacked, so someone was looking for them.

"Using that card is like a giant arrow pointing to you, saying 'here I am,'" I told her, fighting the urge to roll my eyes when she blushed. "They're looking for

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you four girls," I added, looking around the giant ass Wal-mart, because once we'd piled out of two vehicles, they'd all scattered to the four winds inside that damn store.

"Kay," she sighed, turning to Bella and biting her thumbnail. "This is instead of a paycheck, isn't it?"

"No, silly girl," Bella chuckled. "You'll get paid...when we get out of this mess, Mack. And stop that!" she growled, smacking at the poor girl's hand. "Do have any idea how gross that is?"

Alice popped in beside them, stating, "Your fingernails are filled with bacteria - from skin cells to fecal matter, Makenna. Every door you've touched, every itch you've scratched, and everything you've picked up in this God forsaken store is going in your mouth when you do that."

"Ugh," I gagged, turning away from them as they howled with laughter. "When you put it that way, it's a wonder we aren't all OCD...carrying bottles of that anti-bacterial shit..."

"Ooh, I'll get some of that!" Makenna chirped with wide eyes, running off down the aisle.

"Fan-girl," Alice and Bella muttered at the same.

"What...does...that...mean?" I growled. "Define it for me."

Alice grinned, looking over at Bella, who was smirking with her arms crossed over her chest. We were standing in the middle of the soda aisle, trying our damndest to accommodate ten fucking people.

"She thinks you're *so* cute," Bella sang, reaching up to pinch my cheek, and I playfully swatted her away, much to Alice's amusement. "She would have posters of you on her wall. She lives to stare at you. If you asked her, she'd probably want your autograph..."

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Alice snorted into hysterical giggles, nodding in agreement. "You are eye-candy for her..."

I groaned, shaking my head. "Can we just get this shit done?" I growled, trying to change the subject.

Bella fought her smile and nodded. "Sure thing... *pretty boy*."

"Stop," I grumped, pushing the cart down the aisle and leaving them to their laughter.

When I walked around the corner to the next aisle, the chip aisle, I was met with the sweetest sight. Apparently, Bella had walked the opposite direction, and she was standing on her tiptoes to try and reach a bag of corn chips on the top shelf. Her t-shirt had lifted up, showing just the bare sliver of her skin.

I tried to ignore the small scar on her belly just above her jeans, so I walked up behind her, grabbing the bag, and let my body press into her back.

She spun in front of me, leaning back against the shelves.

"You could ask for help, short stuff," I told her.

"I could," she sighed, reaching out and grabbing my belt loops to pull me close enough to try and reach the bag of chips in my hand.

I shot them high into the air, out of her reach. "No, no, no," I chided with a smirk, laughing as she tried to practically climb me to get to them. "There's a fee involved with my height services," I told her, trying to sound sincere, but failing miserably, because she was giggling up at me.

"What do you want, Edward?" she growled, and it was damned sexy.

"Kiss me," I purred, leaning towards her.

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"We're gonna get busted, you know," she whispered, closing some of the distance. "You'll have a lot explaining to do, sir."

"Don't care," I said, finally covering her mouth with mine. I knew deep down, she was right, but there was a part of me that just didn't give a shit.

Still with one hand in the air, holding the bag of chips, my other arm wrapped around her middle, holding her close. Kissing her was like a drug, and I found myself thinking more and more about it. I turned my head just to delve my tongue deeper, to taste more of her, but we were interrupted by the clearing of a throat.

"Hmm, who knew that corn chips were that damn romantic," we both heard behind us, and we gasped apart to see Esme standing there with a smirk on her face.

"They don't call them *Lay's* for nothin'," Bella muttered, causing me to snort into laughter.

"If you two are quite finished, we need to go. Carlisle just got a phone call that wasn't...good," she said, shaking her head. "But he wants everyone home when he talks about it, so finish up quickly, okay?"

She started to turn away, but stopped, facing us again with her finger pointed at us, and said, "And I *knew* something was different about the two of you!"

Bella and I both chuckled, but worked our way towards the checkout lines.

It took most of an hour to get ten people checked out, bags loaded into trunks, and back to the cabin. By then, I had begun to notice my father's behavior. He was nervous and angry. He was pacing by the time we all met in the living room, falling into chairs, sofas, and ottomans.

He looked to me as I sat next to Bella, and I watched as his eyes darkened as he set his eyes on her. She shifted uncomfortably under his gaze, but said nothing.

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"As you all know," he started, taking a deep breath before continuing, "Ben let us know that the girls' apartments were broken into."

We all nodded, but stayed quiet.

"We have a little problem now," he sighed, walking over to his laptop that was hooked up to the flatscreen. He pressed a few buttons, and a video started to play. It looked like the evening news in Seattle, because I recognized the attractive blonde I'd put on when I was making breakfast every morning.

Royce King was arrested today at his home just outside of Seattle. He's being detained without bail for charges varying from gun trafficking to terrorism. King has been rumored for a number of years to be involved in various illegal activities, and has been quoted claiming to be the last Godfather .

Up until this morning, the FBI had remained quiet concerning the two men they took into protective custody just a few days ago, but Charlie Swan, CEO and founder of the multi-million dollar company, Twilight Technology, has been removed from the area, his position at the company's headquarters, and has not been seen at his home in weeks. It's rumored that Mr. Swan is the primary witness against Royce King.

The film footage that was showing as the news woman spoke was the basic "perp walk," where they march the accused right in front of all the media right into the police station. King looked smug and unworried. He looked like a very rich man that could pay his way out of anything. He wasn't as old as I was expecting, maybe in his mid-fifties, wearing a flawless suit, not a single gray hair out of place.

A spokesperson from Twilight Tech, who wouldn't go on camera for us, stated that not only is Charlie Swan in protective custody with the FBI, but Swan's twenty-six-year-old daughter, Isabella, is currently missing.

"Oh, damn," Bella sighed, shaking her head.

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When Channel Six News asked the police about Isabella Swan, they told us that it had been reported, and there is now an ongoing investigation into her disappearance. Authorities in California reported finding Isabella's car in the parking lot of a hotel just off of the highway. It was also reported that she had checked into that same hotel, and from there, she hasn't been seen.

"My fucking car!" Bella growled, looking up at my father.

He fought his smile, shaking his head. "I know you love that precious Mustang, Bells, but I wasn't concerned about it when I found your *blood* in your hotel room."

She pouted, folding her arms across her chest. "And now...the whole damn world's looking for me."

"And then some," Alice muttered, typing away on her laptop. "Cheney just sent pictures to me of Jake's house..." she said with a wrinkle to her nose, spinning the computer around so that we could all see a little house, almost in shambles, with broken windows, a busted in door, and the garage wide open. She spun the computer back around and typed a little more, only to turn it towards us again. "And this is Gravity..." She winced when Bella and Makenna both swore loudly.

Bella's office was burned to the ground. And while the headline on the newspaper article stated arson, we were all pretty sure it was King's men.

"These are warnings, Bella. You have to stay out of sight," my father told her. "However, I need to get to TT. I need to find out exactly who has deemed themselves as the official spokesperson."

Bella snorted, shaking her head. "You know who it is," she growled, looking up at him.

"Yes, but I can't outright accuse him," he countered.

"You're thinking Jacob's father, aren't you?" I asked, looking between them.

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Bella nodded, but it was my father that spoke.

"Billy Black went to college with Charlie. He majored in Accounting. He's a genius with money and numbers," he said, starting to pace back and forth.

"When I retired from the Air Force, and you and I stopped at the Swans when you were young, Charlie was having some financial trouble with TT. Billy had made some poor investments, and I bailed them out. Charlie put me on the board that very day. If something were to happen to Charlie, the control of TT falls to me. If something happens to *me*, then it falls to Billy Black."

Bella huffed, her face dark as she sat next to me, studying the floor.

"Why wouldn't Bella inherit it?" Makenna asked. "I mean...she *is* his daughter."

"I don't want it," Bella muttered, shaking her head, her face filled with a look of disgust.

"This...is a money thing," Alice added, looking over the top of her laptop. "I've done more research on Billy Black than any sane person should, but he's clean, or at least, he was the last time I checked. He's not in bed with any of King's men, but from what I gather, it wouldn't break his heart. Jake isn't like his father, at all, so Charlie's safe with him."

"However, with all that's going on," Bella sighed, leaning forward on the sofa, "it wouldn't shock me one bit if he used it to his advantage... *or*," she growled, holding up a finger to my dad, "King's threatening him."

"And that's my theory, too, Bella," my father said with a nod and quite the proud smirk on his face. "So I need to go back to Seattle, shake things at TT up a bit, see what crawls out."

He turned his attention to me. "Stay here. No one leaves unless absolutely necessary, especially Isabella. The last thing we need is an overzealous podunk cop with an overgrown sense of heroism. The minute she's reported found, she's a target again." He turned to Alice with smile. "I take it you've figured out

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how to communicate with Ben."

"Yes, sir," she chirped with a huge grin. "He's using multiple routers, and so am I. If anyone were trying to track us, they'd ping to about seven different countries, before they were rerouted back to the beginning randomly... In fact..."

"Okay!" Bella cracked up. "You're the shit. We all know it. A simple 'yeah, no problem' would've worked."

Alice grinned. "Yeah, no problem!"

We all cracked the hell up, because she was hilarious and a fucking genius on top of it.

My father snorted, rolled his eyes, and turned back to me. "You're in charge. If something goes wrong while I'm gone, you know what to do."

"Yes, sir," I told him.

"Any questions before I go?" he asked, looking around the room.

"How long will you be gone?" Emmett asked, shifting forward in his chair.

"Not sure, but thanks to Alice, my laptop is secure. I can only get email as contact," he sighed. "I want to get in and get out. I need to make an appearance at TT to assure that Billy doesn't start assuming command since Charlie is MIA. But I also want to make sure there isn't anyone threatening him, either." He looked around at all of us, asking if we had questions one more time.

"Yeah," Mickey huffed, rolling her eyes. "Can I go with you? You're gonna need backup, and this slumber party shit is for high school cheerleaders."

Nine heads spun around to look at her, some offended, others amused. Makenna, who'd been bunking with Mickey, looked rather hurt. Bella and Jasper, however, didn't look surprised at all.

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"No, Mick. I can't bring you anywhere near TT," my father answered, his face slightly confused. "I need you here. I need double the guards at night. I hope no one traces Bella and the girls to me, but if they do, they may just be able to find every property, everything that's in my name."

"Fine," she sighed, rolling her eyes dramatically.

I was just about to snap at her for disrespect, but my father interrupted me.

"Edward, I'd like to see you before I go," he ordered, and I stood up, giving Mickey a warning glare that I was pretty sure she was ignoring.

We walked out onto the back deck, continuing down to the lake shore, before he turned around to glare at me.

"What the holy *fuck* are you doing, son?" he growled, his hands balling up into fists. "Bella?"

"What about Bella?" I asked, not giving shit away.

"Do you even care about her? Because, Edward, if she's just another girl to you... She's fucking better than that!"

"Don't!" I growled, stepping closer. "She's not just another girl. She's... *important*."

He stopped, pulling back to study my face. "How important, son?" he asked, his demeanor calming just a bit.

"Like...I'd rather die than anything happen to her." I sighed in frustration and defeat, but I needed his advice, whether I wanted to admit it or not. Running a hand through my hair, I gazed out over the lake. "Like...I don't know what the hell I'm doing, but I can't find it in me to stop."

My father chuckled. "I'm sure she can handle you..."

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"It's not funny," I whispered, turning to look at him. "She's...I mean... This is between us, right?"

"Always," he said, sobering quickly.

"Miller hurt her...so badly. I just don't know what to do..." I gripped my hair again, feeling like a kid for running to my father, but I needed guidance. "I want to help her, and I want to be with her, but..."

"Does she feel the same?"

I nodded, smiling a little. "Yeah, I think so. I mean, I'm pretty sure. Shit, I sound like a fucking kid with a crush, and this so much more than that. More serious. More intense..."

He smiled, but it was a sad smile. "I'm going to give you two pieces of advice, Edward. Listen closely, okay?" he asked, raising his eyebrows at me until I nodded. "First, that feeling...it's the best, worst, most terrifying, and yet, most beautiful feeling in the world. There's nothing like it. And it just doesn't come along all the time. So you have to pamper it, nurture it, and treat it gently. You've got to hold on to it for dear fucking life, because it's so damn precious, and so easily lost. Got me?"

I nodded again, swallowing hard, because I knew he was talking about him and my mom at this point.

"Good," he said gruffly, frowning a bit. "Next... I know Bella has been through some things that I'm guessing she's only felt comfortable sharing with you. Am I right?"

"Yes, sir."

He nodded, took a deep breath, and let it out. "You're loyal to a fault, son, but Bella needs to talk to someone."

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"She talks to me..." I interrupted in a growl, because I knew Bella couldn't share her experience just yet. "She's comfortable...with me."

"Okay," he said, holding up his hands. "Then at least talk to Esme, Edward. She's been worried about the girl. You don't need to give her specifics, but at least she can guide you. And anything you say to her will be kept in the strictest of confidences."

"I'll think about it. I'm not saying no, Dad. This is new, and I don't want to rush Bella into anything that hurts her..."

He nodded in understanding, reaching up to squeeze my shoulder. "You be careful while I'm gone. Take care of them, son. But make sure they do what they're supposed to do, because I see they're starting to get distracted - you, included. One unguarded moment can have disastrous outcomes. And you know what to do if something happens."

"I do," I told him, hugging him roughly, before quickly letting him go. "Watch your back, Dad. We'll be in touch."

He gave me a quick nod, before walking away. I stared out over the lake, hoping like hell that nothing happened to him.

A/N... Okay, so we're losing Carlisle. He's heading out to spy on Billy Black.

So both Bella and Edward have admitted to being drawn to one another, but she can't be touched in certain places. I can't say that I don't understand. After what she's been through, it's *completely* understandable. However, our boy can't stop himself, because he looks like totally willing to work within Bella's boundaries. He also utterly regrets kissing her with force in that stairwell.

Jasper is...well, he's Jasper. He's calm and seemingly all knowing. LOL

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Now...Mickey. She has worked most of you into a frenzy. Her issues are revealed in the next chapter, and that's the chapter that I need to give warning about. There are some details of Bella's captivity that comes out...I want you guys prepared.

Now...Makenna. Have you figured out her crush on Edward is harmless? If you hadn't before this chapter...Bella and Alice's reactions in Wal-Mart should have clued you in. She just likes a pretty face. And it doesn't get any prettier than Edward... LOL She just likes to look. And who could blame her?

Your theories on Makenna and Mickey as far as coupling goes... Yes, I'm using all canon couples. But I can't reveal what my two girls are gonna do. That would be cheating. But I will say this...they do not end up as a couple. Does that help? Probably not, it probably just starts all your minds working overtime!

I want to thank JenRar for beta'ing this for me... who's constantly going...MORE! LOL ;)

I also want to thank all of you who wished me a Happy Birthday! It was an awesome day.

Now...review for me! Review because you have to beat this last chapter...which, by the way, had the most reviews for one chapter that I've ever had! THANK YOU! Let's do it again. The next posting will most likely be around Monday. So let me hear it...whether it's 'Holy crap, how long will Carlisle be gone?' or it's 'Is Edward gonna kill Mickey when he comes back in?' Hell, I'll even take a 'Just hurry the hell up Monday!' LOL Let me know... Until then, Later...

Chapter 9

A/N...This chapter comes with a warning label. The things you will read will not be pretty, though I'm sure most of you can use your imaginations when it comes to Bella's captivity. But I feel it necessary to warn you anyway.

Second...you will find out what Mickey's problem is...some of you said pure jealousy, some said she was like Rose - just plain loyal to her boys - and others think there's a sinister part to her. We'll see the real reason...I promise.

Oh yeah...and I wrote this first paragraph WAY before the incident in Japan...just FYI. My thoughts, prayers and hopes go out to everyone over there...

So... let's get to it, but stick around at the bottom...

CHAPTER 9

BELLA

I knew my girls well enough to know that as soon as Carlisle and Edward left the living room, they were about to turn on Mickey. I grabbed Makenna's hand tightly, but there wasn't a force on God's green earth that could stop Rose's mouth. I've tried. It was like trying to fight a tsunami.

"What the *fuck* is your problem?" she asked coolly, looking nonchalant from the loveseat across the room, but I knew she was anything but nonchalant. She was pissed.

The room grew eerily quiet as Makenna scooted closer to me, and Emmett and Jasper stared wide-eyed between the girls. Mickey tried to pretend she didn't hear her, but Rose was like a pissed off bulldog; she wouldn't let it go.

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"It's obviously not the *job* that bothers you, since it's the living arrangements you attacked," Rose continued, sitting forward.

She had been sitting next to Emmett, but he shifted uncomfortably when he most likely felt her mood change.

"This isn't a job; it's a fucking death sentence," Mickey growled, finally looking up with fire in her eyes. "We'll be lucky to see Carlisle step through those doors again."

Esme inhaled sharply from her seat at the kitchen counter and slid gracefully to the floor. "Carlisle is quite capable of taking care of himself in this situation, Michelle."

Her eyes snapped over to Esme at the sound of her real name. "Don't call me that, and I was simply offering to help Carlisle. It's his own fault if King's men get to him."

Suddenly, the therapist that Esme was kicked into gear, because she switched up so quickly, we all spun our heads to look at her.

"Who gave you the nickname, Mickey?" Esme asked softly, a knowing look on her face, like she was about to prove a theory.

Mickey scoffed, rolling her eyes and waving the question away, but it was Jasper that answered.

"Eddie did," he said calmly. "It was after we'd worked our first mission together. He told her that a woman that could fight like a man needed a stronger name. Remember, Mick? He said you didn't look like a Michelle, but that you needed something cooler?"

I watched her face redden, either in embarrassment or in anger. I just wasn't sure which.

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Alice and Rose looked over at me, but I shook my head to keep them quiet. I'd seen this coming, because I could recognize jealousy from a mile away. I saw it in my job just about on a daily basis. I wasn't worried about her feelings for Edward, because I saw the way he treated her. She was a member of his team, his *employee*, and he'd yelled that she was like a sister to him when we'd had our fight in the stairwell of the law office. I'd figured out Edward's personality when it came to certain things, and I could tell the way he talked to me had changed; it was a completely different tone than the way he talked to everyone else.

"Shut up, Jazz," she snapped, shaking her head, but she turned her hateful glare on me. "This is your fucking father's fault."

"No, shit," I huffed, "but you look like you're blaming me. I didn't start this shit." I gripped Makenna's hand when she shifted again next to me, because my girls were nothing if not protective of each other and me.

"Look, I get it," she started, rolling her eyes again. "Your dad and Carlisle are friends, but I just don't know why the Feds can't watch you...why we're doing it. We have better things to do than watch a bunch of cheer..."

"If the fucking word cheerleader pops out of your mouth one more time," Rose snapped, standing up, "you'll need a machine to breathe when I'm through with you."

Rose stood, Mickey stood, and I stepped between them.

"Rose, don't," I told her.

"Yeah, Barbie, don't," Mickey mimicked. "You might just break a nail..."

Rose stepped towards her, and I stopped her. "Don't do it," I told my best friend. "I'm telling you, Rose..."

"Bells..." she growled, her eyes locked on Mickey behind me.

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"Mickey, exactly what about these girls is making you this angry?" Esme asked, and now everyone was on their feet, because the tension was mounting high in the room.

"Look, I get that this is a job," she said, shifting on her feet, "but they're using this shit to their advantage. They're fucking around, causing a distraction, and someone's gonna get killed!"

"No one's a distraction, Mickey," Esme said calmly, moving just a touch closer to her. "Everyone here has a job to do. Yes, Bella is the prime target, but her girls are in just as much trouble. I know that this is frustrating for you, but I'm pretty sure everyone in this room is aware of the danger."

"How do you know what's frustrating to me?" she snapped back.

"Mick, you need to calm down before Edward gets back in here," Jasper warned, giving her a raised eyebrow.

"Why, is he afraid I'll hurt his little whore's feelings?" she sneered.

I smiled, took a deep breath, hearing my girls' groans as I turned my attention to Mickey. "You should ask him," I told her, stepping towards her. "When he gets in here, ask him."

"You think you know him," she countered. "When this is over, he's gonna drop you like a bad habit."

"Okay..." I shrugged, not sure where I stood where mine and Edward's future was concerned. It was hard enough living day to day at the moment. "But what does that have to do with you? What do you care what he does? From what I've heard, he doesn't tell you guys about it, anyway."

I heard Emmett and Jasper snort softly, and Mickey shot them both glares. "You two, shut the fuck up. You're no better trying to hook up with the fairy and Barbie here," she told them, gesturing to Alice and Rose.

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"Pixie," Alice snorted. "Get it right..."

Mickey huffed a humorless laugh, rolling her eyes again.

"What-the-fuck-ever," she snorted. "I just wish this was over so that you bitches could go back to the *Mystery Machine*, solving stupid cases, and we can go back to the way things were."

There it was. I saw her fear in that moment, because as I looked around the room, I could see it. Alice had shifted to stand next to Jasper, and Emmett had now taken a protective stance just barely in front of Rose. She was losing her whole team; at least, that was the way she saw it.

"Please don't call them that," Emmett stated firmly. "Mick, we've been together for a long time, but I would appreciate it if you wouldn't speak for me..."

Her mouth fell open when he'd finished. I didn't speak to Emmett as much as I spoke to Jasper, but from what I could tell, he was a damn easy going guy. Nothing really bugged him, and there wasn't anything he couldn't find the humor in, but I could tell what she'd just said really pissed him off.

He shot a nervous glance Rose's way, but turned his attention to Mickey.

"We're making the best of this situation, but these girls are cool, Mick. You seem to be the only one that can't see it..."

I turned my attention back to her, asking, "Where's your family, Mickey?"

Esme smirked, but hid it quickly, saying nothing.

"You shut the fuck up," she whispered, glaring at me with pure hatred. "I don't have any. Those boys are my only family."

"You're afraid of losing them, right?" I asked, trying to keep my voice calm, because if I put myself in her shoes, I completely understood it. They were her family. They took care of her, worried about her, and joked with her. They made her feel like she was a part of something.

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Mickey said nothing, but seethed in front of me.

"Yo, Mick," Emmett said, rubbing his face. "We're not going anywhere, babe. Seriously. We're still a team. What makes you think..."

She shook her head back and forth slowly. "'Cause ever since Edward pulled this stupid bitch out of that room...things are different. This team isn't the same..."

"You're right," Esme whispered to her. "It's better. You guys worked together really well in Seattle. What's changed?"

"Her," Mickey sneered, pointing to me.

"What about her?" we all heard from the sliding glass door. It was a cross between a snarl and a growl, but I flinched when I heard it.

Edward stood in the doorway, absolutely boiling over with this temper. I'd seen him pissed at her for talking back to Carlisle earlier, but this didn't come anywhere near it. This was a whole new level of anger.

"Nothing," she mumbled with a shrug, and started to leave the room.

"Stop, Mickey. This isn't over," he growled. "I asked you a question. Answer it!"

We all jumped at the command, and Jasper and Emmett looked nervous. I was pretty sure they'd all had to deal with Edward's temper at some point in their careers.

"Answer the fucking question, Mickey!" he yelled, his hands balling into fists at his side.

"She's ruining everything!" she screamed, turning in front of him. "You saved her, I get it. Can't you just fuck her and turn her loose like the rest of them?"

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I gasped, looking over at him. If he didn't understand that she was jealous before, he got it right then, because his face flickered from anger, to shock, to disgust - and it was that last emotion that shattered her.

"Edward, stop," I urged, shaking my head. "Just let it go."

His head snapped up to meet my gaze, and I winced, shaking my head. His gaze softened, but that didn't stop his anger. It also made him realize that his private life was no longer private.

"What I do...is *none* of your fucking concern," Edward stated, his voice not as loud, but still laced with a deep, menacing tone. "Mickey, your lack of respect ends now. You will do as your told. You will treat this as any other job and act accordingly. If I hear otherwise, this will be the last job you do on my team. Do I make myself clear?"

"Sir," she sneered at him. "When *you* act professionally, then I will, too."

"I don't fucking answer to you, Michelle. You work for me. You answer to me. If you are no longer a productive member of this team, I need to know right fucking now." He stepped closer to me, and she totally saw it.

"I think your sympathy sex worked, Edward. She seems fine now..." Mickey muttered, rolling her eyes at me for the last time, because instead of Edward losing his temper, I did.

She started to turn, but before Edward could reach her, I grabbed her arm. It was time I got this shit off of my chest anyway, though I was shaking when I started to speak.

"Fine, you say?" I asked, not yelling, not growling, but trying my best to stay calm.

My girls shifted behind me, but I heard Jasper whisper, "No, no, no."

Blood & Glory

"I was held in a basement for almost three days solid with no food or water. I watched a man beaten to death by another man, simply because he was in the fucking way. And Miller used me as a fucking pin cushion, laughing the entire fucking time." I panted in front her, because only Esme had seen what I was about show an entire room of people.

I lifted my shirt, just enough to show my stomach. "Does this look *fine* to you?" I asked, watching her face contort in shame and disgust. "Miller loved bruises, but he liked the smell of burning flesh better. He used a lighter just like the one over there on the mantle; I can't bring myself to even touch it. He used a knife to cut my clothes off, not giving two shits if he cut me or not. And the entire time he did those things, he told me - *in explicit detail* - how he was going to fuck every orifice I had. He asked me questions that I didn't have the answers to, and he didn't care. He kept me strapped to a metal table in a fucking freezing room, every once in a while setting a rat at my feet. He would pour water on my face, and laugh when I vomited off the side of the table when I choked on it, which eventually turned to just dry heaves. He told me that no one would find me, that he would find my father next and make lampshades out of his skin, only after showing him pictures of what I looked like when he was through with me. My father, Mickey. You've met him, and despite all of his faults, do you think he could have handled that?"

She shook her head, but her eyes never left my scarred skin.

When the bruises had finally healed, I was left with a fair amount of small cuts. I still had a very small scar - small, thanks to Esme's beautiful stitch up job - across my eyebrow and a long one down my thigh. It was the burns she was looking at. There were two. They were the shape of two fairly large leeches on either side of my abs, along with a few other smaller scars here and there, but that was only a part of them.

"What you can't see are the hits, Mickey. You have no idea what it's like to be held down while some asshole fucking touches you in places that used to be private. And I fucking relive it every time I close my eyes. Does that still sound *fine* to you?" I asked, finally dropping my t-shirt back down.

Blood & Glory

She shook her head no, her face paling as I stepped closer to her.

"We aren't taking them away from you. I wouldn't dream of coming between you and your team, Mickey, but I can't say that I regret Edward coming down into that basement. His timing was...impeccable. I know that these circumstances aren't ideal, but my girls are used to making the best of it. Forgive them for just trying to get along, help, and maybe make a few friends. Yes, my father started this, but I didn't ask to be taken. And whatever happens between me and Edward is none of your goddamn concern. But I will tell you this...your opinion on whether I'm fine or not doesn't mean shit to me," I told her, but my expulsion of all that internal poison caused my stomach to roil.

I left the room, barely making it to the bathroom at the end of the hall, losing everything I'd eaten that day - and then some, it seemed. My whole body shook as I fell to my knees next to the toilet. I heaved again, and felt warm, gentle hands pull my hair back as I sobbed.

I felt a cool cloth on the back of my neck, and I looked up to see Esme hand over another one to Edward, before leaving the bathroom.

"I'm sorry," I told him.

"You have nothing to be sorry for, Bella," he said softly in my ear from behind me, holding me close as I started to shake again. "It's me that should be apologizing..."

He held my hair as I heaved again, and my sobs couldn't be contained, but for some reason, I couldn't stop apologizing.

"Shh," he crooned, pulling me to his lap, but I could tell he was worried. He cleaned my face again, but looked up when Esme returned. "Are you sure?" he asked, and I looked up to see that she had a syringe in her hand.

"Yes," she sighed, kneeling beside both of us. "Bella, I'm going to give you something to calm you down, okay, sweetie?"

Blood & Glory

I nodded at her, wide-eyed, unable to articulate anything anymore. I turned to look at Edward, gripping his shirt.

"I'm not going anywhere, but let's get you someplace else, okay?" he verified, before picking me up.

He carried me to his room, with Esme behind him. He set me down on his bed, tucking my hair behind my ears.

"Bella, that was...a *huge* breakthrough," Esme sighed, looking weary, but hopeful. "But I'd like you to get some real rest. This will help, okay?" she asked, holding up the syringe.

I nodded stupidly, taking the drink that she handed me first, and then wincing at the pinch of the needle. My vision turned blurry, my eyelids heavy, and I sank into a world of nothingness.

~oOo~

EDWARD

Esme and I didn't leave the room when Bella's eyes finally closed. I looked up at her, practically shaking with emotions that I didn't quite understand.

"Did you really just call that a fucking breakthrough?" I growled low, even though nothing could disturb the shattered girl in my bed.

"Yes," she said calmly, sitting down on the edge of the bed. She brushed Bella's hair from her face, and then turned back to me. "It was a breakthrough. She let it all out, Edward. That's probably more than you've heard, am I right?"

"Yeah," I groaned, kneeling beside the bed to just look at her, because seeing her scars had wrecked me. Hearing - in utter fucking detail from the beautiful girl's mouth - exactly what she'd been through just about made me murderous. And if I hadn't left the room to follow her, it would have been Mickey that I'd have taken that emotion out on.

Blood & Glory

"I want to...help her," I whispered, finally looking away from Bella.

"Why?" she countered, raising an eyebrow up at me. When I didn't answer, she continued, "I'm not stupid, Edward. I listen to everything around me. I know what kind of lifestyle you boys have, but I won't have Bella hurt. It would end her, especially after her attack."

"I would never hurt her," I seethed, standing up and starting to pace. "I would do anything for her."

Her eyes watched my every step, before she took a deep breath. "She's very strong, but she's scared, son," she started, but shook her head. "I have every bit of faith that she can get past this. Given that she wasn't actually raped by that monster, she stands a very good chance. But if you're in this for just this moment, then you're time with her is over. I'll take her somewhere I can keep her safe, Edward, *and* help her heal. She's not a play thing."

I gasped, stopping in front of her. My entire body, mind, and soul screamed at the thought of never seeing Bella again.

"Don't test me," she stated, pointing a finger at me as I shook my head back and forth. "If you think I don't still have connections, then you've clearly underestimated me."

"Please," I begged. "You...she... She comes to me!" I finally ground out, my voice barely there. "She wants my help..."

"I know she does, and I know that I haven't seen her smile at anyone in the year and a half that I've known her the way that she did with you today in the store. Not even with Jake - at their best of times - did she ever smile like that. So I'm asking you, Edward. What are your intentions with her?"

It seemed like my father and his girlfriend had had a chat about me and Bella, because not only did he blow up at me, now she was threatening to take Bella away. Not a chance in hell.

Blood & Glory

"*You* are clearly underestimating *me*, if you think you can take her from me," I said, trying my damndest not to yell, not to pick up the closest thing and launch it across the room. "She's not yours to take. She's a grown woman...let her make up her own mind."

"I know what she is, but I *can* claim that she's not of sound mind. *What are your intentions?*" she asked again through gritted teeth.

"I...you... Please don't take her!" I begged again. "I would just kill myself trying to find her. I'd die before anything happens to her. I've never felt this before...she's...she's just...every-fucking-thing!"

A slow, warm, smile crept up Esme's face, and she nodded once. "Good," she sighed. "Then you have work to do."

"Kay," I said with a nod, pulling a chair in front of her. "Tell me..."

"You need to dig deep and find all the patience you can muster, Edward," she started, tilting her head at me. "You need to be kind and gentle and all those things that you've never had to be." She paused for a moment, but stood up and took my place pacing. "Will she let you touch her?"

I grimaced, but I'd had every intention of coming to Esme for this anyway, so I decided honesty was the best policy. "She's okay with some things, but not others."

She stopped in front of me, her gaze warm and sympathetic. "I know you're a private person, Edward, but anything you say is kept between us."

I nodded, taking a deep breath. "We've kissed, but she froze when I touched her stomach...there are some places that are okay..."

"Really?" she asked, smiling a bit when I nodded. "That's good. Most victims of assault don't allow even that much contact. Have you two talked about...this?" she asked, gesturing between me and Bella.

Blood & Glory

"We want to try," I told her, nodding a little. "We're both...drawn to each other, and...I've promised her that I'd never take away her choice again. This is her show," I huffed, feeling exposed and vulnerable, but Esme just nodded.

"Good," she said again, placing a hand on my shoulder. "I want to talk to her when she gets up, but you're already doing very well, son."

A strange feeling floated over me when she called me son. It made me miss my mother, my real mom, but it made me feel cared for, as well.

I nodded, turning to look at Bella again.

"She's going to sleep for a few hours, sweetie," she said, squeezing my shoulder. "And I'm sure your talk with your team is far from over," she muttered, her voice a touch harder. "I believe Carlisle wanted double the guards..."

"Yeah, at night," I sighed, getting up one more time to kneel beside the bed. Without taking my eyes from Bella's sweet, relaxed, sleeping face, I said, "She's the first woman that doesn't hate what I do for a living. She's the first one that made me want to know more, learn more, *be* more..." I stopped, stroking my finger lightly up Bella's cheekbone. "She's aware of her limits, Esme. I just don't know what mine are..."

She snickered, shaking her head. "If you...care enough about her, there won't be any limits," she chuckled. "You'll do everything you can for her. I still want to talk to her, but I have a feeling you two will figure this out on your own. Like I said, she's a strong woman."

I stood up, leaning over to place a long, slow kiss to Bella's cheek, despite Esme's presence. "Sleep, baby. Have only sweet dreams. He won't touch you again, I swear it," I whispered against her skin.

She shifted a little, her hand brushing across mine, but she was truly out cold. I stood up straight, facing a woman that just earned a new level of respect from me.

Blood & Glory

"Thank you," I muttered, frowning a bit. "She sleeps in here from now on. If I have to bunk on the floor or the sofa, I will, but she's afraid of waking Rose and Alice. She can't sleep when she thinks they're going to touch her."

"I agree," she sighed, giving Bella a kiss on the forehead. She stood up tall, locking eyes with me. "I was pregnant once," she whispered, a tear in her eye. "The father was killed overseas, but he had dark hair, dark eyes. The first time I met Bella, I saw what my child could've been. I love her like she's my own, Edward. She's brilliant, brave, and so very sweet. She's strong willed and loves openly. She lost her mother, and I lost my child...we fill roles for each other. Can you understand why I'm protective of her?"

I nodded, totally getting it. "Yes, ma'am," I sighed. "But you have to understand that I trust no one with her safety but myself. Miller, King...whoever...they won't lay a hand on her again, and if they do, they'll be stepping over my dead body to do it. I don't know what the future holds for the two of us - that's up to her - but I will promise you that Miller will be dead by the end of it all."

"Your father said the same thing," she mused.

"I bet he did," I chuckled, but sobered quickly. "If you don't mind, I'm going to take my crew outside for a few words."

She smirked, nodded, and sat down beside Bella. "Don't kill them yet."

I laughed, shaking my head as I opened my bedroom door. "I'm not making any promises."

I walked down the hall, and as soon as I stepped into the living room, I was assaulted by Bella's friends.

"Is she okay?" Alice whispered, gripping the front of my shirt, tears streaming down her face.

Blood & Glory

"She's asleep," I told them all as they gathered around me. "Esme gave her something to calm her down. Excuse me for just a second, Alice," I said, looking over the girls to my crew that was hanging out in the kitchen. "You three...outside! Now!" I snapped, pointing towards the back deck.

They all flinched, but didn't say a word as they walked outside. Mickey looked as white as a ghost, but I couldn't find it in me to care.

Turning back to Alice, Rose, and Makenna. "She's going to take my room, okay?" I asked, and when they nodded, I continued. "She needs the space."

"She's afraid we'll touch her," Rose concluded aloud.

"Yeah," I sighed, wincing a bit. "Is it possible for you guys to move her things?"

"Yeah, sure, Edward," Makenna piped up immediately. "Um...I'd like to move in with Rose and Alice in her place."

I smiled sadly, knowing that Mickey now made her uncomfortable, and for that, I was sorry. "That's between you ladies..."

They smiled, but Alice spoke up before I started to leave them.

"Um, Edward..." she said, her eyes flickering to the back porch, and then back to me. "She's...I mean, not that it's our business, but she's...well, you're the only family she's got. And I know that's no excuse," she added quickly when I opened my mouth, "but she sees us all getting closer...and it's scaring her..."

I smirked, leaning to her ear. "How close, Alice?"

She squeaked, jumping just a little, but smacked my arm. "Shut it! I'm just saying that she's feeling left out."

"And it doesn't help that she's probably been crushing on you hard for as long as you've known her," Makenna snorted.

Blood & Glory

I laughed, thinking that was like the pot calling the kettle black, but I kept quiet, because Rose said it for me.

"Um, yeah, Miss Stares-a-Lot," she snorted, shoving Mack towards the hallway. "Forgive her, she's young..."

"What?" Makenna gasped, her mouth hanging open. "I can look. I'm just not going all psycho about it!" she argued.

"That's very true..." I muttered. "At least there's that."

The girls laughed, making their way down the hall, but Alice stopped, with a wry smile on her face, saying, "By the way...I don't kiss and tell, either..."

I grinned, shot her a wink, and broke into a laugh. That short thing had really grown on me, ever since we'd talked on the phone during our hunt for Bella. "Touché, Alice...touché."

I could hear her laugh all the way out the sliding glass doors. I slammed them open, my eyes landing on Mickey, and two strong hands gripped my arms.

"Don't, man..." Emmett growled. "I know you're pissed. I know your girl is having a rough go of it, but don't make shit worse."

"Get the fuck off of me," I snapped, turning my gaze back to Mickey. "Do you feel better now?" I asked, my voice low and barely under control.

"Edward, I'm sorry," Mickey whispered, taking a few steps back from me. "I didn't know..."

"Of course you didn't fucking know! There were reasons you didn't fucking know!" I snarled, fighting Emmett's strong ass arms, but he was holding me back with everything he had, and I wasn't budging. "For once, couldn't you just have trusted me on this one? There's a reason I don't tell you guys everything... Jesus fucking Christ!"

Blood & Glory

"We do trust you, man," Jasper said calmly beside me. "Em, let him go."

Emmett's grip lessened, and I stood up straight. "Have you lost your fucking mind, Mick?" I seethed, looking over at her.

"No," she whined, shaking her head.

I could see that she was scared of me, but she was red in the face, like she was embarrassed.

"It sure seems like you did. You'd have to be fucking crazy to talk to me like that in front of everyone. Did you really tell me to 'fuck her and cut her loose like the rest of them?'" I asked, stepping closer to her.

Mickey grimaced, shaking her head.

"No?" I growled, running a hand through my hair. "That's funny, 'cause I could've fucking *sworn* that I heard you say that."

"Edward, I'm *sorry*," she begged, still backing away from me.

"You're sorry now, but..." I threw my hands in the air. "I don't want your apology, Mick. You're gonna save it for Bella, because there isn't one of us that needs to explain anything to you." I looked up at Emmett and Jasper, who were tensed, just in case I snapped on her again. "You wanna tell me what that childish show of immaturity was all about?" I asked, turning back to her.

She shook her head, looking down at her boots.

"That wasn't a rhetorical question, Mick," I stated, folding my arms across my chest.

"You like her," she whispered, finally meeting my gaze. "This isn't some... *thing*...with her, is it?"

I gritted my teeth and nodded. "Is that a problem for you?"

Blood & Glory

I watched as a sadness crept over Mickey's features, an expression that I'd never seen before. It was filled with desperation and loneliness, and what she said next made me speechless.

"When this is all over, you'll all leave me..." she whispered, looking up at me. "All of you."

"No, we won't, Mick," Emmett whined, walking to her.

"You're all the family I've got," she said, turning away from him.

Suddenly, her behavior made perfect sense. She wasn't jealous because she had some sort of crush; she was jealous because she thought we were moving on.

"Mick," I sighed, and she turned to face me. "I...I can't do this job forever. I don't even know why I've done it this long. But there's nothing that could change my feelings for that girl in there," I told her, pointing back towards the house. "I know we're all you've got, but even if we were to end this shit today, nothing says we have to stop being friends."

This was the most I'd ever said in front of Emmett and Mickey concerning my feelings, and it made me uncomfortable, but she'd been throwing up defensive walls since she joined us with Charlie Swan, so apparently, she needed to hear it.

"I will say this one time," I huffed, glaring at all of them and holding up one finger. "I need that group of girls to stay safe. I need you at your sharpest, and I need you to stay focused. I can't have mistakes, or emotional outbursts, or even fighting. I need us to work *with* them in order to ride this out. I know we're all getting... *close* in there," I said, raising an eyebrow at Emmett and Jasper, who smirked shamelessly, "but I need your help. I can't do this without you. My dad is gone, and we need to really pay attention. I can't have Bella found. I'll kill the next motherfucker that lays a hand on her. Am I clear?"

"Sir," Emmett and Jasper grunted, goofy smiles on their faces.

Blood & Glory

"Yeah, Ed," Mickey said, her features a little more relaxed.

"So what's the plan, dude?" Jasper asked, sitting next to me.

"My dad said to double up guards around the house at night," I told them, and they all sat around me to listen.

For the next hour, we talked about things we could change to keep the girls safe. There was even mention of only one person designated as the shopper to keep us in supplies. Bella couldn't leave the house, because she was now a "Missing Person," so her picture was plastered all over the Seattle news. In fact, the last update on that situation was that the law office that she dealt with came forward, stating that they'd seen her with a man matching my description, so now I had to lay low, as well.

We discussed a schedule, Mickey and Jasper volunteering for night duty, and Emmett and me taking the day. Mickey felt horrible that Makenna had moved out of their room, but I told her maybe it was for the best, considering that she was going to be up nights. I wanted Emmett in the daytime hours with me, because he was a scary looking fucker to someone that didn't know him, so if someone got curious about the cabin, he'd be the guy to open the front door.

When we had some sort of plan to follow while my dad was away, Emmett and Jasper went in the house. Jasper wanted to catch some sleep before the night, and Emmett wanted to grab a bite to eat before walking the perimeter of the property with me.

"You should get some sleep before tonight, Mickey," I sighed, leaning back in the chaise lounge.

"I used to have the biggest crush on you, pretty boy," she chuckled, and my head shot around to look at her. She was red in the face, but she was still smiling. "But you're kind of an ass, Edward. Or at least...you were. You're not anymore. I watched you with Bella in the bathroom. I've been that fallen down drunk, and you weren't that sweet with me. It was kind of shocking to see, actually."

Blood & Glory

I winced, but said nothing.

"If she's who you want, I'll protect her. I'm sorry, Edward. I really am. You guys are falling for these girls, and all I could think about was that I was losing my brothers all over again," she whispered, looking down at her hands.

I knew that Mickey was from New York. Her three older brothers had been firefighters, all in the same house. She'd lost them all when the first building collapsed on September 11, 2001.

"No one will leave you, Mick," I sighed, rubbing my face. Aside from the phenomenal kissing with Bella earlier, it had been a shit day, and I was exhausted. "Even if my dad shuts the team down, it doesn't mean you have to go back to Brooklyn. You can stick around, you know..." I chuckled, punching lightly at her leg.

She smiled and nodded. "I know, I just...freaked out."

"Get some rest," I told her, groaning when I stood up. "I still need to make one perimeter check with Em, and I need to cook dinner. Any requests?" I asked her with a smirk.

"Hells, yeah," she laughed. "Those barbecue ribs of yours, pretty boy!"

I chuckled. "Will do, wild child. It'll be ready when you get up, okay?"

She nodded, opening the sliding glass door, and we both went inside.

~oOo~

BELLA

I stretched long and languidly, inhaling the scent of Edward's sheets, before I decided to open my eyes. I blinked a few times, smelling food and hearing laughter filter in from what sounded like the back deck.

Blood & Glory

I sat up in bed, rubbing my face and taking a look around. I frowned in confusion when I saw that my bags had been brought in. I looked up when the door creaked open, seeing Esme poking her head in.

"Ah, she's alive!" she chuckled, giving me a wink and closing the door behind her. She was carrying a soda in her hand, offering it to me when she sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Yeah, I guess," I snorted, shrugging one shoulder.

"How do you feel?" she asked, cupping my face and looking into my eyes.

"Rested," I muttered. "And a little...numb."

She nodded, like she'd thought as much. "I'd like to talk to you for a moment, if you don't mind."

"Sure, about what?"

"Edward," she stated, watching my reaction. "What I saw today in the store...is that something you want?"

I frowned, a little upset to be asked that personal of a question, but I knew she meant well. She was only trying to help me.

"Yes," I whispered, playing with Edward's comforter. "He hasn't forced me to do anything, if that's what you're asking, Esme."

"I wasn't, but that's good to know." She smiled, tilting her head at me. "He's insistent that you stay in here. That you stay with him. Is that okay?"

I nodded, biting at my bottom lip.

"He's offered to sleep on the sofa over there or on the floor, but he's determined to keep you near."

Blood & Glory

"He's worried."

"He is, but I need to ask you a question, Bells, and it won't be easy to hear," she told me, picking up my hands. "Do you want to be with him because he saved you? Or because you care for him?"

I gasped at the question, almost insulted, but I could see after my reaction today how it could appear to everyone. Edward knew some of what I'd been through, but it was everyone else's first time hearing it, and fuck, if I hadn't gone into morbid detail. My girls must be going crazy.

I thought her question through, wondering if Edward were to walk away, would I be able to move on. I wondered if I was seeing him as a hero, and not the guy that drove me crazy, that stuttered with only me when he was nervous. That stopped me from going too far with him on the couch, because he knew that I was panicking.

I thought about how I felt when Jacob and I started dating seriously, and my feelings were nowhere near this strong with him.

"It's him," I whispered aloud. "It because I care for him, Esme, and it's strong. It's not that he saved me," I told her. "It's because he's been there ever since."

She smiled, nodded, and rubbed my hand lightly. "He seems serious, Bells."

"We want to try... this is new for him," I explained, not knowing how else to explain it. "But..."

"But what, sweetie?"

"I kinda freak out when he touches me," I told her, feeling utterly mortified with that admission.

"Touches you, how?"

"My skin...on my front..."

Blood & Glory

"But he can...hold your hand, kiss you, touch your back and other places. He can touch you over the clothes?"

"Yeah," I sighed, feeling my face blush. "Esme...what if he can't wait?"

"Oh, sweetheart, I don't think that will be a problem," she chuckled. "All he can think about is how to help you."

"Really?" I gasped, my mouth hanging open as I stared at her wide-eyed.

She laughed, shaking her head. "Let's just say, Edward and I have come to an understanding when it comes to you," she snickered, patting my hand softly.

"O-o-kay," I said, dragging the word out, and afraid to ask.

She chuckled again, but took a deep breath. "Look, Bella. You're a strong woman that knows her own mind and heart. Follow them. They've never let you down before, have they?"

I shook my head no.

"And as far as touching is concerned," she sighed, looking a little pained, "take your time, do only what you're comfortable with, and keep trying, sweetie. Never give up. Don't give up, because that young man outside looks like he's in it for the long haul, okay?" When I nodded again, she continued. "All men - Edward is no exception - need to be shown the way, Bella. They're stubborn, simple creatures."

I laughed, falling over on the bed in a fit of giggles, because that was Edward in a nutshell. Maybe not simple, per se, but definitely easy to read.

She laughed with me, patting my shoulder. "Now, I've been told to come get you, so why don't you get cleaned up, because there's a cook outside that's pacing a groove in the wooden deck."

I nodded and crawled off the bed to head into Edward's bathroom.

Blood & Glory

"Oh, and Bella," Esme called. "You had an amazing breakthrough today, and you'll only continue to get better, but I'm very proud of you for how you handled a very...ugly situation."

"Thanks, Esme," I mumbled, going on into the bathroom.

By the time I showered, shaved, and redressed, I felt like a new woman - a *starving* new woman. My stomach growled as I walked down the hall, inhaling whatever delicious things Edward was cooking.

I walked to the sliding glass door, smiling at the ruckus that the table was emitting.

"I'm telling you," Makenna growled, slapping money down on the table, "five bucks says I'm right!"

"No, no, no," Alice chimed in, slapping more money down onto the table. "It was the first guy. I should know. It was me she called when it happened!"

Rose laughed, her head falling back. "You're both wrong! It was the clown, I'm sure of it," she chuckled, adding her own money to the pile.

The whole table laughed, and I couldn't help but smile at them, because even Mickey looked more relaxed.

"Bells!" Alice sang, jumping up from the table so quickly that Jasper had to catch her drink before it toppled over.

I smiled when they all called my name, but the pacing cook in front of the charcoal grill came to a complete halt. Despite just how amazing he looked in khaki shorts and a white t-shirt, he looked tired, worried, and like the weight of the world rested upon his shoulders.

Our eyes met briefly, before my pixie swarmed into my vision.

"Bells, tell them!" Alice urged, pulling me out of the house and onto the deck.

Blood & Glory

"Tell them what?"

"Tell them the funniest job we've done," she said, pushing me down into a chair.

"Oh! Is that what this is all about?" I asked, pointing to the money on the table.

"Holy hell, yes!" Emmett growled playfully. "End their torture, Bellsy!"

I grinned over at him, because he'd stolen Makenna's nickname for me. A plate full of barbecued ribs, roasted corn, and some salad landed in front of me, and I looked up to see a concerned, but warm-eyed Edward bending down to me.

"Tell them, but eat, too," he whispered in my ear, leaving the lightest kisses next to my ear. He used that voice that was commanding and sexy and in control, and normally, it would drive me crazy, but I was starting to see it was just...well, Edward.

"Thanks," I whispered back.

"They've been driving us crazy with this debate," he chuckled, holding his hands up when my girls all argued at him at the same time.

"Okay, okay!" I chuckled, shaking my head and picking up a fork. "So what? I'm just supposed to guess at the ones on the table, or do I get a hint?"

"Even though it widens my chances by like a ga-jillion to one, you just need to tell your favorite, because that's the bet," Alice gushed, rolling her eyes. "We all think we know, but we each said something different."

"We haven't had a ga-jillion cases, Pixie," I snorted, finally taking a bite. I chewed thoughtfully, looking over to Rose. "And the clown is wrong. That wasn't funny, that was *John Wayne Gacy* creepy!"

Rose laughed, her head falling back. "Well, shit!"

Blood & Glory

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Jasper laughed. "Like the serial killer...Gacy?"

I laughed. "Yeah, some woman wanted her husband followed, because she thought he was cheating. He wasn't," I chuckled, swallowing and shaking my head. "He was dressing up as a clown and trying to pick up single moms at the flea market."

"I thought you said he wasn't cheating," Emmett snorted.

"I can't imagine a girl on this fucking planet that would find that hot," Mickey gagged, and the table exploded. "He wasn't cheating, 'cause he couldn't get any play with that setup!"

"Exactly!" Rose, Alice, and Makenna all said at the same time.

I continued to eat, amazed at how good it was, listening to them make fun of the "Gacy Case," as we'd dubbed it years ago. I was trying to think of the funniest case, when it hit me.

"I got it!" I called out, and my girls beamed. "The first case...the 'Lollipop Kid Case.'"

"Yes, yes, yes!" Alice squealed, diving for the money on the table. "I got it right!"

I chuckled, shaking my head at her and taking a long drink of soda.

"Don't tell me..." Edward said, laughing. "Midgets...little people...whatever? Do I even want to hear this?"

I laughed, shrugging. "It's hilarious. It was our first case. Do you remember a few years back that TV preacher that got into trouble with drugs? He was all...anti-gay, anti-drugs, anti-everything?"

"Um," Jasper mused, scratching his chin for a moment, "that was...Taylor...Tyler...Tyson! That's it! Reverend Billy James Tyson!"

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I grinned, nodding when Alice was still bouncing in her seat. "Yup. Well, we got him busted, but we kept the real shit quiet."

Alice couldn't keep it in any longer, so she blurted out the rest. "His wife hired us, because she thought he was gambling church funds away at the horse track. So Bells followed him for a few days. Pretty normal shit at first. He'd have lunch with friends, visit people in the hospital, sign his books at the bookstore. But it was Mondays that were his big days...he'd slip off by himself. And he *was* going to the horse races...he just wasn't *betting*."

The whole table groaned, looks of pure disgust written all over their faces.

"I followed the GPS in his cell phone, and Bells followed him through the stands, down the track, and back to the paddocks," she continued, the cheesiest of grins on her face. "She found a horse stall that had been taken over by all the horse jockeys. It was like the Munchkinland version of Sodom and Gamorrah in there! There were drugs and little, teensy, naked sexy things going on, and the reverend was all in the middle of like three little guys as they...with lines of coke...and..."

"Ugh! Stop!" Edward growled, putting his hands over his ears as the whole table burst into hysterics.

"We have pictures! Wanna see?" she piped up with a grin.

"No!" all three boys grunted.

"Anyway, we got him busted for the drugs," I finished with a chuckle, setting my fork down and turning to Edward. "That was good, Edward."

He smiled, nodded, but said nothing about the food, leaning closer to pick up my hand. "How are you?" he asked softly as everyone else broke out into loud conversation.

Esme had joined us, and they had to fill her in on the bet, the stories, and of course, the reverend himself.

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I shrugged, playing with his fingers. "Better, really. I guess I needed to really let it out. How's Mickey?"

He grimaced, but said, "Mickey had three brothers in New York. All firefighters out of the same firehouse. All on 9/11. She lost them all in one day. We are...their replacement."

"Oh," I groaned, but nodded in understanding. "She thought I was taking you away?"

He smirked, jerking his chin to the rest of the table. When I glanced up, I could see the problem. Alice was sweetly feeding Jasper some sort of dessert, and Emmett was telling Rose a joke, which was making her laugh so hard she was holding her stomach. I snorted, fought my smile, and turned back to him.

"She feels she's losing you all," I stated with a sigh.

"Something like that," he muttered, running a hand through his hair.

"I would never think of coming between you and them," I whispered, frowning down at our hands. "Not your friends, or your dad, or your job, because I know how it feels when someone doesn't let you be...well, yourself."

I felt fingers under my chin, lifting my gaze to meet sincere green orbs. "They know that," he urged, an unreadable expression on his face. "However, she owes you an apology, Bella," he said firmly, his eyes darkening just a bit.

"No, she doesn't," I sighed, looking over at her, and then back to him. "She can't help how she feels, Edward. And these haven't exactly been stress-free times, you know? I'm sure that with this many people in the mix, there will always be someone freaking out."

He nodded, sighed, but tilted his head at me like he had something to say.

"You look so tired," I murmured softly.

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He shrugged, but looked up when my girls and Mickey stood.

"Come on, Bells. Dish duty," Rose chuckled, starting to pick up the plates on the table. "The boys cooked, so we'll clean up."

"Sure," I said, standing up and helping.

By the time everything was in the dishwasher, the food put away, and I was wiping down the counters, I noticed that I was left alone with Mickey, who was leaning against the counter watching me.

Emmett, Rose, Makenna, and Alice were all in the living room, watching some movie. Edward had gone to take a shower, saying that he was setting up the couch in his bedroom, because *someone* had taken his bed. I'd laughed and shoved him away.

"I'm sorry...for earlier," she said softly, looking towards the living room, and then back to me. "I didn't know..."

"It's fine," I told her, not looking up from the counter as I wiped down the microwave. How, when Edward did most of the cooking, it got so gross, I'd never know.

"I was in love with him once," she muttered, and I looked over at her. She was staring at her hands. "Hell, I've probably been in love with all of them, because together, they're the perfect guy."

I chuckled, mirroring her posture at the counter. "Emmett's humor, Jasper's sweet spirit...Edward's..."

"Looks, girl," she laughed. "He's gorgeous, I know!"

I grinned, nodding. "Pretty boy," I concluded, finally realizing where it stemmed from, though they used it now to tease him about his private life.

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"Exactly," she chortled, rolling her eyes. "But they're my brothers now. I saw him kissing you at the store earlier today..." Her voice trailed off, but I could hear a touch of amusement in it.

I grimaced, but waved for her to go on.

"He's always been...a bad ass, always been in control and cold and all business. But to see him smiling and laughing with you...I...well, the changes were unnerving...like why? Where was *that* guy when I first met him, you know?"

I nodded, knowing what she meant, because he still was bad ass and in control and all business. He just wasn't that way with me.

"Whatever it is...don't stop, because he's saved my life more times than I can count, and he deserves to feel..."

"Not like a monster..."

Her head snapped up, and she stared at me wide-eyed, nodding slowly. "Yeah, 'cause he isn't. At all."

"I know..." I smiled sadly, tossing the rag into the sink on our way out of the kitchen.

"Oh, and Bella?" she whispered, just before we joined everyone in the living room. "No woman should go through what you did. We're gonna kick Miller's ass for it."

I chuckled, and my skin crawled at the mention of that man's name, but I could see she was sincere. I could see the sparkle of mischief in her eyes and a sad smile. No matter what the future held, I could see that she meant what she said, and that her fears had been set aside. Her loyalty lay with Edward and his team, but that now included me and my girls, because as I looked around the living room, I could see the same looks of attraction and sweet smiles of flirting between Rose and Emmett, the silly whispers in ears and blushing cheeks between Jasper and Alice.

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Things were changing, were merging between my girls and their team, and I wasn't sure if that made things better, or more dangerous, because when you added the element of emotional attachment, did we make better decisions or worse? Were we looking out for everyone's best interest, or just the person that means so much that you can't stand the thought of them getting hurt - or worse, dying.

I took a deep breath and let it out, because I didn't have the answer, but I didn't have it in me to think about it, either. All that I wanted at that moment was to seek out Edward. I needed that feeling of safety and comfort that came with just being in the same room with him, so with a wave to everyone, I headed down the hall to his room.

I had to bite back my swoon, giggle, and smile, because the second I walked into his bedroom, I was met with the cutest, sexiest sight ever.

A freshly showered Edward was asleep on the sofa in his bedroom. It looked like he'd just sat down and couldn't help it. He was gloriously shirtless, though there was a white undershirt in his hands. He was wearing what looked like navy blue Air Force sweatpants. His face held none of the worry or stress or anger that it had earlier in the day, but it was relaxed and sweet, his jaw covered in just a touch of stubble.

God, he was beautiful, like art work or a poster. And I couldn't - *wouldn't* - disturb that. Grabbing the blanket at his feet, I covered him up.

I gently placed a kiss to his forehead, silently wishing he had sweet dreams, because after all, didn't we all deserve them?

A/N... Whew... that was a roller coaster, I know. But so many of those things needed to be aired. Bella first... Yeah, it wasn't pretty, but it all came to a boiling point when Mickey said she was fine... FINE isn't something Bella feels yet, so that's why she kind of...exploded.

Next...Mickey. Imagine a 15 or 16 year old girl losing everything on 9/11. Imagine being so angry that you wanted revenge and you joined the

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military. And imagine finding the same connection in three boys that you had with the brothers you lost... yeah, you wouldn't want to let them go either. Whether or not she had a crush at one time is irrelevant. The point is...she doesn't NOW. She is loyal to Edward and crew...and she will carry that loyalty to the girls. She just...freaked the hell out...

Oh, and Edward... sigh... He's such a...puzzle. There's absolutely no getting control when it comes to Bella. Not with their relationship, or her healing progress, or even Bella herself. And that's driving him crazy, yes? LOL

I ADORE Esme. That is all. LOL :)

Okay, thanks to JenRar for beta'ing this for me. She'll kill me over cliffies soon, I swear... LOL

And yeah... I tend to summarize the chaps in my A/N's... For those that aren't used to it, it's just something I do, because after 45 mins of reading 10,000 words, you tend to forget what happened 20 mins ago... LOL

Coming up is a little lighter, with a dash of citrus zest... :)

ANYWAY... I need reviews. I need them like Edward needs sweet dreams...so hit me with whatever your mind is filled with. Like: "Poor Edward will snap under all this pressure soon..." Or... "Carlisle needs to come home soon!" LOL The next posting will be around Thursday... just FYI. So let me hear everything you've got on your mind until then... Later.

Chapter 10

A/N...It's Thursday... and it's my day off, too! That's a big deal right there! I've been waiting for you guys to catch up to THIS POINT, because I need you see the chemistry between E and B. I need you to see exactly what Bella is struggling with...on a ummmm... lust level... Teehee

So that being said, this first part is quite...lemony. As lemony as Bella can deal with...which, God Bless her, makes her a STRONG woman... Yeah, so this is rated M. And for those that know my writing... You're welcome! LOL :)

On with it... I believe we left our fave couple with Edward zonked out on the sofa.

CHAPTER 10

EDWARD

I awoke with a start to the sound of the bathroom door opening. I sat up quickly, trying to remember reality and not the dark dream I was clambering up out of. I tried to remember actually going to bed - or the couch, really - and I couldn't. The day before had been so exhausting that I must have just passed the fuck out.

I looked up to see Bella walking into the room, and she looked like a ghost or the most perfect vision, or maybe she was just a sight for sore eyes, because my dreams weren't as beautiful as she was.

She smiled sweetly when she saw me sit up. "Hey, I didn't mean to wake you," she whispered, walking to me.

I just shook my head, swallowing thickly, because she had on a tank top and plaid pajama bottoms, all in a light blue that just made her skin so pretty. I reached out to her, unthinking, and pulled her between my legs, but it seemed

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that it was okay, because she didn't panic.

"I promise not to be so loud from now on," she giggled softly. "I swear, I'm a pretty good roommate. I'm fairly organized, I'm clean, and I can make a bed that you can bounce a quarter on, *sir*."

I grinned, chuckling softly. "You didn't wake me, Bella," I told her, feeling relieved at the sight of her smile. Her outburst at Mickey the night before had worried me to no end, but she'd joined the table for dinner looking fresh, like she felt a little lighter. "Tell me you're okay..." I said, putting my hands on her waist, a place I knew was safe for her.

"I am. I feel better after getting that out of my system," she sighed, stepping closer and cupping my face. "I'm glad you got some sleep...I can let you..." She jerked her thumb behind her towards the bed, gesturing that she go back to bed.

"No," I said quickly, holding her to me. "Not yet. I just...I want..." I started, but couldn't articulate what it was that I actually wanted.

My whole world now revolved around her, and I hadn't had a chance to *really* talk to her since she'd woken up when Esme's sedative had worn off. I just needed to make sure she was okay.

Starting at her shoulders, I slipped my hands down what skin was safe, what was okay for me to touch. I needed to *feel* her, but I never wanted to make her uncomfortable. I touched her sides, the outsides of her thighs, and trailed my fingers down her spine, before finally coming to rest on her bottom. I looked up at her somewhat amused, but darkening gaze.

"You're so fucking beautiful," I told her, hoping that she knew it.

Bella smiled, biting that bottom lip of hers. Her cheeks pinked with a slight blush, but she softly said, "Thank you. Tell me what you want, Edward."

"This," I breathed, slipping my hand along her neck and rubbing my thumb across her bottom lip. I locked gazes with her, surprised to see the same heat I

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was feeling gazing back at me.

"Kay," she whispered with a nod, and leaned in.

I needed her touch, her kiss so badly. I needed to make sure the "breakthrough" she'd had earlier didn't set us back, that she was still in this with me, because somewhere along the way, I needed her to want me. I needed her to chase away the desperate feelings I had when I woke up from bad dreams. My walls were crumbling, and the only one I wanted to pull the bricks away was standing between my legs, smelling like soap and fruit and all warm girl.

With both of her small, warm hands on either side of my face, she brought her mouth to mine. Immediately, those same hands slipped into my hair, and I moaned at the feeling of her pulling me closer. I wrapped an arm around her waist, sitting back in the sofa and bringing her with me, her legs straddling my lap. The sensations that came with that were instant. The feel of her weight on my groin as we lined up just perfectly, her heavy breaths against my cheek as she turned her head to deepen the kiss, and her heart beating against my chest felt so right, so perfect that it caused me to break away from her mouth, kissing down her cheek to her neck.

When I swirled my tongue along her skin just below her ear, her hips rolled over my now hardening erection.

"Oh fuck," I growled, my head hitting her shoulder, but my hands stilled her hips.

Bella's hands didn't stop. They ran through my hair several times as she caught her breath against my temple, before slipping down my shoulders to my sides. I pulled back to watch her touch me. Little fingers caressed my pecs, my abs, and then finally traced around the tattoo on my chest, before I looked up at her.

"Touch me, Edward," she whispered, her brow furrowing.

"Show me how, baby," I panted, letting her grab my hands from her waist.

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It was so early that the sun wasn't even out yet, but what we were doing felt so intimate, like we were only two people on the planet, because the house was completely silent, except for our whispers, our heavy breathing, and the occasional moan.

"Over the clothes," she said, placing one of my hands on her ribs, but the other one went to her breast.

She gasped, and my eyes immediately shot to her face, but when I felt her nipple harden under my palm, I knew we'd just crossed the next step with her. And God, if that didn't look like it made her happy.

"Yeah?" I asked her, unable to stop my mouth from quirking up at her as I relished the weight of her in my hand.

"Yeah," she answered, her hips rolling against my cock again.

She fit perfectly in my palm, warm and heavy, but still perky. It was like she was made just for me. I hadn't been joking with her when I'd told her I was an *everything* man. I loved all things that made girls...feminine. But the more I learned about Bella, the more I touched her, I realized that no one before her had come anywhere near this perfect for me, the missing piece - my other half.

I brushed my thumb lightly across her pebbled peak, reveling in the sounds it caused her to make, but even more, the prideful smile that crept over her face, before diving for my mouth.

"More, Edward," she moaned against my lips.

The sound of my name filled with so much want, so much need, caused me to moan and my own hips to meet the rhythm she was setting, but watching her face carefully, I cupped both her breasts at the same time. I brushed both of her nipples, leaning in to kiss openly and slowly up her neck, whispering words of encouragement.

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"That's it, baby, just feel me," I whispered against her skin, feeling her nod, her breath gush out against my cheek. "You're doing so well... When you're ready, Bella, there are so many ways I'm going to make you feel so fucking good."

She whimpered, arching up to me, her hips causing me to harden even further in my pants. I was so close, not because of what she was doing, but how beautiful her face was when the next sentence ghosted across my cheek.

"Edward, you *do* feel good, and I'm so close," she panted, her fingers digging into my shoulder and bicep.

She arched again, and I tentatively lowered my mouth to her nipple, never taking my eyes from hers, especially when she nodded frantically. I held her back as her hips continued to roll over me, my tongue swirling over the fabric of her tank top around her nipple slowly. When I sucked it completely into my mouth, her whole body shattered in my arms.

"Oh, shit!" she gasped, her head falling back as she pressed her apex against me.

I could feel the heat, the moisture coming from her, even through our pajamas. I could feel her muscles twitch against my cock, and I was just about to die from the need to keep rubbing, keep the friction going.

As she calmed down, she folded back into me, wrapping her arms around my shoulders. She blinked slowly, her eyes heavy lidded, and I couldn't help but feel smug about being the one to put that sated look on her face.

She pressed her forehead to mine, her fingers playing with my hair, and a slow smile crept over her beautiful face.

"Hey, baby," I chuckled at her, because she just looked so very relaxed.

"Hey." She sighed contentedly. "You touched me," she giggled, rubbing her nose along mine.

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"I did, and it seemed to turn out pretty good for you," I said, kissing her lips softly as she smiled.

She pulled back just enough to smash her lips into mine for another searing kiss. I couldn't help but just hold onto her perfect ass as she ravished my mouth. When we finally broke apart, I stared up at her, my mouth open, panting like I'd run a marathon and still tasting her on my tongue.

Her hand slipped between our stomachs slowly, carefully. Looking in my eyes, she said, "Your turn, Edward..."

~oOo~

BELLA

"Your turn, Edward."

"B-bella, baby, you d-don't have t-to," Edward stuttered, and that alone caused me to kiss him to distraction.

I felt him shift a bit underneath me, but his hands shot to my hair, turning my head to deepen the kiss.

"You don't want me to?" I asked, knowing the answer, because as soon as my hand covered his erection, my stomach clenched at the sound of his beautiful moan.

"God, yes," he panted, his head falling back to the sofa. "B-but o-nly if you w-want to..."

I grinned, but hid it quickly as I leaned in to kiss down his neck. I trailed my fingers down his toned stomach, over the little line of hair just below his bellybutton, to the edge of his waistband. My hand wrapped around him on the outside of his sweatpants, and I met the rhythm of his hips. They raised up under me, pressing his cock even more against my palm. Edward was rigid under my touch; he was big and twitching, and God if I didn't want more, but I

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wasn't sure I was ready just yet.

He must have sensed my hesitation, because his head snapped up to look at me.

"Bella?"

"I want to...do more for you, but..." My voice trailed off, and I swallowed thickly.

It seemed Edward knew the best thing to say, because his lips brushed against my cheek as his hand covered my own to guide me over him. "You keep doing exactly what you're doing, baby," he breathed, kissing down my neck. "It's perfect... *you're* perfect."

One of his hands gripped the back of my tank top, while the other kept my own hand moving at a pace he wanted. The sounds he emitted in my ear told me he was getting close.

"Do you feel that, Bella?" he asked, his face buried in my neck, but he squeezed my hand over his cock as I nodded against his jaw. "That's all you, baby. You did that to me. And I'm about to come so fucking hard..."

We both sped up the rhythm, and I heard his breath catch in his throat, but it was the sound of my name from his lips that caused my next reaction.

"I want to get better, Edward," I whispered into his neck as he wrapped his arms around me.

He pulled his face back, and his eyes were lighter, more content as he studied my face. "You will, baby," he said, standing up with me in his arms.

He walked us to the bed, setting me down gently. "Don't you move," he ordered playfully, his sweet crooked smile on his face as he pointed a finger at me. "This conversation isn't over. It's just on hold for a moment."

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I nodded, watching him grab another pair of sweats from his drawer and walk into the bathroom. By the time he returned, I was chewing my bottom lip to death.

Edward crawled up onto the bed with me, pulling me into his arms so that I was cradled against his chest. "You are getting better, Bella. Look how far you've come..."

"I know." I nodded against his bare chest. "I just...want to be normal."

I could feel his smile at the top of my head, but he was quiet for a moment. Suddenly, he rolled us to our sides so he could look me in the eyes.

"Tell me what's normal, Bella," he said firmly, that commanding tenor to his voice that sometimes never went away.

"I don't know..."

"You seem to have this ideal in your mind of where you want to be," he whispered, running his fingers gently through my hair, "and I want to know what that is, because I want to get you there. Get *us* there."

I gnawed at my bottom lip as I studied his serious face. I used to be the type of girl that knew what she wanted, both in and out of the bedroom. I loved touching and being touched. I loved kissing and groping. I loved making love slowly, with long, deep kisses, and sometimes roughly, with sweaty skin and crooked smiles. Sex had been fun once, and I wanted it that way again. And I wanted it so badly with Edward that I could barely see straight.

"I feel like I don't control my body anymore," I whispered, embarrassed with that admission. "I used to be very in control..."

He smiled a wicked, carnal smile as his brow furrowed dramatically. "Hmm... Well, there's a goal to look forward to..."

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I giggled, smacking at his arm, but he just chuckled and held me closer. "What about you? This *can't* be any fun for you...constantly having to watch where you put your hands, or make sure I don't freak out..."

"Were we in the same room a minute ago?" he teased, kissing my forehead as I tried not to laugh. "I was never *this*..." He gestured between us. "I wasn't a *hold a girl afterwards* type of guy, Bella. That sounds terrible to say, but it's the truth. I was demanding, and I took...and took roughly. Not that I didn't give, because that's...hmm, just as satisfying, but..." He shrugged, took a deep breath, running his hand through his hair as he stared at some spot just behind me. "I haven't been with anyone in months."

"Me, either," I stated with a one shoulder shrug.

We were both quiet for a moment, and I realized that we were probably very similar people sexually, prior to my kidnapping. Although I was in a committed relationship - well, I was committed, Jake was an idiot - Edward wasn't, but I'd be willing to bet neither of us was shy in bed.

Edward's hands traced up and down my spine as he just let me be, but what I told him next caused his hand to still.

"I want that...that demanding thing," I whispered, knowing he was watching my face, but I was staring at his neck instead. "I want you to be able to just...fucking touch me when you want. Take when you want. If I'm wearing shorts or a skirt, I want you to be able to touch me, Edward. I need it, but I'm..." I paused for a moment to catch my breath, because this was scary shit to admit. "There's something totally hot about someone just not able to control themselves, to just need you, want you so much that they just...fucking take it, without fear that it's violating the other person."

He nodded, placing a kiss to the tip of my nose.

"We've known each other for three weeks, Bella. Is this normal?" he chuckled, but his eyes were dark.

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"This whole thing isn't normal. It's not like we can date..." I grinned.

"Like I'd know what I was doing there..." he muttered, rolling his eyes.

"How hard is dinner and movie?" I countered, cupping his face until he nodded. "But we can't. I'm not sure this would exist had we just met on the street...or at your dad's house..."

He smiled. "I can be...difficult, Bella. I know. But something changed in me when I met you..."

Edward had always struggled when it came to expressing his feelings, but I noticed it was only when it was revealing about himself.

"I'm going to ask this again," I whispered, again, unable to look him in the eye. "You want this?"

"More than I've ever wanted anything," he whispered back against my cheek. "I just don't know what I'm doing...what you need. Hell, I don't even know... *normal*."

I smiled, leaning in to kiss up his jaw to his lips. "If we don't know normal...then I guess it doesn't matter."

He smiled against my lips and kissed me back thoroughly.

"Tell me," I started, scooting closer. "If we were this elusive *normal*, what would you do to me, Edward?"

He grunted, but I felt his hands twitch at my back and the stirrings of something between us again. "Really? You want to hear that?"

"Oh yeah," I said, tangling my legs with his.

His hand slipped up my arm into my hair, and he leaned in to kiss my forehead, cheek, and then lips. "I'd kiss you everywhere, baby. And I do mean..."

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everywhere," he rumbled, in the sexiest voice I'd ever heard him use. It was low and filled with such sexual promise that I moaned in response. "I'd want to taste you. I'd want to feel every inch of you shatter when I make you come with only my mouth, Bella. I'd want to leave my mark on you - in places that only you know exist."

"Jesus," I breathed, squeezing my eyes closed and unable to keep from slipping closer to him. I was drawn to his voice, his body, his thigh that was now gliding between my legs.

"Then I'd roll you onto your stomach and start all over, baby," he whispered, kissing down my neck. "I'm nothing if not thorough." He suckled at my earlobe for just a moment, before continuing. "I'd want to see every inch of you bare and underneath me. I want to watch your face when I slip inside of you, *move* inside of you for the first time. I'd wrap your legs around me, so I can take you deep and slow. And I damn well make sure you were satisfied completely before I came, Bella..."

His voice - hell, his words alone - were making me press down against his thigh.

One of his hands cupped my ass, helping me find the right pressure, the right speed as I used his rock hard thigh to shamelessly get off again.

"But I wouldn't stop there," he crooned against my ear. "Uh uh, no way. You're too beautiful not to keep up... *all...night...long*," he rumbled against my jaw. "I'd love to see you move on top of me, baby - your muscles tensing around me. I'd love to be able to kiss down your back as I move in you from behind. I have knowledge that will blow your mind, Bella. I want to make you come with just my hands. I'd take you against the wall, so I could control every single second of your orgasm."

"Fuck," I groaned, my eyes rolling back into my head and stomach tightening with my impending climax.

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His grip on my ass tightened as he guided me over his thigh, and my breath caught.

"Come for me again, Bella," he commanded in a whisper against my lips. "I can see that you're close. Show me this is what you want..."

My hands grasped at his strong shoulders as my eyes rolled back. And for a split second, I thought if Edward could do this to me fully clothed, I would not survive it completely naked. To actually feel him inside of me just might send me over the edge, never to come back.

"Fuck, Edward," I cried out softly, and his mouth captured mine in an all consuming, searing kiss.

My whole body shook with the force of that orgasm, and Edward held me close, running his fingers through my hair and down my back.

"Hmm, it seems we have our list of goals, baby..." he said, grinning at me. "And Bella...I'm not going anywhere...I've never...felt like this..."

I nodded, still panting, my sweaty brow pressed to his. "Me, either," I panted, feeling his very hard arousal between us.

"Don't even think about it," he chuckled. "This was all about you, *sweetness*."

I giggled at the term he'd used in the law office, making fun of Liam's cheesy flirtations. Edward pulled me back down to his chest, and I curled around him. As my eyes drifted closed, I realized I hadn't felt safer since my kidnapping, and I'd never felt as connected to one person as I did to Edward at that moment. Because as sleep overtook my heavy lids, despite our strong wills and his demanding demeanor, despite my aversion to touching and his willingness to help, I was falling hard for the man in my arms.

~oOo~

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I awoke the next morning alone in bed, and as I stretched, my hand brushed against something on Edward's pillow. I looked up to one single flower - a daisy. One single white daisy, so perfect that it didn't even look real. The center was as yellow as the sun, the petals white and looked like they'd just opened.

I smiled, picking up the flower and holding to my nose. It was such a simple, sweet gesture that I couldn't help but sigh in contentment. I knew he woke up earlier than I did, but this morning must have been different. To leave the flower was a huge thing for Edward. There was no note, but I got the message.

"And he says he doesn't know what he's doing..." I scoffed to myself with an eye roll. I snickered, set the flower down on the nightstand, and got up to get ready for the day.

From the sun beaming in the window, it looked like it was going to be a rare sunny day, so I dressed in denim shorts and a small white t-shirt, pulling on sneakers, and finally, tucked the flower in my hair.

The house was quiet inside, but I could hear voices out on the deck. All the girls were sitting around the table, smiling and laughing, and looked to be just finishing their breakfast.

"Bells!" they all sang, including Mickey, who set her fork down to pass me the waffles.

"Thanks," I said, taking the plate.

"You look better," Rose stated, giving me the once over with a small smile.

"You're getting sleep."

I nodded, swallowed what I was chewing, and said, "Yeah. I kinda slept in, didn't I?"

"No harm, Bella," Esme told me, waving it off. "You need to catch up anyway. And the girls haven't exactly been productive, except make the decision to go swimming..."

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I chuckled, looking around at all of them.

"You should come with us," Alice chirped, practically bouncing in her chair. "It's supposed to be sunny all day."

I looked down at my lap, seeing the long scar on my thigh, and I shook my head. "No, but thank you," I whispered, frowning and avoiding their silence, but Rose was not to be deterred.

"I got you a one-piece, Bella," she soothed, touching my hand. "No one will see anything..."

Esme saw me eye the scar on my leg and decided to put her therapist hat on. "What happened there?"

I bit my lip, looked up at her, and then around to my friends. I was wondering why she was asking in front of the girls, but in reality, I'd spilled everything to them two days ago, so there was no harm in continuing. If I was going to make an effort with Edward, then I damn well could do it with my girls - hell, Mickey, too, for that matter.

"Um..." I started, running my finger down its length. It was about four inches long, and not too dark, considering Esme had stitched it up nicely. "I think when Carlisle and Edward showed up, they set off an alarm of some sort," I whispered, closing my eyes and trying to remember. " *He* had picked up a knife and was running it down my face and stomach...he cut my underwear. He said he was ready for me...that it was... *time*."

"Time for what?" Makenna whispered, her face pale when I looked up at her.

"Mack!" Alice and Rose hissed at her.

"He kept telling me once he was finished with me, he was going to... *have his way*..." I said, my throat suddenly dry. "But the alarm...caused him to jump, and when he spun around, the tip of the knife caught my leg."

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I looked up at Esme, who was smiling sadly, but proudly. "Good girl," she whispered.

"And when did Edward get in there?" Mickey asked, her face dark and serious.

"Right after that," I told her with a nod. "Miller blamed the alarm on a deer crossing a sensor or something, but once he realized it wasn't an animal, he flipped the fuck out. He came downstairs one more time to ask me who'd found me," I sighed, looking at my scar one more time. "I could only think that Alice must've gotten my GPS thing working... But I lied, said I didn't know, and he ran back upstairs. There were a few explosions...I don't know what they were."

"Um, one was the barn," Alice stated with a shrug. "Carlisle took out the power supply and all that guy's satellite equipment."

"The other was the front door," I heard behind me, that same soft voice I remembered pulling me from the darkness.

I spun to look at Edward, who was wearing an unreadable expression. He was wearing black cargo shorts and a tight white t-shirt, carrying an ax, of all things.

"The door was high tech...plastic explosives work every time," he said with a shrug. "Once my dad blew the barn, we needed to move, because we weren't sure where Miller was..."

"Oh, okay." I nodded, turned back to Mickey. "He came in after that. I don't remember much after he took me upstairs..."

"That's because you fell asleep," he chuckled, kneeling beside me.

"Should I be worried that it's Friday the thirteenth or something?" I snickered, pointing to the ax in his hand. "Do you know Jason...big guy...hockey mask...likes to chop up campers in the woods?" I teased, gesturing around us at the fact that we were in the middle of no-damn-where.

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He grinned, shook his head. "No, there's a big rain storm coming in from the west tomorrow, so we'll need firewood, silly," he chuckled. "Emmett's coming to help me. Nice flower, by the way," he said with his smirk, pointing to my hair before standing up.

"I thought so, too," I sighed dramatically, not giving anything up to our audience. "That's why I'm wearing it," I teased him.

"Let's go, Eddie!" Emmett boomed, coming out the sliding glass doors. "Let's go play lumberjacks!"

He was wearing long khaki shorts and no shirt, and I thought Rose would fall out of her chair.

Edward snorted, rolled his eyes, and gave me one last serious look, before walking away with him.

"Come on," Rose ordered, tugging my hand. "You don't have to swim, but you can at least hang out with us, Bells."

I nodded, shoving my plate away, and followed Rose, Alice, and Mack to their room.

"I'm gonna give you a choice, Bells," Rose stated, walking to the pile of bags in the corner of the room. "I thought this would be an issue, so I bought you two suits. A one-piece...or a tankini..."

She held them both up, and I frowned at them. Neither would cover everything, but at least the tankini didn't look too bad, *and* it had boy shorts. The boy shorts were solid dark blue, the top multicolored stripes. The one-piece was simple solid red.

"That's a bit *Baywatch*, don't you think?" I asked, pointing to the red one.

Alice exploded into giggles. "Come on, Bells...you can run in slow motion along the beach..." My tiny pixie starting running in exaggerated slow motion

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around the room, pretending that her non-existent boobs were bouncing with each step, which only led to Makenna joining her, while singing the theme to that hideous TV show.

I laughed, shaking my head. "I don't think so," I snorted, snatching the tankini out of a laughing Rose's hand. "But I reserve the right to cover up at my discretion."

Once we were dressed, I had to admit that the bathing suit covered up more than I'd been expecting. The main portion of my scars were on my torso. Along with the burns on my stomach, there were two on the underside of each of my breasts. There were multiple small scrapes and cuts that were already fading away, but those were everywhere. If I counted my blessings - Edward coming inside that basement when he had was the number one blessing - then I should be grateful that I wasn't scarred worse than I was. And it wasn't even the scars that bothered me the most; it was the actions that had come when I'd received them. It was the punches and Miller's laugh and all the things he said while doing them.

By the time we all were dressed, grabbed a bunch of towels, and filled a cooler with beers and sodas, I was actually looking forward to hanging out with just my girls, while the boys did whatever they were doing.

Mickey passed us in the hallway, stating she'd been up all night and was going to bed. "Don't let the Paul Bunyans ruin your fun, ladies..." she chuckled, closing the door to her room.

"Is Jasper sleeping, too?" Makenna asked Alice as we walked through the back sliding glass doors.

"No, he can go days without sleep," Alice stated with a shrug. "Something about being a sniper. He can sit or lay for days without moving. He can't change it..." She shrugged again, but we all ran into the back of Makenna when she came to an abrupt stop.

"What the..." I started, holding onto her to keep from falling out of the house.

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Makenna's mouth was hanging open, her face blushing a deep red. "Holy shit," she breathed, her eyes locked on something towards the edge of the lake.

I followed her gaze, hearing Rose groan beside me.

"Oh, hot damn," Alice and Rose muttered at the same time.

It seemed all the boys were in on the firewood chore, because all three were down by the lake. All three were sweaty, stripped bare to the waist, using their strength to get the job done. Emmett was lifting the full logs, setting them on their end so Edward could swing the ax down over it, slicing it in half, only to do it again to create four logs. Jasper was carrying the finished pieces to the pile at the side of the cabin.

"That should be a fucking screensaver," Makenna muttered, holding up her phone to take the video.

"Um...text that to me..." Rose whispered.

"No texting!" Alice hissed. "Just...give me the fucking phone later...I'll burn a DVD..."

I laughed, but it died in my throat as I watched Edward run a hand through his sweaty hair. He was so fucking hot, it was almost painful to look at. His shorts had dropped low on his hips, his muscles were sharp and defined from the workout he was getting in, and every inch of him was glistening with sweat. Add in the light touch of stubble on his face, the smile at whatever Emmett was saying, and his hair sticking up everywhere, and I couldn't help but moan at the sight. Because despite how limited we were in what Edward and I could do, I still wanted him. Badly. It was like being hungry, but the piece of chocolate cake was locked under glass. And Edward was cake and sex and all things yummy all rolled into the one thing that I couldn't quite touch the way I wanted.

"Jesus Christ, he'll be the death of me..." I mumbled, shoving Makenna to get her attention.

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"Why, Bellsy?" Mack sang with the silliest of grins.

"Shut it, just...go," I snorted, shoving at her again.

We walked out to the dock, laying out our towels, but Rose deliberately took her time bending down to straightening hers.

"You are so shameless," I chuckled, rolling my eyes.

"Not everyone got their hero to save them, Bells," she huffed, putting her hands on her hips.

I frowned, shaking my head. "It's not like that," I sighed, sitting down on the dock's edge and dipping my feet into the cool water. I leaned against one of the docking posts, staring back towards where the boys were still working, only now a tad bit distracted by our presence. "I don't know what it is, but it's not the whole hero worship...thing..." I mumbled, watching as the girls sat beside me, all of them sticking their feet into the water.

"Have you kissed him again?" Alice asked with a smirk.

"Wait, what? What do you mean... *again*?" Makenna gasped, her mouth hanging open as she stared at me, then Edward, and then me again. "Oh, girl, if you don't spill, I'm totally knocking you into this lake!"

I chuckled, shaking my head, but I glanced up to look at Edward briefly, before telling them a little bit of the things we've tried, leaving out the things they didn't need to know - like *details*. However, it was enough information to make Makenna swoon.

"This whole thing I'm dealing with...I can't be myself anymore," I told them, splashing my feet in the water.

Rose laid back onto her back, her feet still in the water, but her eyes never left me. "You're still... *you*. You just had the shit kicked out of you."

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"I guess," I said with a shrug. "I feel so off, like I'm battling inside with the fear that freezes me and the person that I used to be."

"But you're not scared of anything but being touched...and only in certain places," Alice noted, and it wasn't accusatory, just her way of thinking out loud. "What does Edward say?" she asked, her face serious.

"He's surprisingly... *encouraging*," I said with a smile I couldn't stop. I turned to look at her, and she was beaming. "He's always so...that..." I pointed across the lake to Edward ordering Jasper and Emmett to "stop fucking around so that they could finish what the hell they were doing."

We all laughed, falling over onto the deck in heaps of giggles, because that's how we saw Edward just about on a daily basis.

"But he's not that way with me," I finally finished, wiping away tears.

"You know," Rose said, still chuckling from the perfect timing of that earlier statement, "the Bella I used to know...she would have already walked a beer over, just to watch him drink it."

"Ten bucks...if you do it." Makenna smirked, reaching into her bag and pulling out a ten dollar bill.

"That's *my* change from Wal-Mart, Mack," I laughed, and Alice and Rose joined me.

"Well, you can have it back... *if* you take Edward this beer," she chirped, pulling out a bottle from the cooler and holding it out to me.

"Hmm," Alice mused, tapping her chin and staring longingly across the water at Jasper. "The Bella I knew would make him come to her."

"I'll do us all a favor, then," I chuckled, standing up and grabbing the bottle from Makenna. "Hey, boys!" I yelled across the lake.

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Three sweaty heads spun instantly, the argument they were having just to piss Edward off ending immediately. In fact, I was pretty sure he was about to grab poor laughing Emmett by the throat.

"Beer?" I asked, taking the bottle and drawing a long gulp from it.

"That's my girl," Rose chortled, sitting up just to watch the three of them strut our way. "Mm-mm-mm," she groaned, shaking her head. "Oh, Bellsy, I owe you one."

"I'll remember that," I giggled softly, sitting back down in my spot.

Heavy footsteps hit the wooden dock, rumbling all the way up to where we were sitting on the end. If I thought watching Edward work from across the backyard was hot, then nothing could have prepared me for what he looked like all sweaty and flushed and hair in disarray up close. He seemed to be pissed off at his boys, but that just added to the sexiness that he was exuding at that very moment.

"Here," I said with a smirk, holding out another beer from the cooler and passing out three.

"Hey, that's the last of the fucking beer!" Emmett growled.

"And?" Rose asked, raising an eyebrow at him. "Esme's gone to the store now, and I'm pretty sure that she'll pick up more beer."

Emmett's mouth snapped shut, much to Jasper's amusement, but my attention shifted to Edward, who was taking long draws on his bottle, his throat working with every swallow, and I suddenly had the urge to lick it. Lick his neck, his jaw, his sweaty chest, his tattoo, his abs...

I shook my head, taking my own drink, before finally finding my voice. "You looked like you could use it," I told him, fighting my smile.

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"Thanks," he sighed, kneeling next to me. "Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum over there," he snorted, jerking a thumb behind him towards Jasper and Emmett, "thought it would be funny to take their sweet ass fucking time..." He glared their way, but neither of the boys looked chastised.

I chuckled at Jasper's and Emmett's goofy smiles, looking back to Edward's grumpy face. "Did you guys get it done?" I asked innocently, trying not to watch the boys' nodding heads and focus on Edward's oh-so-serious expression.

"Yeah," he sighed.

"Good," I chirped, patting his sweaty shoulder and fighting the urge to lick my lips. "Then you can hang out here."

I watched his expression change from cranky, to surprised, to amused. "I still have to make another perimeter check."

"Later," Emmett grumped from behind him.

"Later," I mimicked, " *and* I'll run it with you. Emmett can have the night off."

He snorted, looked back at Jasper and Emmett, who were looking everywhere but at their boss, and then looked back to me.

I caught my girls' eyes, and they were all waiting with bated breath for him to say yes. They wanted so badly just to hang out with everyone. It had been a rough few weeks, and I knew my girls just wanted to have a little fun, or they wouldn't have gone to the trouble of buying my bathing suit, laying out all the towels, and bringing out beer to coax the boys over.

"It's a five mile perimeter, Bella," he said with a smirk, but I could see a slight glint in his eye. He was totally giving in.

"That's fine," I chuckled. "But it's a Sunday, Edward. A weekend...try to find some sort of time to relax..."

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He grinned and nodded, finally sitting completely down beside me. He unlaced his shoes, removing his socks, as his boys took the opportunity to follow suit. Soon, the radio was on, the beer and sodas were passed around, and we all started trading stories. After about two hours, even Mickey joined us, stating that we were making too much noise, having too much fun to resist for her to fall asleep.

Rose and I traded stories about high school. Makenna and Alice told stories about going out - all of us girls - and the bombed dates, hideous pick up lines, and terrible dancers we'd encountered over the years. Emmett and Jasper told hilarious stories about training camps and practical jokes on each other and Edward, but the best were stories of Edward's piloting skills.

"So, yeah," Emmett chuckled. "We were supposed to fly into Mexico, grab this guy's kidnapped daughter, and bring her back to the States. The mother was from San Juan and decided to take her there, without telling him anything. She was heavy into the drug trade, so you can understand how he didn't want his kid down there...right?"

We all nodded, excited to hear the story, but Edward just sighed.

"Anyway, we had this all planned out," Jasper continued the story. "Carlisle was walking in there with Emmett, who looked like a damn bodyguard. Mick was dressed as his assistant or some shit, but in reality, she was there to find the kid, pick whatever lock she was behind."

"She wasn't in the house," Edward muttered. "The kid...she was outside."

"How old was she?" Alice asked, her little brows furrowed.

"Twelve," Edward chuckled. "Smart as shit...wanted to go home, so as soon as she heard shit go bad inside the house, she bolted. Headed straight towards me and Jasper."

"Oh damn, what happened?" Makenna gasped, turning to Mickey.

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"One of the drug cartel's gunmen got... *touchy*," she growled, rolling her eyes at the boys' laughter.

"God, I thought she'd shoot the bastard right there," Emmett guffawed.

"Grabbed her ass without shame. But the second that Eddie and Jazz said they had the girl, we let her pound the guy once, before bolting out the back door. We were suppose to leave after the fake drug deal, because we were only there to catch sight of the kid and to make a plan for pick up later, but that didn't happen..."

"Ed comes flying over the back fence, practically landing his chopper right on the back porch..." Mickey snorted. "Scared the shit out of the mother, because Jazz started picking off guards left and right. They had to cover us 'til we could get from the house to the chopper."

Edward chuckled softly, but his gaze was on his feet in the water, not really on anything else.

"The fuckers that were supposed to be watching the kid came from the other side of the yard, and soon...we were surrounded and split up," Mickey snorted. "You took a huge chance, pretty boy..."

Edward grinned down at the water and shrugged. "You're alive, right?" he countered, still not looking up, and I could now see his demeanor as embarrassment. He didn't like the praise.

"Barely," Jasper huffed, rolling his eyes. He turned to Alice to finish off the story. "Ed tells me to start firing with the AK-47 and not to stop until he tells me to. Fucker takes that copter, spins it in a circle for me to take out the guys behind us. *Then*, he hovers over just close enough to grab Emmett, who was on the far side of the house, because he'd had to dive behind a car. Edward set that copter on top of the fucking car, making sure to crush the roof so they couldn't drive the bitch!"

I laughed, looking over at Edward, but he still wouldn't look up. He just took a long drink from his beer.

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"But more fuckers arrived, so Edward tells me and Carlisle to run upstairs to the top window. And damned if he didn't put that thing *right the fuck there* so that we could step from the house to the chopper, without even having to jump," Mickey chuckled. "Came this close," she said, holding up her finger and thumb barely an inch apart, "to snagging the power lines with his blades."

"So you got the kid home to her father?" Rose asked, looking over at Emmett with her mouth hanging open.

"Yeah, but the drug leader shot her mom in the head as we pulled out," Edward mumbled, his brow furrowed and his mouth in a thin line, before he downed the rest of his beer. "Kid saw the whole thing."

"Aw damn," I sighed, shaking my head.

And there was the real Edward... *right there*. There was the reason that he thought he was a monster - why he didn't think what they did was good or heroic or even beneficial. Despite the good that came out of that whole situation - the saving of a child from a terrible life - he saw a child lose their mother, right in front of their eyes. He saw the backlash of what poor decisions had on one little girl. It wasn't just the mother making a choice to delve her child into the dark drug world, or the fact that the plan could've gone better, or even that he'd ordered to kill. It was *all of it*. Every decision Edward made stayed with him, including the repercussions afterwards.

And I suddenly wanted to kiss him, to tell him he saved his whole crew - and a little girl that was innocent in the whole thing. He saved her to let her grow up to become something, to have a life, not to be a part of her mother's fucked up world.

But instead of that, I asked, "You have your own helicopter?"

His head shot up, and he turned to me. "Hmm? Yeah, yeah...it's at my house..."

He had a house? And his own fucking helicopter? My eyebrows shot up, because that was the sexiest thing I'd ever heard. I *needed* to see him fly it. He

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abso-fucking-lutely had to fly me somewhere. And at the moment, I didn't care if he flew me into hell or Disneyland.

"I want a ride," I giggled, tilting my head at him when all my girls joined in.

"Fuck yeah!" Rose cheered. "That would so rock."

"Yeah, we could like buzz the Twilight Tech tower, flipping off Billy," Makenna laughed, her head falling back.

Edward grinned, shaking his head and rolling his eyes. "Fine, ladies...when shit cools down. I'll take you out..."

"Sweet!" Alice growled, giving Rose and Mack a fist bump.

I chuckled at them all.

"Speaking of Billy," Alice said, getting up from her perch at Jasper's side. "I need to check and see if Carlisle has emailed any updates. And I'm starving..."

The rest of them got up, saying they'd make a bunch of sandwiches, but I stayed put, looking out over the lake.

"Can you swim?" Edward asked suddenly, following my gaze.

"Um, yeah," I told him with a nod. "Why?"

"See that floating dock in the middle?" he asked, pointing to the center of the lake.

"Is that what that is?"

"Uh huh," he said, standing up and offering me a hand. "Race you to it," he chuckled, and his eyes were bright green - whether from the adolescent challenge or the story we'd just heard, I wasn't sure.

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He tugged me up to my feet, dropping his phone, keys, and wallet onto the deck next to my towel. He stood next to me at the end of the dock.

"My dad and I would race all the time when we'd stay here," he said, turning to me with a smile. "Ready?"

"Yeah," I chuckled. "On three, okay?"

"One..." he laughed, leaning over.

"Two..."

"Three!" we both yelled, diving in.

Despite the fact that I was in pretty decent shape, Edward had me beat by his strength and height. My hand slapped down onto the floating dock a mere second after his did.

"Still champ!" he laughed, but I put my hands on top of his head, pushing him under the water.

Strong, firm arms wrapped around me underwater as he came up in front of me. A wet Edward was a fucking gorgeous Edward, as he leaned forward, his hair slicked away from his face.

I couldn't help but wrap my legs around him when he pulled me close. It was a new, but sensational feeling. It wasn't uncomfortable or scary; it wasn't even giving me a panicky feeling. In fact, it felt good to be that close to him.

"Is that okay?" he asked, his voice a husky whisper and still a little out of breath from our race.

"Yeah," I said, my own voice sounding surprised.

He smiled, a sweet, wide smile. "I wanted to stay this morning..."

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"But thank you for the flower," I countered, leaning in closer when his hands flattened on the bare skin of my back.

"Mmhm," he hummed, pressing his forehead to mine.

Something in me snapped. Maybe it was watching his activities earlier, or maybe it was hearing about his helicopter or his excellent piloting skills, or maybe it was just the leftovers from being in his arms the night before. But the kiss I laid on him caused us both to groan, to turn our heads, to drag teeth across bottom lips. It caused me to pull him closer, digging my fingers into his back.

Edward wrapped his arms around me, his hands caressing my neck, my shoulders, my ass.

"Edward! Bella!" we both heard from the shore.

We broke apart with gasps, staring at each other as Jasper called us again from shore.

"Come in, 'cause Carlisle sent a message, guys!"

"Can't it wait?" Edward growled back, finally breaking our gazes to look at him.

"No, he's got info. Guys...it's not good..." He stopped, like he was debating on saying anything else. "Um...they may know where we are..."

"Oh, fuck me," Edward growled, turning back to me.

"Come on, Edward," I sighed, wiping water from his face. "Let's go see what he says."

He nodded and took a deep breath, but stopped me before I could swim away. "No matter what, Bella. I will protect you... I'll keep you with me..."

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I smiled, but it was a nervous smile, because I wasn't sure about anything when it came to our lives. "I know. Let's go..."

A/N...Yeah, I know...a cliffie. You better get used to them in this story, LOL. Just sayin'.

So our couple had a little fun...relieved a little stress, so to speak. They also tested a few of Bella's boundaries. And like Edward said, they now have their list of goals. Mmmhmm... whew. Yes, Edward was a little cranky the next day. And you will find out why, because the next chapter is in his POV.

However, a shirtless, sweaty, intense, wood-chopping, PILOT Edward is just damn hot, not to mention Emmett and Jasper. And I'm with Mack...that needs to be a screen saver. LOL

Like I said in the first A/N...I wanted you guys to catch a glimpse of their chemistry, because Bella was not a shy person when it came to sex before, and she's feeling out of sorts with the way that her mind is controlling her. Just keep that in mind. Edward on the other hand...is willing to help her, because... well, he's just as outgoing sexually. And they are drawn to each other. I imagine if she hadn't been kidnapped, they'd have been at it like bunnies already... LOL But our girl, Bella, is falling hard already.

Anyway, I'm gonna pimp a story... I don't normally pimp stories, but this one I will. I just started *The Greatest Gift* by my girl les16. When I say I just started, I mean that I'm only on chapter 10, but so far this story has me sad, nervous, scared, amused, and turned on all at the same time. You guys that have been with me for a while know my tastes... so when I tell you that I'm hoping, praying, and *begging* for a HEA, then you'll know that I've put my faith in this author... and this is fantastically written. It's AH...and definitely different. Apparently, Edward is a jerk that needs to have his head yanked from his ass, and there's a guardian angel that is just the guy to do it. Give it a go, and if you do, then leave my girl some love.

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Next, I wanna thank JenRar for beta'ing this... I love her with a sickness. Seriously. I don't know what I'd do without her. I know that these chapters wouldn't be as good...I know that for sure! :)

Okay, reviews are better than a shirtless, wet Edward kissing you in the lake on a hot summer day... Ummm yeah...no they aren't. LMAO BUT...they are awesome for me, so please send me some love or hate or "they're moving too fast" or "she just needs to kiss the shit out of him" or even "take what you can get, Bells"... LOL But I will be posting again on Sunday or Monday, so you can yell for that to hurry up. Okay...until then, Later! :)

Chapter 11

A/N... I wanted to let you guys know that the first half of this is in Edward's POV. And though it's slightly repetitive, I thought you'd like to know what he was dealing with, what was going through his mind as he picked a flower, chopped wood, and listened to his crew praise him. Because I'm not sure it's what you're thinking. :)

I know you're anxious to hear what Carlisle's message said, but Edward's thoughts are *very* important...and somewhat pleasant, if you ask me. So I'll let you go see what he's dealing with...and I'll see you at the bottom, because I'm sure that I've got more to say.

And I'm posting early...so that earns me reviews, right? Right?

CHAPTER 11

EDWARD

God, all I wanted this morning was to stay in bed with Bella. She was sleeping so soundly wrapped in my arms, but I knew I had to relieve Jasper and Mickey from their night shift.

I hadn't been prepared for what we'd done the night before. I hadn't been prepared to touch her, but she was so very responsive to my touch, my voice. I could see that I made her feel safe. I could see her inner struggle with what she *wanted* to do, versus what she was *capable* of doing.

As I gave in, letting another few minutes tick by, I just looked at her. Really fucking looked at her. She was so beautiful, her dark curls brushed back from her face - totally my doing. Her lips were in a half pout, half smile, and she looked so relaxed, so very content.

It took all I had to pry myself from her arms. I wasn't lying when I told her I'd never held a woman after sex. I didn't normally, but with her...I'd do anything.

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She was changing everything about me, and I wasn't sure how to feel about it. I wasn't sure what to do about it, and I wasn't sure I *wanted* to do anything about it.

The biggest priority was her safety, but what about when this shit was all over? Would she still be okay with what I did? Could I be enough for her? Or was the job too much? She made me reevaluate everything. I wasn't even sure I wanted to do the job anymore, if it meant being away from her. And that thought was what scared me the most, because if I quit, what did I have left?

I showered, dressed quickly and quietly and made sure she was tucked in tightly before I left the room. I made a quick pot of coffee and poured myself a cup, just as Emmett wandered sleepily down the hall.

"Perimeter check first?" he mumbled, and I nodded.

We passed Mickey and Jasper on the porch, and they waved good morning. They usually waited until we got back and I cooked breakfast before they turned in for a few hours, but Jasper stopped us.

"Storm coming in tomorrow, Eddie. Just watched the news," he sighed, leaning back in his chair.

"Okay, we'll need some firewood for the house," I thought out loud, running a hand through my hair.

"I'll help, Ed." Emmett yawned widely, shrugging his huge shoulders. "No biggie, but let's get this done so you can make waffles."

I grinned, nodded, and took off to the left towards the back fence. The whole perimeter was almost five miles all the way around, so we usually ran it - Emmett going one way, me the other. On the way around, I found an entire field of daisies, and couldn't resist picking one just for the beautiful girl asleep in my bed. If I couldn't be there when she woke up, I could at least leave something that told her I wanted to be there.

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Once I was sure all was still secure, I ran back inside the house, placing the flower by a still sleeping Bella's hand and a kiss on her forehead, before going back to the kitchen.

Emmett said he'd go find a tree to break down into logs, leaving me to my work. I looked up when Esme joined me.

"How'd Bella sleep?" She yawned, pouring herself a cup of coffee.

I kept my attention on the waffle batter, because I was afraid my smile would give me away, but I answered her. "She's still asleep. I just checked on her."

"Good," she sighed. "She needs the rest..." she muttered, heating the pan for bacon.

The next hour went by pretty quickly. Emmett had found a fallen tree, but I'd saved some of the wood for a project I wanted to build, so after stashing that in the shed, I grabbed an ax for after breakfast, and once back to the house, found Bella up and eating at the table on the deck.

The girls were talking about Bella's time in that God forsaken basement, and at first, I was pissed at them for making her relive it. She was making incredible headway, and I just didn't want her upset.

"When did Edward get in there?" Mickey asked, giving Bella a look of awe as she described what Miller had done at the end.

"There were a few explosions...I don't know what they were," Bella muttered, shrugging her shoulders, and before I could answer for her, Alice did.

She told her that the biggest explosion, the barn, had been a part of the plan. She let her know that we'd had to take Miller's communications down.

"The other was the front door," I interjected, and I watched as Bella spun around to look at me.

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I knelt before her, making sure this conversation wasn't upsetting her, because if it was, it was over. But as soon as she teased me about the ax in my hand, I knew she was just fine. I knew she was just trying to get better.

"Nice flower, by the way," I murmured, noticing it in her hair. It was all I could do not to reach out and tug it down, but I knew that the ladies at the table were watching us.

"I thought so, too. That's why I'm wearing it," she said with the sweetest of smirks on her face.

There it was. There was that spark that she carried with her at all times, that only came out for me. It was a sign of her strong spirit and just a glimpse of the woman that pointed at me and told me that I didn't get to tell her what to do.

I walked away from the deck, hearing the girls laugh and chatter the way they usually did, and found Emmett down by the lake shore, dragging a huge tree along.

"Let's get this done, Eddie," he grunted, dropping the damn thing at his feet. "The girls are talkin' about swimming today..."

It was the best workout I'd had in ages - breaking the tree into sizable pieces, chopping those down to smaller logs, and toting them to the storage bin on the side of the house.

"The girls are going swimming!" Jasper hissed as he ran up and took over the loading of the storage bin.

I laughed, shaking my head. "Then let's get this done. That bin was empty except for a few rotten pieces..."

It took a few minutes to find our rhythm, but when we did, the work flew by, until Emmett started talking about Rose. Rose in a bathing suit, Rose flirting, Rose's tits, Rose's this, and Rose's that.

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"Enough!" I growled, just as both of their heads shot around to watch Alice, Rose, Makenna, and Bella walk down the dock to lay down blankets.

"Aw, too bad, Eddie...Bellsy's all covered up," Emmett teased.

"Shut up, you idiot!" Jasper hissed. "She has scars, asshole!"

My eyebrows shot up at Jasper's outburst, but he just shrugged, saying, "Alice said something. She's worried, you know..."

"Oh, fuck...damn." Emmett frowned, looking over at the group of girls. "My bad...sorry."

I nodded, turned back to look at Bella, and despite the fact that she was more covered than her friends, she looked incredible. Suddenly, my mind wandered to the night before - my hands touching her, my mouth on hers, the sounds she made when she came...

"Shit," I sighed, shaking my head to clear it.

"You know Alice has an IQ of like one-ninety-one?" Jasper asked, grabbing the next stack of logs that had fallen.

"Yeah, well...Rose is like five foot ten...and has a concealed weapons license..." Emmett countered.

I snorted, shaking my head at them. They were gunning hard for those two girls, but that didn't stop me from acting just like them.

"Bella's been shot..." I blurted out, watching both of them drop what they were doing to stare at me.

I was an idiot, acting the same way they were - acting like a lovesick fool - but I couldn't help it. And what the hell was I bragging about exactly? Why did the thought of Bella being that strong turn me on to no end?

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"Where?" Emmett gasped, his mouth hanging open.

"How?" Jasper asked, his voice full of awe as he glanced over at the girls all lounging in the sun.

Bella was splashing her feet in the lake water, looking a little uncomfortable with the conversation around her, and I couldn't help but wonder what they were talking about. As I watched her laugh, tuck her hair behind her ear, and look over at us, I took a deep breath.

"Do you want to fucking join them or not?" I growled, picking the ax back up.

"Hell, yeah," Emmett said with a cheesy grin.

"Well, then stop fucking around, so we can finish what the hell we're doing!" I yelled, spinning when the girls exploded into laughter.

Jasper stood quietly, waiting for the next load to carry to the bin, but I could feel his eyes on me. "You're falling for her... Bella, I mean."

"Jasper, not now," I grunted, swinging the ax down with more force than necessary.

"Are you?" Emmett asked, setting another log on the chopping block.

"Seriously?"

"Drop it," I growled, swinging the ax again.

"Why are you fighting it, Ed?" Jasper asked, pulling the logs away so that I could chop another one.

"I don't know," I moaned. "Can we get this done, seriously?"

I glanced over at Bella again, wiping the sweat from my brow. Was I falling for her? I wanted to protect her, but even more...I just *wanted* her. She was beautiful and smart. She was quick and didn't put up with my shit. And she was

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stronger than she was giving herself credit for. She represented all things good - even though she was just as belligerent as I was - she was calm in tense situations, quick witted when I was being an ass, and caring about those around her.

Last night flew to the forefront of my mind again as I chopped more wood. The way she'd clung to me, the way that she'd needed to hear what I'd do to her if I could, the way she'd sounded so broken when she said she wanted to get better. I'd told her everything I'd do to her. I'd told her things that I'd never do to another woman, but that I wanted with her. And her reaction had been just amazing. Making her come again, with just my thigh and my words, had been the single most erotic thing I'd ever done with a woman. It almost beat the act itself, and I realized three things.

One, Bella - prior to her attack - had to have been amazing in bed. I'd be willing to bet she was fearless and sexy and all things that I'd beg God above to see.

Two, she desperately wanted to get back to that person.

And three, I wanted to get her there, because the thought of her being with someone else, of opening that side of herself to another man, caused me to cling to her as she fell asleep in my arms.

I looked to Jasper, who was watching my every move.

I was just about to kill Emmett, who was singing, "Eddie and Bellsy sittin' in a tree...K-I-S-S-I-N-G..."

I took two steps towards him, ax in hand, but the voice from across the beach caused all of us to spin around.

"Hey, boys!" Bella called, holding up a bottle. "Beer?"

"Oh, God, Eddie," Emmett begged. "Please... *please* tell me we're done..."

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"Fine," I growled, tossing the ax down onto the chopping block so that it struck with a dull thunk.

As soon as I'd downed the first beer Bella had given me, I gave in. I sat down beside her, tugging off my sneakers, and listened as the girls traded stories with Emmett and Jasper. They talked about practical jokes we'd pulled on each other overseas, like the time that we put a scorpion in Jasper's bed, causing him to scream like a woman and then sling it at us. Emmett had laughed so hard, he'd pissed his pants that night.

When Makenna had started talking about going out in Seattle, of dating and terrible pick up lines, my jealousy reached an all time high, which only caused me to feel like an ass. How could I fault Bella for dating in the past, when I'd done the same? But it didn't stop me.

But when they started telling stories about old missions, bragging about my piloting skills - specifically the Mexico mission - I wanted to walk away. I didn't see it as a successful mission, especially when the girl we were sent to retrieve had watched the violence unfold right beside me in the copilot seat. I'd strapped her in, telling her to hold on, that we'd get her out of there, that her father had sent us. She'd watched as the men that were told to protect her, shot *at* us, despite the fact that she was in the helicopter with us. She'd watched as her mother had changed her mind, starting to come to her, but the man she'd left America for had shot her dead right in front of her daughter's eyes. My crew forgot about, or chose to ignore the fact that the young girl had been a mess as we finally pulled away.

I was just about to get up, when Bella's question stopped me.

"You have your own helicopter?" she asked, and I turned to look at her face. Her eyes were dark, her head tilted in a flirtatious manner, and I couldn't help but tell her the truth.

"Yeah, at my house."

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Her eyebrows rose up high into her hairline, a slow, sexy smile spreading across her face. "I wanna ride," she said with an amazing giggle.

Her friends begged to go, too, and I couldn't help but give in. I told them that once things settled down, I'd be glad to take them out.

My chopper was at my house in Forks, hidden in a camouflaged covered tent. It sat just behind my wood shop, several yards from my front door. I missed my house, and I suddenly had the desire to take Bella there. I wanted her to see the real me, because I'd never brought anyone there. Hell, my crew rarely visited me at my house. It was my refuge from all things violent. It was comfortable, calm, and simple - the way I wished I could be all the time.

Everyone left us, Alice saying that she was going to check for messages from my father, and I turned to look at the beautiful girl by my side. She was staring out over the water, the sun glinting off her hair and highlighting a reddish tint to it that I'd never noticed before.

"Can you swim?" I asked, surprising even myself, because the perfect silence between us was just so damned comfortable. But I needed her away from the house, if only for a moment.

I pointed out the floating dock, and just like a fucking kid, I challenged her to a race, which she gracefully accepted with a sweet smile and a beautiful laugh. She was fast, faster than I'd expected, when we practically tied at the floating dock. I'd been swimming that race against my father for years, and the first time I'd beaten him, I was fourteen. I hadn't lost since.

"Still champ!" I teased her, laughing when she dunked me under.

It was while I was under water that I opened my eyes to her sexy form in front of me. And despite how much I wanted to reach out and just take her, I needed to be mindful of her boundaries. She was wearing little tiny shorts, instead of bathing suit bottoms, and I couldn't help but notice that she was athletically built. I'd felt her muscles under my hands before, but to see them was a completely different story.

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I wrapped my arms around her waist, thinking that would do, that would be enough to just hold her close, but when her strong, smooth legs wrapped around my waist and I could feel her skin against mine, we both gasped at the feeling.

I never wanted her to do something that made her uncomfortable, so I had to check with her. "Is that okay?" I asked, making sure I was looking at her facial expression.

"Yeah," she snickered, a slight smile of shock, surprise, or maybe even pride flickered over her wet face.

"I wanted to stay this morning," I confessed softly to her, hoping she knew that I was telling the God's honest truth.

"Thank you for the flower," she whispered, her cheeks flushing a little redder now that she'd been in the sun for a few hours.

And I finally got it. I finally figured out that Jasper was right. I was falling for her. Hard. I realized it, because every little step she took, every fear she met head on and conquered, it was a win for me, too. It made me happy that she could cross some imaginary line and take a step toward what she considered *normal*. I didn't know what the fuck normal was, but I damn well wanted to celebrate every time I saw that sweet face break into an amazed, but proud smile.

I pulled her closer, because that recognition made me want to kiss the shit out of her and drown myself in the lake at the same time. If I was falling for the brown-eyed beauty in my arms, then all bets were off. I'd never be able to let her go, even once this fucked up shit was over, because by God, I'd keep her safe until the bitter fucking end, until I was old and gray and couldn't walk from the fucking arthritis.

Before I could even formulate a plan to kiss her, her mouth was on mine, and I thanked God that she wasn't shy. It wasn't a shy kiss, either. It was full and deep and slightly rough. I wanted to ask her what she was thinking, what made

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her pull at me so hard, but I couldn't stop kissing her to even try. I wanted to tug her up on that floating dock and claim her in the sunshine, but I knew it wasn't possible - not yet, anyway.

"Edward! Bella!" Jasper called us from shore. "Carlisle sent a message, guys!"

I pulled apart from her, my heart pounding, my dick throbbing, and my mind screaming. I felt out of control with the need to just hand this girl my heart, my balls, and my hand so that she could lead me into hell, because I almost didn't care anymore.

"Can't it wait?" I growled, finally breaking away from her stunning, flushed face to look over at him.

"No..." he said, but I could barely hear him, until the last thing left his mouth. "They may know where we are..."

"Oh, fuck me," I groaned, looking over at Bella.

She reached up, wiping water away from my eyes and nose, taking a deep breath, but I could see the worry in her eyes. If they'd found us, we'd have to move her again. If they'd found us, we'd have to fight.

"Come on, Edward. Let's go see what he says."

She started to swim away from me, but I couldn't let her - not when everything about her now tied me to her, not when I thought I was falling in love with her. Instead of saying that, though, the chicken shit that I was blurted out, "No matter what, Bella. I will protect you... I'll keep you with me..."

She relaxed minutely, nodding a bit. "I know. Let's go..."

By the time we swam back to the dock, dried off, and wrapped towels around ourselves, I had played every scenario out in my mind. My imagination had taken over, and the enemy was right around the fucking corner. There were ninjas on our property, as far as my overactive brain was concerned. So when I

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got to the dining room where everyone was waiting, my heart was in my throat.

"What'd he say, Alice?" I asked, standing behind her, with Bella at my side.

"Just...listen," she sighed, clicking the mouse. "I'll read it to you." She began to read.

I need all of you in the room, and I need every single one of you to pay attention.

First things first. Royce King is still being detained in a county jail cell, but that doesn't stop his reach or his power. If anything, it's making him more powerful, because the idiots that are in there with him just worship the ground he walks on and have no problem protecting him in there for future favors on the outside.

According to Ben, King has offered some sort of huge payout to the person that captures Bella, her father, and whoever defends them or tries to hide them, and that includes the FBI, and you, Edward. Do not let your guard down for the next few days.

I've done my best to hide each and every one of my properties. I've used different identities, but with the right resources, they are still traceable. The house you guys are in right now may be the most well hidden one I own, because it's still in Edward's grandparents' names.

Bella, I think we were right. I think that not only was Billy behind the press release concerning your disappearance, but I think he's after your father's business. He's been a nervous wreck since I walked in the door. I've been acting CEO since I arrived, and he's been avoiding my calls and my requests for meetings.

He's got a huge problem, though. He knows his son is with Charlie Swan, because the Feds contacted him. If he sells out his boss, then he could damn well get his son killed. So I think he's bitten off more than he can chew.

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Alice, I'd like for you to delve as deep as you can into Billy Black's financials. Go outside of the US if you have to, but I want to know if he's skimming from the top at TT, taking from someone else, or being blackmailed by King to get to the Swans. I want to know every penny this bastard is spending or accepting.

Also, Alice, I'm attaching a list of recently hired TT employees. Could you please look into them, and let me know if any of them stand out to you. I'd use Ben, but he's got his hands full.

Makenna, I know that you've studied the FBI's intelligence file on King. Unfortunately, we lost the files in the fire at Gravity's office, but I know what you can do. Sit down, draw every face you can remember, and get everyone in that house familiar with every single member of King's army. You have a perfect memory, Mack. Please put it to use.

We all stopped, turned to look at Mack, but she was already sitting with a dozen freshly sharpened pencils in front of her, and she was carefully and silently sketching away, utterly absorbed in her task.

"Perfect memory?" I whispered to Bella.

"Photographic," she snickered, poking Alice playfully in her ear. "Continue, pixie."

Edward, I'm depending on you to make the best decision here. If you want to stay in that house and chance King's men finding you, then you risk having to fight. If you want to move on to the next place we've already discussed, then do it. I trust your judgment. My opinion is that you wait it out, keep a watch, and the very minute someone unwelcome shows up, get rid of them and move on, but you risk exposing Bella to not only King's men, but the police that are now looking for her. She was last seen with you, Edward, so you two really have to lay low. Don't go out, if you can help it.

The problem is this. The Feds' undercover guy has told Ben that Riley Miller has lost his mind over what happened at his cabin. He's treating this as his own personal manhunt to find Bella and finish what he started. He's even called in a

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few favors from King, so there's a rumor that King called his nephew in. James Hamilton. He's the only son of his older sister, Sasha. Alice can look him up for you - and what you find will not be pretty.

The undercover Fed is also telling the FBI that Miller is now acting in King's stead. He's calling the shots. Edward, if that's the case, then Bella is the prime target. She's the only witness he's ever left behind. Not only did he abuse her, but he committed murder right in front of her. Ben says the FBI wants to talk to her, but even he says that they can't keep her safe. They've had to move her father once already and lost an agent in the process. And if they're trying to get to Charlie, they'll try to get to Rose, Alice, and Makenna, as well. Miller's taken this personally, so he will want to be the one that takes her back, and he won't care who he uses in order to get to her.

Son, King's roots are thick, and they run wide, spreading out through most of the state - and I'm willing to bet farther. There's not many people you can trust outside the room you're standing in. You know how to contact me when you decide what to do. And please do me a favor. Please take Esme with you. No matter what, I need you to take care of her in my stead.

I'm doing my best to get back to you, but I want to keep an eye on things around here. I'm privy to more information this way. With Charlie's absence, I'm way too public of a figure for them to touch me, so please don't worry.

If you stay at the house, all of you...then be prepared to be on lock down and on high alert. The way it's set up is a perfect hideout, but at least no one will hear you when you blow their goddamn heads off. I'll back any decision you make, because I know it's not an easy decision for you, but you can handle this, Edward.

Contact me soon, C.

"Well, shit," I growled, gripping my hair as the whole room waited in silence for me, but amazingly, Bella remained calm.

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"Alice," she said, her voice taking a different tone. "Look up James Hamilton before you do anything else."

"Got it, got it, got it," Alice chanted in her usually three time manner, as her fingers started to fly across the keyboard of one of the laptops in front of her.

She then turned to Makenna. "How many soldiers did King have in that file, Mack?"

"Fourteen. However, we...or rather you, Edward, and Jasper took down five of them in the garage of that law office," Makenna answered without even looking up from her drawing. "So I only have nine faces to draw..."

"Only..." Jasper snorted, looking to me with the question on everyone else's face - what now?

Before I could answer, Alice gasped.

"Holy fucking hell," she breathed, her eyes wide as she read whatever was on her screen. "James Hamilton. Thirty years old, six foot one, a hundred and seventy four pounds. Blond hair, blue eyes. No identifying ink, no scars, no college degree... What he does have is a scary list of juvenile offenses - petty theft, assault, assault with a deadly weapon, assaulting an officer, battery, grand theft...on and on. He spent most of his teen years in a juvenile facility, except the last year, which he spent in a mental health facility for the criminally insane, because he decided that he'd not only attack a female guard, but he cut her open to...and I quote 'see what was inside of her,' but they couldn't keep him past the age of eighteen, when he was released back to his mother, Sasha."

Bella started pacing, and Rose sat down next to Alice, muttering, "This is a seriously fucked up gene pool."

"He stayed pretty quiet for the next few years, and I can't really see what he did, until just about six years ago. He was caught for possession of narcotics with the intent to sell, but only served six months in county jail, because the

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case was thrown out. He was also accused of stalking one...no... *three* girls, all who recanted their stories, causing the cases to be thrown out of court, but...huh...two of those girls were never heard from again. The third? That would be Victoria..."

"Stop it!" Makenna gasped, finally looking up from her drawing of a guy with a huge scar down his neck. "You mean that redhead from the law office?"

"The very same one. Guess Uncle Royce liked that one and decided to keep her," Alice said wryly, but she finally looked up at Bella. "This guy is every twisted sick fuck you've ever heard of, all rolled into one motherfucker."

"Like Miller is an angel," Bella sighed, looking over her shoulder. "Rose, can you remember that project we worked with your dad on?"

Rose nodded, turning to look at her. "Yeah, sure...wait! You want to do that here? Bells, you want to stay?"

"No!" I growled, shaking my head. "We aren't staying. We're getting the fuck out of here."

"Why?" Bella asked, standing up from leaning on the back of Alice's chair. "We have time to plan here, Edward. We have space to fight them. *Let them come to us*," she urged, but I was shaking my head the entire time she was speaking. "I can..."

"Bella, no!" I snapped, because I just couldn't risk it. I'd wanted to keep her moving, keep her out of sight until this shit was over. I couldn't just stick around and let not only one, but *two* fuckers with sick intentions come after her, with however many of King's men with them. "Not a fucking chance in hell!"

"Don't!" she growled, pointing a finger at me, and I felt the whole room go still. "Don't fucking order me around. Even your dad said that he'd wait until they showed up here, finish them, and then hide again if we have to. I don't want to run...I want to end this!"

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"You can't end this, Bella," I yelled, fisting my hair and starting to pace in front of the kitchen. "King will run this until he's dead."

"That can be arranged," Jasper said calmly, leaning against the wall behind him. "I mean, we've taken care of assholes in prison before..."

"King?" I asked, looking at him like he was crazy. "They'll know it was a hit. The man probably doesn't take a shit without the entire guard crew knowing about it and documenting it."

"I'm with Bella on this one, Edward," Mickey said softly, shrugging a shoulder when I spun to glare at her as she sat next to Emmett on the sofa. "Seriously, think about it. We can set up traps, continue our overnight runs, only let one person go out for supplies. There are *nine* of us, all smart, all able to handle a weapon."

"Um...no, not all of us," Alice muttered, blushing profusely.

"I'll teach you, darlin'. Don't you sweat it," Jasper told her, shooting her a wink and looking up at me when I glared at him. "What? Where's the next safe house, Edward?"

"We hit Alaska," I told him.

"Kate's?" Emmett growled. "No way! I'd rather fight! There's no place for supplies up there, Eddie!"

"I vote we go," Rose mumbled, looking scared when we all turned to her, but she flushed when Bella scowled at her. "Bellsy...these guys are scary. Miller's got bad intentions with you. I get what Carlisle is saying, I just... Look around you, Bella. They could hike in from anywhere. One mistake, and they'd be on us like white on rice."

I nodded in agreement, though that wasn't my biggest concern. My biggest concern was looking at me like I was an asshole. "No, Bella! Please. Let's just get you out to the next safe house..."

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"I don't answer to you, Edward. I've told you that before, and you need to start listening," she snapped, and fuck, it wasn't the time to notice how fucking gorgeous she was when she folded her arms across her chest, set her jaw, and tilted her chin in defiance. "We could put it to a vote..."

"No fucking vote," I growled, throwing my hands in the air. "I can't risk it. I just can't. We'll pack up, and we're out of here by tomorrow morning."

"No!" she snapped back, her hands on her hips. "I don't want to run from him, Edward. You told me he doesn't deserve the best of me, and the best of me would fight. I'm staying here."

I picked up the bar stool closest to me and threw it out the back sliding glass door, because she was using my own words against me. "Damn it!" I growled, watching it shatter down the steps, before turning back to the room.

"Okay," Esme sighed, finally stepping between us. "Everyone just calm down. Edward, I know this decision isn't easy, but you really need to stay calm, because breaking furniture isn't helping."

I snorted at her, rolling my eyes, but I couldn't see staying. I couldn't risk anything happening to Bella, which by proxy included Alice, Rose, and Makenna, because I knew Bella would protect them to the point of no self preservation.

"Edward, why leave?" Esme asked, staying calmer than anyone else in the room.

"He won't fucking touch her again! I can't risk it, Esme," I growled through gritted teeth. "I swore I'd keep them all safe!"

"But at what cost, Edward?" Bella countered. "If we keep running, if they figure out every property that Carlisle has, then we'll run forever. There won't be the next safe house, because they'll know every move we make..."

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"Ed?" Emmett interjected, using a softer tone than usual. "She's kinda got a point, dude. I mean, why not stick around? If we're waiting for this shit to be over, and King won't stop until he's dead, then at least take out the psycho fuckers when they come for Bellsy. If we can take them out, maybe King will get the hint. I'm pretty sure we can handle it. Don't you remember the garage? That shit went down pretty damn smoothly..."

I sighed, obviously outnumbered, but I turned to Esme for one last silent plea.

"I know you feel responsible for her, because you found her, Edward," she said softly, placing a hand on my shoulder, "but sometimes, demons have to be faced nose to nose...or at least through the sight of a gun." Her smile was wicked, all knowing, and all things confusing at the moment.

The whole room chuckled, except me. I turned to look at Bella, and I could see that I wasn't going to win this. I was outnumbered and obviously thinking with something other than my mind, because they all had valid points, but I just didn't know what I'd do if something happened to the girl that was currently waiting for me to answer.

I didn't say anything; I just walked out the back door to the shed, slamming the door behind me. I needed to think, I needed to get away from the girl that I'd sworn to protect. I couldn't look at her, knowing that if she didn't survive, neither would I.

~oOo~

BELLA

A shiver went down my spine when I heard the shed door slam. I closed my eyes, taking a deep breath, because I'd seen Edward pissed and frustrated and just plain bull-headed, but this wasn't any of that, or maybe it was all of that combined, but it was also panic.

"Fuck!" I shivered again, and I suddenly realized I was still wet from swimming in the lake.

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"Why don't you give him a some time, Bella?" Esme said, wrapping an arm around me. "Go get warm, and maybe by then, he'll be calm enough to talk to."

I nodded, but I had things to do first. I turned to Jasper. "You'll teach Alice? Guns, I mean..."

"Yeah, sure," he said, pushing away from the wall. "Give Eddie a few minutes, Bells. He's..."

"...too close to this," Mickey finished cryptically with a one shouldered shrug. "The problem with that? We have to answer to him."

Her smile was crooked, and her eyes were full of mischief. I totally understood what she was saying.

"I don't," I stated. "I'm not a part of your team. I have my own girls to worry about."

"Exactly," Emmett chuckled, giving me a wink. "Now...what's this project you and Rosie were talking about?"

I turned to Rose, raising an eyebrow at the term "Rosie," but she just fought her smile and shook her head.

"My dad was an electrical engineer," she explained. "He wired houses under construction, but he liked playing with spy shit. He liked trying to build booby traps. Said he got his inspiration from the movie *Home Alone*. The project that Bella is referring to is the time he wired our whole house...every window, every door, even the driveway. He was protesting the fees that the security companies were charging."

"So you could do that here?" Mickey asked, standing up. "An alarm or something would go off say...if someone turns in the driveway or breaks a window?"

"Yeah," Rose and I said at the same time.

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"But we'd need a ton of supplies, like wire, connectors...I don't even know what tools are around," Rose stated, looking up to Esme.

"There are a few things," she mused, looking out the back door, "but you'll have to brave the shed."

"I'm not scared of him," I growled. "He can get pissed all he wants. He can't fire me!"

The whole lot of them chuckled.

"Bellsy, why do you want to stay?" Rose asked, but everyone was listening.

I looked around the room. They were studying my face, because if anyone should want to run, it would be me, but I didn't.

"He tried to break me," I whispered, looking only at Rose. "He tried to make me less than human - and he came damn close, but he won't win. I can't let him win." I sighed, looking over to Esme, and finally, Alice. "My dad is trying to do the right thing, and I'll admit, the way he went about it wasn't great, but he deserves to try. Without his soldiers or gang members or whatever the fuck he wants to call them, King is nothing. The bully can't hurt you if he doesn't have his backup..."

I shrugged, turning back to Rose. "It's *my* turn to bully, and I want Miller on a fucking slab, because he's made me a freak! I don't want to be that anymore!"

With that said, I left the room, because I was freezing. I needed a shower and dry clothes, and I also still had a perimeter to check, even if Mr. Cranky Pants had forgotten.

My shower was as hot as I could stand it. I took my time, giving Edward his space, because I knew this wasn't an easy decision for him. Not only did he have to follow his father's orders, but he was responsible for every single life inside the house. It wasn't something he took lightly. However, when it came to me, he was almost irrational, and I wondered if he felt so fucking obligated,

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due to finding me in that basement, that nothing else mattered, nothing else could reach him.

And that hurt, because I wanted him to fight by my side. I wanted him to want keep me safe... *for him*. And I wanted his team to work with my team, because together, we were fucking *good*. Really good.

When no one was looking, Edward and I had... *something*. It was deep and quiet and slow burning. It was honest and so sexually charged that I could barely see straight. It was sweet and soft and kind. Edward was gentle with me and respectful. He was attentive and acted like no one else mattered, but when everyone was around, I could see his restraint. He didn't touch me, other than a hand or a shoulder. He didn't say the things he said when we were alone, and his voice was harsher, rougher.

I knew he was a private person, but those actions gave off a vibe of embarrassment or shame. I normally had a pretty damn good self-esteem, but I knew I was slightly broken. I knew I was scarred, scared, and easily discouraged, which was one of the reasons I'd like to put a bullet in Miller's head, because *this* wasn't me.

I wanted Edward. I wanted him heart, body, and soul. But I wanted him to want me in return - privately *and* publicly. I was falling hard, too hard for the private man, but the man in charge of a mercenary crew needed to be kicked in the balls.

I stepped out of the shower, dried off, and dropped the towel to the floor, studying every scar that Miller had left on me - visible and invisible. I started at my sternum, seeing tiny hair sized scars that he'd used his knife to make. There were ten of those - two across my sternum, one on each breast just above my nipples, two on either side of my rib cage, and one on each hip. It seemed Miller's only focus was on my torso.

Then there were the burns. Fortunately, there weren't scars on my nipples, though he'd held the lighter to each of them until I'd dry heaved, but there were still the ones on my stomach and under each breast, and one just below my

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belly button, above the line of my pubic hair.

I closed my eyes as I remembered where Miller had put my own hands against my will, shuddering at the thought and moving on to the rest of my own personal evaluation.

The scar on my eyebrow didn't bother me; it was barely there. The one on my leg, probably the ugliest one of all, didn't bother me, because that was the very last shot Miller had gotten in. The scar on my leg, the long gash, it represented the end of Miller's time with me and the first time I'd heard Edward's voice, and with that last thought, I knew what I had to do.

I dressed back into the shorts and t-shirt I'd had on that morning before going swimming. I steeled myself, taking a deep breath, and finally opened the door to the hallway. I walked into the main room, noting that everyone was there, except Edward.

Emmett, Rose, and Jasper were hovered over a piece of paper, sketching out what looked like the house. Alice was typing away furiously, occasionally switching from my laptop to hers. Makenna was working on her second portrait, her hair now pulled up into a messy bun, secured by one of her many pencils.

My girls were, if anything, hard working, smart bitches, and I knew they took this shit seriously.

I looked over at the sofa, my brow wrinkling as I saw poor Mickey fast asleep. The poor thing had been up all night and most of the day, so I knew she was exhausted.

I finally found Esme. She was starting dinner, and that bothered me a bit, because that was something Edward seemed to live for, and if he wasn't in here to do it, then he was still pissed off, hiding in the shed.

She held out a small brown paper bag. "Here," she said, and I walked to her, taking it from her. "I think it's time you start using this."

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I peeked inside, glancing back up at her. "Does it work?"

"Yeah, but you really have to follow directions," she told me, adding pasta to a pot of boiling water. "And I'm wondering if *someone* helped you...maybe your sensitivity to touch will lessen."

I didn't know what to say, but just nodded, gripping the bag in my hand. Esme had been the best help since she'd shoved me into the shower the first night. She'd cleaned my wounds, stitched me up, and held me together.

I walked around the counter, kissed her cheek, and said, "Thank you."

"You're welcome, sweetie," she whispered, kissing my forehead before I could turn away. "Now, go give that boy what for, because you're right...Carlisle's right. Staying is the smartest thing..."

I walked quietly out of the house, stepping off of the back deck. I walked around the shed, not recognizing the sounds I was hearing. The shed doors were propped open, and I could see a bare bulb swinging in the evening breeze, the smell of rain eminent in the next few hours. I looked up at the sky, and sure enough, clouds were rolling in.

I sighed, but turned my attention to the brooding man that seemed to be taking his frustrations out on a piece of wood. He was using some sort of tool, rubbing it up the side, causing little curls to fall to the shed floor. Once he was satisfied with that, he grabbed a piece of sandpaper, placing his hand flat on the board, and rubbed with the grain.

Every muscle in Edward's bare torso flexed with the movement. His brow wasn't as furrowed, though he was completely absorbed by the things he was doing. His shoulders were hunched over in action, as he braced one arm on the workbench and weren't as stress filled as they had been when he was yelling inside the house. I realized then that Edward made things to escape the tough shit.

"Whatcha makin'?" I asked, leaning in the door way.

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Without looking up, he muttered, "I have a stool to replace."

I grinned, shook my head, and looked down at my feet, before glancing back up at him. "Terrible thing, tempers," I teased, smirking when his gaze shot up to meet mine briefly. "But at least you own it."

"At least," he huffed, dusting his hands off on his shorts, picking up what looked like the seat of the original stool. He placed it on top of the new board, tracing around its edge to mark what I assumed would be the new seat.

"Is there one of these at every safe house?" I asked, just trying to get him to engage.

"No...just my house, here, and my father's house."

I nodded, though I was pretty sure he didn't see. "Does it help?"

He looked up at me, his eyes sharp, but so very green in the light of the bare bulb. He set the pencil down, ran a hand through his hair, and shrugged.

"What's in the bag?" he asked, leaning back onto the workbench.

I could see we were avoiding the elephant in the room. Never mind that we needed to come to some sort of compromise about safety. Never mind that we'd just been snarling at each other approximately an hour prior. And never mind that my urge to run into his arms was just about making me shake.

I didn't like arguing with Edward, but I couldn't let him think he could just order me around. He was in charge of his crew, but not in charge of me.

I was also completely aware that the only time I felt safe was when that man was in the room, and that utterly unnerved me.

I tossed the bag at him, and he caught it effortlessly, opening it up and taking out the tube of scar removal cream that Esme had bought for me. He quietly read the instructions, the name, only to look back up at me with raised

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eyebrows.

"Esme," I answered his unasked question. "She says it works." I shrugged, sitting down on a crate that was holding the shed doors open. "She also says that it should help with my fear of touch," I mumbled, looking down at my sneakers.

I heard Edward sigh deeply, and suddenly, his legs appeared in my vision. My eyes raked up his form, over his shorts and up his bare chest to lock with his, and he handed the bag back to me. I took it back, setting it in my lap with a nod.

He knelt in front of me, but I didn't look at him.

"Look, I promised you that I'd do the perimeter check, Edward. Can we just get it over with?" I sighed, starting to stand. I was all brave in the bathroom by myself, but sitting there in front of him, my fears came back full force.

"Bella, wait," he said, his voice soft, the voice that he used when it was just the two of us, and suddenly, I was pissed, glaring up at him.

"Wait for what?" I snapped, gripping the bag in my hands in order not to shove him over.

He flinched, his hands stopping to hover just over mine. "I know you're still mad at me, Bella. Can't you see my point about leaving?"

"No, I can't, Edward." I folded my arms across my chest. "They'll find us everywhere. Carlisle said this place was the best hidden...that it would take them longer to find."

"It's not that," he groaned, running a hand through his hair, his fingers gripping it hard. "God, I know you can handle yourself, but I can't...I just don't know... I c-can't I-let anything happen to y-you," he spat out after struggling through that sentence.

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Despite the adorable stutter, I was still mad, because he didn't get it.

"I'm aware you feel responsible for me...some sort of obligation to your dad, or because you found me, or whatever," I sighed, holding up a hand when he started to interrupt. "But I'm responsible for those girls in there, Edward. And I can't have someone use them against me."

"You still think you're just a fucking *obligation* to me?" he asked, his mouth hanging open.

I didn't answer his question, because in all reality, I didn't know shit when it came to Edward. "I need to stay," I told him, pointing to the ground. "I need to finish Miller. I want him to come to me, and not walk the fuck away."

I watched as Edward's eyes darkened, his mouth in a tight, thin line as he studied my face.

"He's made me someone I don't recognize in the mirror anymore, and I want him finished. I want him to find us here, Edward," I growled, standing up and turning away from him, because I was losing my battle with my tears.

I could feel him step closer behind me, but he didn't touch me. "I'll kill them if they touch you, Bella," he said softly, and I could hear the truth behind those words. He meant it.

"I know," I sniffled, nodding, and finally feeling the arms around me that I needed.

He kept his grip high on my shoulders, never forgetting where he could and couldn't touch. "No, you don't know," he groaned, and I swore I could feel feather light kisses to the back of my head. "You think you do, but you don't. But we'll stay."

I turned around to face him, and his face was dark, almost scary with his intensity.

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"But I need you girls to listen to me, Bella. I'm not kidding. We will all sit down, make a plan, and stick the fuck to it, got me?" he commanded, pointing a finger at me.

I grabbed it and nodded. "I just want to give my dad a chance to testify, Edward. I'd rather take these guys down, so that all King has left is himself."

He pursed his lips, his head falling back just a little, letting out a deep sigh. "Yeah, I know. And it's the better way to go, but I swear to God..." He paused, looked back at me, cupping my face. "I will fucking rip apart the next motherfucker that touches you."

"Okay," I said with a shrug, because as long as Miller stopped breathing, I didn't care. "Perimeter check, Edward," I reminded him with a poke to his stomach.

He nodded, let me go, and turned to walk back into the shed. He picked up his gun, tucking it into his waistband, and pulled a t-shirt on over his head. "You armed?" he asked, and I nodded, lifting the back of my own shirt to show him my nine millimeter. "Good, then let me show you the grounds. I want you so familiar with it, you can name the fucking trees," he mumbled.

I snorted, grabbing the bag that Esme had handed me earlier.

"Here," he said, holding out his hand for it and tucking it into one of his pockets. "I want your hands free, just in case, okay?"

"Kay," I said with a nod, as he closed up the shed and locked it.

We were quiet as we walked towards the back part of the property and almost half way around. I wanted to ask him a thousand questions, but we'd fought and kissed and fought again until I was tired. I was hungry, and I just wanted the day to end, but I blurted out one thing at the same time he asked a question.

"Tell me about your house..."

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"Do you think the cream will work?"

We both chuckled, and he held out his hand for me to take. "Answer mine first, and I'll tell you about my house in Forks..."

I grinned, looking up at him and barely seeing his eyes in the dying light of the day, and for a split second, I was wondering exactly what he was asking. Would the cream take away the scars? Or would it help with my fear of touch if he helped me?

"I have no idea," I said with a shrug. "The label says it will take care of *visible* scars."

My answer must have satisfied him in some way, because all he did was nod once, but he was quiet for a few more yards as we walked together, our hands brushing against each other, but free, not tied together, in case of trouble.

"Forks is a really small town," he started softly. "When we first moved there, I hated it. There was nothing to do, and since we'd moved from California, I really just despised the place." He chuckled, shaking his head. "I didn't have my mom, I kinda stuck out in school, especially with my stutter," he admitted with a grimace, "and my dad was constantly gone. So I started exploring the woods around our house."

I nodded, eager for him to go on, because I remembered that Edward, that stuttering, sad kid.

"Eventually, everything grew on me," he sighed. "I started taking shop classes and learned how to build shit. Dad put me in touch with a speech therapist, and my stutter started to go away. But I still hiked the woods, still found places that looked like no one had ever seen. I played baseball, making friends with the wrong crowd. I got caught smoking weed one day behind the bleachers, and my dad doesn't give second chances, so he shipped me off to military school."

"Where?"

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"Back to California, believe it or not," he laughed, squeezing my hand when I chuckled. "I discovered that once I was there, once I got settled in, I missed the woods, missed the...quiet of the trees, so I vowed that I'd buy a place back there one day, and my dad still has his house there."

"But you joined the Air Force...got shipped overseas," I urged, wanting him to continue.

"I did, and it was great. I met Emmett and Jasper in training," he said, turning us to the left as we met some boundary line. "I saw Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, and lots and lots of sand..."

I laughed, having to stop to catch my breath, because I could well imagine it was nothing but desert over there.

He chuckled, tugging me to keep going. "Anyway, as you know...we met Mickey over there. When I got hurt, they paid for my medical bills, and I took most of what I'd made over there and came home. I found a place; it's off the main highway, and you can barely see the driveway, but it winds back into the woods.

"There is a separate garage, the house, and my helicopter, which is covered up most of the time, but I can fly it out of there if I need to." He stopped, pointing along a row of trees. "Before I finish, look where you are, Bella. This line of trees? If you walk straight through it, you'll meet the main road. And on that main road is..."

"That gas station...right there!" I gasped at how far we'd walked. I turned to look behind us, and then at the line of trees again.

"Exactly. Good girl," he muttered, leading us on. "If something happens to me and you need to get away, that's where you go. Okay?" he asked, raising an eyebrow at me, and my heart sank at the thought of him hurt...or worse, but I nodded.

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"Anyway, my house isn't big...three bedrooms, two baths, a living room, but I remodeled the kitchen first thing!" he said with a wide grin, chuckling when I giggled; I could imagine that was very important to him.

"Next, I turned the garage into a workshop. And I hid my helicopter. At night, you can see every star, hear only the woods around you. You can even hear a wolf howl every once in a while. It's...calm there."

"Sounds beautiful," I told him, looking up at him.

His nose wrinkled, and he shrugged. "I don't know about beautiful, but it's simple, and it's mine. I paid it off with the first job my dad sent me on."

"It's sounds really nice," I sighed, looking around, and I could see we were coming up on the lake; we were almost back to where we'd started.

"You'll see it," he told me, tugging me to a stop and chuckling at my confused expression. "I owe you a helicopter ride, remember?" he asked, his slow, sexy crooked smile creeping over his handsome face, and suddenly, I felt ill.

"Oh, right," I muttered, again feeling like another obligation I'd just forced upon him. "You don't have to, Edward. I was just surprised to know someone that had their own means of flight. I owe you too much already; don't add to it."

I turned away from him and walked back towards the house, leaving him there. I stomped into the back door, and everyone glanced up, looking past me for Edward, who didn't follow me.

"Alice, email Carlisle that we're staying," I sighed, waiting for her to nod, before turning from the room and walking down the hallway to the room that Edward and I shared, which was just one more thing I just was too tired to dwell on.

I shed my clothes, tugged on pajamas, and fell into bed - the same bed we'd shared the night before. I just was too confused, scared, and exhausted to think

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about the night before and the things Edward and I had done, the possibility of seeing Miller again, and all the planning we'd yet to do. I just needed to shut it all out for one night, and I'd face everything else tomorrow.

A/N...Okay...before you get upset with our Bella...please, *please* keep in mind that she's running the gamut of emotions right now. And Edward hasn't exactly been forthcoming with his feelings. He's gruff and only seems to vocalize his need to *do his job*, and that's just discouraging, especially to someone that wants someone she can't seem to reach out and take.

Now...Carlisle's message... He's given everyone a task, and he's staying in Seattle to watch not only Twilight Tech, but Billy Black, as well. I know James sounds like a real peach, and I know that both Edward and Bella have legitimate reasons for being on opposite sides of the fence, but Carlisle made the most valid points about staying.

Now...next chapter will be shorter than you're used to, but *highly* important! It's actually a bit pivotal when it comes to Edward and Bella.

I want to thank a few people...JenRar for Beta'ing this when she's busy as hell. Have you freakin' slept yet? And second (and they go together) les16 and MedusaInNY for pimping this story like there's no tomorrow. Les16 has a kick ass story *The Greatest Gift*, and I'm so invested in it, that fights break out regularly on Twitter, much to MedusaInNY's amusement, I'm sure. So... come play with us... all of us.

Now...review...because I just *know* you've got stuff to say...like: "Bella's done lost her damn mind..." or "Edward needs to learn how to communicate" or "I hope Daddy C knows what the hell he's talkin' 'bout!" LOL ... So the next post will be around Tuesday or Wednesday...so the obvious yelling remark can be... "OMG, hurry up!" Which is something I see in just about every review. Lol Now...until then... come play on Twitter or I'll see you guys next post...until then...Later.

Chapter 12

A/N... Ugh! What a weekend it's been! This site failed on just about all of us! LOL Lord, you would have thought the end of the world had come! Authors weren't able to post. Readers weren't getting their chapters. Reviews weren't showing up on the site, or in email inboxes. And still story alerts are not exactly where they should be...nor is it easy to post on here.

Chapter 11 SHOULD have posted on Saturday night. All day Sunday and all day today, we tried to get it done. NOT A CHANCE IN HELL...but someone figured it out...or at least a way around it.

There is a solution to this problem in the future...so see me at the bottom.

Now, for what you're really here for... Edward and Bella are on two completely different planes when it comes to communication. Some of you were upset with both of them. Immaturity reared its ugly head with both of them, but they are passionate about what they do, and what they do is similar, though Edward's is highly more dangerous. Now...that being said, Bella was only following Carlisle's advice... Edward...wasn't.

So let's catch up with these two. It's been a week since that email came in...you'll be surprised as to what has happened, though by the end of this chapter, I think you'll be happy.

CHAPTER 12

BELLA

"No, Alice," Jasper chided gently. "Don't turn off the safety yet." He chuckled as he reached over and stopped her hand.

"Holy shit, if you shoot me, I'll be so pissed," Rose growled, looking up at the two of them, and I couldn't help but laugh.

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Rose and I had taken over the kitchen counter, paperwork spread from one end to the other. Alice had researched every fucker on the list of Twilight Tech employees Carlisle had sent her, and we were going through each and every one, looking for shit that might set off any alarms.

Carlisle's email had been a week ago, which totaled my time in hiding to almost two months. A week was also the last time I'd had any real conversation with Edward. He'd switched to the night shift, sending Mickey to days, so that he and Jasper could work together.

The first morning after our huge fight, I'd awoken to one more flower on his pillow, sitting next to the tube of scar cream, and that was the last interaction we'd had. Not that we weren't busy, because we all were, but we were clearly avoiding each other.

When it wasn't raining, Jasper worked with Alice and Makenna, teaching them how to handle a handgun. Emmett and Rose started to sketch out how to wire the house with some sort of alarm system, and I helped them on most days. Mickey and I took the morning perimeter check, Rose and Emmett the midday, and Esme and I took the last one of the evening together, except tonight, where Emmett was doing it alone and Esme had made a supply run.

Sometimes, I'd see Edward in passing. He'd make breakfast before heading off to bed, or he'd help Esme with dinner before disappearing outside. He'd get the rundown from Emmett about how the alarm system was coming or from Alice about research, but was gone immediately, usually out to the shed until Jasper was ready to run the grounds with him.

"Does Carlisle really need to know which motherfucker was a Boy Scout or not?" Rose scoffed, setting the next page to the side.

"Maybe," I chuckled, flinching when thunder rattled the whole house.

I turned towards the sliding glass doors to see rain pouring so hard that the lake could barely be seen. It was almost dark, and Edward was due up any minute.

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I looked around the house, shaking my head at the changes it had gone through. The back wall of the dining room had been turned into a display of all of Makenna's sketches. Some of the faces up there were scary, others benign, but the first one always made my breath catch. Miller was first. To look at his picture, you wouldn't think he'd be as evil as he was. He was thin, with light eyes that I knew for a fact were blue, light brown hair, and a scar on his chin, but the simple picture didn't depict the way he spoke or the wicked smile or way he smelled - like sweat and lighter fluid.

The dining room table looked like something out of a gangster movie. There were guns, grenades, wires, and tools all over it. Emmett was a weapons specialist; apparently, he'd carried a "few" things with him in the false bottom of his Jeep Cherokee and had brought them in the house as soon as we'd decided to stay.

I sighed, looking up at Rose. "I miss Roy's."

She snickered, nodded, and said, "Best beer on tap, I swear to God!"

"Damn, I could really use a beer," Mickey grumbled, getting up from her chore of cleaning her gun.

"Me, too," Rose and I said together, and I hopped down to grab a few bottles from the fridge, passing them around.

"What are we toasting, ladies?" Emmett boomed, walking in and shaking the rain from his hair. He'd volunteered to take the last perimeter check of the night alone.

"Um," Rose mused, smiling up at him. "The installation of the alarm system. We should be up and running, don't you think?"

"Hells, yeah!" he laughed, grabbing his own beer, popping it open, and clinking to ours.

"Let's check," Jasper chuckled, running to the front door and opening it.

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A shrill, shrieking sound resounded throughout the house, causing all of us to groan, but cheer at the same time. I was proud of our work, because everyone had pitched in, but I was tired of girl stories, especially about Edward. I was tired of feeling alone when I went to bed. And I was tired of thinking about what his silence meant. I was furious at him for ignoring me.

"Jesus Christ!" we heard from the hallway, and Jasper slammed the door shut as we all turned to Edward, who looked extra cranky and like he'd just woken up and showered.

"Oh, shit! Sorry, dude," Jasper said, grimacing.

"I take it the alarm is working," Edward grumbled, rolling his eyes as he made his way into the kitchen.

"Yup, hooked it up today," Emmett said proudly. "Bellsy and Rosie ran the wires to the electrical box. Mickey and Alice set up the sensors on the driveway. There are two...one at the entrance off the main road and another just before the last curve, which I guess we'll hear when Esme comes back from a supply run."

Edward nodded, poured himself a cup of coffee, and leaned back against the counter. "Any other updates?" he asked, looking to Alice.

"Um, nothing from your dad," she said, sitting down at the counter next to me and pulling out a few pages. "We've been working on that list he sent me of new TT employees, and I wrote a program to scan Billy Black's movements, not only at the office, but his home computer, as well."

"You... *wrote a program*..." he verified, his eyebrows raising high into his hairline.

I snorted. "She's small, but carries a big brain," I chuckled, kissing the Alice's spiky head. "Don't ever change, pixie. You're beautiful."

She giggled, rolling her eyes.

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"According to Alice, she doesn't score high on the... What did you call that?" Edward chuckled.

"The facial grid, Edward," she scoffed, rolling her eyes at him.

"How do you know about that ridiculous grid she believes in?" I asked him, surprised he was even speaking this much, considering we'd probably exchanged ten words in the last week, most of which were, "Good morning," or "Good night."

"She taught me all about it when we were looking for you," he huffed, shrugging and turning to the fridge.

Alice scoffed. "I could really teach you. I've tested that program on all us girls. Wanna know the scores?"

"No, Alice," he sighed, sounding bored and setting out ingredients for whatever he'd decided to make for dinner. "I don't need to know the scores."

"Good, because they're a waste of time," I scoffed, stopping Alice when she started to argue. "Don't, pixie. I know you like that piece of technology, but I hate it. Beauty isn't measured by binary code."

Edward snorted into a chuckle. "Exactly."

"Well, I wanna know," Emmett countered. "What were the scores?"

"Rose was an eight point nine," Alice told him, turning in her seat. "Mack and Bella were both eight point two and eight point three...in that order."

"And Alice was a seven or some shit," Makenna growled. "It's a crap test, Alice!"

"Seven?" Jasper gasped. "That's bullshit!"

His outburst caused Alice to laugh, but blush profusely.

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"No kidding," Edward muttered. "Eight point three doesn't even come close." His words were mumbled, with his back to me.

I was the only one around him, so I heard him loud and clear, and it only added to my confused feelings about Edward.

"Yeah, well, I'm not taking it again," I huffed, pointing to the scar by my eyebrow. "Stupid score would probably go lower."

Edward's face darkened as he spun around to look at me, clearly unaware that anyone had heard him. "Jazz is right. It's bullshit," he growled.

"It works on men, too," Alice chirped, and that caused the end of the conversation, because all three boys backed slowly away from her.

I chuckled. "See?" I grinned, turning to Emmett. "It's crap!"

The alarm sounded a different tone, and we all jerked.

"It's probably Esme," Emmett stated, picking up his gun.

"Yeah, but let's use it as that drill we planned," I told him, turning to Edward. "You're with me."

Edward nodded, turned off the stove, and took his gun from his waistband.

Jasper took Alice and Makenna up to the attic, because there were three ways to look out, and he could guide them well. Emmett and Rose went out the back, taking a right to skirt around the side of the house. I was to take Edward - who had no clue about this shit, because he hadn't really spoken to anyone all week and we'd only planned the drill that day while he was asleep - out the kitchen door to a clump of trees. Mickey took a low spot right in the front window, killing the lights in the living room.

"It probably *is* just Esme, but we've been wanting to test this drill Emmett and Mickey set up," I told him, leading him out of the side door, which led to the

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left side of the house.

"Kay," he said, running low with me across the side yard, stopping behind a very large tree that split just perfectly and faced the final curve of the driveway.

Rain poured down around us, fat drops falling on our heads, faces, and shoulders from the tree, as we watched the driveway. Bright headlights swept across the field in front of us, and I recognized Carlisle's BMW instantly.

Edward relaxed, but I gripped his arm. "Wait," I whispered. "Emmett gives the 'all clear.'"

He huffed in frustration, and for a moment, I wondered if it was because he wasn't in charge.

"Why wasn't I told..." he started, but shut up when I spun in front of him.

"Because you've been avoiding the entire house for a week," I deadpanned, folding my arms across my chest. " *You* chose to switch to nights, so deal with it. We needed to take precautions when the alarms were installed today, Edward."

"I didn't choose," he countered, shaking his head. "Mickey came to me and asked me to switch for a few days. She couldn't sleep in the daytime...I was just helping her, Bella."

"And you just happened to do this after we'd practically killed each other after Carlisle's email..." I sneered, feeling hurt that he couldn't have just told me this shit. "So you were really just avoiding... *me*."

"No," he gasped, shaking his head again. "I've m-missed you this w-week," he sputtered.

"All clear!" Emmett boomed from the garage door.

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"Emmett, you scared the fucking hell out of me!" Esme growled, and I swore I could hear a smack resound across the driveway.

"Clear!" I called out, not breaking my gaze from Edward. "I've missed you, too," I told him softly. "But I'm not going to beg for your attention. I won't force my company on someone that can't deal with my shit. I can barely deal with it, so I get it, Edward. You can just tell me you can't fucking take it, okay?"

I wiped rain from my face and started to head back to the house, but strong hands reached out and gripped my upper arms, forcing me back into the tree.

"Stop!" he growled, looming over me, rain dripping from his face to mine. "Stop acting like you know what I'm thinking, Bella. It drives me fucking crazy!"

"Well, what am I suppose to think, Edward?" I growled back, glaring up at him. "One minute, we're fooling around in your room, or making out in the lake, and the next we're fighting like cats and dogs. And *then*...you're gone. Poof! I know you don't like talking in front of your crew, but a simple 'this isn't working,' or 'I'm not into it, Bella,' would have sufficed. Don't just fucking ignore me!"

"I swear, I'm not!" he growled back, but he didn't move from right in front of me. "You seem to have it in your head that you're just this... *obligation* to me. It's not true, Bella. It's more...and it's so much more, that I can't even fucking see straight!" He panted heavily, taking his grip from my arms and placing his hands on the tree trunk on either side of my head. We were slowly becoming drenched in the rain. "I'm not ignoring you. I just needed to get my head straight. You cause me to make irrational decisions, because *nothing* can fucking happen to you..."

He stopped and ran a hand through his hair, causing it to slick back.

"You think I *wanted* to be away from you this week?" he asked, huffing in frustration when all I did was shrug up at him. "I fucking lose my mind when I

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can't watch you every minute."

I snorted, rolled my eyes, and shook my head. "Always have to be in control."

"It's what I fucking know!" he growled back, finally losing his tentative grip on his temper. "It's not about controlling *you*, Bella! It's about making sure that every second, you're okay. About making sure that you don't get hurt, or have another panic attack that I can't be there to help you through. And *fuck me to tears*...I miss kissing you!"

"Why didn't you just say something?" I pouted, now feeling like a spoiled brat.

"No time, baby," he whispered, finally touching my face. He wiped the rain from my cheek, leaning in to press his forehead to mine. "You guys were working so hard that by the time I'd get caught up with all that I needed to do first thing, you were already sound asleep in my bed." He took a deep breath, shaking his head. "Believe me, it was all I could do not to crawl in beside you."

"A note?" I teased, poking at his chest. "Just knowing that you wanted to be there, but couldn't...it would have made a difference. I didn't feel safe alone..."

"You weren't alone," he countered softly, now leaning every bit of his weight against me. "I was there. I'd check on you all night when we weren't running perimeter checks. It's a habit I started when Jake was in the house, only this time...I can go in the room..."

I watched his half smile quirk up his face, and I rolled my eyes again.

"Stalking me, are you?" I asked, finally giving in to my need to touch him. My hands snaked up his chest to either side of his neck.

"It's *my* room," he chuckled, wiping more water from my face. "And those other things you mentioned, Bella...my room, the lake. I've really missed those things. I hope you don't think I'm done with you, because I've only just started..."

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"I really missed you," I admitted softly, with a furrow to my brow. "I don't feel safe unless you're there."

"I miss watching you get better," he replied, brushing his lips across mine and leaving my whole body tingling with that simple gesture. "I didn't want to switch, but when one of my crew needs me, I have to help them. I just did it without thinking."

"Just tell me next time," I sighed. "I spent the whole week hearing about bars and clubs and bets to see 'who could get the girl.' I heard about girls and back alleys and public bathrooms...and if you don't think they know your business..."

"Bella," he groaned, pulling back a bit. "This isn't like that...I want *you*. I want to be with *you*...whatever that means..."

I looked up into his eyes, and nothing but pure green honesty stared back at me.

"I'm sorry you heard that shit, baby... They don't know how to keep their fucking mouths shut, and that's why I never tell them anything," he growled. "What they've seen and what they know are two completely different things. It's the part of the military life I'm not proud of, but this isn't like that. *You* are in control of this," he said, motioning between us.

"Why me?"

"Because I'm stupid when it comes to relationships, Bella. If you want me to do something, you have to tell me." He paused for a moment when I nodded, but continued. "You have to tell me when I touch you wrong, or if something I do makes you uncomfortable, or if you're feeling..."

"Neglected," I huffed, watching him flinch just a bit. "I want this...so bad, Edward. And it's not easy, because I just don't know what's okay for me... but if you're just going to drop me like the blonde in the alleyway...I can't..."

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" *You are my life now*," he growled huskily. "There are no more blondes...or redheads...there's only this one brunette that knows exactly how to drive me nuts! She's the only thing I can think about. She's beautiful, and smart, and so fucking sexy. I want her to the point I'll go mad! And I'll want her even after all this shit is said and done and King is six feet under. I'll want her even if all she can do is kiss me for the rest of my life, but I'll do my damndest to erase every bad memory she's got!"

"Edward," I breathed, looking up at him.

"What, love? Tell me."

"What if the memories never go away?"

"Then we'll make better ones to crowd them out," he countered.

"What if I...can never... What if you can't really touch me?" I asked, thinking no normal relationship would survive that.

He snorted, rolling his eyes, but his hands started to move. They drifted down my sides to my ass, one cupping my cheek while the other continued down to my thigh. With one swift tug, my leg was wrapped around his hip.

"I'm touching you...now," he purred, his eyes darkening, and I could feel everything line up just right.

We were soaking wet, standing under that tree in the rain. Edward's white t-shirt clung to him like a second skin, and I could even make out his tattoo through the thin fabric. Every muscle he had flexed and rolled with the restraint he was using.

I panted as I looked up at him, because he didn't realize his thumb was caressing the long scar on my thigh. I looked down at his hand on my skin, and then back up to him.

I could feel him freeze, but I said, "Don't stop. Touch it again."

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His thumb dragged over it again, slowly and sensually, and I moaned at the feeling and the black intensity of his gaze that was locked onto his own hand on my leg.

"I'm touching you now, Bella," he said again in a whisper, pressing his hips into mine, and I closed my eyes as his lips and tongue ghosted down my cheek to my ear. "You will get better, and I don't care how long it takes, love. I told you, I can be *very* patient when it comes to something I want. I just...I n-need..."

I couldn't take it. I couldn't take the sweet stutter or the warm, wet, almost trembling Edward in front of me. I couldn't take having spent the last week thinking he'd just gotten tired of me or frustrated. I couldn't take the feel of him between my legs without kissing him, because God, I loved him, and the reason I'd been so mad at him was because I'd thought he was pushing me away.

I didn't know if we were on the same page, but I knew it was damn close, so I pulled him in, kissing him with all that I had, because I'd missed his touch. We both moaned, my own breath catching when his hips pressed into me with just the perfect pressure.

Using the leverage from the tree, I pulled myself up, wrapping my other leg around his waist, so that he was holding me completely against the trunk. Edward broke away from my mouth and looked at how we were wrapped around each other. He smiled a wicked, carnal smile, gripping my ass as he began a slow rhythm of grinding his erection into me. Over and over, he pressed, his mouth leaving open, suckling kisses next to my ear. My eyes rolled back with every moan he let loose in my ear.

"God, that feels so fucking good," I growled, grabbing both sides of his face to pull his mouth back to mine and rolling my hips over him. "I missed your touch this week. I thought...I'm sorry I..."

"Shh," he breathed against my mouth. "I'm not going anywhere, Bella. I'm sorry I didn't just tell you I was switching shifts..." His mouth captured mine,

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his tongue delving in to slip along mine, until I was a panting writhing mess, but he reached up and cupped my face. "I c-can't let you g-go, baby," he stated, his voice a cross between a whine and a husky sexiness that I'd never heard before. "I c-can't let you go, 'cause... I l-love y-you..."

I inhaled sharply, my fingers gripping his wet hair as I forced his forehead to mine. His sweet stutter just added to the honesty that I heard in his voice, but I still stared at him wide-eyed...and so very close to coming.

"I do, Bella. I love you so fucking much..."

My legs squeezed him closer, feeling myself lose that final grip, and I came. Hard. I wrapped my arms all the way around his head, burying my face in his neck and blinking back rain and tears as he shattered against me. And I knew that things would never be the same for us again.

~oOo~

EDWARD

I was a fucking idiot. Not only had I just changed to nights without even saying anything to Bella, but I'd just told her that I loved her as I dry humped her to orgasm - hers and my own - against a fucking tree.

She shivered in my arms at the same time her phone beeped.

"We should get inside, baby," I told her, watching as she pulled her phone out, shutting off the beeping. "You'll catch a cold..."

"Yeah," she sighed. "I need to put that medicine on."

I frowned, tilting my head at her in complete confusion. "What medicine?"

"That scar cream," she said, her legs slipping down my body until her toes touched the ground. "It only works if you keep putting it on every so many hours."

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"Shit," I sighed, kneeling in front of her gorgeous legs. "Just one more thing I fucked up. I was supposed to help you, wasn't I?" I asked, looking up at her.

My eyes focused back on the long scar on her thigh that I'd touched just moments before. Leaning forward, I locked my eyes with hers as I pressed my lips to it.

"It's okay, Edward," she mumbled, pulling at my shoulders.

"No, it's not. I'm sorry I didn't tell you what I was doing, Bella," I said, pressing my lips to that scar one more time with reverence, because that was the first time she'd ever let me touch one of the results of Miller's torture, and I wasn't going to take that shit for granted again. "I'm just so used to... *doing* shit. I didn't think. Do you still want me to help you?"

She nodded quietly, pulling at my shoulders again at the same time I watched a shiver wrack her entire frame.

I stood before her, cupping her face. "You're cold. Come, let's get you inside."

We walked back into the kitchen door, soaking wet from the rain. I wanted to get Bella dry ASAP. When we stepped in, everyone glanced up.

"It's raining, you know," Jasper said wryly, folding his arms across his chest.

"No shit," Bella and I growled, and I shook water from my hair.

"What the hell took you guys so long?" Emmett asked, his brow wrinkled, but I could see him fighting his smile. "I mean, we were back inside in like five minutes..."

"I..." I started, not knowing what to say, because I'd just ripped my heart out of my chest and handed it to the girl at my side, but it wasn't lost on me that she hadn't said it back.

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With the way I'd told her - all grinding teen, make-out session up against a damn tree, for Christ sake - I'm not sure that I blamed her. However, I didn't need to tell this whole crew about that shit. If I didn't know where the fuck Bella and I stood, then these assholes weren't getting a fucking thing from me.

"Um, I thought I saw someone on the grounds," Bella lied smoothly. "So we waited it out."

"Fuck, what was it?" Mickey growled, standing up from her perch on the sofa.

"A deer," I sighed, shrugging, "but we didn't take a chance that someone might have followed Esme from the store."

"Right," Bella said with a nod and a bone rattling shiver.

"Shower," I ordered, pointing down the hall. "Before you catch pneumonia."

"Kay," she snorted, rolling her eyes and wiping water from her face.

I looked around the room, hearing the pouring rain batter against the windows and roof as Bella made her way down the hall. Mickey looked tired as she, Rose, and Emmett watched a movie in the living room. Alice was sitting in front of a laptop, intently studying whatever was on the screen. Makenna was sitting with Jasper, and they were going over step by step how to load a shotgun, cock it, and then disengage it. However, it was the woman in the kitchen I needed to speak to.

"Can I talk to you for a moment?" I asked Esme, who looked up from her bags of groceries.

"Yeah, Edward," she said with a nod, walking down the hall to the room she'd shared with my father, as I followed behind her.

When the door was closed, she turned to me, concern all over her face. "What's happened? Is Bella okay?"

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"Yeah, she's fine," I told her, running a hand through my wet hair. "I'm sorry I'm dripping..."

"Never mind that, son. Talk to me."

"I want to help Bella with that scar stuff you gave her...I just don't know..."

"What to expect?" she finished for me, and I nodded. "With Bells, there's no telling," she chuckled. "From what I gathered, she closed her eyes when Miller started to... well, you know..."

"Right," I growled, hating the sound of that fucker's name.

"She's been using it regularly this past week," she continued, starting to pace. "But her own touch is different than someone else's. Just...go slow. Gauge her every reaction. If it's too much, make *her* finish. And I wouldn't force her to show..."

"I wasn't going to make her strip, Esme," I grunted, rolling my eyes at her chuckle, but I started for the door.

"She's been upset this week," she said softly, raising an eyebrow at me.

"I'm...an idiot," I sighed, falling into a chair. "I'm a busy idiot that just didn't tell her..."

Esme laughed, and I realized it was comforting sound, because she wasn't laughing at me. She was just laughing at the situation.

"Oh, Edward. You really have to work on communication with her!" she snorted, sitting on the edge of the bed. "Not that she's innocent, because she isn't, but I watch her struggle, sweetie. This whole week, she thought you were ignoring her, but I could see her shrug it off, because she's damaged."

"She's not fucking *damaged*," I growled, sitting forward and gripping my hair.

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"Yes, she is, Edward. She's not the Bella I know. The girl I met could set a room on fire, just by walking in the door. She could command the attention of an entire bar full of men, never even giving them a second look. She could break hearts without saying a word."

I snorted, but nodded, because I could well imagine. "That Bella is still in there," I muttered, and I felt stripped bare, because I desperately wanted to hear the three words back that I'd told her outside.

"She is, and I see her emerge when she's with you. Every fiery argument. Every offer of a beer on the dock." She laughed heartily when my head snapped up to look at her. "Oh, yes. I watched that whole thing... And every time she teases you. I see it. Whatever you're doing, Edward, don't stop."

I smiled, nodding, and stood. "Thanks, Esme."

"Anytime, dear," she sighed, opening her door.

She walked back down the hall to the kitchen, and I made my way to the bedroom I shared with Bella. I stepped in, closing the door behind me, and found a clean, warm Bella sitting in the middle of my bed, wearing a bathrobe. Her hair was brushed and still wet, but in her hands, she was studying the tube of medicine.

"Hey," she said, smiling sweetly when she looked up at me.

"Hey. You weren't starting without me, were you?" I teased, chuckling when she grinned and shrugged her shoulders. "Give me few minutes, okay?" I asked, and she nodded.

I grabbed a towel and some dry clothes, taking a quick shower. When I was done, I rubbed a towel over my wet head, pulling on clean shorts and underwear. I entered the bedroom again, to find Bella nervously chewing on her bottom lip. I sighed, frowning at the sight, because I never wanted her to be afraid around me.

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"If you aren't ready for this, baby," I whispered, sitting on the bed in front her, "just say the word. This is your show..."

Her little hands clenched into fists, and I watched as she steeled herself to do this. Her eyes squeezed closed, she took a deep breath, and finally locked gazes with me, holding out the tube of cream.

"How do you want me to do this, Bella?" I asked, noticing that she wasn't talking very much.

"I usually do this in the bathroom...in the mirror," she told me softly, "but I'd rather just..." She gestured to the bed.

I nodded, swallowing thickly, because I really didn't know what I was doing and I didn't want to see her upset, but I had a feeling I was about to really push her boundaries.

"Lie back," I whispered, setting the tube on the bed and crawling up beside her. I played with the belt on her robe, but my eyes never left hers. "Are you dressed?"

"A sports bra and underwear," she giggled, looking away from me with brightly blushing cheeks.

I chuckled. "Bella, look at me," I commanded, and her head spun back. "I'm untying this now, but I want your eyes on me. And open, got me?"

"Yeah," she said, her voice a little shaky.

"The very second you think it's too much, you need to tell me."

She nodded again, but her eyes closed when my fingers tugged open her robe. I shouldn't have been shamelessly ogling her, but I couldn't help it. Yes, there were scars on her flat belly. Yes, her hands immediately went to cover herself, but fuck, she was beautiful. She was toned, with strong muscles and soft curves. Her breasts were full, and I had to fight my groan at the mere hint of

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nipples peaking up due to the cool room. The sweet cotton boy short underwear just completed her perfection, because they were multicolored stripes and just adorable.

"Bella, eyes open," I told her, cupping her face and rubbing my thumb along her cheek bone. "I don't want you seeing *him*. I want you seeing *me*."

"Kay," she groaned, looking up at me with pure terror.

I reached down, dragging my fingers over the scar on her thigh. "We've gotten this far, love. We can get a little further."

She nodded, taking a shaky breath as I bent down and kissed that scar again, before taking the tube into my hands. I wanted to start where she was comfortable, or at least as comfortable as she could be, and move on to the harder shit.

"Tell me how, baby," I told her, making sure that her eyes were open and on me.

"Put it on like you were covering a zit," she said, smiling up at me when I chuckled.

"Okay," I snorted, shaking my head one time at her, because sometimes, even in the most scariest of moments for her, that beautiful spark came shining through.

I smoothed the cream over her thigh, making sure to cover the whole thing, every now and then checking to make sure she was still watching. I squeezed a bit more of the stuff onto my fingers, locking gazes with her.

"Your stomach?"

She grimaced and nodded, but gripped my hand when I moved forward. "Edward, I'm..."

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"Scared," I finished for her, leaning over to press my lips to hers. "I'm right here. And you're beautiful and strong, and I'm just putting medicine on a zit," I told her, smiling when she snorted.

I kept my face near hers, whispering in her ear the entire time that my hand got closer to her skin. "It's me, Bella. It's just me."

She had two long burn scars up her stomach, and my goal was to get both of them. The very second my fingers touched her skin, she hiccuped a sob.

"I can't, Edward..."

"You *can*, love," I told her. "He doesn't own you, Bella. It's just skin. He'll never touch you like that again. No one will touch you like that. Only good touches from now on, I promise."

"Just you?"

I smiled, kissing her temple, and slowly moving my fingers to the next scar. "If that's what you want, Bella. I meant what I said outside, baby. I'm not going anywhere. I love you, and I'm here...if only to put cream on you..."

She groaned, rolling her eyes up at me, but God, she was tense. "I want more than cream, Edward. What about when this is all over? And you're not forced to live with me..."

"I may not let you go," I whispered, applying more cream to the second burn, only to move on to a couple of long, what looked like cuts, on her ribs. She closed her eyes again at the change in the position of my hand. "Uh uh," I crooned, nudging her temple with my nose, "eyes on me, Bella."

I had one more scar to go, and it looked like Bella was just about to fall apart.

"One more, *sweetness*," I said, giving her a half smile at the silly ass name that Liam had called her in the law office.

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"Edward," she whined, but a tear slipped down her face, and I kissed it away.

I put the cream on my finger, swiping it along her ribs, but instead of taking my hand away, I placed it flat on her stomach.

"No more," she panted, looking up at me, and my heart shattered.

"Give me your hand," I told her softly, kissing her temple. "Put it on top of mine, baby," I instructed, and when she did, I bent to her ear. "It's just me. Only me. Does it hurt?"

"No..."

"Do you think I would ever hurt you?"

"No, Edward..."

"Then memorize *this* feeling. Look at me. Feel me. And remember that *this* feeling is a good one, okay?"

"Kay," she whimpered, looking up at me, and then cupped my face with her other hand. She linked her fingers with mine on top of her belly.

I stretched out beside her, thinking "fuck it" to working tonight, because Bella needed me. I placed soft kisses along her cheek, jaw, and finally, down to her ear. Our hands were still linked, still on her stomach, and Bella looked down at the sight.

"Okay?" I asked against her temple.

"Yeah," she breathed, though it still sounded shaky, but when she looked back up at me, I saw what I'd been hoping to see - that stunning smile of pride creeping up her face.

I chuckled. "Good girl." I placed a loud kiss to her ear, relishing the short but oh so sweet giggle it caused. Not that I didn't want to hear it again, but I didn't

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want her to neglect the rest of her scars, either, so I asked, "You have more?"

Her smile fell, and she nodded grimly. "Yes."

"You want to finish those yourself?" I asked, handing her the tube of cream.

"Are you asking if you can get in my underwear, Edward?" she asked, taking the tube from me.

"Mm, as much as I would enjoy that, and as much as *you* would enjoy that...no." I smiled up at her innocently. "I'm merely making sure that we don't push you too far this evening."

She grinned, shook her head, and stood up from the bed. " *Do* you want in my underwear, Edward?"

"God, yes...a thousand times...yes. But not until we can...um, *fully* appreciate the experience, baby," I chuckled, falling flat on my back on the bed, because she was killing me as she stood there in just her underwear and that open robe.

I heard the bathroom door close, cutting off her laugh, but she wasn't in there for long; soon, the bed dipped down beside me. I looked up at her, and her face was serious again as she leaned over me. Her hair created the most amazing smelling curtain around our faces as she kissed my lips softly, only to pull away too soon.

I couldn't help but stare at her, because the robe was gone, leaving just her black sports bra and her "so cute they made my fingers twitch" striped underwear.

"I need to say something, and I need you to hear me out, okay?" she asked, sitting back on her heels.

I nodded, my heart falling into the pit of my stomach, because I could tell that she was way too serious at the moment. She was going to throw my "I love you" right back in my face, because I'd said it too soon, or because I said it

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while grinding against her outside in the fucking rain, but I wasn't expecting the next words to come out of her mouth.

"I knew Jake my whole life," she started, looking at her hands and not my face. "As you know, our fathers are friends. Billy is...a pain in the ass, but Jake has always been there, you know?"

I nodded, but I didn't know. I just wanted her to continue so that I could find out why we were discussing the cheating pig in *my* fucking bed, while she sat there in her underwear.

"I dated in high school, I dated in college...and it was fine. Nothing ever super long term. Jack was probably the longest - six months, maybe. But that was while I was in Virginia," she sighed, looking up at me. "He was a bartender at this bar we'd all go to, and it was fun...nothing serious."

"Bella, you're killing me," I groaned...or growled, I wasn't sure which.

"Just...let me finish," she pleaded, her eyes soft and deep brown, but filled with something I couldn't quite place. "Anyway...when Jane got sick and my dad called me to tell me, I told Jack that I was going home. It was, 'Cool, see ya 'round.' And then I got home, and Jake was there. He was finishing college, applying for an internship with my father, and we started to hang out.

"At first, he was keeping me company when Jane would go to bed or was in and out of hospitals. It was comfortable...and comforting. It was easy. He was the first to say 'I love you.'"

I inhaled sharply, my stomach now roiling with nerves, so I sat up to face her. I started to tell her that just because I'd said those words, she didn't have to, but it would have been a lie, and she stopped me anyway.

"I loved him," she sighed, grimacing a bit, "but I'm not sure I was *in love* with him, so it took me forever to say it. And when I did, I meant it. I cared about him, and we took care of each other. He was there through all of Jane's illness and even helped with her funeral... I just... I just don't think I really knew what

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the words meant..."

I ran a hand through my hair, not giving two shits that it stuck up everywhere because it was still damp. Bella was killing me with this fucking story.

"Until...now," she breathed, finally looking up at me.

I froze, afraid I'd heard her wrong.

"I was *so mad at you this week*," she said through gritted teeth, "and that was just because I couldn't see you...talk to you. I didn't know if you were pushing me away or what, but I wasn't even that mad when Jacob fucking cheated on me!"

I grinned, shaking my head slowly. "I'm sorry, baby."

She snorted, rolling her eyes, and continued, her voice softening just a bit. "I remember every hit and slap and burn Miller gave me. But I also remember the sound of your voice the first time. I remember your eyes being the first thing that had made me feel safe in three fucking days," she said, a small sob escaping her, but when I reached for her, she just shook her head. "I remember that this scar..." Her finger traced down the long mark on her thigh. "That scar was the last one he gave me, because you were there. I remember the first thing I ate was something you cooked. I remember almost killing Jake, and the only voice that mattered was yours..."

She sobbed again, only this time she let me pull her to me.

"I'm so fucking scared, Edward," she said, gripping both sides of my neck and pressing her forehead to mine. "All the time. I'm scared that Miller will get to me...that something will happen to you, or my friends, or my dad. I'm scared that I can't ever touch you the way I really want to. I'm scared that my nightmares will never stop. I'm scared that we'll run forever from this shit."

She pressed a wet sloppy kiss to my lips, and then went on, so I just stayed silent, because I was pretty sure this had been building for a while.

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"I'm scared that when this is all over, I'll be lost, because I won't have you. I'm scared that I need you too much, because the only time I'm not scared...is *right here*."

I grimaced, kissing her roughly, because I didn't know what else to do for her.

"I'm scared that you'll find someone... *not fucked up*. I'm scared that we fight too much, and one day you'll get sick of it."

I laughed, because I couldn't help it, and I buried it in her shoulder, turning my head to place a long, slow kiss to her sweet smelling skin.

"You're gorgeous when you're pissed at me," I whispered in her ear. "That will never get old."

She sniffled a laugh, but pulled back to look at me. "I'm even scared that if I get better, you'll need another person to fix. I'm terrified, Edward. My office is ashes, my friends and family have been yanked from their homes, I've been through hell and back, but the only thing I want is... *right here*. When I'm here, nothing seems to hurt me." She hiccuped another sob, her eyes closing, causing more tears to cascade down her face.

I reached up to wipe them away, tucking her hair behind her ear. "Bella, please stop crying," I begged her softly.

"I will always remember our first kiss," she sniffled, smiling a little at my groan. "It was angry, and jealous, and just plain frustrated. It was so us," she giggled softly, rolling her eyes. "I fell in love your French toast..."

"I fell in love with your apple pie," I chuckled, kissing away more tears.

"Jane's apple pie," she corrected, but continued, "I remember meeting you when we were kids, and your stutter and the prettiest green eyes I've ever seen. I remember you carrying me up the stairs and out of Miller's basement...and the first time you made me laugh...the first time you let me cry...and the first time you shot someone in order to save me."

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She tilted her head at me, biting that perfect bottom lip of hers. "But I don't remember when I fell completely in love with you. I can't do it. I've tried to figure it out, but I wonder if it was always there..."

My mouth fell open as I gazed up at her. She was still on my lap, her hands still on my neck, but they moved, running softly through my hair.

"I don't know if we'll make it through this," she sighed, her fingers making me want to purr they felt so good on my scalp, "but I know that I met the most amazing group of people."

"I love you...so much," I whispered, cupping her face and looking directly into her eyes. "And I swear to you, we'll get through this, or I'll die trying."

She took a deep breath, pressed her lips to mine, and a stunning smile crept over her features. "I love you, too, Edward."

A/N... Now, before you yell at me for ending it there...just humor me, because I promise you chap 13 is worth the wait.

I told you it was a little emotional. Both JenRar and my pre-reader, Goober-Lou, yelled at me for making them cry. So I figured I'd better put a warning in there.

Good...they *finally* figured it all out. What I love about these two is they deal so well *together* ... even when they are upset, they can still sass back and forth at each other...it holds true to their real personalities.

Carlisle is fine...stop worrying about Daddy C. And all alarms have been installed. And before you ask why didn't just Mickey tell Bella about switching? Bella tends to keep shit about her and Edward just between the two of them, and she's got so much on her mind and heart that it didn't register to her that he was switching for Mickey, but to avoid confrontation... Eh...it worked out, because Edward and Bella can't get down to the heart of the matter without a good fight! LOL

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Now...why I'm giving you an extra chapter... *because I can!* Ugh! Not being able to post was just wrong on so many levels, so here's the solution, because there may be a time where this website just won't cut it. MedusaInNY has been kind enough to have put together a *freakin'* gorgeous blog for me. Everything I've written is there... Please go visit it, if only to check her work, because I'm tellin' you...it's beautiful! [www\(dot\)drotuno\(dot\)blogspot\(dot\)com](http://www(dot)drotuno(dot)blogspot(dot)com) - put in the real periods and go see it. But I'm telling you this because if this site goes bust again, then you can always check on there. Sign up for alerts, follow me on Twitter, but next time you won't have to wait. So this chapter is in celebration of finding the loophole! LOL

Thanks to JenRar for beta'ing this for me. And doesn't laugh when I'm too fried to actually *send* the chapter... LOL And to Goober-Lou, who is now on Twitter, for pre-reading my stuff and telling me "holy hell, they're gonna kill you for this cliffie!" :)

Now, review...review because I'm not sure when I'll receive the alert for it! Crazy ass site...and review because I'm still going to post around Friday or Saturday. So until then...leave some love...leave at least "Thank God they finally said the damn words!" or "I have cream Edward can apply" LOL or "I'm heading to your blog now!" Either way...love you guys...and review. Until next time...Later.

~oOoOooo~ Although...I've been told this needs a tissue warning! Just FYI! ~oooOoOo~

Chapter 13

A/N... Oh Lord, if this site isn't just...a pain! I'm going to encourage all of you to sign up for alerts on my blog, because apparently the alerts here aren't going out that well. So just in case... [drotuno\(dot\)blogspot\(dot\)com](http://drotuno(dot)blogspot(dot)com) Mmm'kay?

Now...I wanna apologize for the tissue warning mess up...again this site is driving me crazy. It was supposed to be at the beginning of chapter 12...not there to scare you about this one. SO! That being said...this is no tissue warning... this would be a LEMON warning. Which I'm sure most of you that know me are cheering - you sick twisted pervs (and I love ya for it). AND a CLIFFIE and VIOLENCE warning...so just brace yourself.

Time also travels a bit in this chapter. Take note of it when it switches to EPOV.

Now...I believe we left Mercward and Bella after she said the three most important words...so let's get back there, okay?

CHAPTER 13

BELLA

"I love you, too, Edward."

I'd had to say those words, but I'd needed Edward to know just how important they were. I'd cared about Jake, loved him, though it never ran as deep or as strong as the love I felt for the man that was currently looking at me like I'd grown a second head.

"I love you," I whispered again, cupping his face.

"Yeah?" he breathed, his mouth quirking up into that crooked smile I loved so much.

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"Yeah."

And suddenly, the reality of how close were, how under dressed we were, came into sharp focus. Edward was in just a pair of gray cargo shorts, and I was in a sports bra and underwear. I leaned forward, allowing the skin of my stomach to graze against his, and my whole body lit on fire - not from fear, but from pure, raw *want*.

"Don't you have to work?" I whispered, trying to distract myself from the fact that I wanted everything Edward's body could offer me, especially because I couldn't take it all.

"*Fuck them*," he growled, and it was the single sexiest, two word sentence I'd ever heard whispered in my ear. *Ever*.

The rain spattered against the window of the bedroom as the very thin thread of control left me. I didn't know how much I could take, but I was going to take as much as I was able, because I was sitting in the lap of the hottest man I'd ever seen, and he'd told me he loved me, told me he'd die protecting me, and I wanted to eat him alive.

Howling winds rattled the window pane as I finally just... *took*. Turning my head at the same time Edward did, our mouths connected with whimpers and gasps, tongues and lips, and while our mouths were wild and wet, his hands were still, his arms wrapped around me and his hands flat on my upper back.

"Fuck that shit," I growled, pulling back and glaring at him. "*Touch* me..."

"Where, love?" he panted, his eyes a deep, heated green. They looked like fire and sin, like they held sexual secrets that would cause my mind to explode once he finally revealed them.

"O-over the material, but for shit's sake, touch me!"

Every nerve ending in my body wanted skin on skin, but I knew after the boundaries we'd pushed earlier, it wasn't going to happen; it would've been too

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much - but everything that was uncovered was his to explore. And I wanted him to explore like Lewis and Clark only dreamed of.

A deep, sexy ass chuckle escaped him, as he placed his hand flat between my shoulder blades and bent me back. I panted as his head lowered, his heavy-lidded eyes locked onto mine as he looked up at me through his gorgeous, long eyelashes. He opened his mouth, his tongue snaking out to leave an open mouth kiss just above my breast. Swirling his tongue over my skin, he worked his way up to my collarbone, along my throat, and up to my ear.

"Is all skin free game, Bella?"

I grinned at the amusement, yet pure huskiness to his voice. There was an underlying happiness to his voice, as well, and I loved it. I nodded against the top of his head as my fingers wove their way into his still damp locks.

"Mm, then I'm gonna have to roll you over, love, because I have... *so* much to do..."

I snorted at him, but found myself on my back, looking up at his beautiful face. His hair was everywhere, both his and my doing. His face had a touch of scruffiness to it, just adding to his dark look as he gazed down at me.

"Like what?" I asked innocently, just to see the wicked half-smirk that crossed his face.

"There have been parts of you that I've completely neglected, baby," he said, feigning sincerity. "Take your arm, for instance," he whispered, picking up my right arm as he lined his body up beside mine, leaning partially over me.

He picked up my hand, brought it to his face, his mouth opening to the inside of my wrist. The very second his tongue tasted my skin, he moaned and I gasped. With open mouthed, sucking kisses, he worked his way up to the inside of my elbow - this time, dragging his teeth ever so lightly across my flesh.

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My stomach clenched at the sharp zap of want that that one simple kiss did to me. I couldn't help but press my legs together to alleviate some of the need that was now flowing through me. I felt wet and warm, like goo next to him.

I pulled my arm away from him, to reach for his face. I brought him to my mouth, which caused him to press more of his weight on me - and damn, it felt good. If I thought being in the same room with him made me feel protected, nothing could have prepared me for the feeling of his body covering mine, because we both shifted at the same time. Edward braced his arms on either side of my head, his mouth never leaving mine, but his body lifted and then lowered between my legs. Keeping one elbow bent to hold himself up, he gazed down at me, the other hand hovering.

"Still okay?"

"God, yes," I whined, my body practically writhing under him.

With his free hand, he skimmed lightly down my arm, side, and down to my leg, hitching it up higher around him. His thumb found my scar, rubbing it one time, before he leaned back to me. His mouth captured mine in a searing kiss, leaving me breathless as he pressed his forehead to mine.

"God, Bella, the things I want to do to you..." he groaned, his eyes squeezing shut as my hands began their own exploration adventures.

With my fingers practically in claws, due to the hunger of wanting to touch him so badly, I caressed every muscle of his chest, over his shoulders, and down those fantastically strong arms, only to glide back up to slip them down his powerful back, finally reaching my goal of the waistband of his shorts. My fingers dipped just inside, feeling his hips press forward and the muscles of his ass flex so tightly, and I whimpered at the whole feel of it.

Until he moved away.

"Edward," I groaned, reaching for him, but he just grinned wickedly, dragging that tongue of his across his bottom lip.

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"Patience, baby," he crooned, slipping down my body until he was face level with my bent knees. "I want to try something..." he said against the skin of the inside of my knee. "But I want you to tell me if it's too much, Bella. Promise me..."

I nodded frantically, hoping to God and all that was holy that whatever he wanted to try brought that glorious body of his back to my hands.

"Say it, love," he commanded, his voice taking on the tone that caused my whole body to writhe. An in-charge Edward was a fuck-hot Edward.

"I promise," I squeaked, nodding again and reaching for him, but he just shook his head at me.

"I want to make you feel so good, Bella," he whispered, his lips dragging down the inside of my thigh.

My breath caught, and I could feel my brow break out into a cold sweat as panic started to rise.

"Easy, love," he soothed, reaching up to take my hands and linking our fingers together. "You stay clothed..."

"Kay," I breathed, my eyes sharp on his as he lowered his mouth to my mound, and with just his nose, he traced the edge of my underwear, placing random kisses here and there.

"Fuck, you smell so good," he growled against the cloth of my underwear. "Are you wet for me, Bella?"

I whined a laugh, and it sounded almost humorless, because I was *dying* for him - never mind just *wet*. I could feel the moisture that had leaked out onto my thighs. I could feel the throb when my center clenched at just the mere idea of how close his mouth was to where I needed him the most. But when his tongue dragged over the cotton of my underwear, my hips shot off the bed.

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"Holy fucking hell," I panted through gritted teeth.

"Mm, and you taste even better," he purred, leaning back in to repeat his actions.

I squeezed his hands, trying to bring him in closer, or to move more, or something... *anything*. My legs spread wider for him, and he moaned appreciatively, which only caused me to writhe at the vibration of his voice.

"Edward," I whined. My eyes rolled back in my head when his mouth applied the perfect pressure, his tongue pushing firmly against my clit, and I couldn't stop my hips from grinding against his face.

Pulling one of his hands free from mine, he looked up from between my legs as his thumb caressed the crotch of my underwear, and my hips followed every movement.

"So wet, love," he whispered, his thumb pressing harder with each pass. "I love you...and I want to see you come for me. From now on...every orgasm of yours...is *mine*..."

"Oh, damn," I whispered, my eyes unable to tear away from the most amazing sight of Edward's face, mouth, and tongue between my legs.

It didn't even matter that my underwear was still on. It didn't matter that I was so wet for him, I could feel it when his tongue dragged up the cotton again and again.

What mattered was the pressure of his thumb, the warmth and wetness of his tongue swirling over my clit and finally sucking hard on it through the fabric. And not for the first time, did I wonder how shattered I'd be when - or if - I was actually able feel this man skin on fucking skin.

It was that thought, along with the things he was doing with his hand and tongue, that caused me to explode. My free hand fisted the comforter beside me, while the other gripped his hand tightly, his thumb circling over my

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knuckles in a soothing gesture, but my head pressed back into the pillow as I lost it. Completely. My whole body seemed to shatter into a billion pieces out into the room, and then snap back together. I shuddered as tremors wracked my frame.

I panted, my legs falling limply back down to the bed, as a very smug and sexy Edward crawled back up my body. If I ever had any reason to get better, to be able to be free of the fear of Miller's touch, it was in that one brief moment of watching Edward crawl back up me, because fuck, I couldn't wait to play with that man.

"Hmm," he sighed, fighting his sexy smile as he brushed my hair from my face. "It seems we're crossing all kinds of lines with you tonight."

The man was deadly. I thought I knew him - every grumpy look, every sweet tilt of his head, even the fact that his stutter meant he was nervous. But I didn't know *this* guy. I knew he kissed better than anyone I'd ever pressed my lips to. I knew he could talk a big game, but I didn't know the deep, sensually charged man that was currently rubbing my stomach to help me settle down - the same stomach that twenty-four hours ago, I could barely wash in the shower with my own hands. I didn't know if he was sex incarnate or the devil himself. But God, I wanted him, and the fact that he wanted me, too, just made him that much more lethal.

"I love you," I whispered, my brow wrinkling at just how true that statement was.

He grinned, sweet and silly. "You're just saying that because I just made you come your brains out."

I laughed, bringing him in to kiss him fully. I wanted to try to touch him more, but suddenly, I was so very exhausted - a great, big orgasm will do that to a girl - and after the places Miller put my hands, I was nervous, but I could tell by the way Edward was moving away from me, he wasn't going to allow it.

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"Not tonight, Bella . This was all about you, all about making you feel good, *sweetness*." He gave a crooked smile at my giggle. "I'm so very proud of you," he whispered against my temple. "You've overcome another fear, baby. And I love that it was me that got the brilliance of the experience."

Tears welled up at his sweet words, but I stopped him from getting up. "I want you to stay..."

"Believe me, love, I *want* to stay, but I do need to make a perimeter run with Jasper."

"Well, then, I'm switching to nights," I said, pouting, and then gave a wide yawn.

He grinned, leaning over to kiss my forehead. "We'll talk about it. I'm never far, baby. Just call me if you need me, okay?"

I nodded, gripping his belt loops to keep him close to me as we heard Emmett's hefty chuckle echo down the hall as he made his way to the bedroom.

"What will we tell them?" I asked, looking up at his so very soft green eyes.

"They know," he snorted. "They've guessed and theorized, and I'm pretty sure between Esme and Jasper, they all know. And I don't care...because you love me, and at this point, the whole world can know..."

I sighed in contentment. It wasn't shame that had held him back in front of everyone. It was just...the unknown of our relationship.

"I *do* love you," I said, yawning again.

"Good!" he chuckled, tucking the covers up around me. "Sleep, Bella. I'll check on you all night, okay?"

"Mmhm," I sighed, closing my eyes at his kisses to each of my lids, nose, and finally, lips.

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I heard the bathroom door close, and the shower turn on, but I couldn't think to remember that he'd just had a shower. I was asleep before the door opened back up.

~oOo~

EDWARD

I grunted in frustration when the pillow I'd been clinging to tried to pull away. "No," I whined, holding on tighter. "Stay."

I smiled against her neck and chest as the sweetest giggle shook the bed.

"*Your* schedule, Edward. I'm just following it," she snorted, trying to pry my arms off her.

"Fuck the schedule. You're too comfortable," I grumbled, hitching my leg up over hers, which only caused her to laugh that much harder.

I'd revised the whole schedule two weeks ago - the day after Bella had told me she loved me, which had to be the best day of my life. I sat down with every single person in the house and wrote the best schedule I could to keep everyone happy, but fairly even with experience and coverage in twelve hour shifts.

Emmett, Rose, Makenna, and Mickey all preferred the daytime hours, though at this point, I was pretty sure that Rose could tell Emmett to jump off of a cliff, and he'd do it blindly, with a stupid ass smile on his face. Not that Alice was any better when it came to Jasper, because she and Bella decided to work something of an in-between shift. Alice and Bella liked working on the computer together, following Billy Black's progress, monitoring Bella's "disappearance," and the all around snooping of the TT employees and King's men. But they wanted to be with Jasper and me, so we compromised.

The daytime shift worked five in the morning to five at night, Jasper and I worked the opposite, with Bella and Alice working three in the afternoon to three in the morning.

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Getting to spend all that time with Bella was great, but it was when I'd crawl into bed in the early morning and Bella pulled away two hours before I was ready to get up that I tended to whine a bit, which wasn't getting me very far at the moment.

"I'll make you breakfast," she sang softly in my ear.

"No. Stay." I pouted fabulously, nuzzling her neck and holding her that much closer, even though Bella could cook a mean breakfast. She made the best blueberry muffins on the fucking planet.

"I'll let you sleep in, *and* I'll wake you up with a surprise," she cooed, running her fingers through my hair.

That got my attention, so I opened one eye to glare at her. "How late are we talkin', Bella? And what's the surprise?"

She snorted, rolling her gorgeous brown eyes at me. "I'll give you an extra hour, and the surprise stays a secret."

"Do I get to keep the sexy teddy bear I'm currently holding?"

"No, Edward," she sighed dramatically.

I cursed at that, but an extra hour of sleep sounded awfully tempting. "An hour?" I asked, smiling up at her.

"And breakfast... *and* a surprise," she countered.

"Deal," I huffed, finally letting her up.

She laughed, shoving me playfully. "Damn, you drive a hard bargain, Mr. Cullen. And it's... *your fucking schedule*," she growled, but I could see her smirk as she turned away from me.

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I sat up on an elbow to watch her walk into the bathroom. Her sleepwear of choice hadn't changed since I'd first been able to touch her stomach. Sports bras and underwear. I was so proud of her progress - though she hadn't gone much further than that night - that I could barely contain myself. The skin she covered was the skin that was off limits, and probably the skin I wanted to touch the most; not that I was complaining one bit, because she was trying her damndest to conquer every fear she had, and that included touching me back - which I found out later that Miller had *made* her touch him off and on when he'd hurt her, and the fear came from there. She didn't give many details, and I didn't ask for any.

Some days, I was left with a raging case of blue balls, but I didn't care how many cold showers it took, because Bella was worth the wait. Some days, I'd find myself unable *not* to touch her, play with her, because she was so responsive to my hands, my words, and my mouth. I couldn't help it; I felt consumed by her most of the time.

When the shower kicked on, I rolled over to go back to sleep, falling pretty much instantly.

My dreams hit me immediately, and they'd changed. They were no longer about the little girl in Iraq; they were about Bella, about chasing and chasing her, but never catching her, or if I did catch her, they were so hot, I would wake up hard as steel. I didn't tell Bella, but I'd talked it over with Jasper. He seemed to think - in his infinite Southern wisdom - that I was completely terrified of something happening to her. No shit. My entire being was on edge with every email my father sent, every trigger of the alarm that they'd installed, and every panic attack that girl had. Yeah, and I swore to myself, and God, and Jasper that when this shit was all over, I was taking Bella away to my house and locking us in for a fucking year.

Jasper had laughed at me.

I awoke a little later with the feel of warm, strong fingers gliding along my bare back. They'd start at my shoulders and work their way down to my ass, kneading and touching, and God, it felt amazing, but I wasn't sure if it was my

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dream or reality.

"Edward," Bella whispered in my ear, and I could feel her body leaning over me. "Baby, turn over," she urged, tugging at my shoulder.

"Wha--" I mumbled, but I did whatever that voice told me to.

Those same fingers on my back began working their magic on my chest, arms, and stomach - only this time, I could've sworn I felt lips and tongue and heavy breaths against my skin. I felt lips on my chest and neck, on my stomach and bellybutton.

Groggily, I opened my eyes when I felt a tug at my sweatpants, which were tented to full capacity as it was, but when I caught sight of what was kneeling over me, I just about came right then.

"Baby, what are you do... Oh, fuck," I moaned, my brow furrowed as she pulled my sweats down.

"I *really* need to do this," she whispered, licking her lips, like I was her next meal. "God, for so long...I've wanted..."

"Not that I'm telling you no or anything, but fuck, love...you don't have t-to." My stutter emerged the very nanosecond her warm hand wrapped around my dick.

I never wanted her to feel obligated to return anything I've done for her, but I'd be a fucking liar if I said I didn't want it, hadn't fantasized about it, or beaten off to the mere thought of it in the shower. However, this wasn't about me; this was about what Bella could do, and from the look on her face - that same determined, yet fucking sexy ass look - she was on a mission.

"I told you that I had a surprise for you, Edward," she whispered, and my mouth fell open as I watched her face get closer and closer to my cock.

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Suddenly, I was the most grateful motherfucker that ever lived, because I hated surprises, but *this*, I could definitely get used to. *This* was one hell of a way to be woken up.

"Oh, baby," I chuckled darkly. "You have no idea how fucking hot that's going to look from here."

She grinned, and then dragged her tongue across her bottom lip, finally breaking from my gaze to look at what was in her hands. I watched as a wicked expression crossed her face, before she looked back up at me.

"Do you always wake up this hard?" she purred as she slowly bent down to drag her tongue up the side of my dick.

I hissed like a seventeen year old getting his first blowjob. "Only *lately*," I ground out through gritted teeth, propping myself up on my elbows for a better view. I was not going to miss a second of this.

She chuckled, nodded once, and finally swiped a lick right across the tip, where I was leaking like a busted pipe. "Sweet dreams, then?"

"The reality is far better," I whispered, wanting to reach out and touch her, but I could see how she'd positioned herself was for her benefit, not mine, so I opted to lay back on the pillows, gripping the sheets in order not to just pull her to me and plunge myself as deep inside of her as I could, because I loved that girl so much, and it was so very difficult sometimes not to just show her in every way possible.

"How would you know that?" she teased, her hand moving slowly up and down my shaft as she looked up through her eyelashes at me.

"Educated guess, baby," I panted.

"I'll show you education," she murmured, and her mouth sank down over me.

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"Holy hell," I growled, trying to stay quiet in a house full of people. My head fell back for just a moment, as I relished the feel of her hot mouth wrapped around me.

My mouth fell open when she took every inch of me, which wasn't usually the norm. I panted when her tongue did things I couldn't see, because I felt them from head to toe. And I wanted to cry or laugh or something, when she began a rhythm that had me fighting to keep my hands from her hair and my hips from raising up to fuck her mouth. That would have been asinine behavior on my part.

No, this was perfect just the way she was doing it, *because* she was doing it. And for a moment, I wondered how long it had taken her to build up the courage to try this. It had been weeks since our first kiss, weeks since we'd discovered her fear of touch, and weeks of her only touching me through clothes. But this was the boldest I'd seen her, and I promised God or whoever was above that if this was the real Bella Swan coming out to play, I would save homeless puppies, or cats from trees, or pull thorns from lion's paws from this moment on, because if this was her...the real her...I was the luckiest fucker alive. If this was how she was in bed - sexy and bold and a touch naughty - I would never, ever need another woman again. Not that I'd even thought about it, because Bella was *it* for me. I was done. And my brains were fucking being scrambled.

"Oh, so good, baby...so good," I groaned, my eyes rolling back in my head as one of her hands met the same rhythm as her mouth and the other cupped my balls.

She hummed around me, her mouth coming up off of me with a soft pop, but her hand never stopped. "All your orgasms from now on...are *mine*."

I huffed a laugh at my words being thrown back at me. I laughed, because she had no idea, they were hers anyway. They had been since before I knew I loved her. They were hers the very first time she turned that fiery temper on me, or gave me that sweet giggle I loved to hear. They were always hers, and they would always *be* hers.

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"Oh fuck," I breathed as she sank back down over me, her little hand working along my shaft, but it was when I saw her squeeze her thighs together that I finally gave in. I didn't want to, because she felt so fucking amazing, but it was inevitable, especially when what she was doing to *me* turned *her* on.

"Baby, baby...I'm gonna come..." I told her, feeling the burn deep in my stomach, and I grew that much harder in her mouth when she hummed around me again.

When she took me all the way back in, swallowing around me, I came. My head fell back, my fists twisted the sheets, and curses flew from my mouth in gasps, because she didn't stop. She took all that I lost, and it was more than I'd care to admit. She cleaned me up, finally popping off with another amazing sound.

"Oh hell," I panted, everything - and I did mean, *everything* - about me going limp.

I heard a sweet snicker, and I lifted my head to see that pride-filled smile on her face. Another fear had just been crossed off her list.

"Come here, 'cause I can't move," I told her, opening my arms.

She giggled, crawling up my body and stopping to place a kiss to my tattoo, before bracing her arms on either side of my head. Her hair fell around my face, trapping me in with her beauty and her sweet smell.

"You have to move, baby. I've let you sleep in too long," she told me, nuzzling my nose with her own.

"Kay," I sighed, but made no movement, except to wrap my arms around her. "You're way too dressed."

She laughed, rolling her eyes. "There's a reason for that, silly ass. We *have* work to do," she urged, punctuating each word with a kiss to my lips.

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"No way...I owe you... *big time*," I growled playfully at her, rolling us so that I was looming over her now hysterically laughing self. "And you really do have too many clothes on."

"No, that was...a test, Edward." Her face showed amusement, but her voice was serious.

"And you *so* fucking passed," I grunted, kissing her with complete abandonment.

When I pulled away, we were both breathless, but Bella just gazed up at me, cupping my face.

"I made breakfast for you," she said softly, her eyes a sweet chocolate.

"Blueberry muffins?" I verified, beaming when she nodded. "I love you. Have I said that lately?"

"Not since your blowjob," she laughed, squealing when I bit roughly at her neck.

"Mm, mm, mm, and what a *job* well done, baby," I purred in her ear, suckling at her earlobe.

"It was a... *hard job*...but someone had to do it," she teased, her eyes twinkling with mischief. "A *big* job, too... But I am woman enough to... *handle* it."

I laughed, burying my face in her neck, loving that she was just as dirty as I was. "Okay, enough..."

She giggled when I finally pulled myself from her arms. She crawled off the bed, heading towards the door, but stopped before opening it. "Oh, yeah...I love you, too, Edward."

I smiled, shot her a wink, and made my way into the bathroom. No extra soap was needed this morning.

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~oOo~

BELLA

"Step off the fucking blueberry!" Edward barked in the kitchen.

I snorted, looking up from the computer, watching him barely restrain the violence that certain foods brought out in him. Hell, who was I kidding? The man could be violent over just about anything.

"I'm not fucking kidding, Emmett," he growled. "Take the banana, but drop that blueberry before I fucking break your hand!"

I laughed, got up from the lounge chair outside, and walked into the kitchen. I opened the microwave, pulling out a stash of three blueberry muffins on a plate. I shoved it into Edward's hands and walked back outside.

"Don't kill anyone over muffins, Edward," I called out, sitting back down to the computer.

Alice laughed, looking over at me. "Who knew you could tame the savage beast with blueberries?" she asked, shaking her head.

"No shit," I chuckled, scrolling through the latest list of employees that Carlisle had sent us.

The first list of newer employees didn't set off any alarms, so Alice had told him to just send the entire list, even external companies. We couldn't really leave the house, the alarms were hooked up and working properly, so we had time to search through them all.

"Oh, this poor guy," I sighed, curling my legs up in the chair as I read the next file. "I certainly hope that *Filbert* is a family name..."

Alice giggled, looking over my shoulder. "Oh damn, he never stood a chance, did he?"

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I grinned, pushing her away. "Filbert apparently has quite the *Star Wars* memorabilia collection, because he spends way too much money on eBay. And he's proud enough to show it all on Facebook."

"Wow, he's... *attractive*," she snorted at the poor thing with thick glasses, a beak of a nose, and braces at thirty-something.

"Already looking for other men," Edward snorted, straddling the lounge chair behind me. "Oh damn!" He laughed when he caught sight of Filbert. "Go for it, baby..." he teased, but grunted when I elbowed him in the stomach.

"I guarantee...Filbert, there," Alice snickered, rolling her eyes up to Edward, "is still a virgin, and Bella would give him heart failure."

He laughed, picking up his next blueberry muffin and taking a huge bite. "Yeah, she would...but what does Filbert do?"

"Chew, swallow, and *then* speak, Edward," I chided, but smiled when all he did was take another ginormous bite with a big grin. I turned back to the computer, scanning through the file. "Filbert - that handsome thing - runs the website of Twilight Tech. He makes a damn good living doing it. He has multiple online gaming accounts, and usually sets up a comic book booth at conventions in the Washington and Oregon areas.

"He's so clean he squeaks," I huffed, looking at the two of them. "If you're both done ogling Filbert, may I move on now?"

They both laughed, and Edward picked up his last muffin, leaning back in the lounge. He kept his legs on either side of mine while I worked through the next few files as the sun slowly set, until I came to a name and face that seemed familiar.

I turned to Alice. "Is Mack still up?"

"Yeah, I think so..." she answered, looking up from Billy Black's financials to study my screen. "Why?"

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"Makenna!" I called, and she appeared within seconds at the door.

"Don't you have a picture of a guy named Savage?"

"Yeah, Bells," she said with a nod, darting inside for just a second, only to reappear with the picture in hand. "Paul Savage. It's rumored that he pushes illegal weapons out the back of his pawn shop, and he answers to King."

Edward sat up from behind me, where he'd been quiet for some time now, to look over my shoulder.

"I've got a *Peter* Savage working for TT," I muttered scrolling through his file. "He was hired a year ago to run the cell phone division of my father's company."

"Savage, Savage, Savage," Alice chanted, closing out what she was working on and opening another screen. "Peter, Paul...what the fuck did I read about them? Come on, come on, come on," she whispered, her brow wrinkling as she scrolled through screen after screen of text. "Got it!" she chirped suddenly.

Edward and I both jumped, but leaned in to read over her shoulder as Makenna sat at the table. Jasper joined us, looking like he'd just gotten up, and like he was curious as to what we were doing.

"Paul and Peter Savage - twins, both did time for uttering forged instruments, which is fake money, bad checks. They were arrested back when Charlie had to testify in front of the grand jury - you know, when King was investigated for counterfeiting."

"Then how in the hell is Peter working for TT?" I growled. "They should have found that shit when he was fucking hired."

"Hmm," Edward mused, reading from my screen, and then switching to Alice's. "He may have just gotten lost in the shuffle, love. Look," he said, pointing to each computer. "Here, you can see that the cell company was bought out by Twilight, but all the employees were grandfathered in."

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"Shit," I sighed, turning to Alice. "Email Carlisle. Just tell him to look into Peter Savage."

"Kay," she said with a nod, pulling up email. "And he's sent a message to us, too."

"What's he say?" Edward urged, sitting up straighter.

"Nothing; he just sent a link." She clicked on it immediately, bringing up a newspaper article. "Oh hell," she sighed, shaking her head. "Listen to this..."

The search for Isabella Swan is still in full swing. The daughter of millionaire, Charlie Swan, who is rumored to be in the protective custody of the FBI, has been missing for several weeks. A hotline has been set up with the Seattle Police Department, if anyone has any information regarding the whereabouts of Isabella.

Isabella was last seen at the law offices of Spencer, Wyatt, and Townsend, where Miss Swan's investigative services have been used previously. She was seen in the company of a man identified as Edward Masen. He was over six feet tall, wearing blue jeans, a white t-shirt, and a brown leather jacket. He has reddish-brown hair and green eyes.

Spencer, Wyatt, and Townsend was also the same law office where the shootout occurred in the parking garage, shortly after Ms. Swan and Mr. Masen were last seen. A drug bust allegedly went down badly, resulting in the death of five men, but the FBI is still withholding information. They are stating that the investigation is still in its earliest stages.

The Seattle Police have received numerous tips concerning the whereabouts of Isabella Swan. She's been spotted in California - most specifically Disneyland - Portland, Oregon, and most recently in the Walmart of a small town just outside Glacier Peak Park. The official spokesperson at the Seattle Police Department states they are investigating every lead, because Isabella is a person of interest in another investigation, regarding the death of a Randall Chapel.

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Anyone that has any information concerning Isabella Swan or Edward Masen is strongly urged to contact the Seattle Police Department...

I stood up, starting to pace. "Shit," I breathed, looking over at Edward. "We were spotted in Walmart, Edward..."

He grimaced, but nodded, standing up slowly and turning to Jasper. "Get everyone out here."

Jasper nodded and bolted inside the house, calling everyone's names as he went.

"Some...bored housewife with nothing better to do than watch CNN all damn day saw us," I growled, shaking my head.

"Bella, that was weeks ago," Edward stated, stopping my pacing by putting his hands on both my arms. "They could believe Walmart just as quick as they could believe Disneyland."

"I wish we were at Disney..." Alice muttered, typing away on her laptop. "But now, we have to worry that they find *this* place in the family records, Edward. *Your* family records, I might add."

"Edward, what's wrong?" Esme asked, coming out of the house with everyone on her heels.

They all fell into chairs and loungers, looking up at Edward's darkening face, but it was Alice who explained, reading them the article that Carlisle had linked us to. I could see my girls' reactions and read them perfectly. Rose was mad, because she hadn't wanted to stay in the first place, but would always be a team player. Makenna looked worried, while Alice stayed calm, pulling up housing records for the local area.

Edward's crew reacted differently. They were focused, leaning forward, waiting with bated breath to hear his next command, but he was watching Alice's work.

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"Can you see requests for information concerning this house, Alice?" he asked her.

"I'd have to break into the state's system, but I could get with Ben and see if he's heard anything," she told him.

"Good. Go ahead. See what other info Benny's got for us, and let me know."

"Sure, sure, sure, Edward." She nodded, still typing away. "Do you still want Carlisle to look into Savage?"

"Yes," I told her. "Please tell him. I don't want him out there without that piece of info."

Alice nodded and silently got to work, but I looked up at Edward, whose face had gone from the earlier playfulness, to serious and dark and intense. He paced, running a hand through his hair as everyone talked softly.

"Um, Ed?" Emmett started. "I say we install a few more sensors..."

We all snapped around to look at him, including Edward, who asked, "Where?"

"That back fence...the side over by the main highway...and the far treeline over there," he explained, pointing. "I've got the lines for it, and I've got the extra sensors. I could...or *we* could...have them in by morning, if we started now."

"That would..." Edward sighed, looking up to me. "That would be the entire perimeter. Too bad we don't have lights..."

"We do," Rose piped up. "I saw some in the garage when we installed the alarm. There's a whole case of them. Your dad must've considered putting them up, because it's like everything is there. With everyone's help, we could be wired for alarms, lights, and sensors by morning..."

"Well, if we're gonna work through the night," Mickey sighed, standing up from her chair, "then let's get goin'." She looked to Emmett, because he'd been

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a huge help the last time we'd done this.

"Okay, just like last time... Rosie, Bellsy, you guys run the wires to the electric box again. Alice...you, Esme, and Mack can get all the sensors ready. Ed, Jazz...let's find places for the those lights," he said, looking up at Edward, who was nodding. "By the time we're done, this place will be more secure than Jonestown."

I laughed, because I couldn't help it, which caused everyone to turn my way - especially Emmett, who was quite proud of his pun.

"Okay, note to self: don't drink *anything* Emmett makes," I chuckled, the whole group of them joining me.

"I have the Kool-aid, Bellsy! Don't tempt me. You'll be begging for a glass when Eddie starts to piss you off," Emmett guffawed, walking away towards the garage with everyone else following him.

I grinned, shook my head, and looked up at an amused Edward. But as I looked at him, I remembered the *taste* of him, the *feel* of him, and the *weight* of him from that morning. God, he'd been so perfect as he'd slept that morning, I hadn't been able to stop myself from at least trying to touch him; he'd been so beautiful as he lay there in my arms and belligerent when I tried to get up and get ready. My pull to him was so strong that I could barely see straight. I *wanted* to touch him, *wanted* to taste him, and I wasn't going to let my fears take that from me - or him.

And holy hell, if he wasn't a fucking fine specimen of a man; in every way, he was perfect. His body was one thing - all toned muscles, wide shoulders, an impeccable ass, and smooth, warm skin. His face was another - with a jaw that could cut glass, eyes that could break your heart or make it pound, and a smile that melted a woman's panties right off her without her even knowing it. But when I'd revealed what was inside those blue Air Force sweats this morning...well, it was by far the most perfect part about him. I'd felt it through clothes, I'd ground against it on his lap, but to actually *see* every beautiful inch of it made every cock before it *pale* in comparison.

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"What are you thinking?" he chuckled, probably watching my teeth tear away at my bottom lip.

"That it's going to be a *long* night," I sighed, lying through my teeth, even though I'd been shamelessly ogling him, completely unable to stop the innuendo that escaped my mouth.

"Mmhm," he mused, looking me over. "Liar." He chuckled. "But you're right. We'll be at this when the sun rises."

"Then let's just get it done, Edward," I groaned, leaning up to kiss his lips softly, something that the rest of our friends were now getting used to - not on my part, but it shocked them to see Edward that affectionate. "And behave... Don't make me get Emmett's Kool-aid," I ordered, raising an eyebrow at him.

He grinned, nodded, and took the stack of flood light boxes from Jasper's hands. We all quickly got to work.

It was amazing what military-trained people could get done. My girls and I were smart, educated, and hardworking. Alice had tried over the years to teach us various technological things - from using it, to fixing it. There wasn't much Alice didn't know, and what she didn't, she'd find the answer online quickly.

Edward's crew was a different machine. I don't know if it came from living in the middle of the desert for years, having to build everything they needed, or from picking up and moving all the time when they were still in the service, but it was fascinating to watch. The whole time that my girls, Esme, and I ran the wires from different parts of the property and attached them to the power source, Edward and his team figured out where to best put the lights. We didn't have time to put up poles, so they were arranged on the ground or on the trunks of trees.

Just before sunrise, it was up and running. If someone stepped anywhere on the back, side, or front of the property, lights would turn on and an alarm would sound. Alice even set up an alert on her laptop, showing a grid of the entire grounds, including the house - something she'd been working on since we

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installed the first set of alarms.

As morning dawned, we all took different shifts, so the others could catch up on sleep - the main ones being Emmett, Rose, Mickey, and Esme, who'd all been up for almost twenty-four hours.

Alice and I were so exhausted, we couldn't even *look* at another fucking thing on the computer, so the two of us sat stupidly staring at the TV, where some movie that I was sure we'd seen was playing softly. Pots of coffee stayed brewed and hot, and it was the only thing that was keeping me up at the moment.

Edward and Jasper were out on a perimeter check, a habit they weren't about to break, because the sensors could still be set off by the wildlife around the house, so they told us human eyes were better. To be honest, I just think that they were trying to find ways of staying awake.

When the sliding glass doors opened, I could hear the twin sighs of relief echo from both myself and Alice. The two tall men walked into the house to the kitchen, pouring themselves more coffee, only to come join us in the living room.

"What ya'll watchin'?" Jasper asked, his sweet, calm, crooked smile in place. He seemed to be the only one that wasn't suffering from exhaustion.

"No idea," Alice and I muttered, both breaking out into wide yawns.

Edward chuckled, sat down beside me, and pulled me to him. "Close your eyes, baby. It's okay."

I wasn't about to argue that command, because he was warm and smelled like sunshine, coffee, and just Edward. My head fell to his chest, and my body curled to his side, and I wasn't sure I even took two deep breaths before I was out.

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I wasn't sure how long I slept, all warm and cozy and pressed to Edward's side, but I was jerked awake when the driveway alarm sounded shrilly throughout the house. I gasped, sitting up straight and gripping Edward's t-shirt as everyone poured out of their rooms, including Esme.

Jasper shot up from his chair, ran down the hall, and I could hear the sound of the attic ladder being yanked down in a hurry. The rumbling of his running feet thundered overhead.

"Ed!" he called, and Edward shot up from the sofa. "It's a local cop, man. He's coming down the drive in an SUV."

"Fuck," Edward breathed, running a hand through his hair. "Girls...all of you get back into one of the back bedrooms. Don't make a sound. If this fucker sees Bella, it's all over. Go!" he ordered, pointing down the hallway.

"You, too," I urged, tugging on his sleeve. "They're looking for you, too, Edward!"

He just shook his head, pulled his gun from his waistband, and pressed his lips to mine. "I'll be fine. I love you. Go, baby, and stay quiet!" he hissed against my lips.

Before I turned the corner of the hallway, where Makenna was tugging my arm to get me to move, I watched as Edward hid behind the front door, looking deadly as he raised his gun. Emmett positioned himself in the kitchen - also with gun in hand - but still out of sight, if someone were to look straight inside. Esme was placed, ready to open the door, with Jasper visible behind her. Mickey had bolted up to the attic to watch everything from above, letting Rose shut her in up there.

I took one last look at Edward, poised behind the door, and our eyes locked. A gut-wrenching, knee-buckling, stomach-clenching fear wracked my entire frame, and suddenly, I was so very afraid. He was everything strong and good, and nothing could happen to him, but the dread that I was feeling just made me start towards him.

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"Edward," I breathed, my brow wrinkling.

"No, Bella," he whispered, shaking his head, his face fierce with the command. "Go, baby." He pointed towards the hall behind me. My mouth opened to argue, but he shook his head again, his gaze softening just a bit when he mouthed, "I love you...I'll be fine. I promise."

It took everything I had to turn away from him, but I did, following the girls. Rose and Alice chose the bedroom closest to the front door, so they could crack the window to hear what was going on. We all slid down to sit underneath the windows, and Rose and I pulled out our guns. Despite the fact that we were prepared for it, we all jumped when the knock pounded on the door.

I heard the front door open, and all I could think to myself was, *Please don't see Edward...please don't see Edward*. I chanted it over and over in my head, sort of like a prayer, because I couldn't be found. The police would take me away, handing me over to the FBI, and even Ben said they couldn't protect me like Edward's team could, and there was no way in hell I was getting separated from my girls - or Edward, for that matter. My father could testify all he wanted, but there was not a chance in hell I could face Miller or King.

"Good afternoon, ma'am," we heard from the doorway. "My name is Seth Clearwater. I'm with the Trinity Sheriff's Department. I was just going door to door, asking a few locals and vacationing folk a few questions. I don't know if you've seen the news, but a missing girl was rumored to have been spotted up here, and the FBI has asked us to look into it."

"Really?" Esme gasped. "I haven't heard anything about it, but then again, I don't watch much TV."

"I understand, ma'am," the sheriff chuckled, "but would you mind at least taking a look at a few pictures?"

"No, not at all."

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I heard shuffling around, and Esme sighed, sounding forlorn, but I knew it was all an act. "No, Sheriff, can't say that I have seen them."

Them.

My eyes widened, and I looked over at Rose. "They have a picture of Edward?" I breathed, barely making a sound.

She shrugged as she put a finger to her lips so we could listen, at the same time that Alice's laptop pinged softly from the floor. She crawled to it, but I listened to the sheriff again.

"What about you, sir? Have you seen them?"

"Nope," Jasper drawled. "Not at all. But then again, I haven't really left the cabin since we arrived."

The sheriff chuckled again. "I'm sorry to have to bothered you, but if you see them, could you please give me a call?"

Rose, Mack, and I all scrambled to peek up over the window sill.

The sheriff was young, tall, and looked to be of American Indian decent. He had a sweet smile as he shook Esme's hand, tipping his hat before walking back out to his truck. His cell phone rang, and he stopped to speak on it, leaning on his truck.

"Carlisle emailed," Alice whispered, her eyes wide.

"What'd he say?" I asked, leaning over her shoulder to read it, and my mouth fell open.

On my way to you now! Do not leave until I get there.

C.

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My heart plummeted, because as I realized the urgency behind Carlisle's email, the driveway alarm sounded again. Looking carefully out the window, Rose and I gasped, because the sheriff hadn't left yet, which meant we were about to get more company.

The bedroom door flew open, and Edward and Emmett waved us to them, pressing fingers to their lips for us to stay quiet. Jasper ran passed us, yanking down the attic door in the ceiling, so we could see Mickey.

Her eyes were wide as she whispered, "Four SUVs...all black, turning in the driveway. They should be here by..."

Before the word "now" could leave her mouth, shots rang out from the front yard. Emmett darted back into the room that my girls and I had been hiding, peeking out the curtain.

"Fuck me, that sheriff is dead," he whispered. "A dozen or so goons in the front yard...ten or so heading to the back..."

"It's time to go," Edward growled.

"We can't," Alice hissed, grabbing his arm. "Your dad just emailed. He said to stay put until he got here."

"Fuck!" Edward hissed, looking around the hallway, where we were all waiting for his instructions. With flared nostrils and gritted teeth, he pointed to Jasper. "Get up there; get guns in those girls' hands now! Mickey, get your ass down here. We're about to see if this drill of yours and Emmett's is worth a shit. Let's go!"

Alice and Makenna scrambled up into the attic to join Jasper. Mickey darted down the hall to the front window, where she set up a rifle.

Emmett bolted down the hall into the room he'd been staying in, and came out with a handful of headsets, passing them out to everyone. We immediately put them on. He then grabbed Rose's hand, both of them pulling out their guns.

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Edward tugged my hand and rushed us into his bedroom. He dove into his closet, pulling out a duffle bag and tossing it on the bed. He pulled out two more guns, handing one to me.

"You..." he growled, giving me no room for argument, "...you will not leave my side. Do you hear me?" he asked, and I nodded fervently.

Checking the glock he handed me and making sure that it was loaded and tucked into my back, I looked up at him. "Are we going outside?" I asked.

"Yeah," he answered with a nod, pocketing several clips, pulling a black baseball cap on backwards, and slinging the bag over his shoulder. He turned to me, slipping his hands into my hair and pressing his forehead to mine. "No arguing, Bella. Just follow me, and do what I tell you, okay?" he asked, but before I could answer him, his mouth was on mine, kissing me too roughly, too desperately.

We both spun when one of the perimeter alarms sounded. We left the bedroom, heading for the kitchen door, and Edward tapped his ear piece. "Open radio...I want to hear every last fucking thing! Got me?"

"Sir!" they all called out.

Edward took his gun in one hand and my hand in the other, and we we got ready to slip carefully out the back door - into what...I had no idea.

A/N...Yeah...I know...but I warned you about the cliffie. So...Edward and Bella are becoming a pretty solid team, along with everyone else, though that will surely be tested in the next chapter.

Sooo...the trip to Walmart set off some alarms for King's peeps. It was inevitable, but they seem prepared, and God knows they are capable.

Our little couple got some fun time...starting with Bella, and then ending with yet another fear crossed off of her list. And that's good for *everyone* involved! XD

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I don't have to tell you about next chapter, 'cause I think you're all smart enough to figure out it's a big damn fight.

I want to thank JenRar for beta'ing these as quickly as she does...it allows me to stay ahead with a little cushion! And Goober-Lou for pre-reading...and yeah, you don't wanna know what she had to say about the first lemon. LOL Trust me!

So review...and don't forget to check out the blog and sign up for alerts... at least until this site gets its head out of its ass... Just sayin'... drotuno(dot)blogspot(dot)com Next posting will be around Sunday or Monday if all goes well. So REVIEW...I'm checking them despite the site foul ups... Until then...Later

Chapter 14

A/N...Well, it's been an interesting few days with this site. Apparently they are working on the problem, but we'll see.

Now...the trauma at hand. You guys were WAY excited that Edward and Bella said their I love yous. And I love that YOU love Edward's stutter. That's so awesome. I didn't know a stutter could be hot, but I guess it is...LOL

Yes, yes...big fight, I know... You're yelling at me to shut up, so you can see how this goes. Now...as usual...M for violence, cuz I'm a firm believer in "kill 'em all, and let God sort 'em out."

So...on with it... we'll talk at the end...

CHAPTER 14

~oOo~

"No arguing, Bella. Just follow me and do what I tell you, okay?" he asked, but before I could answer him, his mouth was on mine, kissing me too roughly, too desperately.

We both spun when one of the perimeter alarms sounded. We left the bedroom, heading for the kitchen door, and Edward tapped his ear piece. "Open radio...I want to hear every last fucking thing! Got me?"

"Sir!" they all called out.

Edward took his gun in one hand and my hand in the other, and we got ready to slip carefully out the back door - into what...I had no idea.

~oOo~

EDWARD

"Okay, Ed," Jasper breathed into my ear piece. "We've got assholes to the left of us, and assholes to the right. Tell me when I can start my target practice..."

"Just fucking tell me what's out this west side door, J," I huffed, cracking open the kitchen door slightly and pulling us back in. "We need to stop them from leaving. They're here...they'll die here," I growled. "I need to get to the shed..."

I peered outside, seeing no movement in the dreary afternoon.

"Edward...Bells," Mack started. "There's two to the left of the door, and two to the right. You can't go out that way..."

"You *can* go out the deck door," Alice added.

"Gotcha," Bella said, tugging me with her.

"The first shots fired at me, J...you can open up hell, got me?" I growled, slowly sliding the deck doors open.

"Sir." he retorted, and I could hear him ready his gun, ordering Alice and Makenna to do the same.

"Eddie," Emmett called, "we've got company on the east side. Two. We've got four heading to the front door, Mick...with smoke canisters. You and Esme watch yourselves."

"Fuck," I sighed, turning to Bella. "We're surrounded. It's guns up or nothin'."

"Fine," she sneered, flipping the safety off on her nine mil. "Where to?"

"If we can get to the shed, there's at least cover enough for us to pick them off the side and back of the house."

"Good. Go!" she said with a nod, and we both darted out the back doors.

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"Watch the corner of the house, guys!" Alice warned.

The very moment Bella and I stepped foot outside the house, all hell broke loose. I heard the shattering of glass, which I could only assume was the smoke canister they were aiming towards the front window. I heard Jasper's order to the girls to fire at will. And they did, because the fucker that was hiding around the corner of the house fell to the ground as we ran by.

Shouts and screams rang out. Some were over the radio, with my team working seamlessly together, some were outside, but all were just chaos in my head. My goal was the shed, because not only would it give us cover, but my father had a cache of guns in there.

Bella and I ran past a clump of trees, flattening ourselves behind them when shots ricocheted off the trunks.

"Shit," she breathed, aiming quickly and firing two rounds from between the limbs. "That's one," she muttered wryly. "We can take him down from the wall... O'Quinn or O'Hara or some shit..."

I grinned, kissed her head, and whispered, "That a girl! Four more yards, Alice. Cover us!"

"On it, on it, on it," she growled, and four shots zapped through the brush to our left. "You're good. Go now!"

"Emmett," Mickey growled as we dodged more stray bullets. "Where are you?"

"Under the house, Mick...give me five seconds!" he answered, grunting as it sounded like he hit the deck. "Fuckers," he muttered under his breath.

"Edward!" Alice and Bella both yelled, as a guy popped up out of nowhere just as I reached the shed doors.

Alice, Bella, and I all fired at once, the guy shaking as he fell to the grass, and then Bella and I dove into the shed, slamming the doors behind us.

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"Fuck me," she panted, leaning up against the corner.

"Kinda busy, love," I teased her, giving her a wink as she snorted at me.

"Just..." She waved her hand and rolled her eyes, still breathing heavily, but I could see her fighting the smile that was curling at the edge of her lips. "Just... *weapons*, Edward."

I smiled, moving the work table to the far side of the shed. There was a trap door underneath. My father had built it as a root cellar when the cabin was built, but as his career changed, so did the purpose of the little storage room.

I yanked up the door, flipping on the light switch and offering Bella my hand. I wanted her by my side the entire time.

"No fucking way, Edward," she gasped, her eyes wide as she glared at the basement. "I...I can't go down there. I don't give a fuck what's in there..."

I grimaced and nodded, realizing that it must have reminded her of Miller's basement. "Okay, but you've got my back up there, right?"

"Yes. But I'm not going underground..."

"Then you shoot anything that comes near this shed, baby. I don't care what the fuck it is...if it moves, it's dead. Got me?"

"Kay," she said, turning towards the small window. She lifted it slightly, aiming her gun through the opening.

I ran down the stairs, not wanting to leave her long at all. Along the back wall were automatic weapons. On the counters...grenades. But it was the grenade launcher I was aiming for, because those fuckers drove up in SUVs, but they weren't leaving in them.

I shouldered the weapon, grabbing a bag of grenades, a few more clips, and three boxes of bullets. I tossed them into the bag I'd taken from my closet. I

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also snatched open one of the cabinets, revealing my father's safe. We had one in every home, including my own, and every fucking combination was the same - my mother's birthday. Inside were a few stacks of cash, phony passports for my father and me, and credit cards, matching the fake identities. If we were on the run, we'd need to be different people, so I wasn't taking any chances - I emptied the fucker.

I heard Bella's gun fire off three quick rounds, and I popped up to make sure she was fine. She was - just looking pissed off.

"How many we got, baby?" I asked her, coming up the steps.

"There are three dead on the side, two at the back door. Alice, what's the front look like?" she asked, but it was Makenna that answered.

"We got two, four...six... *eight* left, all hiding behind those damned SUVs," she growled. "And fuck, Bellsy...I think that James guy is leading this shit!"

"Miller?" Bella and I both sneered at the same time.

"I don't see him, but there's money riding on who gets to shoot him..." Emmett chuckled darkly.

I snorted and rolled my eyes, believing every word. "How much we talkin'?" I asked, smirking at Bella's growl, because she wasn't used to the shit talking Em and Jazz did.

"Fifty-K, bro," Jasper chuckled. "A high price for low scum, dude."

Bella smiled, but said nothing as we got ready to leave the shed.

"That's my vacation money, boys," I growled. "That bastard belongs to me. Now...we're coming out this shed. How's it look between here to mine and Bella's drill point?"

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"You've got one asshole..." Jasper started, but a shot rang out. "Never mind... nice shot, Alice. You're clear. Go, go, go!"

I didn't wait for anymore instructions; I just grabbed the door, made sure Bella was by my side, and took off for the tree we'd designated the day the alarms were installed. It was the very same tree I'd handed the beautiful brunette my heart, too.

We fell against the trunk, peering out over the front lawn from our location on the side yard. Makenna was right. All the little mafia cowards were hiding behind their SUVs. I dropped the bag to the ground, looking around the truck to survey the front drive.

"On the ready, Jasper...Emmett," I growled, setting the grenade launcher up between a V in the trunk. "I'm about the turn the light on in the kitchen...it's time to step on the scattering roaches."

Bella readied her nine mil, aiming it the same way I was, but I had the bigger bang.

"On my mark..." I said, lining up the first SUV in my sight. "Now!"

I pulled the trigger, and the grenade shot out, catching the driver's side window perfectly. The whole truck bowed in the middle when it exploded, coming up off the ground a few feet. A giant fireball bloomed into the air, but I lined up the next shot, because I didn't want those fuckers gaining any ground whatsoever.

"Nice, Ed!" Emmett cheered.

My team fired rounds on the running men - Bella included. She took down a guy heading towards the side of the house; he was running blindly, because his ass was on fire.

I shot again, taking the second SUV down, and this time, they scattered everywhere.

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"Bella, one and two o'clock," I told her, and the men fell before they'd taken two steps. Hot damn, that girl was an awesome shot.

"Shit, I got a runner, Ed!" Jasper growled. "He's heading towards the last car... The last one, bro..."

I lined up quickly, but didn't have a clear, clean shot. "Fuck," I snapped, turning to look around. "Bella, cover me. I gotta get out in the open for this one..."

She nodded, stepping with me, and aimed her weapon as I quickly lined up my shot. I could see five or six men start for the remaining truck, but I fired early, because I was too afraid to have Bella out in the open, so instead of catching all their asses inside the vehicle, they were able to dive for cover.

"Get back behind that tree!" I told her as shots aimed our way, but instead of running, she fell.

"Shit!" she cried out, falling to the ground and grabbing at her leg.

I pulled her behind the trunk and knelt before her. "Where?" I asked, pulling at her hands that were gripping somewhere near her ankle.

"It's just a cut, Edward," she said, pulling her hands away. "It's bark from the tree. I'm okay," she sighed, looking up at me.

It didn't look okay. It looked like it hurt like hell as blood seeped through the leg of her jeans and down to her sock.

"Cover us!" I ordered into the radio, reaching for my bag for anything to tie around her calf.

I tugged out an old t-shirt, ripping a strip of material off of it. "Better safe than sorry, Bella," I told her softly, and for once, she didn't argue, just leaned back against the tree and looked up at me wearily.

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The shots around us started to get fewer and fewer as I tended to Bella's leg. I could hear changes over the radio, too. They were cleaning up, and Emmett barked that he was coming out from his cover to take a look at the damage. Jasper ordered Mack and Alice to stay in the attic, just in case, but he was heading out, as well.

Mickey and Esme called the front clear, but it seemed too quiet, too easy.

"Fuck," Mack muttered, whether to herself or to Alice. "I lost sight of James..."

Bella's eyes locked with mine, her face filled with concern.

"Do you think you can walk, love?" I asked her, and she nodded.

"Yeah," she sighed, starting to push herself up, until we both heard the click of a hammer being pulled back.

"Well, it's good she can walk...that makes my job easier," I heard behind me, but it was the cold metal to the back of my head that caused me to freeze.

"Don't move, hero. One inch, and your girl will be wearing your brains... *and* she still comes with me. Mm, mm, mm...and the fun we'll have, *Isabella*..."

Bella looked sick at the nauseating tone of this asshole's voice.

"I don't fucking think so," I sneered, my eyes never leaving Bella's as her hand started to inch oh-so-slowly behind her. "I love you," I mouthed to her, hoping like hell that it wasn't the last time I got to tell her.

She smiled sweetly and nodded at me, looking up at the tree and back to me, her hand still working its way to the small of her back.

I felt a grip on my shoulder. "Drop the gun, *Edward*," he ordered, poking the back of my head for emphasis.

"Oh, look, baby," Bella sighed, sounding bored. "James has done his homework. He knows our names and everything. And here I thought that he'd

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be stupid, what with all that time he did in juvey..."

I smirked at her, but dropped my weapon anyway, because I wanted to take any focus he had on her and put it on me. I tossed my Glock away, and James kicked the grenade launcher across the grass.

"I can't line up a shot, Edward," Alice cried frantically in my ear.

"Shit!" I heard Emmett growl as he started to run. "I'm coming, man, but I gotta go the long way. He'll see me from a mile away, dude."

"I want you to stand up. Slowly," the asshole said, poking the back of my head again. "Then you're gonna turn around..."

I gritted my teeth, my eyes still locked with Bella's. The way I was kneeling over her, James couldn't see her movements. If I stood, he'd see where her hand was. My fists clenched in my lap.

"You'll never make it off these grounds, James," I growled, looking over my shoulder, but he smacked my head with the butt of his gun. "Fuck!" I spat, squeezing my eyes closed.

"I said stand the fuck up!" he snarled, gripping the back of my t-shirt.

Bella moved so swiftly, I could barely see the movement. Her gun was now out from behind her back and by her side, under the rest of the ripped t-shirt I'd used on her wound.

I smirked and shook my head. I was completely and irrevocably in love with that woman. Jasper had called her bad ass at one point. He was so fucking right.

As I stood slowly, I was putting every last bit of trust I had in the girl at my feet. If she moved wrong, or he caught sight of her hand, or if he got twitchy, I was a dead man. Just before I turned away from her, though, I watched as her eyes broke from me, her brow furrowed and then almost relax completely. She

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fought a smile - of all things - as she turned to look up at me.

"Do what he says, Edward," she urged, sounding frantic, but not looking it. At all.

I made one last move to turn, but she mouthed, "Get down!"

I hit the deck as two rapid fires sounded, one right after the other. James screamed and fell next to me, still holding his weapon, but obviously hurting. Pulling back my fist, I let it go with all I had, nailing the bastard in his mouth and knocking him senseless, his hand and weapon falling useless to the ground. It was kicked away before I could get to it.

Looking up, I couldn't help but smile. "'Bout time you got your ass back to work..."

"Shut up, son," my dad laughed, looking past me. "Bells, you okay?"

He was sweating, as though he'd run the whole way here from Seattle, still wearing a business suit. He looked pissed and worried, like he was carrying a heavy piece of news.

She let out a deep breath, struggling to stand, and we both took her hands to help her up. "Yeah, just...pissed off. That fucking hurt!" she growled, looking down at her leg.

We both snorted at her, but there wasn't anything that could stop me from pulling her into my arms. "Jesus fucking Christ," I breathed into her neck. "Don't you ever fucking scare me like that again!" I whispered fiercely in her ear. "Got me?"

"Sir," she sighed, and when I pulled back to look at her, she was smirking at me, but she also looked exhausted.

"Let's get her inside," my dad muttered, looking around at the damage. "I'll take care of this jackass...I have some questions for him."

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I nodded, scooping up Bella into my arms, despite her protests.

~oOo~

BELLA

"Goddamn it!" Mickey growled, writhing on the living room floor.

"Easy, Mick," Jasper soothed, holding her hand as Esme plucked glass, bullet fragments, and bits of wood out of her shoulder.

Apparently, a stray bullet had caught the window frame right by her face. She was lucky as hell it hadn't been four inches to her left, because it would have caught her in the head. She was also lucky that it didn't go in very far, and Esme was able to get to all the pieces - or at least, she was *trying* to get out all the pieces.

"Alice, Rose!" Edward barked, coming in the back door.

"Yeah?" they both called back.

"Pack as much shit as you can load into a couple of bags. This place is done, okay?"

"Okay," Alice sighed, closing both her laptop and mine, stowing them both in their bags.

She shot up from the table, following Rose down the hall.

"Don't even think about it, Bellsy," Emmett chuckled at me, looking up from my leg. "Let me at least get it cleaned up, and then you can fight Eddie on which luggage you're takin'."

Edward's head snapped around, and his eyes locked onto mine when I laughed. "Em, if she moves, tackle her back to the sofa. I'll get your shit, Bella."

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"Damn," I laughed, my head falling back to the arm rest of the couch. "It's just a flesh wound!"

Emmett guffawed, starting to say, "Ni..." but Carlisle walked in the front door on the phone.

"Damn it, Benny, are you going to send a clean up crew or not?" he yelled into the phone. "Well, fuck, I've got two of my own injured, and I've got to get them the hell outta here. And there are twenty-five of King's men dead on my lawn!" He listened for just a moment, but huffed frustratedly. "They killed a local sheriff the second they drove up, Cheney!" he boomed, walking down the hallway.

From what I could piece together, Carlisle had parked off the main highway once he saw the fire from the SUVs Edward had destroyed. He ran through the woods the rest of the way, just in case, and he'd been brilliant to do so, because had I not seen him sneaking up behind James, I wasn't sure Edward would be alive at the moment.

"Where's James?" I whispered to Emmett, who was pouring peroxide on my leg and wiping away the dirt and grime from it.

"Don't ask...I think Carlisle and Eddie have him tied up in the shed."

I knew the bastard was still alive, because my shot had caught him in the thigh and Carlisle's had caught him in the chest, but Edward had knocked him out with one punch. When Edward had picked me up to carry me inside, Carlisle and Jasper had grabbed a hold of James and dragged him away.

"I think they were *politely* asking the whereabouts of one Riley Miller," Emmett muttered sarcastically.

"James is dead," Edward stated bluntly, and there was no emotion, nothing in his voice to say that he could give two shits about it.

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"King's only nephew is dead..." I verified, looking over at him as he knelt beside my head.

"It seems his femoral artery had been nicked," Edward said with a smirk and a shrug.

"Oops," I muttered, leaning into Edward's chuckling kiss to my head. "So you didn't find out where Miller was?" I asked, and even Emmett's head shot up from his wrapping of my leg.

"The only thing he would say was *everywhere*," Edward sighed, rolling his eyes. "A bit dramatic, but we couldn't get anything else out of him. No matter how much we... *tried*."

I shivered at the menace that surrounded his words. It was unapologetic and filled with malice and hatred. I loved the man kneeling beside me, but there was a part of me that didn't want to know *exactly* what methods he'd used in order to get information, because Edward was determined to rid the earth of Riley Miller.

"It was probably better that way, Bellsy," Emmett snorted. "If James had actually gotten his hands on you, Edward wouldn't have been so...kind."

I grimaced, but one look at Edward's face told me that Emmett wasn't only right, he was putting it mildly, but that didn't stop me from reaching out to the small cut on his head where James had pistol whipped him.

"That's very true," Edward sighed, reaching up to tuck my hair behind my ear. "And I'm fine, baby," he whispered, taking my hand away from his temple and kissing my fingers.

We both turned when Mickey cried out again, and Edward got up to check on her.

"How ya doin', wild child?" he asked her, kneeling next to her.

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Esme was stitching her wound as best she could under the circumstances, and staying calmer than the rest of the house as curse word after curse word flew from Mickey's mouth.

Edward chuckled and shook his head when Mickey spoke through gritted teeth. "Laugh it up, pretty boy. This fucker hurts. Esme was out of shit to numb it, asshole!"

The boys only chuckled at her, most likely used to her temper when she was hurt. She truly was their little sister, almost to the point that they picked on her.

I sat up on the sofa, swinging my legs gently to the floor. I carefully put weight on it, testing how badly it was going to give me trouble, but it wasn't too bad. I'd definitely had worse. I gingerly made my way to the hall, only to run into a seething Carlisle.

"Damn it!" he growled, looking like he wanted to throw the phone in his hand instead of pocketing it. "Edward!" he yelled, making me jump and almost fall back, but his hands caught me. "Sorry Bella," he sighed, righting me against the wall and looking sheepish for scaring the shit out of me.

"S'okay..." I muttered, looking up at him. "You all right?"

"We need to get out of this house," he said, looking past me to Edward, who had run when he was called by his father. "We have to clean it ourselves. Benny's... *occupied*." He sneered that last word, and I wondered what the fuck else could be going on.

"Okay," Edward groaned, rolling his eyes, but pulled me to him. "Where you goin'?" he asked me, squeezing me gently.

"To get my things, Edward," I told him with a shrug. "I'm okay to walk..."

He nodded, but he turned his attention back to Carlisle. "Alaska?"

"Kate's waiting for you."

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"What do mean, me? You're not coming?" Edward growled, running a hand through his hair.

"I can't," his dad countered, shaking his head. "Twilight is a fucking mess..." He turned to me. "You were right, Bells. Savage squeaked through Charlie's screening process. He'd been monitoring every call you guys made. And Billy...well, I want to talk to Alice before we discuss him."

"Good thing we haven't used our cells then..." I added, looking up at him. "How'd...why'd you come? Not that I'm complaining..." I trailed off, trying not to think about the sight of a gun pressed to the back of Edward's head.

Carlisle groaned, shoving his hands into his front pockets. "When you sent me the message about Savage, you sent a request of Benny, too."

"Yeah, I did," Alice said, poking her head out of the last bedroom. "I asked him to watch the property website for the whole state. I could've hacked it, but I figured he was watching it anyway, for hits on any spelling of your family's names."

"Well, he was," Carlisle stated, but paused for just a moment to look at Edward. He sighed deeply before going on. "They had to move Charlie again..."

"No," I breathed, falling back against the wall, as Edward's thumb on my neck made soothing circles, trying to keep me calm. "Tell me he's okay... Tell me!"

"He was roughed up a bit, but he's fine." Carlisle winced, shaking his head sadly. "Benny said they almost didn't get to him, because it was a car bomb. How they found him is beyond me. The D.A. is looking to expedite the court date, but of course, King's lawyers are fighting it. I think they're hoping that if they take long enough, they'll eventually get to your father...or you," he said ominously.

"Won't happen," Edward sneered, looking up at his dad.

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"You came damn close to losing her today," Carlisle countered, pointing a finger at him. "What the hell went wrong?"

"Nothing *went wrong*," Edward yelled back. "A fucking local cop was doing door to door questions. The assholes followed him right in..."

Carlisle grimaced, but nodded in acceptance of Edward's explanation. "Yeah, that's kind of what Benny expected. When you two were spotted in the store, Benny was notified immediately. The man they have undercover sent a message that Miller wanted you found, and he let us know the second they headed this way. Once they got to the area, they probably listened to the police scanner. Hell, they even sent a group to Disney..."

I grinned, but looked to Edward. "Hope we didn't kill a Fed..."

"You didn't," Carlisle snorted, placing a hand on my shoulder. "But we need to get you out of here, before Miller realizes he's lost a whole shit load of men." He turned to Edward. "Burn it."

I watched as a touch of childlike sadness flickered across Edward's face at those two words, and he grimaced, swallowing thickly, but he nodded reluctantly in obedience. My heart broke for him, because this was a house he had memories of his mom in. He was a kid here once, and as I looked around, I could almost see the boy I'd met so long ago, running around with a beaming smile on his face, dressed in only swim trunks. I could practically see him rushing to a beautiful woman with the same color hair and eyes he had, making her laugh, because he was impossible not to love.

"There's no other way?" I asked, looking up to Carlisle. "Isn't there something else that could be done? Does it have to be burned down?"

My rapid fire questions seemed to shock Carlisle for just a moment, but he shook his head no. "No, Bells. If I had the Feds to come clean up, then it might be possible to salvage the house, but since you were here, your prints are everywhere. There are twenty-five men out there, all connected to King. Not to mention the illegal weapons stashed on this property, one of which was used to

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destroy three out of four SUVs," he finished, giving Edward a raised eyebrow.

"Well, that just seems like...a waste. Why just burn it? *Everything* in here just goes up in flames. I don't get it," I sighed, frowning at him. I gave Edward a side glance. "I'll get my stuff. I need to change clothes anyway," I muttered, walking away from the both of them.

I didn't pay any attention to any of them, until Alice blurted out, "You know, Carlisle, there's this cliff four point two miles to the west. We could tow all their asses down there and let them fall off. And we've cleaned a house before...we could get rid of every fingerprint in this place." She gestured to the two of us, nodding frantically.

"And the sheriff?" Carlisle countered.

"He gave chase..." she said. "I'm pretty sure someone can call in on his radio, act like him checking in. A little push, a little shove...and a big boom..."

I snorted at her, because even though I'd known her for ages, she still shocked me - and scared me, if I were to be honest. I turned to the end of the hallway, where Carlisle was seriously considering it, but it was Edward's hopeful face - hopeful, *childlike* face - gazing up at his dad that made my heart sputter.

"Rose," I called, hoping to God we could pull this off, because for some reason, I just couldn't let a piece of Edward's history burn. It hurt to think about the loss of my own mother, so I understood his pain.

"Yeah, Bells?" my best friend asked, popping out of the closest bedroom.

"We need to wipe down this whole house. Not one surface that anyone possibly touched can slide..."

"Sure. Mack! We got work to do. You finish packing," Rose yelled down the hall.

"Kay!" we heard from the back room.

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All three of us stared back at him, waiting for his decision, because despite Rose's innocent expression, I knew her well enough to know that she'd been listening.

Carlisle met my gaze, and then turned to his son. Right then, I saw that he got it. He saw Edward's expression, and he knew he was outnumbered.

"Do it," he told him. "Load everybody into their respective cars. Use Emmett's Jeep, the sheriff's truck, and that remaining SUV, and tow the ruined vehicles down to this...this fucking cliff she's talking about," he said with a wave of his hand. Turning back to us, he pointed his finger. "You'd better get every surface, and I mean it. Bella, your life depends on it, because if someone checks this house and we aren't here, it will raise all sorts of alarms."

"Yes, sir," I said with a nod, turning to my girls. "I need to change clothes," I told them, gesturing to my ruined jeans. "I'll join you in a bit, okay?"

"Sure, sure, sure," Alice chanted with a grin and a hidden wink. "We're gonna need everyone out of the damn house!" she yelled with a giggle. "So get your shit packed and out by the cars!"

I snorted, closing the door to the room I'd been sharing with Edward for almost a month. I was sad to leave it, actually, but at least we weren't burning the damn thing down. I tugged my bags out from under the bed, throwing them on the mattress, and then pulled out a clean pair of jeans. After moving into the bathroom to gather up my toothbrush and shampoo, I walked back into the bedroom, to see Edward leaning against the door.

"Do you need me to pack since you have to..." I started, but he just shook his head, pushing away from the door.

His face was unreadable, almost dark as he walked towards me. His fists were clenched, as was his jaw. The tiny cut on his temple just made him all the more frightening at the moment, so I started backing up, until my back met the door of the closet.

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"Edward, stop..." I breathed, looking up at him.

"Why'd you do that?" he asked, his voice barely audible as he walked towards me, until he was practically pressing me into the door.

"Do what?"

"The house, Bella... *why*?"

I frowned up at him, not understanding his mood at all. "I know what it's like to lose something that belonged to your mother, Edward. And I meant what I said. It's a waste to burn it down," I told him, trying to skirt around him, but one of his strong arms shot out to the closet door with a heavy thud, blocking my way. "Edward, you're scaring me," I whispered, looking away from him.

With his other hand, he reached up to caress my cheek. "I don't mean to, baby...I j-just..." He exhaled heavily, pressing his forehead to mine. "W-what did you l-lose?"

"My mother's bedroom," I said, relaxing at his touch, because despite his current demeanor, his touch was sweet, soft, and needed. "She...she died at home," I muttered, closing my eyes at the memory. "It was like the second she was gone, Charlie turned the room into his work room, because it was attached to his office. He started keeping new inventions and shit in there..." I growled through gritted teeth, my hands clenching into fists. "I...I used to watch movies with my mom in there!" I hissed, glaring up at him. "So...yeah, keep this place for as long as you can, Edward."

Suddenly, his hands were in my hair, and his body pressed me fully against the door. He tilted my head up, sweeping his mouth across mine once, twice, three times, before dragging his tongue over my bottom lip, finally plunging it into my mouth. I moaned in response, because I couldn't help it. He could be so intense, but fuck, if it wasn't sexy as hell.

Between each warm, wet, glide of his tongue and lips, a sound I'd never heard from him rumbled from his chest, vibrating against mine. It sounded almost

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like a sob or a growl - maybe a mix of the two - but I pulled him in for more, because it had been a really scary day.

"Edward," I whimpered, when he finally broke from my mouth to trail heavy, open mouth kisses down my neck as my hands gripped his biceps.

"I'm sorry I scared you," he whispered against my skin. "I...I j-just w-wanted to thank you..."

I grinned against his jaw, because that sweet stutter did funny things to me and he could be so fucking confusing sometimes. "You can thank me like that anytime - just not so...predator like..."

He chuckled, finally burying his face in my neck and wrapping his arms all the way around me. "I love you so fucking much," he muttered against my neck.

"I love you, too," I said, taking both sides of his face in my hands and pulling him back. "We gotta get moving, Edward."

He took a deep breath and nodded, his face almost sheepish. His nose wrinkled adorably as he said, "I *am* sorry to have scared you, but when he said to burn it..."

I nodded, cutting him off. "I know. Go...let's get this shit done."

He placed one last kiss to my lips and pulled back to look at me. "Are you okay on that leg, baby?" he asked softly.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I told him, and both of us jumped when Carlisle's booming voice echoed down the hall.

"Edward, front and center. Now, son! We gotta get moving!"

I grinned up at an eye rolling, smirking son, but I turned him towards the door. "Hurry, Edward. We have to get finished before people start to show up looking for these assholes."

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"You're right," he sighed, and nodded, stopping at the door. "Thanks again, Bella."

Before I could say anything, he was gone.

~oOo~

Once again, the efficiency in how our two teams worked together was amazing. Rose, Alice, Mack, and I closed off the house the second everyone had their things packed and tossed outside. With rubber gloves that Esme provided us, we each took a corner of the house, working our way to the living room, and eventually, the front door. We wiped down every surface, every door knob - even the walls.

With a big barrel, we started a fire to burn ruined clothes and garbage, because not one piece of DNA or one fingerprint could be left behind. As that burned, we wiped down the lawn furniture and railings on the deck. We pulled the laundry out of the washers and dryers. We even took out every plate, every glass, and every pot and pan to wipe off any fingerprints. It was exhausting and tedious work, but it went quickly with the four of us.

Esme cleaned the shed, taking every weapon King's men had on them and closing up the storage room down below. Mickey helped her, because she couldn't lift the bodies and put them back into the trucks to help the boys.

The four men worked their asses off, lugging bodies to the cars and seatbelting them back into the cars they'd driven up in. Emmett hooked cables and tow lines from the Jeep, the sheriff's truck, and the remaining mafia SUV to the three burned vehicles, in order to tow them down the road to the winding curve and cliff that Alice had told them about.

The mafia men were treated with no regret, because they'd come up here with bad intentions; they would have killed every last one of us without a second thought.

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The sheriff, however, was treated with a little more care, a little more gentleness, because all he'd been doing was his job. As I worked my way into the living room, I watched four military men change from just "cleaning up," to wearing solemn, reverent expressions as they set the young man that had only been looking for me, only wanting to do the right thing, into the passenger side of his truck. I half expected them to salute him, but instead, they all placed a hand flat to the top of the truck's cab, before jumping in to take off down the driveway.

Emmett drove his Jeep, with Carlisle in the passenger side, Jasper drove the SUV, and Edward took the wheel of the sheriff's truck. The sun was setting as they pulled out of the driveway.

My girls and I were so tired by the time we fell down on the front steps to wait. I'm pretty sure I dozed off with my head leaning on Rose's shoulder at some point, but I snapped awake when Mack gasped.

"Well, looks like they did it," she snorted, eying the west, where a giant orange fireball blossomed up into the air.

"Hope they called in from the sheriff's radio," Alice mumbled, fighting a yawn and losing.

"Edward was going to call it in," Esme stated with a deep sigh.

I closed my eyes again with a yawn of my own, and waited for the boys to return. It wasn't long until the driveway alarm bleeped from inside the house, indicating that someone was approaching. I didn't have it in me to look, until a familiar rumbling engine caught my ears.

My eyes snapped wide open when Rose snorted, "Now how the hell do you suppose he got that?"

Standing quickly, my mouth fell open at the sight of something other than just Emmett's Jeep rushing down the driveway; he was being followed by a sight I thought I'd never lay eyes on again.

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My Mustang.

I flew past Emmett, Jasper, and Edward, who were all smiling as Carlisle stepped gracefully out of my car.

"How the hell did you get this?" I gushed, snagging the keys from his hand.

Carlisle grinned, stepping out of my way as I dove into my car. Everything was still there.

"I suppose I should be glad that you put the title in Gravity's name, not your own," he chuckled. "Benny was able to get it released to me, because, well...I technically own Gravity..."

"Oh my God! I could fucking kiss you," I growled, popping the trunk just to make sure all my belongings were still there, happy to note they were.

"Well, it drives like a dream," he laughed. "Got me here an hour earlier than I'd expected."

"That's because she *rocks!*" I chuckled, rushing to him and planting a kiss on his cheek.

My car was my most prized possession. It was a brand new Mustang Shelby, silver, with two bright blue racing stripes that went from bumper to bumper. She had stunning alloy wheels and a fucking strong ass engine, and I loved her with a sickness. Carlisle had been right - I had put it in my company's name, not mine, because when Jake and I had broken up, I didn't want him taking her from me, and he had threatened it after I'd posted the picture of him and Lauren in the lobby of Twilight Tech. So when I changed my cell number, moved out, and stopped speaking to him and my father, I'd changed the title to the car at the same time.

Carlisle chuckled, squeezing my shoulder. "And I thought my son had an addiction to muscle cars," he whispered, jerking his chin towards a practically drooling Edward, who tossed a set of keys to his father.

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"I'm *so* fucking riding with her," he growled, eyeballing my car like a lion stalks a gazelle.

"Ah, the poor, poor Dodge is tossed to the wayside," Carlisle laughed, but nodded, turning to everyone else. "Let's load up and get on the road."

We were to ride in pairs, and the pairs were just what I was expecting. Emmett and Rose took his Jeep, Jasper and Alice were in his truck, Mickey and Makenna were driving Carlisle's BMW - which Esme had been driving since she'd first gone into hiding with us - and leading us out of the driveway were Carlisle and Esme in Edward's Dodge Challenger.

Edward and I sat patiently waiting for everyone to load their things, but I could see him eying the stick shift, the steering wheel, and the dashboard as I cranked my car.

"Yes, I'm sure you'll drive her before this trip is over," I teased him.

He laughed, leaning over to kiss me softly. "Good, 'cause *she's* gorgeous...and the car's not bad, either," he purred in my ear, giving my earlobe a soft suckle, and biting it when I burst into laughter.

Cars cranked and engines revved, and both of us looked up at the house one more time.

"When were you here with her the last time?" I asked softly, watching his eyes drink the house in like he'd never see it again.

"The last time she finished with chemo," he said, but his voice was soft, thoughtful. "I was...twelve. It was the spring before I met you...just before she died," he whispered, his brow furrowing. "We sold the California home, but he kept this one..."

He finally turned back to me, his eyes so very green and a touch sad as I reached up to cup his face.

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"Will you tell me about her?" I asked, stroking my thumb along his cheekbone.

"It's a long drive to Alaska, Bella." He sounded almost uncomfortable. "I'm sure we'll talk about a lot of things," he hedged, looking up when Jasper's truck pulled away.

"I know, but she seems important..."

"She was..."

"She still *is*. Never forget that," I countered, making sure he was looking at me. "Our mothers make us who we are, Edward - whether they're gone or not."

He took a deep breath. "Trade you stories..."

I grinned. "Okay."

"Okay," he snickered, kissing my lips one more time. "Drive, love. I wanna see what you can do with this thing..."

I giggled, shifting into first and spinning out in the driveway to catch up with the rest of our caravan. "You asked for it, baby...you asked for it. Next stop...Alaska..."

A/N...You guys can rest easy that no one was seriously injured. James Hamilton is dead, King's only nephew is gone, and I'm pretty sure he won't be happy.

So...both teams worked flawlessly together. Yes, there were hiccups and snags, but it was good to see both sets of teams working together in a completely different way. Carlisle showing up was a lifesaver - literally. In case you didn't catch how he knew... when Alice sent a message to Benny, it sent up red flags. King's well aware of Carlisle's crew, so he'd been looking for any property in relation to the Cullen name. When Bella and Edward were spotted in Walmart, King's men started searching for them in every location that was mentioned. Once they were on the move,

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Benny's undercover agent let him know. As soon as poor Seth called in where he was going, King's men followed him in. I am sorry to have killed Seth, but unfortunately, he won't be the only casualty in this war.

Now...coming up...the trek to Alaska, a sit-down meeting with Carlisle, and you meet Kate, and who she is in relation to Carlisle and Edward.

Now...please continue to check my blog... [drotuno\(dot\)blogspot\(dot\)com](http://drotuno.blogspot.com). There have been some AMAZING additions to that sight. Blood and Glory has a beautiful new banner thanks to Barbarella, an amazing blinkie thanks to MedusaInNY, and now a few pics that show you everyone's cars, and Edward's helicopters - both military and civilian. Sign up for updates, because I'm always adding to it - more thanks to MedusaInNY.

I want to thank JenRar for beta'ing this story, because it can get so jumbled with all the shit that happens! LOL Love ya!

I'm inviting you to join me on Twitter: Drotuno We have a damn good time over there, even when I should be working. LOL

REVIEWS, please. Let me hear what you thought of the fight... "Bella kicked ass..." or "Edward is damn hot in charge..." or "Yay! Daddy C came!" LOL I don't know... just tell me what you think. And I want to thank you for all the reviews...your addiction and love for this story makes me smile, like a big cheesy grin! So please review. I'm posting on Sunday, like MOST of you begged, so the next post will probably be Wed or Thur. Just FYI. So until then...Later.

Chapter 15

A/N... Whew...so we got through some tough shit, huh? I want to thank all of the cheerleaders out there who practically jumped up and down in support of that gunfight. The teams worked really well together. Edward and Bella were solid when they had the same goal. And Bella's protective nature kicked in to save Edward's mother's cabin. I don't blame her, his face would have been heartbreaking.

So now...we're off to Alaska. You guys have some interesting theories on who Kate is in relation to Carlisle and Edward...well, Edward specifically. I can honestly say, you're wrong...and I think you'll be surprised. So...let's get traveling and catch up with everyone on the road.

I'll see you guys at the bottom...

CHAPTER 15

EDWARD

"Wake up, sleepyhead," I whispered into Bella's ear, placing a long kiss just below it.

"No," she grumped, but reached up to thread her fingers into my hair. "I don't want to."

I smiled, burying my face into her sweet smelling neck, because it hadn't taken two hours after leaving the cabin before she admitted she was too tired to drive. Not that I could blame her, because the last forty-eight hours had been really rough, with very little sleep for anyone.

I wasn't complaining, either, because her car was a sweet ride, and a hell of a lot of fun to drive. It was almost as fucking sexy as she was, and that was saying something.

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"Where are we?" she asked, not looking up or opening her eyes, but nuzzling closer to my face.

"The ferry, love," I whispered. "And I hate to admit it, but you gotta take the wheel for a bit. Can you wake up enough for that?"

She groaned, shifting in her seat, finally opening those gorgeous brown eyes to look at me. "Buy me a cup of coffee, Mr. Cullen, and we'll talk about it."

I chuckled and nodded. "Yes, ma'am. Though you should know that once we're over the Canadian border, Carlisle wants to stop for dinner and a meeting. He's not going the whole way with us, but wants to make sure we get through the check point first."

"Kay," she said with a yawn, stretching adorably and opening her door.

She joined everyone else, the wind blowing her hair back, and I had to fight the urge to pull her back into the car and do whatever things she would allow me to do. It had taken all the strength I possessed to not ravish her when she'd stood up to my father about my mother's cabin. *Everything in me*. I knew I'd scared her with my actions, but had I kissed her, touched her the way I'd wanted to, I truly would have scared her, and most likely ruined the boundaries we'd worked so hard to cross.

Bella *got* it, though. She understood it when we were just kids, and she still understood it. She just handled it differently than I did. She relished fun memories of her mother, but the fun memories for me were hard, because while my dad had been in the service, it was just me and my mother. She was all I had for the most part growing up, and losing her had wrecked me.

I took a deep breath of cool sea air to clear my head. Bella had said that she'd wanted to hear about my mother, but we hadn't said much on the trip so far. I wasn't opposed to telling her anything, because Bella never made me uncomfortable, but I was nervous as to what emotions speaking about my mother would bring out in me.

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I watched as all of the women followed each other around the side to the restrooms together, and I made my way inside to get the coffee she wanted.

"Hey, sweetie," a raspy voice chuckled, making my head spin from where Bella had disappeared around the corner, to look at a woman that had to be in her mid to late fifties. "What can I get ya?" she asked, giving me a big smile with a sparkle in her eye.

"Two coffees, please...cream and sugar," I requested, tossing a bill on the counter and resuming my ever watchful gaze out the window.

Bella and Rose came back around the corner, all smiles and laughter, and I couldn't help but smile with them, because they were such a tight group of girls - all four of them, really. It was like they knew what the other was thinking, what the other was going through. Again, my thoughts went back to those same girls standing up to my father, to stop him from burning down my mother's cabin.

"You're all set, honey," the woman said behind me, sliding two paper cups my way. "Pretty girl," she commented softly.

I smiled, looked over at Bella chatting with "her girls," and then back up to the woman behind the counter. "Yeah..." I said, with probably the goofiest grin I'd ever worn.

She chuckled. "Have a good day, lover boy."

"Thanks," I snorted, rolling my eyes at my own behavior, but I couldn't help it.

I stepped out the door of the ferry's concession counter and took a long look around. Something was making me uneasy, and I couldn't quite put my finger on it. Directly in front of me, the girls - which now included Mickey - were all laughing around Bella's car, while she pulled a sweatshirt out of the trunk. To my right, my father and Esme were talking quietly as they leaned on the ferry's railing. Emmett and Jasper were walking my way, but they were obviously picking up the same feelings I was.

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"Something's off, Ed," Jasper whispered, his brow furrowing as he surveyed the ferry like I was. "I feel like we're being watched or some shit..."

"No kidding," I growled.

"Shit, shit, shit," Emmett breathed, but he wasn't looking at us.

"You sound like Alice," I chuckled, turning to look at him, but what he was glaring at made my heart stop.

"Fuck," I snapped, staring at a drawn rendering of my own fucking face.

There was a missing persons sign on the side of the concessions stand - one of Bella, and one of myself. Both stated that we were wanted for questioning. And if the lady that made my coffees could notice Bella, someone else could, too.

"Dammit," I growled, walking away from Emmett and Jasper towards Bella, whose conversation ended abruptly when she saw my face.

"Edward, what's wrong?" she asked, tugging on her sweatshirt.

"We have to hide our faces, Bella," I told her, reaching to the back of her shirt and tugging the hood up over her head. "There's a sign with our faces on it on the wall over there."

"Shit," she sighed, reaching back inside the trunk of her car and pulling out my baseball cap. "Here," she said, handing it to me, and I tugged it on backwards.

"Come on," Rose said, taking Bella's hand. "We'll hide you in numbers, though you *could* just sit in the car."

"I need to wake the fuck up," Bella snapped grumpily, which only made us all chuckle at her. I quickly handed her the cup of coffee I got her. "Thank you," she grumbled.

"This way, then, sunshine," Rose laughed, rolling her eyes.

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Towards the back of the boat, there were a few benches that faced the railing, and one in the corner. They were set off by themselves, and that seemed to be where we were heading. Arranging me and Bella in the corner, everyone else sat around us, just to block the view of us.

"It's always something," Bella sighed, fighting her smile, but looking out over the water.

"No shit," I muttered, taking a sip of coffee.

I straddled the bench, and Bella sat in front of me, facing the water, her back to everyone else. We were comfortably quiet for a few minutes, as our friends chatted amicably around us. I watched Bella close her eyes and breathe deep the sea air, reminding me of several trips with my mom, because where we were going was a place I'd been coming to since I was a baby.

"My mom loved this ferry," I said softly, looking down at the wake the boat was leaving in the water. "She liked the sea air."

I felt Bella's eyes on me. "My mom did, too. She swore one day that she was going to make Charlie move to Florida," she giggled, shaking her head.

I smiled and nodded. "Yeah, mine had *no* complaints living in California."

Bella shivered, and I opened my arms. She curled into my chest, letting me wrap my jacket and arms around her.

"Drink the coffee, baby," I whispered, placing a kiss to her temple as she nodded slightly.

"I'm not sure I would have liked Florida," she mused out loud, "but I'd go...just to have her back for one day..."

I frowned, squeezing her closer, because I knew that feeling intimately. "Yeah...just one more conversation."

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"Exactly," she sighed, pressing her forehead into my neck.

We were quiet again for a minute, before I blurted out a question I regretted almost instantly. "What would you ask her?"

She snorted, and it sounded bitter and callous. "How she could be so selfish and leave me. How what my dad did to her overrode her daughter's future. I was fucking *eight years old*! Didn't she think that I would need her?"

I winced, turning her face to look at me. "I didn't know... I'm sorry I asked."

"Don't be. I found out later - recently, actually - that Charlie cheated on her. It must have shattered her. He was...everything to her."

"Not everything, Bella," I countered with a shake of my head, thinking I didn't know what was worse - my mom taken away too soon because she was sick and it was out of her control, or Bella's mother taking her own life because she was too sad to face reality.

Both fucking sucked, if you asked me.

"Your dad's a fucking idiot, Bella," I growled, rolling my eyes at her snicker. "He is. He's a fool for many, many reasons."

"He was a man of privilege, Edward. He was a man with a lot of money, a lot of power, and it all went to his head. I'm not sure if Carlisle didn't keep him grounded, to be honest. I can't imagine what he'd have been like had you guys not moved closer." She shrugged. "I was twelve and saw the change. I heard phone calls, and as I got older, ran into your dad at the office on the rare occasion. He was always chastising Charlie for something or other," she chuckled.

I grinned, wishing now that I hadn't gone to military school, that we'd have been able to grow up together. "My mother used to say she was my father's moral compass...maybe it all finally sank in!"

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Bella laughed and nodded. "Maybe, but I could always tell when Carlisle had visited, because Charlie would come home and try to spend time with me. But Jane and I had a routine, you know? Still, she did her damndest to accommodate the addition of him on our movie nights or our homework projects."

"Did you always know that my dad was your godfather?"

"Mhm," she said with a nod and a smile. "Yeah, definitely. Did you know that Charlie was yours?"

"No!" I laughed. "That would have been good info to have."

"Well, Charlie mentioned it once," she told me. "I guess the last time Carlisle went overseas or something...maybe he knew your mom was sick. It was before I met you, obviously, but he was worried."

"Ed," Jasper hissed, and when I spun to look at him, his eyes flickered to a security guy making his rounds. "You'd better hide your faces."

I felt fingers on my jaw, turning my head back to Bella's amused face. "Kiss me," she said, with a silly grin and a giggle.

"Now?" I laughed, but damn if I didn't want it, thanks to that little smirk she was wearing. I wasn't big on PDA, though.

"My hood will hide us, silly..."

I was on it, because I watched that tongue of hers glide across her bottom lip slowly, and suddenly, our audience didn't matter. In the past few weeks, they'd all gotten used to it anyway. There was some unspoken rule that if they didn't say anything about me and Bella, we wouldn't say anything about Jasper and Alice or Emmett and Rose. And there was *plenty* that we could've said.

The problem wasn't kissing her, or hiding from the guard - it was controlling ourselves, which was becoming more and more of a problem for me. One taste

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of her, one sweet whimper pushing against my cheek, and I fucking *wanted* her. It only took one touch of her hand on my face - or in this case, one grip to my shirt, pulling me closer - one gliding caress of her tongue against mine, and I was fighting every urge I had. I'd never loved anyone the way that I loved this woman, and I fought the urge to prove it in every way. It was all I could do to abide by her boundaries, but I'd *never* fucking hurt her, and that was always what stopped me.

I barely heard the catcalls behind us, barely registered when they called it all clear, because my hand had found the edge of the skin on her stomach. I heard her moan deeply, but I didn't pull away. We'd been there before and conquered that fucking fear, so I touched her there as often as she'd let me. *My* touch was now the only thing that I wanted her to feel, though we still had a few more fears to face.

Our friends were cracking the fuck up when my father walked up on us.

"It's time to load up, guys. We're docking now," he chuckled, and I pulled back from Bella, licking my lips.

"Love you," she whispered, biting that bottom lip.

"Mmhm, got me busted," I snickered, kissing her nose, before helping her up off the bench. "I used to be the tough guy. I *used* to have a reputation to uphold."

"Tough guys can be good kissers, too, Edward," she teased, glancing at me out of the corner of her eye. "And being a jerk isn't a reputation; it's a personality flaw..."

I laughed, pushing her to follow my father. Ignoring the last part of her verbal jab, because she was right, I decided to focus on the first part. "You think I'm a good kisser?"

"Really, Edward?" she laughed, looking up at me and coming to a halt by her car. "Has that ever been a worry prior to *this* moment... *right here*?" she asked,

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poking her finger on the roof of her car.

"No." And I shamelessly laughed, because she could shove back at me just as hard as I pushed at her.

"Then shut up!" she scoffed, rolling her eyes at my shameless grin.

Just before we got in, my dad stopped us all. "There's a restaurant just off the main highway. It's right after the border. We'll stop there. And Alice, they have WIFI," he added, raising an eyebrow at her.

She grinned, nodded, and climbed up into Jasper's truck. She was so short, it was comical to watch. When she saw me laughing, she flipped me off *and* stuck her tongue out at me.

"Come on, hot lips, quit making fun of shorty back there," Bella chuckled, starting her car once the ferry had completely stopped.

"I can show you *hot lips*, love," I purred, leaning across the center console of the Mustang. "Any time...mmm- *mmm*...any place," I crooned, looking her up at down and licking my bottom lip, just to watch her fight her smile.

"I know you can... but it's gonna be a *long* drive to Alaska, baby," she sang, pulling out after Emmett. "A long, long drive..."

~oOo~

BELLA

I could tell the border cross was making everyone nervous, but not as nervous as Carlisle. He had secured a specific entry point for us through Benny, but that didn't mean someone else wouldn't recognize me or Edward from the signs that seemed to be posted here and there.

The fact that Carlisle also made sure that it was sunrise when we crossed was brilliant on his part, because wearing sunglasses helped hide our faces. But as

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always, Ben came through, because while some cars were detained or asked more in depth questions, we were practically waved through.

My breathing finally calmed down by the time we all parked in the restaurant's parking lot about an hour later.

"Hey, Edward," I whispered, brushing his hair from his forehead. "We're here."

He'd fallen asleep just about the time we'd driven over the Canada border, and had slept damned hard, up until I turned the engine off. I hated to even wake him, because he looked so sweet, so peaceful.

"Where?" he mumbled, his brow furrowing and his eyes squinting as he looked around.

"Your dad wanted to stop, remember?"

"Yeah," he said with a wide yawn, which in turn made his eyes water and turn so very, very green.

"Come on, sleepy," I chuckled, because he was pushing his adorable limits for me. "Dessert's on me."

"Mm," he rumbled, rubbing his face roughly, only to shove his hand through his hair. "Can dessert *be* you?" His sexy crooked smile just made me bust out into a giggle and roll my eyes.

"Oh, Edward...the things I could do to you with just syrup," I teased him with a wink, getting out of the car.

I wanted to laugh as he almost fell out of the passenger's side seat, slamming the door behind him in order to catch up to me. "Baby, wait," he gushed, pressing into me from behind as I reached the entrance. "Like what?"

"No way...I can't give away my secrets," I sang, opening the restaurant door.

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"Y-you..." he sputtered, raising an eyebrow at me and pointing his finger.
"Y-you're the d-devil."

I smirked at that delicious stutter of his, shrugged, and left him to his thoughts as I joined everyone else. We took over a back room, closing ourselves off from the rest of the diners. Just before I sat down, I felt warm lips at my ear.

"One day, Bella," he warned, his voice husky, sexy, but full of that commanding thing he always carried on the surface. "One day? There will be *nothing* to hold us back, baby. No fears, no scars, no clothes...nothing, because you're getting better, whether you admit it or not. And I'm going to show you... *secrets*. Secrets that will keep you...mmm... *wet* for days. Have you begging me to let you come. So...you bring your syrup...we can work with that, too."

"Sweet Jesus," I breathed, closing my eyes as his tongue ran up the edge of my ear.

My back suddenly felt cold, because he was gone, pulling out chairs for the two of us, with the sickest, sweetest, most innocent fucking expression on his face. And I immediately had the urge to punch him - or take him on top of the table; I wasn't sure which.

"Bells, you okay?" Carlisle asked, his brow furrowing as he studied my face - never mind that his son was laughing his ass off. "You look pale."

"Tired," I mumbled, falling in my chair. "I need coffee...and *pancakes*." I growled the last word, narrowing my eyes over at Edward, who was still laughing. "Ass," I muttered, but smiled when he placed his hand on my thigh.

"Has Eddie pissed you off in some fashion, Miss Bella?" Jasper drawled, grinning at the two of us.

"What? Ed? No!" Emmett guffawed, practically falling out of his chair with laughter.

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"Nothing I can't...handle," I said with a big smile at Edward, who opened his mouth to say something, but I stopped him with a shake of my head. "Just...don't. Just quit while you're ahead, Edward."

Grinning, he nodded and picked up the menu. His torturing of me was over - or at least, paused for the moment.

Our waiter interrupted us to order, and Carlisle waited until the food was actually in front of us, before saying why we were all there. "I want us all on the same page before I leave you here," he stated, looking up and down the table. "So tell me what you know." He sighed, turning to Makenna. "How many faces were *taken down*, Mack?"

She grinned and said, "We had nine on the wall...well, ten with Miller, but we removed five of the big faces in King's army - or they had an *unfortunate accident* on a curvy road in Trinity." Her false innocent clarification was hilarious, but she kept going. "Miller's still public enemy number one, with the Savages - both Paul and Peter - Dale Young, and Wes Michaels."

"Good. That's helpful, because aside from Miller, the rest aren't that high in King's rankings," Carlisle sighed. "James Hamilton's death will shock Royce King to his very foundations. He was the only heir he had, because King's wife, Mary, can't have children."

"Then why is Miller running his shit?" I growled, glaring at Carlisle. "Shouldn't his nephew have been doing it?"

"James' mother," he stated with a nod. "Sasha Hamilton knew what her son was, so she took him out of the lifestyle for years. Her failing health is the only reason he was back to work."

I huffed, but accepted it. "Well, this will surely kill her..."

Edward snorted with a nod, but turned to his dad. "What about Billy? Is he ratting you out?"

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"Well, that's what Alice is here for," he said, pointing down to the end of the table, where my pixie was busy eating with one hand and typing with the other; it was quite something to watch, actually. "What have you found out?"

"I found, despite the fact that TT owns Global Cellular, Billy Black uses another company to make all of his calls," she stated with that knowing tone to her voice. "And if he did that on purpose, then he knew that his calls were being monitored by King - or at least, one of King's men." She sighed, turning the computer so that we could all see it. "Now, I started this program a couple of days after your message to look into his spending habits," she told Carlisle, who nodded slowly. "I'm not quite sure what to make of it, because he's not only taking money in, but he's paying it right back out. And I *don't* mean his paycheck and his bills."

Carlisle's nose wrinkled as he studied her screen. "All overseas accounts?"

"Yep, yep, yep," she chanted, pointing to the screen. "Except for this one..."

"Only cash withdrawals..." Carlisle mused, rubbing his bottom lip. "And always on the same day of the month."

"He's paying someone off, isn't he?" I asked, looking from Alice to Carlisle, both of whom were nodding solemnly.

"Yeah, but for protection or to keep them quiet?" Edward added, sitting back in his chair.

"Once a month makes me think protection," Jasper mused with a shrug. "I mean...if someone wants to blackmail you, they'll ask for a lot of money...all at once."

"Usually," Carlisle sighed. "What else, Alice?"

"Well, I did some checking on that redhead from the law office," she stated, and Makenna's head swiveled around.

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"Victoria?" she growled, and I knew her well enough to know that because she'd been the one to warn me and Edward the day we were in the law office, she was invested in this woman.

Alice spun the computer back around so that she could read it. "Victoria Hunter. Current employee of Spencer, Wyatt, and Townsend as a legal assistant. That phone call she made was to a throw-away cell phone, so I have no idea who she tipped off that Bella and Edward were there. But after she recanted her story that James was stalking her a few years ago, she found herself in a nice apartment, driving a really nice Mercedes..." Her eyebrow twitched up. "Is she our undercover?"

"I have no idea," Carlisle stated with a firmness to his voice. "I've asked, because I'd rather not have to kill a Fed, but Benny won't release a mere hint of the undercover agent - even whether they are male or female. Apparently, the person's position is tentative, and they can't risk anyone finding out."

"Ugh," I gagged. "What a case to catch. Not only is your life literally in the hands of the most notorious mob boss since Gotti, but she has to pretend to be his *other woman*!"

Edward chuckled. "That would've been you, had you graduated from Quantico, Bella."

"Not a chance in hell," I huffed, shoving him. "I don't fake it."

Rose barked a laugh, practically choking on her soda. "Then how did you stay with Jake so long?"

"Wasn't home," I sang, rolling my eyes.

The whole table exploded into hysterics.

"Anyway," Carlisle snorted, giving me and Rose one last amused glance, before turning back to Alice. "Is that everything?"

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"So far," she stated with a shrug, "but I'll keep at it."

"Good work," he praised her, sitting back a bit. "Now, this is as far as I go with you guys, but I want you to know a few things about where you're going."

"Does Aunt Kate know the level of... *importance* she's about to let into her house?" Edward asked, his voice taking on such a serious tone, the whole table looked up at him.

"She's well aware, son," Carlisle said with a smirk. "Plus, I've pulled a few men from...retirement," he stated with a chuckle.

"Who?" Edward growled, glaring at his dad.

"Alec and Sam," he muttered.

"Oh," Edward sighed, his eyebrows high, but he visibly shuddered. "Sam's a scary fucker..."

"He's tough, yes," Carlisle laughed. "But they'll both be joining you guys in Alaska. Now...Kate."

"If she's family, won't we be found up there?" Alice asked, looking over the top of the laptop.

"She's not technically family," Edward snickered. "She was my mother's best friend since school. They both married military men, so they became even closer. So any connection between her name and ours doesn't really exist."

"Well, Garrett and I set it up that way," Carlisle sighed, taking a sip of coffee. "We wanted to make sure that either family had a place to go...had some place that was safe. And it was the main reason he moved them to Denali to begin with."

While Edward's crew was listening to this like they knew all about it, my girls and I were confused.

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"And what happened to Garrett?" I asked, not really wanting to know.

"He was on my first crew after we retired from the Air Force. He was a sniper, like Jasper here," Carlisle said, smiling slightly as he gestured to the blond at the end of the table. "His last mission for me, he had a heart attack. Kate didn't even know he was sick. He hid it from everyone, but planned well. She doesn't want for anything."

"Anyway, Kate is the coolest woman!" Emmett gushed with his big boy smile. "She's like Katherine Hepburn, Aunt Bea, and Albert Einstein all rolled into one!"

Edward and Carlisle laughed, shaking their heads.

"The down side..." Jasper snorted, giving Emmett a second glance, "is she lives *literally* in the middle of no-fucking-where. So she grows everything she needs and raises whatever meat she eats. It's a fucking farm, but it's pretty damn cool there."

"Don't think she's in the dark ages," Edward interjected, chuckling at Alice's wide-eyed, panicked gasp. "She's totally hooked up there - satellite, WIFI, because she can't miss her cooking shows - so she's modern, too."

"And she's a helluva shot," Jasper laughed, his head falling back. "I swear Garrett must've trained her."

"He did," Carlisle snorted, rolling his eyes, but his face sobered when he turned to Esme. "I want you to stick with Edward; he'll protect you...and if you need to get a message to me, then tell Alice. Okay?"

"Are you *sure* you should go back, Carlisle?" she countered him, looking fierce as she stood her ground.

We all took the hint and left the table, everyone tossing money down and giving them their privacy. Once we were all outside, Edward held his hand out for my car keys, and then turned to everyone else.

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"My crew," he addressed them. "You all know the way, right?"

"Sir," they called out, probably out of habit, but even Mickey was nodding.

"If we get separated, just head straight there...no phone calls, no stopping. Got me?" he asked, his voice taking that commanding thing again, because I could see that when he separated from his father, all the responsibility - our safety, our concealment, our destination - all rested squarely upon his strong shoulders, and he didn't take it lightly. And God it was hot and sexy and all things naughty that were running through my mind at the moment, but it also made me feel sorry for him, because it was a lot of weight to be carrying around.

"Sir," they grunted again in agreement.

He seemed satisfied with their sincerity, and he turned to me. "Keys, love," he stated firmly.

I snorted, shaking my head and taking my keys from my pocket as I leaned against my passenger side door. Dangling them from the tips of my fingers, I purred, " *Sir*."

He huffed, rolled his eyes, and reached for my keys. "Bad habit, baby," he whispered. "Sorry."

"One day," I crooned, mimicking his sexy ass rant in my ear from before our breakfast. "One day, you'll realize you aren't my boss."

He stepped closer to me, his feet on either side of mine, his weight starting to lean in on me as he braced his arms on each side of my head. His smile was crooked and sexy, but also nervous and almost timid, but his eyes were dark and heavy lidded.

"No, Bella. I'm well aware of who's in charge here..." he said, his voice deep and carnal, all things that made my girly parts twitch.

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"If that's the case," I chuckled, looking around as everyone climbed into their respective vehicles, "*prove it.*"

"How do I prove it, baby?" he asked, reaching up with one hand to caress my cheek with his thumb.

"Kiss me."

He smirked wickedly, dragging his tongue across his bottom lip so slowly, I thought I'd scream from the sheer want of it.

"*Ma'am,*" he grunted in a whisper, before his mouth captured mine.

And just like on the ferry, we lost ourselves for just a moment. My fingers hooked into the belt loops of his jeans, pulling him as close as I could. Edward's hand slipped into my hair, gripping it almost roughly as he turned my head, his tongue not just entering my mouth, but *claiming* it.

We both moaned, our hips pressing together as we kissed against my car. When we finally broke apart, we were breathless, panting, with flushed cheeks. Edward pressed his forehead to mine, closing his eyes as he tried get himself breathing normally.

My own eyes filled with tears, because as much teasing, flirting, and playing that we did, I still couldn't do all that I wanted to with him, and I *so* wanted to. I wanted to show him that I loved him, show him that I wanted him. I was tired of letting my fears win.

"I love you," I whispered, and I was met with concerned, but oh so vibrant green eyes.

"Love you, too. What's this?" he asked softly, wiping his thumb under my eye.

"I'm tired of being afraid," I sighed, looking into his eyes, which softened immediately.

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"I *will* wait, Bella. Please know that. When you're ready...I'm here," he urged softly against my cheek. "Believe me, I want you - so much it's all I think about sometimes - but I can wait. I want to wait...for you. I told you that you're getting better all the time, despite what you believe."

I nodded, unable to say much else, because since we'd met, the man in front of me - who had no patience for anyone else around him, it seemed - had endless patience, endless kind words, and made me feel that even though we were far from normal, we were perfect, safe, and right where we needed to be.

"We need to get on the road, love," he whispered, brushing his lips softly across mine.

We both turned when we heard Carlisle and Esme, who it seemed was still upset, coming out of the restaurant. In fact, she was several steps ahead of him as she walked our way.

"He's taking the BMW, so can I ride with you two?" she huffed, her eyes blazing with anger.

"Yeah, sure," we both muttered, looking over her head as Carlisle pulled her things from Edward's Challenger, which Mickey and Makenna were switching to.

"He's so stubborn," she muttered, rolling her eyes as he stepped up to her and kissed her cheek.

I fought my smile, because of all of the couples that were slowly merging around us, they were the two I thought never fought, since they'd been together the longest; apparently, I was wrong.

"Es, I've told you I can take care of myself," he argued, looking uncomfortable at having this conversation around us.

"Yes, I'm aware," she huffed, her nostrils flaring, but we all jumped when she spun to face him. "Carlisle Cullen, you'd better, because I will call Eleazar if

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you don't."

He grimaced, shaking his head. "You don't have to call your brother. I'm just trying to stop Billy Black from ruining TT, and I want to be there when Charlie finally testifies. I can't do that in hiding, Esme, and you know it. I can't keep a watch over new developments in this situation... *while fucking hiding.*"

To break the tension, I asked him, "You're going to court when Charlie goes?"

"I want to escort him as his guard," he said gruffly, breaking his gaze away from Esme. "Ben is trying to get it approved. Just because he gets on the stand, doesn't mean he'll walk away. I can't let that happen."

I looked to Edward, and then to Esme, because if there was a second person on this planet that I trusted my father's life with, it was Carlisle. The first was Edward.

"This time, Carlisle," Esme sighed, obviously giving up, "you'll send some sort of message everyday. Okay?"

"Yes, ma'am," he sighed, and I couldn't help but smile, because he sounded just like his son.

"Love you," she told him, kissing him softly, before climbing into the backseat of my car.

"Yeah...me, too," he told her, locking gazes with Edward. "I'll be in touch."

"Obviously," Edward chuckled, squeezing his shoulder. "I'll take care of her, Dad."

I hugged Carlisle, kissing his cheek. "Be careful. If you see Charlie...just...I mean...could you tell him..."

Carlisle leaned forward and kissed my forehead. "I will, I promise."

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With a deep breath, we watched him walk away, and it gave me the most uneasy feeling. *Could* he take care of himself? And if something were to happen to him, would the two people that meant the most to me be able to handle it? I knew he was a capable man, smart, with an amazing sense of honor, but I just hoped that once this was all over, he'd still be there for us...for his son and Esme. That was the last thought I had before he turned south and we turned north, heading to Alaska.

~oOo~

It could've been a really long ride. It could've been really uncomfortable being in the same car with an upset Esme and an Edward that didn't feel comfortable speaking about his mother, whose best friend we were about to visit. It could've been filled with sexual tension, because Edward and I couldn't stop touching - whether it was just holding hands or Edward's fingers on my knee, my thigh, my hair. But it wasn't.

Esme cooled down about thirty minutes after we pulled away from the restaurant. At first, I just let her be, but then, I just couldn't do it anymore. She'd never let me stew before, even when we were neighbors and I was pissed at Jake, so I started asking stupid, but curious questions.

"It's *really* a farm where we're going?"

Edward grinned, turning his gaze from the road to look at me. "Yeah," he chuckled. "It's a pretty cool place. Aunt Kate's been growing her own vegetables for years. And she's got a few sheep, cows, and chickens, but she's most proud of her horses..."

"Yeah?"

"Mhm," he snickered with a nod. "And her dogs...Huskies."

I smiled, because he looked kind of happy when he talked about the place. When I looked in the backseat to Esme, she was smiling, too. She nodded her head for me to keep him talking, but I didn't have to.

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"It's not what you're thinking. I mean, there *is* a barn," he said, talking more towards the road in front of him than us. "But the house is damn big. My mother helped her design it. It's a bunch of different wings, so when we'd come to visit, we'd have our own space. As my dad changed careers and Garrett joined him, she added on to it over the years, so there would be enough room for his crew. It's like a compound," he chuckled, looking over at me. "You girls might hate it, because we can't go anywhere - not that there's anywhere to go. The closest city is miles away."

"I'm sure we'll live," I laughed.

"When was the last time you visited, Edward?" Esme asked, leaning forward.

"Thanksgiving," he said softly, but his brow furrowed. "Fuck, I haven't even called her..."

"I'm sure she understands that you're busy," she soothed him.

"Yeah, but... M-mom asked me to take c-care of her..."

God, I think I fell in love with him just a little bit more at that statement, because holy hell, did everything have to rest on his shoulders? And I could see the guilt that he'd missed Christmas, New Years, and some other holiday he probably should've called her on, and I couldn't let him sink into it.

"What were they like together?" I asked, thinking he was a kid when they were last together, so his answer would be interesting.

"Like you and the girls," he snorted softly, his lips turning up in the corners. "They'd stay up late and gossip about people they knew. They'd listen to old music. They'd laugh and cook and make fun of bad haircuts."

I smiled, biting my bottom lip, because they sounded like any two best friends that were really close. They sounded like any two girls that liked to reminisce and revel in their friendship. He was right. They sounded like me and my girls.

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"I wish my mom had had that," I sighed, looking out the window at the blurry landscape flying by. "She never really allowed herself friends...not close ones, anyway."

"What did your mom look like?" Edward asked suddenly, looking my way quickly and back to the road as he changed lanes.

"Are you asking me, or the eight year old?" I chuckled, and Esme giggled beside me from between the two front seats.

"Either," he laughed.

"The eight year old would tell you she was beautiful, like a princess," I said, smiling in spite of the topic. "The grownup would tell you she looked like me, only I got Charlie's eyes. What about you?"

"Oh my goodness, if Edward doesn't look like his mother. I've seen pictures," Esme gushed with a laugh, patting his shoulder.

"I do," he agreed, running a hand through his hair. "Hair, eyes, everything. It's like my dad wasn't involved."

The conversation about moms and their funniest moments continued for miles, until my eyes started drooping and my yawns got bigger and wider.

Edward's hand caressed my face, running his fingers through my hair, and he said, "Get some sleep, love. We've got a few hours before we get there."

I nodded, curling up in my seat with a deep sigh. I heard soft conversation, but otherwise, everyone got quiet until I could remember no more, but it seemed like just as I closed my eyes, gentle warm hands were touching my face, and a cool breeze shook me out of my little bubble.

"Bella, we're here," Edward whispered.

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I stretched as best I could in the car, opening my eyes to see him kneeling in my door. His eyes, though tired, were so very green, and framed with long, dark eyelashes as he looked at me with a sweetness that was almost breathtaking.

It was still daylight, even though it was kind of hard to tell, what with the clouds that covered the sky. I looked around, and I could see through sleep-fuzzy eyes that we were definitely on a farm. The air smelled sweet, like hay. There were sounds of animals and my friends' laughter. And then there was a squeal of happiness.

"Edward Anthony!" I heard from behind us, and I'd never seen Edward's head spin so fast. "You get that handsome face over here and give me a hug!"

He smiled sweetly, a tinge of color to his cheeks. "Aunt Kate," he chuckled, standing up, but offering me his hand. "You'll like her, I promise," he murmured to me.

I didn't even have to say a word to her to know that was true. She wasn't a tall woman, but she was very pretty, with light brown hair that was swept up into a loose bun. She was wearing a tan jacket with a hood, over a white shirt and blue jeans that had a few smudges of dirt on them. Her face was sweet, thin, but it was her light blue eyes that sparkled with love for the boy whose face she was reaching for.

"Look at you! You look more like Elizabeth every time I see you!" she gushed, smiling widely as she cupped both sides of his smiling face. "And I have to get an emergency call from Carlisle to see you?"

She kissed his cheek as he hugged her tightly, practically picking her up off of the ground.

"Sorry, Aunt Kate," he muttered, looking admonished.

"Don't you 'sorry' me, mister. A phone call would do," she huffed, rolling her eyes. "Now...where are my other boys?" she asked loudly enough that Emmett

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and Jasper could hear her.

"Right here, Kate!" Emmett boomed, rushing to her and swooping her up.
"How ya doin', gorgeous?"

"Emmett McCarty, put me down...you brute!" she laughed. "If you're that strong, I've got chores for you!"

"You name them, Kate," he chuckled, setting her gently back down on her feet.

"Jasper," she snickered, giving Emmett one last wry smile. "How are you, sweetheart?"

"Just fine, ma'am," he drawled, smiling crookedly at her, before kissing her cheek.

"And Michelle?" Kate asked, spinning in her spot.

And for the first time, Mickey didn't correct someone about her name. She hugged Kate with almost a reverence I hadn't been expecting.

"Are these boys still picking on you? And what the hell happened to your shoulder?" she asked, looking the poor girl over.

"Of course they pick on me, Aunt Kate," Mickey chuckled, shoving Emmett when he gave her a wet willy in her ear. "And it's just the job," she added with a stiff shrug.

"Ah, yes, the job," Kate snickered, looking around. "So let me meet Carlisle Cullen's goddaughter..."

"Aunt Kate...Bella Swan," Edward introduced, guiding me forward with his hand at the small of my back. "And her friends...Rosalie Hale, Alice Brandon, and Makenna Coleman." He paused for a moment, bringing Esme to the front.
"This is Esme Platt."

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For a split second, Kate's eyebrows flickered up, and I wondered if she would have a problem with someone seeing her best friend's widower. She shook Esme's hand gracefully, though, with what seemed like a genuine smile.

"It's nice to meet all of you," she said with a beaming smile and a clap of her hands. "Consider yourselves safe here. The entire property is surrounded by an electric fence. There are four good size dogs that roam the entire area. I've got plenty of protection - two of my own, and two of Carlisle's old retired farts!"

Edward snorted, shook his head, and raised an eyebrow at her. "You'd better not let Alec catch you saying that."

"Oh, poo!" she huffed with a wave at him. "My house...my rules...my insults. Now, let's get your things inside and get you settled. Every last one of you looks like they're about to fall down. Once you've rested a bit, I'm going to let Edward make up for all the missed holidays and help with dinner. It's been too long since I had a handsome man cook for me..."

He laughed, but started to gather our things out of the trunk. Everyone else followed his lead. With a bunch of lugging and joking, the very large group of us made our way to the front door.

The layout of the house was almost like a spider, with a central living environment and several hallways jutting off to different rooms. Kate pointed down each hallway, giving us instructions.

"Edward, your room is the same...the rest of you can pick any room with an open door. And believe me, there are plenty, so please make yourself at home," she said cheerily.

Everyone broke away, heading down one hallway or another. I looked up at Edward, not wanting to vocalize that I wanted to stay with him, but I didn't know Kate's rules or whether he would want me with him, so I grabbed my bag and hitched it over my shoulder. Before I could take two steps, there was a hand on my waist.

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"Electric fence or not...your safety lies with me," I heard rumbling deeply in my ear. "Besides, I got used to my roommate."

I fought my smile, because I really only felt safe to truly sleep when Edward was in the room, but when I looked up at him, I noticed he was wary.

"I want you w-with m-me," he sputtered with a shrug.

"Okay," I chuckled, unable to not melt when he stuttered.

"Okay," he huffed, but broke out into a wide grin. "Take a right, then. Last door at the end of the hallway."

It was like walking into an apartment, minus a kitchen. There was a small sitting area, with a desk, TV, a couple of chairs and a sofa. There was a door on either side of the room, and Edward headed straight for the one on the left.

"My room," he muttered, opening the door.

I smiled, taking a look around the room that was very similar to his room in the mountain cabin. Dark furnishings, blue accents, and a few framed pictures on the wall of mostly scenery and Apache helicopters - from when he was younger, I assumed. But it was the photo on the dresser that caught my attention.

I set my bags on the bed and walked over to pick it up. It was the Edward I'd first met when we were kids, all arms and legs, with hair everywhere. He still had the baby cheeks, piercing green eyes, and his trademark crooked smile. Standing next to him was a woman that needed no introduction.

Elizabeth Cullen.

She was no less than stunning, giving every bit of that over to her son. She was looking at him like he was all that mattered, as she wrapped an arm lovingly around him. They were standing in front of a paddock of horses from what looked like this very farm. Elizabeth was wearing a large floppy hat, her dark

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hair with rich bronze highlights gleaming in the sun as it cascaded down her shoulders.

"That was just before we found out she was sick," Edward muttered behind me.

"She's beautiful," I said, setting the picture back in its place.

"She was trying to get me to go riding," he chuckled. "I kept telling her no. Horses made me nervous, 'cause they're so damn big. They could've killed me. I only weighed like eighty-five pounds then."

I giggled, biting my bottom lip as I studied the picture again. "Did you ever go with her?"

"Oh yeah," he laughed with a nod, his eyebrows raising up. "She made me fight through the fear. I'll have to ask Aunt Kate if Goliath is still around."

"Goliath?" I chuckled with what I was sure were wide eyes.

"Don't let the name fool you," he told me. "He's a big baby. In fact, I rode him the last time I was here. There are trails all through the woods out there...and that's still inside her electric fence."

I started unpacking a few things that I'd need for bed later, but warm hands stopped me.

"I want to show you around, baby," he said, running a hand through his hair. "Just let me get a shower to wake up, okay?"

I watched as Edward grabbed a set of clean clothes, a towel, and his shampoo, before heading into the bathroom. The shower turned on, and suddenly, my thoughts were assaulted with visions of a wet, warm Edward standing under spray.

"Damn," I sighed, hopping up from the chair and walking to the door that led to the main hallway.

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I tugged the door open, gasping when I ran almost smack dab into Aunt Kate.

"Oh, sorry," I yelped, closing the door behind me.

"Swan," she said, looking at me through narrowed eyes. "As in Charlie Swan's daughter... *Renee* Swan's daughter."

"Yes, ma'am. How do you know my parents?"

"Oh, I met them years ago. Carlisle invited them here for a vacation before you were born. Well, both you and Edward were on the way. Gosh, child! You look like your mother!" she gushed, taking my face in her hands, "but with your father's eyes." She paused, tilting her head at me. "I'm sorry about your mother. I didn't know about it until years later, and now you father's in trouble."

I smiled, shrugged, but she kissed my cheek softly.

"You're in good company, child."

"Thank you," I told her, but noticed her eyes drifted past me to the door and her brow furrow.

"Now, Bella," she huffed, her arms folding across her chest and frown curling down the corners of her mouth. "Why don't you tell me what you're doing in Edward's room?"

I gaped, looking from her to the door and wishing Edward would hurry up, because I damn well didn't want to offend a woman that looked like she loved him like her own son. I also didn't want to sleep without him.

"I...I mean...we," I sputtered, looking her in the eye. "I love him."

Her eyes raised up high, but I could see her fighting her smile. "I know," she chuckled, wrapping an arm around me. "Carlisle kind of gave me a heads up..."

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I sagged in relief, almost leaning into her. "I'm sorry we...I mean...after Edward found me, I sleep better with him near..."

"I know that, too," she said with a smile, leading me down the hall towards the main house. "Now...let me tell you all sorts of stories about our young Edward..."

A/N... Ahh...so it's AUNT Kate. :) And here some of you were thinking that I was sending him back to some old lover. Nah... She's something else.

So they're at the next safe house...completely hidden away in the forests of Denali.

So...Carlisle went back to TT, because Billy is either in trouble or up to know good, maybe both... The threat is smaller in size, but no less lethal. King will still call the shots, and he has yet to find out about his nephew, James. Miller is still out there, and he's well aware he left a witness behind. Bella isn't safe until he's either caught or dead.

Ah...and our Edward and Bella...he's a dangerous flirty thing. They'll drive each other crazy soon... LOL... And that will be next chapter... you'll get to meet some of the new peeps...a little lemony taste...and a talk between Edward and his Aunt Kate.

I want to thank JenRar for beta'ing this for me. It's a miracle she hasn't killed me over this story! LOL Thanks to GooberLou, who now has a craving for syrup...I can't imagine why... :D And MedusaInNY for huge help on my blog... come on over there... [drotuno\(dot\)blogspot\(dot\)com](http://drotuno(dot)blogspot(dot)com)

I also want to thank les16 for the amazing review she gave this story on [indieficpimp\(dot\)blogspot\(dot\)com](http://indieficpimp(dot)blogspot(dot)com) ... If anything just go over there and read it, because her love for this story truly shows. Thank you, BB...that was beautiful! Also...check out her story *The Greatest Gift!*

REVIEWS... Please let me know what you think...whether it's "Edward and syrup sound like a yummy combination" or "Bella won't last against

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all that hotness aiming her way" or Daddy C better be careful, because Esme didn't sound like she was playing!" LOL Either way...let me know. I need reviews... A LOT! I will most likely be posting on Sunday... so until then, Later! :)

Chapter 16

A/N... Well now! :) That was quite a response to the last chapter. Apparently, some of you have developed a taste for syrup now. Interesting... LMAO Now, so far I don't have any plans for outtakes, but you asked for some concerning Aunt Kate's "Young Edward" stories. I'll think about it, but they aren't really in the works at this point. However, we do get to hear a little more from Aunt Kate in this chapter. I think you'll like her.

Also, this chapter has lemon warnings! Not that any of you are complaining, because I know most of you! scans my eyes around the room

Anyway, I wanted to welcome all the new readers out there! :) And there are a lot of you! I'm happy to have you along for this crazy ride. Now...let's get on with it!

CHAPTER 16

EDWARD

For the first time in weeks, I could tell Bella finally felt safe. Not just safe, but *comfortable*. I didn't know if it was the farm, my Aunt Kate, or the fact that we weren't staying up odd hours of the night to run in the woods. We didn't have to here.

It had only been a few days since we'd all trudged into my aunt's home, exhausted, weary, and just plain wrecked. We'd worked as a flawless team, but we had just come from a big gunfight, clean up, and traveling through another damn country to get where we were. We were all fried - mentally, emotionally, and physically.

We did nothing but sleep the first day. All of us. Aunt Kate told us not to worry about a thing, that Alec, Sam, and her two men, Tom and Obie - whose names were actually much more complicated than that, because they were part Inuit or

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Eskimo, or some shit - were watching the grounds around the clock.

Tom and Obie preferred to stay in the barn, in an office that Kate had converted into an apartment for them, because they were brothers and were used to living together. They handled not only her security, but the animals, as well. From what I could tell, they didn't say much, but they'd do anything she asked of them and seemed to treat her with the utmost respect. However, it didn't take long for the girls to dub poor Obie as... *cute*.

Alec and Sam used to be a part of my father's first crew, so they tended to be more accessible, more talkative with everyone. Alec was in his mid thirties, and probably the youngest member of my father's crew at one time, besides myself. He was an easy going guy, who occasionally took bodyguard gigs in his spare time, now that he was a retired mercenary. He was Italian and boisterous, loving a good joke, and even better a girl's blush. He and Emmett hit it off right away, and all the girls loved him.

Sam, on the other hand, was a big scary fucker. He'd always scared the shit out of me as a kid, and still unnerved me as an adult, even though we were on the same side. Despite his age - because he was older than my dad - he was in phenomenal shape, standing tall at over six-foot-four. He was scary, because he was huge and seemed to take up more space than even Emmett, but in reality, they were about the same size. He could walk into a room without fear, without a weapon, and I was pretty sure Godzilla could be in there, and Sam would still come out on top. He was also horribly scarred on his hands, arms, and part of his face. That alone scared the shit out of the girls the first day...well, all except Bella.

While Rose and Makenna had flinched at the sight of Sam and his scars, Bella's eyes had softened, almost to the point of tearing up. She introduced herself immediately, gazing up at him with such sympathy, it almost hurt to watch. She saw the man, not the scars. She saw his pain, not his intimidation. She saw *Sam*, not the results of a mine he'd accidentally stepped on twenty some-odd years ago.

And he fucking *adored* her for it.

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Not that I blamed him one bit, because she was easy to love, but he'd go out of his way for her. It was hilarious watching him fawn over her, because he was totally pushing fifty. It was like she'd tamed a fucking giant, and she completely changed my perspective of him. He'd open doors, carry shit, and basically became her guardian if I wasn't around or was busy doing something else. Bella, in turn, got him to smile - something I'm not sure I'd ever seen him do the entire time I'd known him.

By the third day, the girls and my crew were all pretty much caught up on rest, and they started getting bored; Emmett was itching to help Kate around the place.

My crew was used to her farm, because we'd come here around holidays or to cool off after some major mission. Mickey loved feeding the animals, Jasper liked working whatever vegetables Kate had planted, and Emmett and I always fixed whatever was broken or run down.

What surprised us most was that Bella and her girls were completely willing to pitch in. They had all proven themselves in tough situations, but they were - at their core - *city girls*. So we assumed heavy labor was out, and we would've been okay with that, but Bella wasn't having any of it. They wanted to help, wanted to pull their weight, which they did - in spades.

Rose and Bella wanted to work with Mickey. Both girls had taken riding lessons when they were kids, so they were all for taking care of the barn, feedings, and basic care of the horses, dogs, and chickens. Makenna made excellent help for me and Emmett. She couldn't swing a hammer to save her life, but she could paint, stain, and sand with the best of them. Alice, of course, worked with Jasper, though to be honest, of all the girls, the little computer genius wasn't exactly cut out for farm life. She did her damndest, but ended up working most of the time inside with Kate, monitoring the computers for messages from my dad while cleaning.

I still tried to cook at least one meal a day for everyone, though Kate loved to do it. Alec even got in on the act, because he loved to cook - especially traditional Italian - so it became a rotating thing.

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And then there was Esme, who I was concerned wouldn't be welcomed into my mother's best friend's home, but she was...warmly. Aunt Kate pulled me aside, telling me that my mom would want my father to be happy, and if Esme made him happy, then she had a new friend - that I shouldn't worry so much.

So as the sun set on our fourth day on the farm, it seemed we'd found some sort of comfortable rhythm at my aunt's home. Did I miss my house? Yeah, but not so much that I'd be willing to walk away from the best thing that ever happened to me - especially not while she was still being hunted by that motherfucker, Miller. Were we all still petrified something would happen to my father, or someone would find us, or Charlie's testimony that still loomed overhead? God, yes. In fact, Bella had nightmares about it just about every time she shut her eyes. However, we were all so strangely comfortable, despite the circumstances, that it made me nervous. I hated like hell to think something could go wrong.

I watched from the front porch as Bella played with the dogs, just before their last feeding. They were damned big dogs, looking more like wolves than huskies, but they seemed to take to her - especially Tia, the oldest female, who was looking excitedly at Bella to throw the stick so she could give chase, which she did over and over, until the dog was a panting mess.

I smiled as the dog lay the stick at her feet, waiting patiently for the next go round. Her tongue lolled out the side of her mouth, and her tail wagged so hard that it shook her whole body, so with a sweet laugh, Bella threw it again, finally calling an end to the game. All three dogs followed her happily to their bowls, and once she filled them, she headed back towards the barn.

"You're in love with her," I heard from the screen door.

I looked up at Kate, nodding silently and running a hand through my hair as I sat back on the swing. She sat down beside me and patted my leg.

"Push us," she commanded. "My toes won't touch. Garrett hung this thing too high."

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I chuckled, kicking us gently with my foot, and we sat quietly for a few minutes, swaying in the early evening breeze.

"I can lower it for you," I told her.

"Nah, it's one of the last things he did. Leave it," she sighed, looking over at me. "She's a beautiful girl, Edward. Your mother would've loved her."

I smiled, but swallowed thickly, because I'd just thought that very thing as we'd driven up to Alaska. We'd traded stories about our moms, both good and bad. With Bella, it didn't seem to hurt as much, but looking at the woman that had loved my mother like a sister, it really tore at me.

"I don't mean to upset you, child," she soothed, patting my leg again. "It's just nice to see you happy. It's all she wanted for you." She paused, taking a deep breath. "She worried that leaving you with Carlisle would turn you into more of a soldier than a man, but she was wrong. You got the best parts of both of them. Your mother and I met Bella's parents, did she tell you?"

"No," I gasped, looking over at her with raised eyebrows. "When? 'Cause her mom's been..."

"Yes, I know. Renee died when Bella was very young...younger than when you lost Liz, if I'm not mistaken," she said, a frown curling down the corners of her mouth. "We'd planned this big thing here," she chuckled softly. "Just family, old Air Force buddies, and some friends for a weekend getaway. Your father barely made it in from overseas, but he came, and he brought the Swans with him. He wasn't working with Charlie yet, but they'd been friends forever. Both Elizabeth and Renee were expecting, though you were coming first."

I smiled, shaking my head. "That's cool," I replied. "Did they get along?"

"Renee and Liz?" she verified with a laugh, and I nodded. "Like two peas in a pod. They both knew what they were having...a little boy and a little girl. They had *huge* dreams for the both of you."

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I chuckled and nodded. "I'm sure, but..."

"Yes, Renee killed herself, I know," my aunt sighed sadly. "I'll never understand it. She left that sweet girl at such a young age. I'm not sure why. We all tried to keep in touch, but we all had busy lives. A few phone calls, a few letters, but by the time you were born, we just never got together again. Plus, Bella's father was a damn busy man...not to mention your own."

I snorted, rolling my eyes. "Charlie's...a fool. Trust me when I tell you that."

"So was your own father, Edward," she sighed, cupping my face. "They both lost their wives - differently, yes, but men are aimless without their loves. Carlisle shouldn't have sent you to military school; he should have kept you close. It was the biggest fight we had, your father and I. I even offered to take you in...school you here myself, because I felt you needed family and love, not *training*. But he won, saying he wasn't home much to begin with, and I gave up, because you aren't mine."

"It wasn't bad."

"It wasn't good, either, Edward," she huffed. "Your mom would never have let you be sent away!"

I laughed, knowing that was the truth. My mom would've kept me close - bad behavior, smoking weed, and all.

She studied my face, finally reaching up to cup my cheek again. "Carlisle called me a few years ago, just as you joined his crew. It was after your crash and discharge. He was upset. He told me I might have been right, that he'd raised a soldier, not a son. He saw you becoming cold, angry, lethal...and it wasn't what he wanted for you."

I frowned, looking down at my hands. "I was..."

"So when he called me a few days ago," she continued, a knowing smile on her face, "imagine my surprise when, despite these...unusual circumstances, he told

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me all about Bella, her father, and *you*."

I smiled over at her. "Spilled the beans, did he?"

"Every single one!" she laughed. "He's never sounded so proud. Or happy for you. He told me that Bella had been...hurt, but that you and she had found a way to cope, that I should let you be. I should ignore whatever living arrangements you two chose, because whatever you two were doing...well, it was working. *For both of you*."

I laughed, shaking my head, and I caught sight of Bella coming out of the barn with Rose and Mickey. All three were laughing, with rosy cheeks and big smiles.

"What do I do when this is over?" I asked her, barely able to tear my eyes away from Bella as she walked towards us.

"What do you *want* to do?" she asked, and I heard my mother's voice in that question.

"I want..." I sighed, gazing at the best thing I'd seen in days - Bella's full on boisterous laugh. "I want to keep her...never let her go."

"Then *don't*," Kate laughed, standing up from the swing.

"How?" I asked, frowning up at her. "We...we have different lives, if we can even get her back to hers. I travel, she travels, and we could both get killed with what we do."

Kate snorted, but took a deep breath before brushing a kiss to my forehead. "If you love each other, you'll figure it out. It's not hard, Edward. You weigh what's important, and you go with it," she whispered just as the girls hit the steps of the porch. "Your mother would want you happy and in love with a beautiful girl that loves you just as much, not a lonely, rich soldier with no one around him."

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I sighed, blinking back tears. "Thanks, Aunt Kate."

She nodded, shot me a wink, and turned her attention to the happily babbling girls as they joined us. "Well, how are my zookeepers?"

They all started talking at once, but Bella's announcement was the biggest news. "Obie says that Tia's gonna have puppies!"

I smiled, because all three girls were just about to bounce themselves right out of their own skin with excitement.

"Again?" Kate laughed, clapping happily. "That's great! We haven't had little ones rolling around here in a while. Did he say how long?"

"Just a few weeks!" Mickey gushed. "And he said if we were still here, we could be there for it!"

I laughed, pulling Bella onto the swing with me, and she immediately curled into my side, happy as she watched the other two tease each other.

"Yeah, well, if he said a volcano was erupting, you'd follow Obie to it," Rose snorted, jabbing Mickey with her elbow, which only caused Bella to burst into silent hysterics.

"*Really?*" I gushed teasingly with a smirk. "Do tell, Michelle..."

"Shut up, pretty boy!" she growled, but she looked like she was about to burst into flames, she was so red in the face.

Bella chuckled, poking me. "Leave her alone. I think he likes her, too."

"Oh ho!" I laughed, starting to stand up. "Now we're talkin'! Let's just go have a chat with this boy..."

"Oh, God," Mickey groaned, looking to Bella, Rose, and finally Aunt Kate, before putting her face in her hands.

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"Em! Jasper!" I called, still laughing when they poked their heads out of the door. "It seems our fair *Michelle* has found...a boy," I sang, finally standing up, despite Bella's and Mickey's hands pushing and pulling me back.

"Edward, don't you *fucking dare*!" Mickey hissed at me as she pushed against my chest the same time Bella was tugging on my shirt. "You don't need to interrogate him!"

"Excellent!" Emmett snickered, rubbing his hands together, only to crack all of his knuckles. "Who?" he grunted, flexing every muscle.

"You boys wouldn't!" Bella gasped, staring at us with an open mouth and raised eyebrows.

"Oh, yes, we would," Jasper said with a shit-eating grin. "Who, Mick?"

"Fuck!" she snarled, looking redder than ever.

"Obie, it seems," Aunt Kate joined in with a chuckle, before turning to Bella. "And yeah...they *really* would. Though, he's a good guy, boys."

"Edward, *please*!" Mickey begged, shaking her head and stepping in front of the porch steps.

"I don't think so," I snickered, grinning down at her. "It is our job to make sure that he's a decent fellow..."

Bella snorted, rolled her eyes, and folded her arms across her chest.

"Unbelievable...I'm so glad I didn't have brothers. You're going to scare him, Edward. He's really shy."

"That's the point, Bellsy," Emmett chuckled, picking Mickey physically up out of the way and setting her aside.

I was just about to take off towards the barn, when Bella's phone went off. It was her scar medicine reminder. I spun to look at her, because we hadn't really

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worked on her scars or her fear of touch since we'd arrived at the farm, but she just waved me on.

"Go...be a bully, Edward," she chuckled, rolling her eyes again. "I need a shower first. I smell like dogs, sweat, and hay," she huffed, but broke out into a giggle.

I grinned, kissing her forehead, and took off for the barn as Mickey called uselessly after us.

~oOo~

BELLA

I snorted to myself, but looked up at Rose as they all ran off towards the barn, Mickey frantic behind them. "They'll scare him to death," I chuckled, standing up from the swing.

"True," she laughed. "Obie's a pretty quiet guy...he'll think the worst when they walk up in there."

"Go make sure they don't like...tie him to the barn beams and hang him upside down," I told her with a laugh. "They'll torture him for his girlfriend history or something."

"Stupid boys," Rose scoffed, rolling her eyes and heading down the steps. "They should just ask Alice to check him out."

She walked away, but Kate's chuckle caught my attention. "Alice won't find anything on Tom and Obie. It's not like there are a ton of hospitals where they came from."

"Oh!" I gasped, but broke into a smile. "Yeah, but they don't need to know that!" I laughed, and she joined me.

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"Which reminds me," she continued. "Those two will be making a supply run for me tomorrow. I need all of you to make a list of things you'll need. They're going all the way into Anchorage, so they can hit a bunch of stores for me. They go once a month."

"Okay, no problem," I said with a nod, reaching for the screen porch door. "I'll let the girls know. I'm sure it's time to stock up," I told her, mentally making a note of more scar cream, because my tube was almost gone, but that also reminded me of something else I needed.

I walked through the house, finding Esme's room. She was sitting on the edge of her bed, folding clothes. She'd taken the task of everyone's laundry, though not one of us asked her to.

"Hey," I sighed, leaning in the doorway.

"Bells," she sang, glancing up from a pile of socks that would intimidate the most seasoned of housewives. "How you feeling? How's that leg?"

"Fine," I told her. "I...um, I need to talk to you."

"Sure, sweetie, close that door," she said, jerking her chin as she balled up two black socks together. "Maybe you can help me with these..."

I laughed at her tortured expression, but nodded and sat down on the other side of Mount Tube-Sock. "Is this everyone's socks?" I chuckled.

"No! Just Emmett's!" she giggled, rolling her eyes. "That boy, no matter how big he is, still only has *two feet*."

I grinned, but picked up a matching set and balled them up together, setting them aside.

"What did you want to talk about?" she asked, tilting her head at me.

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I wrinkled my nose, but took a deep breath. "Um, just before my last job...you know, Alvarez, I'd been to see my doctor. I needed my...shot." I told her, raising my eyebrow at her. "It's due soon...like really soon."

She took a deep breath and nodded, but didn't say anything.

"The reason I'm telling you is Kate is sending Tom and Obie into Anchorage tomorrow," I continued, the words rushing out of me due to nerves. I didn't like having to discuss my birth control with her, but I had no choice; it wasn't like I could visit a hospital without being recognized. "Kate told me to tell everyone to get their list of supplies ready...and I don't want to miss it..."

"Bella, stop," she chuckled, placing a hand over mine. "I'll handle it. Do you know about the other girls? I mean, I've noticed some new... *sleeping arrangements*. I know about Rose. She prefers the pill, and the last supply run in Trinity I was able to refill it for her, but I don't know about Alice or Makenna."

"I don't think Makenna takes it, and I really don't know about Alice. You'll have to ask her."

"Very well," she sighed, looking forlornly at the now dwindling pile of Emmett's socks. "I'll see about riding in with them. You and Edward..." she started, but paused to study my face. "You're ready for this step?"

"No...yes," I sputtered, and then opted to just shrug one shoulder. "I don't know," I whispered, feeling tears in my eyes, because despite my sexual frustration, I was still terrified of touch. "Yes," I finally blurted out. "But I *can't*." The last word came out in a breathy sob.

She smiled warmly, pushing the socks out of the way in order to scoot closer to me. Cupping my face, she said, "You *can*. And just you asking about birth control means you're at least considering the possibility that it *could* happen, which in turn, tells me you haven't given up, my pretty girl. Let me ask you something."

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I nodded, sniffing a little. "Go on."

"Set aside your fear, Bella, and tell me... Would you have consummated this relationship by now, if you had no fear, no scars?"

"God, yes," I breathed as tears spilled down my cheeks. "I love him *so much*, Esme..."

She smiled sadly, wiping my tears away with her thumbs. "And you want to show him?" she asked, and I was nodding before she even finished the question. "Is Edward pushing too hard?"

"No!" I gasped. "If anything, he's more patient than I am."

She chuckled softly, kissing my cheek. "You two will find the right way, sweetie. Is he helping with your medicine?"

I nodded, swallowing thickly, because I just realized he would probably beat me to his room and then worry why I wasn't in there. "As soon as I get a shower, we're supposed to try again..."

"God, sweetie, I've said it once, and I'll keep saying it. *Just keep trying*," she urged softly, wiping away more tears. "It's not a race, so don't rush yourself. It's not about hormones and chemistry, though I get it, because you two can heat up a room." She chuckled at my sniffing laugh. "It's about making sure that you are a whole person before you share yourself, your *body* with someone else, Bella. And when *that* happens, then you won't *believe* how beautiful it will be, because it won't be just sex, it will be love in its purest form."

I knew she was right, but it was different when Edward and I were alone, when I wanted him so badly that it was almost painful. I wanted him, but when I would reach a certain point, I would freeze, and that bothered me more than Edward, which made me love him all the more. It was a vicious fucking cycle.

We stood up from the bed at the same time, and Esme hugged me tightly. "You're doing fine, Bella. Keep doing what you're doing, because it's obviously

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working," she whispered in my ear, before pulling back to make sure I heard her. "And we'll take care of that shot tomorrow night, okay?"

I nodded, kissed her cheek, and said, "Thanks, Esme."

By the time I walked into the bedroom, I half expected Edward to be there, but apparently, he was off still torturing Mickey's potential suitor. I snorted to myself at his protective nature, but grabbed my things for my shower.

Edward still wasn't back by the time I'd showered, shaved, and shampooed. By habit, I reached for my sports bra and underwear, but stopped, studying myself in the bathroom mirror. With shaking hands, I just grabbed the underwear, pulling them on, and left the bra on the vanity. I pulled a bathrobe on, cinching the belt tight around me, but I was so nervous for this next step that I could barely breathe. I leaned on the sink with braced arms, just trying to get myself under some control. By the time I heard the door to our room slam shut, Edward chuckle to himself, and my name being called, I was just about seeing stars.

"Bathroom," I wheezed, squeezing my eyes shut and taking the deepest breath I could.

A soft knock on the door made me inhale sharply, and Edward's voice, now softer, sounded from the other side. "Bella, you okay?"

"No," I snorted humorlessly, and turned when he opened the door.

"Can I come in, love?"

"Yes," I answered with a nod, and was still nodding when he stepped to my side.

"Hey, what's this about?" he asked, his voice soothing me, although he probably didn't know it. He turned me around, lifting me up onto the vanity so that he look me straight in the eyes. "We can wait, baby," he said, his hands cupping my face. "There's no rush."

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I huffed, rolling my eyes, because those were practically Esme's exact words. "I want to try...I do..."

He smiled softly, pressing his lips to mine briefly. "Then we try...but I don't want you to push, Bella."

I nodded, biting my bottom lip and looking down at my lap. "Kay," I sighed, glancing up when, in my peripheral vision, his t-shirt came sweeping off. "What are you..."

"I need a shower first, baby," he chuckled, but I saw something else gleaming in his eyes. "You're clean, so I should be, too," he said with an evil grin, his tongue raking across his bottom lip as his hands reached for the button of his jeans.

My own hands fisted in my lap, because I so badly wanted to help him out of those damn jeans. I wanted to shove them down, along with whatever other impeding material was under them. I wanted to completely feel Edward without anything between my hands and his skin.

"You're just gonna strip in front of me?" I asked him, wanting to laugh at his smirk, but I couldn't, because I was having a moment of fight or flight.

"I *can*," he teased, tugging the zipper down slowly, and thank God Almighty that he had boxers on underneath. "I have no problem showing you..."

"Oh," I groaned, a furrow to my brow as he chuckled darkly, which caused a clench to all my girly parts, because damn, if he wasn't fucking shameless and gorgeous. "Edward..."

"I'm not keeping you in here," he snorted, but stepped closer to me.

I noticed that he smelled sweet, like sawdust and sweat, and all things that were making it impossible for me to make a clear decision. In fact, I leaned in closer, breathing deeply the scent of him. "Fuck, what did you do today?" I asked, looking up at him.

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"Repaired the back porch. The railing was rotten," he answered, but his smile was crooked and sexy.

"Jesus," I whispered to myself, placing a hand in the center of his chest.

"Edward, let me out of here...please. I can't look and *not* fucking touch. That's torture."

He took two steps back, his hands raised in a surrendering gesture, but fuck me to hell, if his jeans - underwear and all - slipped down to his hips just about two inches. At that point, I was just blatantly ogling him. I *knew* what was beneath that material, and I wanted it.

"I'm not stopping you from touching, *sweetness*," he snickered, winking when my gaze shot up to his.

I slipped down from the vanity, steeling my nerves, because when his shower was all said and done, he would be the one touching, and it wouldn't be as humorous as this moment was. I had overcome my fear of touching *him*. That had taken longer than I'd expected, but when I'd finally let Miller's abuse of my own hand go and taken back control of what I wanted, I had no problems with the man that was currently backing away from me.

I took two steps towards him, and he found his back pressed into the wall. I allowed my eyes to take him in first, and I blinked away the flashback of Miller placing my own hand against the crotch of his pants to feel an arousal that made me gag. Instead, I focused on the pure art form that was Edward's body as he leaned casually against the bathroom wall.

Tense, wide shoulders, narrow hips, and abs with a V that pointed down to just the mere hint of hair all filled my vision. His breathing picked up as my hands raised up in front of his chest. Without the t-shirt, his scent was some sort of strange aphrodisiac, and it caused me to actually lick my lips, before I placed my hands on his skin.

We both moaned together - his deep, and mine almost a whimper - as my fingers lightly raked down his chest, abs, and finally, gripping the front of his

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jeans, including the waistband of his underwear. I leaned in, tracing my nose up his sternum to his throat, and finally up his neck to his ear.

I didn't say anything, but just reveled in the feel of his arms snaking around my waist, the smell of him invading my senses, and the tension that just made us...us. His head fell to my shoulder, and a groan escaped him briefly.

"I really, *really* love that you want to try, Bella," he muttered against the skin of my neck. "But you're killing me..."

I smiled, placing a loud kiss on his neck before pulling back. "And that's what it's like to look at you, Edward," I told him, my hands finally letting the front of his pants go. "Shower, baby..." I sang sweetly, eying his steel hard arousal.

I started to reach for him, but his warm, strong hand gripped my wrist. "Touch me, and we'll have a problem," he panted, his eyes practically begging me.

I wanted to tease him about stamina, but I didn't have the heart to do it, especially when he was looking at me the way he was at the moment - like he really would explode any second on all levels.

His eyes were almost black with want, his jaw tensing and relaxing with every grit of his teeth, and he looked at me through his long dark eyelashes with heavy lids, as his tongue slowly licked his lips.

"Fuck, love, please," he growled. "I love you, but sometimes, I can't be... *honorable*. You've worked too hard to get to this point, baby. You have no idea how much I want you...Please..."

I nodded and stepped away swiftly, understanding completely, because he looked like he wanted to eat me alive. And suddenly, I felt bad for teasing him, when really, I was just trying to distract myself from what we were really supposed to be doing. I was scared shitless for this next step, because not only would he be *touching* my breasts, but he'd see the scars on them, too, and they weren't pretty.

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"Why do we do this to each other?" I mumbled, shaking my head and turning to leave.

Before I got to the door, strong arms wrapped around me, and I was pulled back to Edward's chest. "Because we can't help it, baby. We *both* want what *you're* not ready for. It's how *we*...deal with it."

I nodded, leaning into his kiss to the back of my head. "Yeah, I guess. I'm sorry...I'm just scared, Edward. It seems so cruel..."

"But a helluva lot of fun," he chuckled darkly. "Now...out. And when I'm...hmmm, done in here, we'll work on the more serious shit, Bella."

I nodded again and left him to his shower.

~oOo~

EDWARD

"Edward, please, *please* don't do this," Mickey begged as we all walked towards the barn.

I laughed as Emmett was practically skipping in through the wide barn doors. Mickey tugged on me one more time - this time, my hand.

"Why?" I chuckled, stopping in front of her. "After all the shit you've given me over the years about kissing, telling...all that bullshit! All those stories about your failed dates! Oh no!" I guffawed, squeezing her shoulder. "Let's see if we can't break your...string of bad luck..."

"Dammit!" she hissed, looking to Jasper for help. "Jazz, don't let him do this..."

"Him?" he snorted. "Oh, I've gotta see this myself, darlin'! What makes this guy different than...what's-his-name?"

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"Chris," she growled through gritted teeth with an eye roll. "Chris was an ass. Obie...isn't!"

I grinned over at Emmett, who looked like a kid that was about to be set loose in a toy store. " *Isn't...*she says." I turned back to her. "Then what's the harm in a little... *chat*, Mickey?"

"You'll scare the shit out of him, Edward!" she snapped, but she looked around at all three of us. "He's not my...usual type. He's shy...he's sweet."

Emmett grinned, rubbing his hands together again, like he couldn't wait to get his hands on this poor unsuspecting soul. "Mick...it's a talk. We just want to know he's a good guy."

"Kate trusts him!" she countered, letting me go and gripping his t-shirt. "Why can't you guys?"

"Just a few questions, Mick," I chuckled, dodging her once more, before bolting through the barn doors, with Jasper, Emmett, and now Rose on my heels.

"Guys, is this really necessary?" Rose asked, but I could hear her amusement.

"Hell, yeah," we all answered her, but she just snorted and rolled her eyes.

In all honesty, in the four days we'd been at the farm, I hadn't spoken to the two brothers that much. I trusted Kate's opinion explicitly when it came to security, because she'd learned from my father and her husband, Garrett. She'd caught on to our world beautifully, smartly, making amazing decisions when it came to this farm. She kept it secret, controlled, and probably the safest house we had. It was completely hidden in the Denali forest of Alaska. If someone were to wander up, which was almost impossible to do, they would see a working farm, nothing else. They wouldn't see the arsenal she kept in false walls of both the house and the barn. They wouldn't see the cameras that caught just about every square inch of the place. And they wouldn't see the four giant half wolves stalking them until it was too late.

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Tom and Obie were both busy cleaning one of the stalls, making what looked to be a place for Tia to have her puppies. They both looked up when all of us walked into the barn, leaning on their rakes. They seemed to be concerned, but not scared. However, Obie's eyes betrayed him, because they immediately fell from us to Mickey, the second she appeared at my side.

"Edward, please don't," she pleaded, this time sounding like she was almost in tears when I stepped away from her.

"Edward Cullen," I introduced myself, using a firm handshake and an intimidating stance. "I really don't think we've all been introduced. However, I think you've met Mickey..." I snickered, gesturing to her as she pouted behind us.

"I'll kick your ass, Edward," she sneered, rolling her eyes at my laugh.

"I'm Tom," the older of the two said, shaking everyone's hand. "My brother, Obie. What's this about?" he asked, but he was wearing a wry smile, like he was just catching on.

"Well, Mickey here was just telling us," Jasper started with a chuckle, "that your brother has been...so sweet and kind. It's not something she normally uses to describe someone..."

I laughed, patting his shoulder. "Actually, what Jasper is trying to say is... We believe that Obie is teaching more than just...animal husbandry," I said, with a wide, cheesy grin.

Tom laughed, shoving his brother, who was now forty shades of red and looking everywhere but at Mickey. "You're in for it now, brother," he teased him. "Her big brothers are checking on you..."

Obie's head snapped up as he looked around at Jasper, me, and then finally Emmett, who had commenced to stretching his huge ass arms in a ridiculously dramatic manner, making me roll my eyes.

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Poor Obie broke out in a sweat, but kept quiet, only looking to his brother for help.

Emmett guffawed, shaking his head. "Aw, hell, Eddie...he *is* sweet on her."

"We're just here to make sure that you...don't fuck up," Jasper said menacingly, but he was wearing the funniest of damn smiles.

"Dammit, guys!" Mickey growled, starting towards us. "I can handle my own shit!"

But it was when Emmett jokingly picked her up again to set her aside, that Obie's true colors came flashing to the forefront.

"Don't touch her!" he growled, picking up his rake and holding it like he was about to swing a baseball bat.

"Oh hell," Jasper snorted, as he and I jumped between Obie and Emmett, who was frozen, with Mickey in mid-air. "Maybe this was a mistake," he chuckled.

Tom jumped in on the action in defense of his brother, and suddenly, we were in a standoff.

"Em, put her down," I sighed, thinking that these guys didn't know us well enough to know what was play and what was serious.

"Obie, it's fine," Mickey soothed, rushing to him and grabbing the rake. "They...they're like my brothers... We play around all the time."

Tom snorted, but turned to see his brother's reaction. Obie was glaring at the three of us, like a bear protecting its cub, but it was when he turned his attention back to Mickey that his eyes softened significantly.

"Don't mind him," Tom snickered softly to me and Jasper. "He hasn't been around girls much..." He raised an eyebrow at us. "When Kate hired me, she mentioned that she could use one more, so I sent for him, and we've been here

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for about five months. We're kind of outcasts where we're from, because we're half white and don't know who our father is, so Obie didn't even go to school. I, at least, made it to high school. Kate's teaching him, though. He's a good guy, just...innocent."

"Oh damn, you mean...orphans?" Emmett asked in the most distasteful way possible, which earned him a slap to the back of the head by Rose.

"Rude, Em!" she hissed, glaring at him as he shrank back sheepishly.

I shook my head at him, but turned towards Tom when he answered.

"Yeah, something like that," he told Emmett. "Our mother is from a small village just outside of Juneau, but our father is white, and we have no idea where he is. He left her in the city, with two kids and no money. She had to give us up. There are some Alaskans that still stick to the old ways; they don't want someone else's kids, especially *mixed* kids," he explained, walking us away from his brother and Mickey, who were now talking quietly.

"My brother means well," he continued with a smile. "We're fiercely protective of Kate, because she treats us better than our mother ever did... You know?"

"Our bad, dude," Emmett snorted, holding out his hand to shake. "We live to mess with her, man, so when she got all girly on us..."

I chuckled, shaking my head. "Yeah, she's easy to rile up."

"I see that," Tom chuckled, looking over his shoulder at the couple. "She's fun, a hard worker, and damn good with the animals."

"Which reminds me," I sighed, looking over the stalls. "Is Goliath still able to be ridden?"

"Are you kidding? He loves it. Never acted younger!" he laughed. "I'll get him ready for you tomorrow. He could use a scrub down, anyway."

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"Thanks," I said, shaking his hand. "Tell him,"--I pointed towards Obie--"we meant no harm. We were just picking on her. We'd never seen her so...embarrassed."

Tom grinned and nodded, saying, "Don't worry, I plan on getting my own teasing in..."

Jasper, Emmett, Rose, and I laughed on the way back to the house, but as soon as I started down the hallway, I remembered what I was about to do, and my laugh died as I slammed the door to my room, calling for Bella.

A strange sound came from the other side of the bathroom door and stopped me dead in my tracks. I winced as I recognized Bella's shaky breathing, like she could barely catch it. I'd known the next step for her was going to be big, but she sounded terrified.

I couldn't get in there to her quick enough, but I tried to stay calm, for her sake. I knocked lightly, asking if she was all right, but poked my head in without waiting for an answer. She was practically hyperventilating as she leaned on the bathroom counter. She was dressed in just a bathrobe, from what I could tell, but her face was pale, her eyes looking to me for help.

I picked her up and set her by the sink, brushing her still wet hair away from her face. I wanted to let her know that there was no hurry for this next step, because it was much more intimate than the last few boundaries we'd crossed.

"*I want to try... I do*," she swore to me, and I saw not only the fear, but that fierce determination that she had to put on like a winter's coat.

She was so much stronger than she gave herself credit, and I knew she could do this. If it wasn't tonight, then some other night, but she would break through.

In all honesty, what happened next wasn't planned on my part. I tugged my t-shirt off, dropping it to the bathroom floor. I turned to start my shower, but caught Bella's stare.

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"What are you..." she started to ask, but it was her gaze on my chest that made me react the way I did.

"I need a shower first, baby," I teased her, reaching for my jeans and wanting to laugh as her eyes practically blackened in the blink of an eye. They went from worried, warm brown, to dark and wanting. "You're clean, so I should be, too."

"You're just gonna strip in front of me?"

"I *can*. I have no problem showing you..." I said, realizing how that must have sounded to her, like I was a true asshole calling her out on her fears, but that was not how she reacted.

She leaned in closer to me, breathing deeply, before asking what I'd done that day, and I swear she moaned when I told her. Finally, she pushed me back, starting to slip down from the counter, her voice sounding almost pained.

"Edward, let me out of here...please. I can't look and *not* fucking touch. That's torture."

I backed away from her, because I didn't want her uncomfortable, and pressed myself against the wall behind me. I wanted to give her space to leave the room, so I could finish my shower, but instead, she reached out and touched me.

I wanted grab her, take her against the wall behind me, when her hand shot out to grab the front of my open jeans. I couldn't help but wrap my arms around her, because I couldn't let her touch leave my skin as she dragged her lips up the side of my neck. I felt my cock twitch with every breath that she feathered against my skin.

I wanted to do things to my girl that I had no business thinking about, because she so wasn't ready, but the more she touched, the more I wanted her, almost to the point of losing control. When she caught sight of my erection, I knew I had to stop her, because there would be no going back. I had to stop her, because I

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was about five seconds from yanking her robe open, and that would have been the worst mistake I could ever make with her. I couldn't let that happen.

"Why do we do this to each other?" she whispered, turning away from me, and I felt like a fucking asshole, because she was using me as a distraction.

I couldn't let her think she'd done something wrong, because she hadn't. At all. So I wrapped her up before she made it to the door, explaining that it was just the way we worked, the way we dealt with issues. It may not have been perfect, but it was perfect for us.

I kissed the back of her head, inhaling the sweet scent of her shampoo, as she apologized needlessly. She said it was cruel, but to me, it was never cruel. It was fun pushing her buttons, seeing what reactions she'd throw back at me, and it wasn't as if she couldn't dish it out as well. She was dead sexy all the time, but when she fucking *tried* to flirt, she was breathtaking.

"But a helluva lot of fun," I told her honestly. "Now...out. And when I'm...hmmm, done in here, we'll work on the more serious shit, Bella."

I hurried through my shower routine, just to make sure she didn't have time to think too hard about what we were about to do, but by the time I stepped out of the bathroom, I could see the fear starting to creep back in. She was pacing, tapping that tube of cream against her knuckles. She was worrying the fuck out of that bottom lip of hers, her brow furrowed.

I was in just a towel, but I walked straight to the bed and sat down. "Bella, come here," I sighed, tilting my head at her as she came to a standstill in front of me, where I took her hands in mine, setting the cream beside me on the bed. "What about this has you this worried, baby? It's just me."

"This is...different," she whispered, wrinkling her nose and looking out the window behind me. "I used to be...proud of my appearance, but not anymore..."

"I'm already impressed, love," I chuckled, kissing her lips softly. "I'm a sure thing. I think you're beautiful, no matter what..."

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She smiled sadly, cupping my face. "I...umm... That's not the point, Edward," she huffed, tears filling her eyes. "I disgust myself, despite the fact that I should just be grateful I'm in one fucking piece."

I pulled her closer, sitting her down on my lap sideways and kissing her temple. "But you're forgetting something, baby," I whispered in her ear, smiling a little when she turned to me. "I've already seen you. And I saw you at the worst. Look," I sighed, when she didn't get it.

I opened her robe just on her legs, exposing the long gash on her thigh that, to me, seemed to be the worst one on her - and the first one we'd conquered. I traced my finger down its length, looking back at her face.

"They're already lighter. Can't you tell?"

"No," she sighed, but then shrugged. "Maybe...but I thought it was wishful thinking."

"Nope," I chuckled, kissing her cheek and picking up the tube of cream. "This shit's working, love. So...my point is that if this one is lighter, then the rest are, too. Including the ones I haven't seen. Even still, *I* saw them as *wounds*, baby, so this..." I traced my finger down the scar again. "This will always look so much fucking better than the way I first saw you."

Her gaze left where my fingers were on her leg and met mine. She studied my face for what seemed like forever, but finally, she nodded, reaching for the belt of her robe. That's when she froze, her eyes squeezing shut.

"Hey, don't do that," I chided softly, nuzzling her cheek with my nose. "You look at me. Right here," I told her, pointing to my face. "In fact, let's fix it so all you see is me."

I shifted her around on my lap so that she was straddling my thighs, her robe opening a bit, but it didn't matter. What mattered was the deep chocolate pools that were locked with every movement I made. I untied the robe's belt and let it fall to the sides, but my eyes never left hers.

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"I love you," I told her, trying to ease her shaking.

"Edward, I love you, too, but you have to do this another way..." she cried, gripping my biceps with more strength than I was expecting.

"Tell me, Bella. I'll do this any way you want me to," I urged her, placing a soft kiss to her lips, "but you *can* get through this next phase."

She opened her mouth to speak, but shook her head when nothing would come out. Instead, she crashed her lips into mine, almost knocking me back. I caught her by the waist and knew immediately what she was seeking - a distraction. She wanted to lose herself in us, just to make it easier.

"Just...do it, Edward," she breathed against my mouth, her eyes fierce, determined, but she was still trembling when my hands made contact with her thighs.

I kissed her again, taking my time with long, slow, languid kisses. I wanted to slow her down, make sure she was focused on feeling, and not just kissing, though I could barely think straight.

Continuing up her thighs, I spread my fingers wide, touching as much skin as I possibly could. I touched everything that we'd overcome - her thighs, her stomach, her back, and perfect ass, though the latter was covered in what I was sure was cotton underwear that would make me lose my mind; I hadn't looked to be sure. I skimmed my fingers around her ribs, groaning when her hips finally rolled over mine.

"Mm, fuck, baby," I growled, breaking from her mouth and lightly tracing my thumbs just under her breasts. "You feel so fucking good, love."

"Don't stop," she breathed, finally relinquishing her hold on my arms and ghosting them up to my shoulders so that she could roll her hips again, this time with so much more force. "I want to feel *you*, not *him*."

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My mouth met hers again, wet and warm, with our tongues swirling in the middle of it all. With one last turn of my head, I moved my hands, cupping both of her breasts at once.

Her breath caught in her throat, causing her to pull away from me with a gasp. She pressed her forehead to mine, her eyes squeezing closed again.

"Oh, hell no," I purred, nipping at her chin lightly. "Me, Bella. You watch this, because you feel amazing."

I flattened my palms over her, smiling when both nipples pebbled up to hard peaks. I skimmed over them, pushing the robe off her shoulders and letting it drop behind her.

We both froze.

"Edward," she whispered, though I could barely hear her.

"I'm right here," I told her, kissing her again, while letting my hands resume their position. "If you don't believe me, feel me."

She exhaled roughly through her nose, but removed her hands from my shoulders, gliding down my arms to my hands, where she cupped her breasts with me. When she finally looked, I could almost see the tension leave her, and her hands shot to my face.

"More," she growled, pressing her forehead to mine, but I needed to move her.

With one swift move, I rolled her onto her back and loomed over her, finally taking a moment to look at her. Really look at her.

"Fuck me," I whispered, shaking my head. "You're so beautiful, Bella."

I leaned onto one elbow, leaving one hand free to continue to touch her. The scar cream *had* to be fucking working, because for the life of me, I could only see the faintest of marks on her. What I did see were perfectly round breasts,

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with rosy nipples that were just fucking *begging* to be kissed.

"More?" I verified with her, before leaning in closer, but I wasn't sure at this point I could be stopped.

"Yes," she squeaked, writhing under me, but it seemed the moment I leaned over her, she relaxed, because my towel was suddenly...gone.

"That's not fair, Bella," I growled, looking up at her through my eyelashes. "We're entering really dangerous ground here. Tell me what *more* is, love," I said a little too harshly, but she only smiled back at me as I bent lower and lower to the nipple that was calling for me to suck it.

I locked my eyes with hers, waiting for her answer, licking my lips. "I want to taste you, baby," I told her, trying to help her. "Can I do that?"

"Yes," she whispered with a nod.

I don't know what I was thinking, if either of us was thinking at all, because as soon as my lips surrounded her peak, we both lost control. Bella arched beautifully off the bed, and she ground her wet heat against my bare thigh.

I switched to her other nipple, twirling my tongue around it just to see her reaction, and it was just as beautiful. Her head fell back, her mahogany curls splayed around her, as she cried out my name, but it was her grip on my hair, holding me to her, that let me know we were... *good*.

"Fuck, Edward," she growled, almost pulling me to her lips by my hair.

"Tell me to stop, love," I begged her; otherwise, I was about to do something we would both regret.

"I can't," she huffed, almost like she was laughing, and when I looked up at her, she was wearing that same fucking pride-filled smile. "I need...fuck, I want..." she sputtered, finally just gripping my hand by the wrist.

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She skimmed my hand down her stomach, my fingertips just barely sneaking under the elastic of her bright pink underwear, and I froze.

"They stay on, but damn it...do something..."

I grinned at her desperation, but more at her determination to overcome all her fears, because she was pulling and tugging at me.

I knelt over her, bracing my hand at her head, while the other traced the edge of her underwear. Just as I slipped under, I hissed when her warm hands wrapped around my already aching, leaking dick.

"Is that the game we're playing, Bella?" I asked her through gritted teeth.

"Together," she panted, nodding fervently.

As soon as my fingers slipped through her warm folds, I was on a mission, because she was so fucking wet. I swirled my middle finger over her clit, and her grip and rhythm on my cock made my eyes roll back into my head.

"One day..." she panted, looking up at me, her hips raising off the bed.

"Tell me," I growled, finally slipping a finger deep within her, my thumb pressing just where she needed it most. "What would you do to me, Bella?"

"Everything," she whined. "I'd lick you, suck you, fuck you, and tease you. I'd want you in me on every surface of wherever we are at the time. I'd sneak in your shower, wake you up, riding you hard...nowhere would be safe, Edward. I'd want you in your car, my car - *definitely* my car - the barn, that bathroom, the sofa, but most of all... Do you have any idea where I want you the most?" she asked me, licking her lips and rubbing her thumb across the head of my dick, making me moan out loud.

"N-no," I sputtered, adding a second finger inside her, and reveling in how tight and wet and warm she was. I couldn't wait to sink balls deep into her.

"Where?"

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"Fuck, if I don't want you in your helicopter, Edward..." she purred, making herself groan at the thought.

"Goddamn," I snarled, my head falling back, because I was damn close to coming. "Please, please say my house..."

"Oh, yeah," she whimpered, looking up at me. "Fuck, baby...so close...with me."

"Wait for me, love. I promise it'll be worth it," I told her, curling my fingers inside of her just right, until she cried out my name again. "Mmhmm, fuck, my name sounds good like that..."

I leaned over her, capturing her mouth with mine for a brief, but deep kiss, nibbling on her bottom lip. "Now, Bella, come for me *now*," I commanded, pressing my own hips into her hand.

Bella shattered with a curse and my name, her walls clenching down onto my fingers, and I buried my face in her neck, feeling myself release all over her stomach. "Fuck, fuck, *fuck*!" I growled, squeezing my eyes closed for a minute, because I was seeing stars.

Bella grabbed the towel I'd had on and cleaned us up, but I didn't want to go far. I pulled her to me, nuzzling her hair and placing random kisses to her forehead.

"Love you," I whispered, still breathing heavily.

"Mhm," she sighed, curling into my side and kissing my neck, but she groaned.

"What?" I asked her, pulling her face back so I could see her. "Did I hurt you?"

"No," she snickered, rolling her now warm chocolate eyes. "We forgot the medicine..."

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I snorted, but nodded, grabbing the tube from the edge of the bed. "Okay, but I think we've crossed another fear off your list," I groaned, when I moved to start what we had originally set out to do, though it turned out infinitely better than I'd imagined. "There's only one more, Bella," I told her, raising an eyebrow at her as I squeezed the cream onto my fingers.

Starting at her thigh, I covered every scar. Her stomach, ribs, even the faded ones on her breasts and sternum. I handed the cream over to her, because I knew that there were more on her hips and below her bellybutton.

She grabbed my hand, squeezing the cream out onto the tips of my fingers. Lifting her underwear, she guided my hand blindly, but there were only three scars covered by the last of her clothing. She looked up at me, capping the tube. I could almost tell what she was thinking.

"Next time, these come off, don't they?" I asked, wincing at her slightly fearful expression as I tugged playfully at her panties.

"Yeah," she sighed, wrapping her arms around my neck. "And when they do," she said, kissing my lips softly, "I want you to make love to me, Edward..."

A/N... Okay then... Bella is definitely getting braver, or she just damn well wants him more than the fears are in control...either way, she's getting there.

So we had some heart to hearts in this chapter...between Aunt Kate and Edward, and Esme and Bella. Not to mention the boys just HAD to tease poor Mickey. And for those of you that have been worried about Mickey's single life, now you understand why I haven't said anything sooner. Obie is simple, but he means well. :)

Now...I need to give you fair warning about the next chapter. It is a tissue warning. In fact the next few chapters will be a rough road. Just keep in mind that I do live for my HEA's so keep telling yourself that. For those of you who like the action...some will be coming. For those of you that like the lemons... this is ME writing, so just have some patience.

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Now...huge thanks go out to JenRar for "cracking the whip," and making me concentrate. To Goober_Lou that reads these and yells at me about tissue warnings and lemons. And to MedusaInNY for her huge help on my blog: [drotuno\(dot\)blogspot\(com\)](mailto:drotuno(dot)blogspot(com)) If you haven't gone over there to at least take a peek, you should. Everything I've written is on there, not to mention pics that go along with this story. You might be interested in seeing what Edward's car and helicopters looked like, and also Bella's car and the tree house they originally met in...

SO...REVIEW for me. Let me know what you're thinking...like: "Holy crap, Bella truly will break Edward off properly when she finally overcomes her fear!" Or "Edward has the patience of a saint!" Or "When will we hear from Daddy C again?" LOL Either way... just let me know what you think. The next post will probably be around Wed or Thur. Most likely Wed...because my schedule seems to like Sundays and Wednesdays the best, and you guys don't seem to be complaining. So until then... Later.

Chapter 17

A/N... Now for those of you that hang out on Twitter with me, you are well aware that this chapter comes with a TISSUE WARNING... there are multiple reasons for that, I'm told. For those of you that don't hang out on Twitter, I urge you to, because I'm constantly giving hints and teasers over there. You can find me under Drotuno.

Now...this chapter is completely FULL of information, ups and downs, and unfortunate incidents. I need to remind you of the rating...M for citrus, foul language, and violence. Speaking of lemons, this was written prior to any "leak" of BD pics and videos, so any resemblance is just a coincidence...and just proof that I had a heart attack earlier this week. O.O However, there is no "headboard"... LMAO

Take a deep breath, this will be a bumpy ride, BB's... just remember I love you all...both my old hat readers and you new ones. :)

CHAPTER 17

~oOo~

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~oOo~

BELLA

I came up out of a nightmare with a gasp and a shudder, looking around the still fairly dark room. Warm, strong arms held me tighter, almost as though they knew I needed their strength, their comfort. I rolled over to look at a still sleeping Edward, trying not to shake my head at his sweet face.

The tenseness, the stress, the constant watching over of everyone he knew and loved faded away when he slept, leaving his face smooth, relaxed, and oh so handsome. I smiled softly, biting my lip as I lightly brushed an errant curl away from his forehead.

I'd meant what I'd said the night before. When I could finally remove the last article of clothing, I wanted Edward. I wanted his love, his body, his soul connected with mine in all ways physically, emotionally, and cosmically possible. I was tired of fears and panic. I was tired of loving him so much and not being able to show him that I was completely his - that despite our unorthodox beginnings, I loved him like I'd loved no other.

Edward had been shocked at first, but he slowly began to nod after my admission. His eyes darkened slightly, but stayed so warm, so sweet as he reached up and tucked my hair behind my ear.

~o~

"You're sure," he verified with raised eyebrows. "'Cause, Bella, I'm in no hurry..."

"Yes, I'm totally sure," I told him. "We feel...so right together, Edward," I whispered, cupping his face once he settled us in under the covers of his bed. "And I'm tired of not feeling like me anymore..."

He smiled, tangling our legs together and pulling me closer. He was still completely naked, and I was still in just my underwear, the medicine having long since been applied to my skin.

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"I'm very tempted to take you up on that, baby," he snickered, kissing my nose, "but I won't go that far until you're absolutely certain it's what you want, what you're ready for, Bella."

"Edward," I whined, feeling slightly rejected, but I knew what he was saying. "You sound like Esme."

He chuckled, kissing my lips soundly, before continuing. "Maybe I do, but see...here's the thing," he whispered against my lips. "I want you. The real you. And I want you comfortable and healed - not just from scars, but from fears - before we go that far." He sighed, looking past me with almost unfocused eyes, and then looked back to me. "I've had one night stands. Hell, some didn't last a whole night, and I'm not proud of it, Bella. W-what I w-want with y-you is...always."

I inhaled sharply, looking up when his sweet stutter caressed my ears. He was looking at me nervously, but I could tell he meant what he was saying, and he had more to say, because he kept going.

"I-I...I want to do this right," he said, and then snorted as he took a look at our position. "Well, okay...as right as we can get." He smiled sweetly when I giggled, but I also nodded, because he was totally making sense. "I don't want to rush, or push, or make any of the same old fucked up mistakes I have before, baby. I don't want to...mess up any progress you've achieved, either, love."

I studied his handsome face, tracing my finger over every inch of it, like I was memorizing every freckle, every eyelash, and every hair on his scruffy chin and jaw.

"How will I know?" I asked, as I gazed at his tattoo, but my voice was barely a whisper, because he was totally right. He was way too important to me to screw this up.

"We'll just...know," he said with a shrug. "We've done damn well so far, right?"

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" Yeah," I said, a grin spreading across my face. "And we don't even know what the hell we're doing."

" Exactly," he chuckled, which resulted in a fit of giggles on my part.

~o~

We'd never joined the rest of the house. We'd stayed in his room, completely shut away from the world and all its fucked up problems. I wasn't even sure it was a conscious decision on either of our parts. We'd just stayed wrapped around each other - sometimes talking, other times kissing - but Edward's touch never stopped. His fingers had traced every scar, mark, or just some spot on my body that he became fascinated with as we spoke or kissed. And it went from strange and shocking, to comforting, to needed, but it was completely on purpose.

There weren't anymore mind blowing orgasms, but there were amazing kisses, soft laughs, and sweet, silly conversations. He'd told me stories from Afghanistan, from growing up, and even a few fun facts about his mom, like the time she tried to get him to take piano lessons, instead of going to baseball camp over one summer. He'd been seven years old, and he'd hidden from her in the house for a whole day. He ended up a pitcher that year, because apparently, she couldn't tell him no, either.

I'd told him about some of my funnier moments as a private investigator, meeting Alice and Makenna for the first time, and hilarious stories about my parents - like the time they just *had* to meet my prom date, and Charlie had slapped a tracking device on the poor boy's car.

There'd been serious conversations, as well.

We'd talked about Jake's cheating, and how betrayed I'd truly felt. It wasn't the act itself; it was Jake's and my father's attitudes afterwards that had hurt the most, and Edward had cursed at the story. He'd said that if he ever got the chance to sit down with Charlie again to talk to him about the relationship that had developed between us after he'd rescued me from the basement, he was

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going to tell him - in detail - just what a "fucking jackass thing that was to do to his own daughter."

Edward had explained the mistake he'd made with his high school girlfriend, Dana Whitman. Apparently, he'd known for some time that he was going to be shipped overseas right after graduation, and he didn't tell her. He kept putting it off, because he knew that she'd want to try the long distance thing. It wasn't that he didn't want to email or write letters; it was the possibility that he might not ever come home, and he'd cared about her enough to let her go. So with a steeled expression and a forceful tone, he broke up with her - rather harshly, in my opinion, and I told him so. He said mean things, thinking it would make the break up easier, but it had only shattered her. After that, he'd sworn off long term relationships.

We'd also talked about our moms, laughing at what Kate had told him about our mothers getting along. We'd tried to imagine two more different women, but at the same time, roundly pregnant, comparing dreams and color schemes. And we'd wondered - even if it was just a silly moment - what it would have been like had they remained friends...and had they *lived*. That last thought had made us pull each other closer.

Just before we'd drifted off to sleep, we'd talked about our jobs, our future - if one was possible. Edward had said that he'd already been contemplating leaving his father's crew for the last few months. I'd explained the things I loved about my job - reuniting loved ones, finding lost kids. And I'd told him I hated watching men cheat on their wives, running into dead ends when I was searching for someone, and greedy lawyers.

The future was something that was so fragile at the moment that I could barely give it the attention that it deserved, and as the sun slowly rose, brightening the bedroom just a little more with every passing minute, I snuggled into Edward's side, just to be able to hold onto him longer. I buried my face in the crook of his neck, breathing deeply the scent that just made him irresistible to me, like a warm, sunny day outside, or a fresh piece of cut lumber. I wasn't sure which of those came closer.

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Warm hands drifted down my back to my ass, pulling me in against Edward's naked body, and I grinned against his neck.

"Spend the day with me," he commanded, using a sleep-husky voice and a tone that meant there was no room for arguing.

"Kay," I sighed, placing an open mouth kiss to his Adam's apple. "What are we doing?"

"You'll see," he rumbled, burying his nose into my hair and breathing deep.

"God, you always smell so fucking good," he growled, suddenly rolling us over so that his body pressed against mine in all the right places.

"Good morning to you, too," I chuckled, slipping my hands down his strong back, absolutely reveling in the fact that he didn't have a stitch on. A naked Edward was fantastic.

He smiled crookedly, before leaning in to nuzzle my neck. "Oh yeah... Mornin'," he murmured with a sleep raspy voice against my skin, giving me chills from head to toe.

Our bodies started taking over, grinding and pressing against each other, but it was Edward's words that just about killed me.

"One day," he growled, skirting his hand down my side to my thigh, so he could hitch it up around his waist. "One day, we'll wake up like this, and I'll fuck you hard before the sun rises."

It seemed Edward was horny first thing in the morning - something I'd missed out on. We didn't usually wake up together. And damn, if it wasn't hot.

"I want you wet for me *all* day long," he crooned, grinding his hips just right and hitting me in the spot that made me cry out his name. "I want your first thoughts to be about me. I want you to go through your day still feeling the soreness *I* left you with. Every step you take, every time you sit down, it's me that you still feel, Bella."

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My eyes rolled into the back of my head, because that sounded like a fantastic fucking idea. My hands grabbed at his shoulder and wound themselves into his hair, pulling him closer.

"Fuck, Edward," I hissed against the skin of his shoulder, dragging my teeth over his flesh.

"That's the idea, love," he purred with a deep chuckle. "I love waking up with you..."

"S-shit," I sputtered, one of my hands leaving his shoulder to grip his ass. "Right there..."

"Here?" he asked, grinding against me perfectly, bracing his arms on either side of my head in order to pull back. "Tell me you want to come, baby."

"Yes," I breathed, wrapping my legs around him, my hips meeting the rhythm he was setting. I gripped his muscular ass, pulling him against me, to the point I was shaking.

Using long, pressing strokes, he worked my body, his mouth turned up into a deadly sexy half smile. I was so wet, and he was so hard, that it felt like the thin fabric of my underwear wasn't even there. I could almost feel every inch of him slipping against me. Every muscle he had flexed and rolled underneath his smooth skin. His biceps and forearms were tense, his jaw was so tight that it was like a rock under my lips, and his pecs bulged as he moved.

My climax hit me suddenly and almost silently, the air catching in my throat as my head fell back against my pillows, and I was holding Edward so tightly, he fell against me. His full weight felt so good as I felt him spill onto my stomach.

"I love you," I panted against his neck, as he placed slow, open mouthed kisses to my shoulder.

"Love you, too," he snickered, groaning when there was a timid knock on the door. "What?" he growled, lifting his head to glare in the direction of the

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offending sound.

"Sorry, Edward," Alice's timid voice echoed through the door. "Your father sent a message, and you'll both want to hear it."

"Oh." He sighed, running a hand through his hair. "We'll be out in a minute, Alice," he said, his voice taking on a softer tone that I noticed he used with her.

"Sure, sure, sure," she chuckled.

I groaned, shaking my head. "Every message he sends scares me..."

Edward laughed softly, kissing my lips, before rolling off of me. "Just get cleaned up," he chuckled. "And then you're spending the day with me."

"Okay," I laughed, shoving at him, before getting up from the bed. "Of course I'll spend the day with you...but I get first shower!" I told him, gesturing to my stomach, where the results of our amorous morning still lingered.

He snickered, but his eyes were dark as he took in my whole body, his tongue dragging across his bottom lip. "Can't say that I'm sorry about that, love," he said huskily, with a big shit-eating grin, shrugging one shoulder as he watched my every step towards the bathroom.

I turned at the bathroom doorway, raising an eyebrow at him. "One day, Edward. Just...one day..."

I still heard his laugh when the bathroom door was closed behind me.

~oOo~

EDWARD

We joined the dining room that seemed way too somber, way too on edge for my liking. Kate and Esme were leaning over Alice as she sat at the head of the long table, whispering. Alec was cooking, but kept a narrowed eye on the

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situation. Jasper and Emmett looked first to Bella, and then to me, their expressions grim. Everyone else was eating, not saying much at all. The only person I didn't see was Sam.

Rose looked up at Bella, her nose wrinkling as she said, "It's about Charlie..."

"Sit, sit, sit," Alice chanted, pointing to the table. "I'll read it to you."

Alec set two plates in front of us, his eyes dark. "The deep shit starts now," he sighed.

"Where's Sam?" I asked, looking around the room.

"Sam's gone to be with your father, kid." He patted my shoulder, but he gave Bella a sad smile. "Hear Alice out, and then I'll explain."

"Go ahead, Ali," Bella sighed, looking more worried than I'd seen her in some time. "What'd he say?"

Alice cleared her throat, and then read my father's email.

Okay, guys. I have good news and bad news, and news that falls somewhere in between.

The good news is that King's trial starts today. The last two days, they've been picking the jury, omitting evidence, and giving up their lists of witnesses - Charlie included. Also good news - I've been "hired" as Charlie's personal guard, so I will be with him every step of the way. Benny got it cleared two days ago.

The bad news is, and Bella, I'm sorry to have to tell you this way... the last safe house was found. They used a maintenance man to get into the room, and at the time, there were only two Feds with Jake and Charlie.

"Shit," Bella gasped, looking at me, and then back to Alice, who looked like she'd rather be reading anything but what she was reading at that moment.

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I reached out and took her hand, turning to Alice. "Keep going."

She nodded and continued on.

Bella, Jake's been shot. Your father is fine , but Jake has been moved to the military base just outside of Seattle, where the last I heard, he was in critical condition. Sweetie, I want you to know, the Feds in the room said he took the bullet for your father. He kept his promise to you. I'm so sorry. I will do my best to get regular updates, and Benny has promised to send them to Alice as soon as he hears something.

"Easy, darlin'," Jasper whispered, looking up to me when Bella let out a sob.

"Come here," I sighed, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and pressing my lips to her ear. "I'm sorry, love," I whispered for her ears only. "Jake's strong. He's got to pull through."

I had to believe what I was saying. I knew she held no feelings for Jake, but they did share a lifetime of friendship, not to mention how close of a call it was that it could have been her father.

"Bells," Rose said, sitting beside us, "Jake did what you asked him to, and he'll fight it out. But you should hear the rest of this."

Bella pulled her head from my shoulder and wiped her tears from her face. With a nod, she said, "I know, but of all the people to get hurt, he was the one fucking person that wasn't involved in anything. He just...worked for my dad."

"That's true," Rose agreed. "However, he did love Charlie, and as we all know...lovin' Charlie isn't easy."

Bella snorted, rolling her eyes. She took a deep breath. "Go on, Ali. I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Alice and I muttered at the same time.

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I know you'll be curious as to how the trial is going, so Benny will run a live feed of it for you. You should be able to catch it later this afternoon. He'll send Alice the details.

Edward, I'm asking you guys to stay put, if it's possible. I think you're safest right there. Since the "accident" in Trinity, King's men have scattered. All that remains is Miller, who has his own small group, but he's not as strong as he once was. But I will warn you...the loss of James has shaken King to his core. He's livid, and will seek revenge if he finds out that it wasn't an accident, which I'm sure he's already considering. He's well aware of my connections, but there's not much he can do at the moment, because the media spotlight on his trial is massive, not to mention I've been acting CEO at TT for the last few weeks. That alone is newsworthy, as well. But that won't stop him from looking for you.

Son, we've discussed what is to happen before all of this is over. I still want it done. The job isn't finished until we do what we set out to do. And if you don't remember, think back to the night we took Bella. You may set up a plan with everyone, but only carry it out once the trial is over. I. Want. Them. All.

Alice looked up at me, and then I realized that no one in the room knew what my father spoke of - only myself. Bella had been asleep in my arms when we'd decided to kill not only Miller, but King, as well. I looked around the table at my crew, who looked confused, but ready and willing. I glanced up at Alec, and he was wearing a smug smile, because he knew my father well. He probably had a pretty good idea what had been decided, but it was Bella that spoke.

"You're to kill King and Miller, aren't you?" she asked softly, her eyes still a soft brown from her tears a few minutes ago.

I studied her face, and then turned to Jasper, who was relaxed as always. "I do believe that is the plan, Bells," he snorted, but locked his eyes with mine.

"That's a prison hit."

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"And that's where Sam has gone," Alec added, pushing away from kitchen counter. "Alice, finish his letter, and then we'll talk about King's unfortunate demise..."

Billy Black has taken leave, and as far as I know, Benny isn't telling him anything when it comes to his son, because we're afraid if he knew, he could do something stupid. I'm still trying to work it out as to who is paying him, and in turn, who he's paying off. He's scared shitless, and he hasn't really left town, but he'd become so distracted at the office that he took time off.

Peter Savage, the one you told me to check into, is still monitoring everything when it comes to your cell phones. Do not use them. He and his brother Paul are friends with Riley Miller, and they will tell him immediately. They both are very loyal to him, and a part of that small group I mentioned earlier.

Last thing, Bella. I have actually seen Charlie, and he wanted me to get a message to you. He said to tell you that you know what to do if something happens to him. He's worried that once the trial starts and he's truly out in the open, he could be hit. I hope that isn't the case, and I will do my best to keep him safe.

Once the trial starts this afternoon, I will be out of contact. Esme, Edward...you both know what to do and how to handle this. Kate, thank you for your hospitality, and I hope my son and my crew aren't driving you crazy. And Alec...I'd like you to stick around, just in case Edward needs an extra man. And to Bella and the girls...I think it's best to just hang tight with us just a little longer.

I'll be in touch as soon as I'm able.

C.

The room was dead silent when Alice finished, and I realized they were all waiting for me. I looked up to Alec first.

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"Tell me about Sam," I said, still holding onto Bella's hand, rubbing a thumb across her knuckles, because despite how calm she was on the outside from all of this information, on the inside, she was shaking.

Alec nodded, took a deep breath, and folded his arms across his chest. "Benny sent a message early this morning to Alice. He said that he needed a man that could fit into a prison environment."

"Sam wanted the whys and what fors, so I told him," Esme chimed in. "When he heard everything, he packed up, telling us to get a message back to Benny. They 'arrested' him in Juneau an hour ago."

"He's our hit on King?" I verified, raising an eyebrow at Alec.

"Well, we're getting him in position to do so," he answered with a shrug. "The call comes from you and Carlisle. While King's trial is underway, they keep him in a separate cell from everyone else, but as soon as it's over, he'll be moved back into general population until sentencing." He paused for a moment, and looked to Bella. "He told me to tell you that...he'd 'take care of it, Miss Bella.' He was pretty upset with what you've gone through. He knew it was something, but he didn't know what. Once he heard about Miller, he packed his shit up."

Bella's nose wrinkled, but a small smile curled her lips, because she liked the big, scary man. "Poor Sam..."

I chuckled, squeezing her hand. "Poor Sam...he's a hitman, Bella. This is what he does. He infiltrates unusual places and waits until the perfect time. I've heard stories from my dad that Sam even became a prisoner of war in Vietnam, just to be able to get inside the compound - which is now rubble, mind you."

Her eyebrows rose up, but she didn't say anything.

"His looks are perfect for that," Jasper mused, shrugging one shoulder. "He's so damn big and mean looking, no one will touch him in jail."

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"Right," Alec snorted. "Anyway...I guess if you want to talk plan, we can."

I looked to Bella, who looked almost sick. I turned back to Alice. "What time will the feed start?"

"Not until after lunch," she said, typing away on her keyboard. "Benny says he'll go live around two."

"Good," I huffed, standing up. I offered Bella my hand. "Let's go."

She took my hand, but looked up at me curiously. "Edward..."

"We'll be back in time for the trial, but we're getting out of here," I told her, my voice harsher than I'd have liked, but I couldn't help it. I needed her out of that room, and were things I needed to tell her.

"Edward, don't you think we should..." Jasper started, but stopped when I glared at him.

"No!" I growled, pulling Bella out of her chair gently. "We'll talk about anything you want when we fucking get back, but we're out of here for a few hours."

"Edward," Kate called, just as I reached the screen porch.

I sighed, waiting for her to stop us, but she didn't.

"I told Tom to get Samson ready, too," she said with a smirk. "He needs a run."

I blinked, realizing at that moment that nothing slipped past her.

"Kay, Aunt Kate," I muttered, leading Bella out the door.

We got about halfway between the house and the barn, before Bella tugged my hand.

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"Edward, wait..." she started, pulling us to a stop.

"Bella, as much as I love it when you fight with me...just not now, okay?" I chuckled, kissing her lips to stop her next words. "Humor me, please."

"Fine," she sighed, and let me walk her into the barn.

We were greeted by Tom, who gave us a big smile. "Hey, guys. They're both ready for you," he said, gesturing to the other open door of the stables.

Standing there proudly was Goliath, black as the ace of spades and sixteen hands tall. He was a huge stallion, and the meanest horse on the planet, until you got to know him. He also was the offspring of the first horse I'd ever ridden - Cain.

Yes, Aunt Kate had a Biblical theme when it came to the naming of her horses, because the two mares she had were named Ruth and Mary.

Samson stood next to Goliath, also tall, also proud, but the polar opposite in personality and looks. He was a Palomino, light tan, with a long blond mane and tail. He was calm, sweet, and an easy ride.

Both were saddled up and ready to ride, and from the way that Goliath was pawing at the ground, he was ready to go.

"Thanks, Tom," I told him.

"Sure, no biggie. Listen, we're going on the supply run, and I believe Esme is going with us. Do you think that you can handle putting them away yourselves?" he asked, looking between the two of us.

"Yeah," Bella said dreamily, a smile on her face as she let both horses nuzzle her face. "Hello, boys," she crooned at them.

I chuckled, turning to Tom. "Yeah, we got it. Thanks again."

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"Not a problem. We'll see you later," he called over his shoulder as he headed out of the barn.

"Come on, baby," I sighed, gripping her waist and lifting her to Samson's saddle. "Up you get."

I turned to Goliath, who was giving me the once over that he always gave me, while shoving me with his huge head. "You gonna give me shit again, big guy? Or can we just get the show on the road?" I asked him, taking hold of his reins.

Bella giggled, because Goliath snorted long and hard at me, bobbing his head. "You two know each other, apparently."

"We've had many a battle of wills, haven't we?" I asked the horse, rubbing his nose, patting his neck, and then swinging up onto his back. I turned back to Bella. "You ready?" I asked, and she nodded, adjusting her stirrups. "Good, we'll run them hard. That will calm them down for the walk back."

"Got it," she said with a grin.

"I want to show you something," I told her. "Just follow me."

It wasn't a race, though Goliath pulled ahead with his usual force and speed. I followed the trails that out-skirted the property, well into part of the woods. There was a specific spot I wanted to show Bella; a place that meant something to me.

It was turning out to be a fairly sunny day, but it was blocked as soon as the canopy of trees covered over us. The trail was just barely wide enough for the horses single file. In the quiet of the trees, the only sounds that could be heard were the pounding of Goliath's and Samson's pounding footfalls and their heavy snorts. After a good few minutes of running, I slowed down, because the end of trail was coming up. It seemed like Goliath knew where I was going, because he took the almost covered up split at the end.

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The trail I took was off the normal path. It turned away from the fence and went deeper into the woods, but it opened up into a small clearing. I pulled Goliath to a halt, patting his neck softly, before sliding to the soft grass.

"Wow, this is... *so* beautiful," Bella whispered, hopping down from Samson and rubbing the end of his nose as she gazed around.

I smiled and nodded, reaching for her hand. "Let him go, baby. They'll graze for a few."

She dropped the reins, still looking around. "What is this place, Edward?"

"A place my mom and I used to come," I murmured, leading her to the far edge of the clearing. "I want to show you something. Come here." I pointed to a low branch of a large tree. "My mother liked the sparrows around here..."

"Did you..." she started, walking around the tree. "You built a birdhouse for her?"

"I d-did," I sighed. "We came here after my mother received her diagnosis. She wanted to see Kate, and my dad's retirement hadn't come through yet. She was scared." I took a deep breath. "She...she tried to be strong, but I could see how s-scared she was.

"When she finally told me what was going on, she took me here," I continued, shoving my hands in my pockets. "While we were here, she told me a story about sparrows...some Native American legend on how the leaves fell from trees in the winter. A sparrow had been injured and couldn't fly south for the winter, but sent his family on. He begged the oak tree, the maple...but neither would let him nest in them for protection from the cold. So he finally went to the pine, the lowliest of trees, and the pine let him stay. And he healed, so that by the time the warmer weather came, his family returned to find him all better. As a result of all of that, the sparrow told the other trees they would lose their leaves every winter, while the pine remained green."

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I smiled, because I knew that my mother told the story better, but I shrugged, taking a deep breath. "I'd asked what she meant, because...fuck, she never told a story without a meaning... She told me I needed to be strong and brave, because she was sick. She told me that she loved me more than anything, that she'd fight the cancer, but that if something were to happen to her...she'd always watch me from the pine trees, 'cause they're so tall...and she'd have the sparrows to keep her company."

My voice caught in my throat, and I shook my head. I'd never told anyone about that conversation - not even my dad. Fuck, I'd been eleven going on twelve...what the hell was a kid supposed to think about that shit?

"S-so I b-built th-those," I huffed, pointing to a few houses that hung in the lowest branches. Hell, you could almost see that as the taller I got, the higher I hung them, and I'd hung one every time I'd visited here until I'd graduated from military school.

A small warm hand slipped into mine, inside my pocket, and I looked down to see a warm eyed, concerned Bella staring back at me. "They're really pretty, you know. And they're working..." she said softly, pointing to the closest one as a little bird flitted in and out of it.

I loved her so much at that moment, I could barely breathe. She didn't apologize or have pity. She didn't even ask a question. She just listened, and I knew she cared, but she just didn't have to say it.

I nodded, smiling at the sight, but I looked back at her. "I'm sorry about Jake."

"Me, too." She grimaced. "I hope he's okay."

"What did my dad mean? About Jake keeping his promise?"

"The last conversation I had with them..." She sighed, plucking a pine cone off of a branch as we walked aimlessly around the clearing. "I made them both swear to do the right thing for once. I made Jake promise me - because it was the least he could do to make up for...well, us - to watch over Charlie."

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Bella found a spot she liked and sat down, patting the grass in front of her, and I sat facing her. We both looked up when Samson and Goliath wandered by, barely giving us a second glance; they were just happy to be out of their stalls.

"I want to help you," she whispered, picking up my hand and playing with my fingers. "When the time comes for you to take out Miller...I *need* to help you."

I frowned, looking out over the clearing. "I don't know, love. It's a hit. Plain and simple. If it's done like we've planned hits before, it'll be after the dust settles. It will be a hunt, a stalk, and a kill."

"Exactly," she sneered, and my head snapped around to look at her.

Her eyes were angry and almost black, her hands shaking slightly, but her bottom lip trembled. I couldn't help but pull her to my lap. She hugged me tightly as I wrapped as much of myself around her as I could.

"Please?" she whispered, pulling back to look at my face. She played with the front of my shirt, saying, "I need to end it. He doesn't control me, but no woman should ever go through what I did. He's a monster, Edward."

"I know, and his days are numbered, Bella. I promise you," I growled, shaking my head to clear it of the memory of how I'd found the beautiful woman in my arms.

"And King?" she asked, tilting her head at me.

I reached up and tucked her hair behind her ear. "That will be out of my hands, once the command is sent. Sam will play inmate...most likely shank him on the inside. It will be the easier of the two, in all honesty. Benny will fake Sam's transfer to another facility, and they'll release him. We've worked with the Feds like that for a long time - or at least, my father has."

"I'm scared, Edward," she sighed, shaking her head and looking around. "I'm scared for my dad. I know he's been...a poor parental figure..."

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"But he's still your dad," I finished for her. "I understand, love."

"Yeah," she said, taking a deep breath and letting it out. "I'm scared for Carlisle, too. This brings them out in the open. Anything could happen...walking in the courthouse, driving to it, or leaving it..."

"My dad is acting as a guard for the Feds, which means he'll be armed at all times, Bella," I told her. "He'll be by your dad's side every step. They've been friends forever...remember? Pet dinosaurs and all..." I grinned at her giggle.

"Oh, shit," she gasped, putting a hand to her stomach as she laughed. "I totally forgot about that. That was the only time we'd met," she sighed, but her eyes were warm and sweet. "Oh, I was crushing on you hard by the end of the day..."

"Yeah?" I chuckled, feeling a grin break out over my face. "Even with the stutter?"

"Oh, *because* of it," she groaned, her brow wrinkling as she cupped my face with both hands. "God, you were so freakin' *cute*! And shy..."

"I was." I chuckled, shaking my head, and I couldn't help but lean in to kiss her.

I kissed her long and deep, moaning when her tongue swept across my bottom lip, and I let her take control. She leaned over me, standing up on her knees, which were on either side of my thighs. Strong, little fingers scraped along my scalp as Bella slipped them into my hair.

As she leaned into me, I couldn't help but let my hands wander, loving that there weren't many boundaries left. Over the clothes was no problem, so with strong grips, I cupped her ass over her jeans, reveling in the feel of her.

And fuck me, if I didn't want her! I wanted to take her up on her offer from the night before, wanted to make love to her, until neither of us could see straight. I wanted to bury myself inside of her, until everything around us faded away.

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But I couldn't push her, couldn't take advantage of a girl that had been through the deepest pits of hell, who'd had her power of choice taken away. When I finally *was* lucky enough to make love to the girl in my arms, it would be her choice, her command - and only when she was absolutely sure.

But not in the middle of the woods, and not when we needed to be back at the house to see about King's trial. I knew she wanted to at least catch a glimpse of her father.

I pulled away from her, pressing my forehead to hers. We were both breathing heavily as I ran my fingers through her hair.

"I love you so fucking much," she breathed against my lips.

"You're the m-most important th-thing that's ever happened to m-me," I sputtered, not even bothering to feel embarrassed about it anymore, because she never mentioned it.

We both looked up into the limbs of the trees when a sweet chirping caught our attention. I watched Bella smile softly at two little sparrows tumbling around and over each other to get into one of my birdhouses. Little wings fluttered, beaks were open, and they'd fall, catch themselves, only to fly back up to the perch.

"I'm glad your mom talked to you before she died," Bella whispered. "You have something to cling to...something in your heart that told you she cared enough to watch over you after she was gone."

I watched as an old sadness crept over her features, her eyes never leaving the tiny birds in the nest. "You...you found your mother, didn't you?" I guessed, narrowing my eyes as she nodded slowly, still not looking at me.

"Yeah," she sighed, biting that perfect bottom lip of hers.

She'd never said it, but I could see it now. I put together everything she'd ever said about her mom - how she'd died at home, how Charlie had immediately

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turned Renee's bedroom into something else, probably to try to clean Bella's memory, and how she clung to all things good about her mother, never the bad.

"Jesus, baby, you were just a little kid," I whispered, cupping her face and making her look at me as she shrugged one shoulder.

"We'd stayed up late the night before, watching a movie as she helped me with some science project for school...whales, or dolphins, or some shit," she muttered, looking down at her hands between our stomachs. "I'd woken up the next morning, wanting to add one more thing to it before school, and it was in her room..." She wrinkled her nose. "She'd never said anything...like goodbye or that she was leaving or anything... But when I went into her room, she was...laying funny. There was a bottle of Jack Daniels on her nightstand, along with a spilled bottle of pills. She'd started drinking at night a few months prior - she said it helped her sleep - but the pills were new."

I flinched, thinking Bella had only been eight years old - a *baby*, for Christ's sake!

"Didn't she leave a note?" I asked, but my girl only shook her head.

"I screamed, but there wasn't anyone at home but me," she whispered, her brow wrinkled, but it was the childlike heartbreak all over her beautiful face that shattered my heart for her. "I ran out of the house, because I'd been told to run to Mrs. Kyle's house next door in emergencies...and she called Charlie.

"I remember her being sad," she sighed, finally meeting my gaze. "She tried to not show it around me, but I saw it..." She shrugged again, smiling a sad smile - a testament that she had spent her whole life trying to understand it, but accepting it nonetheless.

I nodded, running my hand over her head and down her back over and over, but she looked back up at the little sparrows that had calmed down with their fighting, or mating, or whatever they'd been doing.

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Without taking her eyes from them, she whispered, "I hope they see us - our moms." She turned back to face me, the most beautiful of smiles slowly curling the corners of her mouth. "I hope they see that their kids love each other. My mom would love that..."

I grinned, kissing her lips roughly. "Mine, too, love."

"We should head back," she sighed, kissing my cheek. "I want to see Charlie."

"Okay," I said with a nod, picking her up by the waist and setting her on her feet.

She took my hands, pulling me up and wrapping her arms around me once I was standing. "Thank you for bringing me here."

"I've never told anyone about this place," I murmured, placing a kiss to the top of her head.

She pulled back, nodded, and smiled warmly. "Well, then, I feel honored."

~oOo~

BELLA

"Bella! It's starting!" Rose called from the kitchen.

"Hang on," Esme chuckled, shaking her head. "Let's get this shot in you first. All the trouble I went to get it, you're gonna take it."

She'd just gotten back from the supply run with Tom and Obie. While the girls put everything away, Esme had dragged me into her room to take care of my birth control shot.

"Was it a pain? Really?" I asked her, smirking at her chuckle.

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She swabbed an alcohol soaked cotton ball over my arm, readying the syringe. She plunged it in without ceremony, saying, "No, but I did have to go to a hospital for some more supplies."

"You posed as an employee, didn't you?" I laughed, still unable to piece together my former neighbor with the woman in front of me, because she was calm in the most frantic of situations.

"Ask me no questions, and I'll tell you no lies," she sang, tugging my sleeve back down and winking at my laugh. "You're all set, pretty girl. Don't do anything I wouldn't do..."

"Esme!" I gasped, breaking into a laugh at her innocent expression and rubbing my arm.

"Bella!" she mimicked back at me. "Let's go see about this trial, shall we?"

I knew she was worried about Carlisle just as much as I was. We'd talked about how we wanted all of this shit over and done with. She told me that Carlisle had promised her time, once we were in the clear. They had talked about moving in together in Carlisle's home in Forks. When she asked about mine and Edward's future together, I didn't have an answer for her. It was a subject we'd talked *around*, not *about*. I did tell her that we would figure something out.

We walked into the large living room, where Alice had hooked her laptop to the flatscreen television. I sat down hard next to Edward, who was watching Alice with an amused expression on his face.

"Is there anything she can't hook up?" he whispered conspiratorially in my ear.

"Um...I'm pretty sure that's a no," I chuckled, looking over at him. "What she doesn't know...she finds the answer, and never forgets it."

He chuckled, looking back over at her. "I heard she was arrested at twelve..."

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I grinned. "I have *no* idea where the money is, so don't ask," I laughed softly. "There's a part of me that thinks it's still out there, because I've never seen her...want for anything."

I was well aware of Alice's history. At twelve, she'd hit the NYSE with a virus so fierce and so big that two and a half million dollars had disappeared. They'd taken her in, questioned her over and over, but she played innocent, like she didn't know the strength of her own programming. The money had never been recovered. And it was that history that got her kicked out of the NASA program. She'd applied, but they discovered her background and asked her to leave, afraid of her mental stability. She was stable, just...brilliant beyond comprehension.

"That fucking rocks," he snorted, looking up at her. "I bet it's in some Swiss bank account, all hidden and shit..."

"Maybe, but with her, who knows?" I sighed, looking at my little genius friend hook wires and speakers up, pulling up a window on her laptop.

"Okay, okay, okay!" she sang in her usual three times manner. "It's starting soon!"

I took a deep breath, sitting on the edge of the sofa as everyone else filed into the room. Edward's touch never left my back, as we waited for Benny to send the feed through.

"It's gonna take a minute," Alice explained, pacing a little in front of the computer. "He's got to bounce it off a few different satellites, before rerouting it through Dubai, Prague, and Quebec. He's keeping our IP address from being tracked that way."

I sighed, rolling my eyes at her and shaking my head. "Ali...not a word of that made any sense...just tell us when he sends it, yeah?"

"Yeah, okay," she sighed, waving me away. "It's coming in now..."

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Everyone's chuckles at my pixie little friend quieted down, and the room became completely silent. The flatscreen went black for a moment, and then I could see as it split up into four sections. Benny wasn't just showing us the trial; he was showing us the entire courthouse. Somehow - though I'm sure Alice could've tried to explain how he did it - he had tapped into the security system.

The place was a media circus, from what I could see in the camera that faced the steps up to the doors. Cars pulled up to the curb, and a parade of people walked up the steps, disappearing inside the front. Three large, black SUVs stopped, and I swallowed as a swarm of men got out of them. But it was the sight of Carlisle's tall, lean form stepping out of the the back of the middle car that caught my attention, because he stood straight, his eyes and head almost on a swivel as he waited for my dad to follow him.

Charlie looked like he'd aged a hundred years since I'd seen him last. He looked weary, thinner, and worse for wear, because he had a few bruises that were healing on his face, which I could only assume were from the last time King's men had located him. He was wearing a navy blue suit, white dress shirt, and a red tie. He was surrounded by agents, who walked up the steps with him, ignoring the reporters' questions on the way by.

"Damn, he looks so tired," Rose sighed, looking over at me. "Just...exhausted."

"I know," I agreed with a grimace, taking a deep breath and leaning into Edward side.

Next, our attention was drawn to the panel that was the courtroom itself, and it looked like something from a movie - all wood, the jury on the left, the tables placed in front of the tall judge's bench, and everyone standing when the judge himself took his seat.

It was then that I finally saw King at the defense table. He looked smug, though thinner than the last time I'd seen him. He was dressed impeccably, in what looked like a designer suit, as he leaned forward towards his lawyers. They whispered furiously at him, and he nodded at whatever they were telling

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him.

Opening statements were made, the prosecution stating they had enough evidence against King to put him away for not only for the weapons charges, but a whole bunch of charges, including fraud and attempted murder. They were also trying to get him for the purchase and/or sale of unregistered weapons.

I don't know how long we watched a parade of witnesses led to the stand, sworn in, and questioned. It was everyone from King's maid, to his driver, his personal assistant at his office - all who had signed confidentiality agreements, because they "never saw Royce King do anything illegal." Jasper muttered something about them being "scared shitless."

Then the prosecution finally called my dad to the stand. The defense asked for a recess, which was granted by the judge. When he called for a half hour break, Edward tugged me up from the sofa.

"Come with me," he ordered, taking my hand and leading me from the room. "You need to eat," he commanded as he pulled out a stool at the kitchen counter. "You haven't eaten since breakfast, baby," he whispered against the top of my head.

"Edward," I whined, gesturing towards the TV room, but when he turned around at the stove wearing a dangerously raised eyebrow, I shut up.

"It's just soup, and you'll be finished before they come back, love," he stated, not giving me a chance to argue.

He set the bowl of a thick, savory smelling soup in front of me, along with fresh bread, leaning against the counter with folded arms as I took my first bite, and smiling when I hummed with the flavors that exploded in my mouth.

"Did you make this?" I asked, taking a ridiculously large piece of bread and dunking it in the bowl.

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"Yes," he laughed, clearly happy that I liked his cooking, though if I were to be honest, there wasn't much of anything that he made that wasn't just amazingly delicious.

"I want another bowl!" Alice chimed, bouncing into the kitchen.

"Fine. Sit, shorty," he chuckled, shaking his head and turning to pour her another bowl. "I don't know where you put it, Alice..." he mumbled, grinning at her giggle as she clambered up on the stool next to mine.

"She has the metabolism of a hummingbird," I snorted, taking a big bite of bread, and then a spoonful of soup.

Edward chuckled, looking up when we were joined by Makenna, Mickey, and Rose. "Ladies?" he asked, gesturing to me and Alice digging in without shame.

They all told him yes, taking seats at the counter.

"You should open a diner," I teased him when he set three more bowls of soup down.

"Not a chance," he snorted. "I don't exactly have *people* skills, Bella."

We all laughed, leaning onto each other, because it was truth. He was one way with those he knew, those he cared for, but he would probably shoot a complaining customer, and there was no telling what he'd do to some poor fool that tried to rob him. He chuckled with us, shooting a wink my way.

All of our laughter came to a stop when Edward's face completely darkened, looking towards the doorway of the living room. We all turned to see a pale Alec, a slack mouthed Jasper, but it was the sound of cursing from Esme that caused us all to really just freeze.

"What?" I asked, looking from Alec to Jasper, neither one looking anywhere but at Edward. "Jasper?" I asked, suddenly feeling a sense of dread descend on me.

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I slipped off the stool at the same time that Alice did, both of us starting for the living room.

"Bells, wait," Jasper said, catching me before I could go on in, but he looked up at Edward, who was right behind me. "I don't know what happened, Eddie," he breathed, looking pale and nervous, not the usual laid back attitude he usually carried.

"Well, fucking spill it, Jazz!" Edward snapped, glaring at Jasper, and then at Alec. "What?"

Alec took a deep breath, shaking his head. "They were coming back from recess, and we were just about to call for you, but instead, the judge called an end to the day - something about King not feeling well. Your fathers... Edward, it was a fucking hit," he said incredulously.

"What?" Edward and I growled, finally shoving past everyone to see.

Esme was a mess in front of the TV, and Kate and Emmett were doing their best to calm her down. They'd switched off the live feed and turned on the news.

I froze in front of the TV as a video played over and over. My father, Carlisle, and two other Feds were exiting the New York courthouse, when a man posing as the press stepped into their path, holding a gun. Carlisle reacted instantly, trying to block Charlie, but it was no use. The man pulled the trigger, and in slow motion, it seemed, the bullet traveled right through Carlisle's upper right shoulder, straight through into Charlie's chest. With one more pull of the trigger, another one clearly hit my father in the head.

"Dad," I whispered, falling to my knees as they played it over and over. "No, Daddy..."

Tears filled my vision, and I felt Rose's and Edward's hands on me. I had no idea what the reporters were saying, because I'd suddenly turned deaf. All I could do was watch, as over and over - on some fucked up loop from hell - the

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last member of my family collapse to the ground in a heap, as Carlisle still covered him and the other two Federal agents tackled the shooter to the concrete steps.

"Turn it the fuck off now!" Edward snarled, kneeling in front of me and gathering me into his arms. "Alice...I want an update from Cheney ASAP," he told her, and I heard her move instantly. He lifted me up off of the floor, whispering in my ear. "I'm sorry, baby. I'm so, so sorry."

"They got to him," I sobbed into his neck. "They still fucking got to them both, Edward."

"Shh, Bella," he soothed, rubbing my back.

"Edward, he's already sent a message," Alice called out from somewhere behind us, but I knew her well enough to know that the news wasn't good.

"Tell me!" he growled.

"He said that Carlisle is fine, the wound was a through-and-through. He...he...he said that Charlie is a...that he's a t-tot..."

"Total loss," Edward muttered sadly with her. "Fuck," he sighed, pulling me closer as my tears started anew. "Baby, I'm sorry."

I had no idea how long he held me, and I had no clue whatsoever when he left the living room, carrying me to his room, but at some point, I must've cried myself to sleep against his shoulder. I squeezed my eyes closed tighter, before opening them. My head hurt, my eyes felt like there was sand in them, and I was confused as to where we were.

I sat up, looking around. We were in the chair in Edward's suite, but I was met with warm, green, sad eyes.

"Hey," he whispered, cupping my face, his thumb caressing my cheek.

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"He's gone, isn't he?"

"Yes, love," he sighed, swallowing thickly. "I'm sorry."

"Carlisle?"

"He's fine. He sent a message about an hour ago. He said they stitched him up, and despite a little blood loss, he's fine. He...well, he wanted to talk to you, but I told him to give you time."

I nodded, sniffing a bit. "What do we do now, Edward?" I asked, tilting my head at him as tears threatened to fall again.

He sighed, looking away from me, but said, "Without Charlie's testimony, Benny's afraid they can't nail King."

"So he wins!" I growled, my tears finally spilling over. "All of this... *shit* was for nothing?"

"Not a chance, Bella," he said, his voice sounding controlled, yet menacing. "My father said to stay put, that we'd keep you safe until we can make another plan."

I nodded, but my father's words echoed to me from our last conversation.

"I want you to listen to everything Carlisle tells you...his group is strong and smart. They'll keep you safe, and when this is over, we'll start over, sweetie. We'll take some time together, okay?" he asked, and I frowned at the tightness in his voice.

"Kay, daddy," I breathed, a little shocked at seeing him this way.

"But I want you to promise me something, Bells," he continued, looking up at me, his eyes fierce and determined.

I nodded. "Yeah...whatever you want."

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"If something happens to me, if for some reason, I don't make it through this..." He held up his hand when I opened my mouth to say something to negate where this conversation was going. "I left something for you in the tree house, baby. Okay?"

I nodded, my brow furrowing. "What?"

He shook his head, waving the question away. "Just promise me..."

"I promise, Daddy..."

I gasped, looking down at Edward. "I have to go..." I sighed, getting up from his lap.

"What?" he growled. "Bella, you can't go anywhere! If anything, you're a bigger target than ever."

"I promised him, Edward," I told him, grabbing a bag from out of the closet.

"You promised who? And what?" he asked, standing up from the chair and snatching the bag from my hands. "Bella, please. I know you're upset, but you need to stay here."

"I promised Charlie. He told me that if something were to happen to him, that he left something for me," I countered, reaching for the bag, but he held it away from me. "I fucking *swore* to him, Edward!"

"But he wouldn't want you to get killed going to get it," he yelled, waving the duffle bag around in the air. "I can't let you leave, Bella. I just...can't. I don't care what he left you!"

"Edward," I sobbed. "I *promised*..."

"No, baby, please," he begged, shaking his head and cupping my face with his free hand. "Just wait until my dad gets here, and we'll make a decision then. I know you want to make good on your promise..."

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"What if it's important to putting King away?" I countered. "Charlie wouldn't have made me promise to go get it, if it wasn't important."

He sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Where is it?"

"In my old tree house," I told him, and suddenly, I started negotiating with him, knowing it probably wouldn't work. "I'll go straight there and come straight back, I swear," I vowed, walking to him and taking his hand in mine.

"Don't," he snapped, rolling his eyes and yanking his hand out of mine to hold it up at me.

"No one will see me...and I'll only stop when..."

"I said, stop!" he growled, shoving the bag back at me.

"Please, Edward..."

Edward's nostrils flared, his fists clenched, and his jaw flexed with his anger. I started to back away. "Just...pack your shit, Bella."

I gaped at him, because it sounded so cruel the way he said it, but he turned away from me, walking into the closet. He came out, his face still grim, but he was carrying another bag.

"Edward, what are you..."

He glared at me, his eyes almost black as he tossed the bag onto the bed next to mine.

"You couldn't possibly think I'd go for that bullshit, did you?" he asked, throwing a couple of pairs of jeans in his bag. "Like I could watch you walk the fuck away from me!" He huffed, yanking open his dresser drawer and packing a few t-shirts. "Like I wouldn't lose my fucking mind the whole time you're gone? No, just... *fuck* no! I'm going with you."

A/N...Deep breaths, everyone. I know, Charlie's gone. I'm so sorry about that. Even Jake is hurt, though most of you wanted Bella to shoot him chapters and chapters ago. This is a bumpy road, like I said before. And even though you're probably upset with Bella...give her a break, okay? Besides, did you really think Edward would let her go alone?

Yes, Carlisle is injured, but okay. It was a hit...plain and simple, and if you didn't figure it out, King totally set it up that way since he was "sick" enough to call an end to the proceedings of the day. And Carlisle's message was very important, especially his words from Charlie.

Edward and Bella talked about their moms, which is also very important for them.

I do apologize, but the next chapter will be a bigger tissue warning than this one, because Bella's reaction to all of this is far from over, and we find out what is in the tree house. And the chap is probably bigger in shock content than anything. I'm asking you to just put on your seatbelt and hold on, because things will level out...well, as leveled out as this story gets.

I want to thank JenRar for beta'ing this. For pushing when I'm slacking. LOL Thanks to Goober_Lou because she is the one that gives the ratings on the tissue warnings, and despite all that happened in this chapter, she loved the "meadow" scene.

And thanks to MedusaInNY for the maintaining of my blog. For those of you that are fans of Angelward and the whole Angel series... well, there is now a Playlist for Broken Angel and Angel's Embrace up and live on that blog. Go here- [drotuno\(dot\)blogspot\(dot\)com/p/angel-series\(dot\)html](http://drotuno(dot)blogspot(dot)com/p/angel-series(dot)html)

Ohhh...I'm damn sure you guys have things to say. In fact, I'm not even suggesting anything this time. Just...go with your gut on this one, yeah? Just scream, cry or yell, because I'm prepared for it. But remember I do love a HEA, so if you can keep that in mind, you may just survive this story... Despite the angst in this... I really do love all of my readers, so let me hear it. I will most likely be posting on Sunday, because it does work

out best that way. Until then... Later.

Chapter 18

A/N... Sorry for the delay in posting...I blame this site again.

Oh boy...here we go. I have said more than once that this is a **HIGH TISSUE WARNING** chapter. There are a few reasons for that. I just need you to brace yourselves, please. I know all of you can get through this just fine.

Now...let's see we left off with a pretty upset Edward and a Bella that needed to leave... Let's see what Edward does about it, shall we?

CHAPTER 18

EDWARD

"Edward," Bella started, but I was too angry to even see straight. "You're coming with me?" she asked, her hand frozen over her bag on the bed.

I wasn't sure what I was pissed about, but the thought of her leaving me, of just walking away - despite how utterly fucking dangerous it was for her to be alone, not to mention that close to Miller - made me possessive, livid, and just about explosive. *Nothing* could fucking happen to her. Period.

"Yes." It was all I could say, because anything more, and I wasn't sure what would come out of my mouth; my internal filter was smoldering and slowly burning away.

"Why?"

"Why?" I growled, spinning around in front of her. "Do you honestly believe I could fucking let you do this on your own, Bella?" I asked her incredulously, holding up my hand when she opened her mouth. "Yes, I'm well aware that you can handle yourself. Yes, I'm completely convinced that I've lost total control of my own life since you've fallen into it. But... *fuck*, love! I can't just let you

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go out there alone. I would go fucking insane." I sat down hard on the edge of the bed, fisting my hair in my hands.

"Edward," Bella whispered, and I felt her lips press to the top of my head.

I looked up at her, shaking my head. "You don't fucking understand, Bella. You don't. I just can't let you go."

"Thank you," she whispered, biting on her bottom lip as her brow wrinkled. "Will they be okay without you here?"

I snorted, but nodded, because my crew was strong, even without my presence. "I'll have to leave instructions with Alec. And I'm sending my dad an email, Bella," I warned her, pointing a finger at her. "So don't be surprised when he reams both our asses."

She grinned, nodded, and grabbed my pointing finger. "We'll go straight there, I promise. We'll be gone...three days, at most."

I humphed, rolling my eyes. Three days. Anything could happen in three fucking days - to *any* of us. I stood up, kissed her forehead, and continued to pack my bag, but Bella stopped me.

"Go...do what you have to do," she sighed, pulling my bag towards her. "I've got this."

I nodded, wanting to stop her, wanting to keep her in that room where she was safe, but it was hard to ignore the instructions of a parent, especially when they were basically dying fucking wishes. I couldn't fault her for wanting to do what Charlie had asked of her, nor could I even begin to understand what she was feeling or thinking. We'd promised her that her dad would be safe, and now he was dead. I knew my own father must've been feeling like shit right about now, because he loved Charlie and Bella like they were his blood.

I walked out of the room and down the hallway. I found just about everyone still up, despite the late hour. They were sitting around the dining room table in

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perfect silence, until I walked in.

Esme rushed to me, cupping my face. "How is she?"

"She's...packing," I snorted, holding up my hands when all of them starting asking questions all at once. "Just...wait," I growled, turning back to Esme. "Apparently, Charlie made her promise that if something were to happen to him, she would go get something he left her."

"Edward, that's insane," Emmett growled. "You can't just let her go!"

"I'm not," I sighed, running a hand through my hair. "I'm taking her."

"It's in the tree house," Rose said softly, looking up from the computer screen that she and Alice had been studying. "I don't know what it is, but that's where he left it. She told me just after Charlie was taken into custody."

"I know," I groaned, shaking my head, but turning to Alice. "Pixie, I need you to send a message to my dad. Tell him we'll be gone no more than three days. Any longer than that, and we'll send another message. Can you rig Bella's laptop like yours?"

"It already is," she chirped, closing one of the computers in front of her and handing it to me. "Email only, okay? No Skype, no Facebook. Just email."

"Yes, ma'am," I conceded.

Then I turned to Alec. "I need you here," I told him. "I need you in charge, in case something stupid happens."

Alec's face twisted into a wry smile. "Sure, Ed. Your father's gonna be pissed, you know."

"I'm aware," I grunted. "But if I don't take her, she'll go on her own, and I can't have that, either."

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I turned back to Alice one more time. "Alice, I need to get through the border, so could you also send a message to Benny? I need to know exactly how to get through without detection."

"Edward," Jasper huffed, folding his arms across his chest. "Your faces are *everywhere*, dude. How are you going to get through?"

"I don't know," I said with a shrug, "but I owe it to her to try, Jasper. We promised her her father's safety, and she watched - *on fucking TV* - Charlie get shot in the goddamn head. At this point, she can have my fucking liver."

Esme snorted, but caught herself. "Edward, this hasn't hit her yet, so you need to be prepared, sweetie."

"I know," I sighed, looking up when Kate got up from the table.

She walked silently to what looked like a pantry door, but pulled on the shelves. They swung out of the closet on a hinge, revealing a cache of weapons. She opened a drawer, pulling out what looked to be two old cell phones.

"Here," she said, shoving one in my hands. "These are untraceable and throw away, if you need it, but only in an emergency," she said, turning on the one in her own hands. "If you need us, or we need you...then it's instant communication. Only call *this* phone, okay?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said with a nod. "Got it."

She rattled off the number for the phone she would keep there several times, making me repeat it until I had it cemented in my memory.

"Edward, how do you plan on doing this? You have to know that someone's watching Charlie's house for her," Alec stated, starting to pace in the kitchen.

"We'll wait until nightfall, park away from the house, and go in silently. I don't think we need to get inside the house - just the tree house," I replied, and he

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nodded, like he'd expected as much.

"And if something goes wrong?" Mickey asked, taking a long draw from her soda, but glaring at me.

"I'll hide us at my house."

Jasper snorted, rolling his eyes. "Well, they'll have a bitch of a time getting to you there."

"I don't like us separating, Ed," Emmett growled, shaking his head. "It's too far away, and it doesn't give us enough time to get to you, because they're fucking looking for you, man."

"I'll get us back here," I countered, "even if I have to fly us back."

Emmett huffed, but stood up. "Fine, let's get you geared up," he said, leading me out of the kitchen and through the back door to his Jeep.

Once out to the SUV, Emmett opened the back door, lifting the false floor to reveal all of his "toys." He snatched a pair of binoculars, two radio ear pieces, and two extra guns - forty fives. He also grabbed some ammo, two extra clips, and two black Kevlar vests, throwing them all in a bag for me.

"You need to be careful, Eddie," he said with a frown as we walked back towards the house. "I understand what you're doing, because Charlie was well aware of just what danger he'd put his daughter in. When we had him those first few days, he was crazed about her - where she was, who was taking care of her. But mostly...he was wondering what would happen to her if he were to get killed. If he told her to do something, then it's important, because he wanted to keep this shit as far from her as he could, though the timing fucking sucks..."

I looked over at Emmett, who on a normal basis wasn't so insightful, but I'd forgotten that he and Mickey had picked up Charlie Swan at the same time my father and I had gone on the hunt for Bella. I took a deep breath and nodded at him, before walking back into the house.

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"What the hell, Bella?" Mack yelled, having joined the group in the kitchen.

She hadn't been in there earlier, and from the looks of it, we'd woken her up, because she was in sweats and a t-shirt, her hair in some sort of twisted knot on the top of her head.

"You're practically walking into their hands, Bellsy!" she snapped again.

Bella was shaking her head back and forth, her hands on Makenna's shoulders. "Stop, Mack. We won't be seen. We won't be gone long. I just need to see what my dad left me," she said, her voice breaking on that last sentence.

I had a feeling Bella was barely clinging to her composure at this point and that she wanted to stay strong.

"Bella, if we're doing this, we need to get on the road," I told her gently, trying to give her an out.

"Kay," she sighed, nodding slowly, but she turned back to her girls. "We'll be back. Stay here, and we'll get you a message soon."

There were hugs all around, and then we walked out to the cars. Bella started for her car, but I stopped her.

"No, baby," I said, guiding her past the Mustang. "Mine. No offense, and as sexy as you are driving that, it's a giant neon sign pointing that you've come home," I whispered in her ear.

She grimaced, giving her car one last glance, and nodded as she walked to my car. "You're right. Thanks for doing this."

I took a deep breath once we were seated in my car and looked over at her.

"Let's just hope that whatever Charlie left you is worth this shit," I told her, my voice sounding way too harsh inside the confines of the car.

She flinched, nodding silently.

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"But Bella, there's not anything I wouldn't do for you, okay?" I asked her softly, hoping she knew this. I picked up her hand and kissed her knuckles. " *Anything*, love," I urged, kissing them again.

"Thank you, Edward," she sighed, but I could see her fighting her tears as we backed out. "I love you so much...you have no idea..."

~oOo~

"Edward," Bella sobbed in her sleep, and not for the first fucking time.

She'd fallen quiet when we left my aunt's farm and stayed that way just about the whole way out of the state. At some point after we'd crossed into Canada, she'd fallen asleep, but her nightmares were atrocious. I would soothe her as best I could, and she would quiet down with the sound of my voice, the touch of my fingers to her face, but I didn't tell her about it once she woke up.

She took the wheel at one point, and I had to distract myself by looking out the window, trying my damndest not to think inappropriate thoughts of just how fucking *good* she looked behind the wheel of my car. I finally forced myself to nap, trusting that she would wake me before the U.S. border, which she did.

We stopped long enough to check emails, grab something to eat, and use the restroom, before I took back the wheel to drive us through the border gate that Benny had secured for us.

It was on the ferry back into Washington that Bella's nightmares returned, and I just couldn't take it anymore. We hadn't gotten out of the car this time, in order to just stay hidden, so I just scooted my seat back, finally giving in to what I'd been wanting to do since my name had sadly escaped her lips the first time I'd heard it. I pulled her across the console and into my lap, waking her in the process, but she clung to me like a lifeline.

"Shh, baby, I've got you," I sighed, burying my nose in her hair as her sleepy cries changed into fully awake sobs. "I'm so sorry, *sweetness*," I whispered, using the term of endearment that had become a joke between us ever since the

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law office we'd gone to together. I used it, because she was so very sweet, sad, and strong... and didn't deserve a fucking bit of anything that was happening to her - most of all the loss of her father.

"He's gone, Edward," she sobbed into my neck, her little hands gripping at my shirt sleeves. "We'll never get to fix shit between us. He probably died thinking I hated him..."

"No, baby, he could never think that," I groaned, holding her tighter, because she shook like she was falling apart. "His sole concern was for your safety, Bella. He made my dad and me swear to keep you safe. He didn't want his mistakes or whatever decisions he'd made to hurt you. I could see how much he loved you, despite how mad you were. He didn't even care about that. Every time he looked at you, it was with pride and awe, baby."

"He was the last of my family," she cried, sitting up straighter. "What do I do now?"

I reached up, cupping her face and wiping her tears away with my thumbs. And God, if she wasn't beautiful and heartbreaking - and everything I never knew to want; at that moment, I'd do just about anything to take away her sadness.

"You're not alone, love. Ever. You have your girls, and you have me and my dad," I soothed her, tucking her hair behind her ears. "I'm not going anywhere, Bella. Even when this is over - and it *will* be over someday - I still want to be with you," I confessed. Though I wasn't sure this was the right time for that particular conversation, I wanted her to know. I never wanted her to ever feel that she was alone. "I love you so much, and that's not going to stop once this is over."

Bella's eyes were red rimmed and slightly puffy, but she nodded, still looking a little lost. "Love you, too..." she breathed, her voice barely there.

"And you'll do whatever it is that you *want* to do, baby," I whispered, leaning in to kiss her lips softly. "I'm pretty sure there isn't much you can't do," I said with a smirk, tilting my head at her.

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She huffed a bit, her lip trembling and her eyes welling up. "I don't know what to *feel*," she whispered, looking around when the ferry started to dock. "I was mad at Charlie for so long..."

I frowned, helping her back into her seat, but I kept her facing me. "You've only just lost him, love. Take a deep breath and just give yourself some time, okay?" I asked, and she nodded, swiping at her tears. "Good girl," I sighed, kissing the side of her head. "Now, let's find some place to lay low until the sun goes down, shall we?"

~oOo~

BELLA

"This is your 'hood, baby," Edward sighed in my ear as we both looked out over the darkened streets. "How's the best way in?"

I took a deep breath, holding the binoculars up to my face. We were one street over from my father's place, but it was the backyard I needed to get to, so I'd been thinking about cutting through the neighbors' yards like I'd done as a kid.

My heart twinged at the thought, because I'd now lost the last connection to my childhood. My mom was gone, Jane was gone, and now, Charlie was gone, and I had to force myself focus on the task at hand, in order not to curl up in Edward's lap and just cry the rest of the night away; in all reality, it was taking everything I had not to do just that. He'd held me each time I'd lost it, and it was a level of comfort like I'd never known. I knew he was uncomfortable, but you wouldn't know it, because he'd been sweet, and kind, and so very soothing. He'd told me how much my father had worried about me, that he'd been proud of me, and completely frantic about my safety. No matter how angry I'd been at Charlie, my father still loved me.

I took a deep breath, swallowing the sob that wanted to escape, forcing back the urge to just bury myself in Edward's embrace and let it all out. Again. I looked out the window to make sure there no one was watching us.

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There was absolutely no movement on the street I'd grown up on. It was one o'clock in the morning, and it was deadly silent and so very still, but if we got out of the car, the street lights would still reveal us, despite the fact that we were both dressed head to toe in black - including Edward's backwards black baseball cap, which I'd come to realize he wore every time we had a situation like this.

I pulled out a drawing I'd hurriedly sketched out on a restaurant napkin when we'd stopped the last time. "Look," I said, pointing to where we were. "If we cut through these two backyards and cross over here, we'll come out in Charlie's side yard. The tree house is right there," I explained, looking up at Edward's handsome face. "The Crowders never had good lighting back there, and the Schwartzes have enough shrubbery to start their own nursery..."

Edward snorted, looking up from the crude map I'd drawn; it wasn't a Monet, but it had gotten my point across. "You sound like you know this from experience, Bella," he noted, his mouth curling into a wry smile.

"There was...a guy," I sighed, shoving him slightly when he started to chuckle. "Jane didn't like him much, and she grounded me..." I grinned over at him as he continued to laugh. "There were parties that Rose and I just *had* to go to..."

"Such a bad girl, baby," he snorted, kissing the side of my neck. "Sneaking out to meet boys... It makes me wish we'd stayed in contact..."

"Yeah," I sighed wistfully, pulling back to look at him. "Yeah, me, too."

As I gazed at him, it seemed that our minds were running along the same track, because I wondered if had we stayed friends, stayed in contact, would we still have fallen in love? Would we have dated in high school, even with the slight long distance? And the one that made my heart clench with want and desire and a touch of regret... Would we have been each other's firsts? First kisses, first dates, and first time making love...

"Would you have snuck out to see me, Bella?" he chuckled, his tongue gliding along his bottom lip, and proving my theory that we were thinking the same

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thing.

"Maybe," I teased, kissing his cheek as he gasped dramatically. "But I would've definitely snuck you in..."

He laughed, nodded, and then took the binoculars from me. "I don't see any movement, love, so whenever you're ready, we can go."

"Kay," I told him, quietly opening his car door.

We bolted into a dark side yard, and Edward whispered, "Weapon out, baby. I don't know if someone's watching for us or not, but I don't want to take any chances, okay?"

I nodded, pulling out my nine mil, but aware that the forty-five that Emmett had given him was still at the small of my back. "Ready?" I asked him, looking over my shoulder.

"I'll follow you," he said, his body lining up behind mine. "You seem to be the expert on sneaking in and out of your house."

I grinned and darted for the Crowder backyard. They hadn't changed a thing. It was still dark, still without any flood lights to reveal us, and I led us quietly to the back corner of their property, where we needed to climb the fence. Edward hopped over it with ease, reaching for me once he was on the other side and setting me down gently.

Mrs. Schwartz had always had a green thumb, and when I was younger, I'd helped many a Spring tend to her flowers, so I knew that there was plenty of space between her rose bushes and the back wooden fence. It was the far corner of the wooden fence I needed.

I came to a stop, trying to remember which wooden plank Rose and I had loosened all those years ago. "Which one is it?" I thought out loud, finally finding the knot we'd used to tug it. "Ah, still there," I said with a grin, hooking my finger into the board and swinging it just enough for us to squeeze through.

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"This must've been some guy," Edward muttered wryly.

"Mmhm," I sighed dramatically, fighting my smile. "He was *really* hot..."

Edward huffed, and for the first time, I could see he might be a touch jealous, so I spun in front of him, grabbing his face.

"Nowhere *near* as hot as you, baby," I purred, looking up at him through my eyelashes. "If you'd been around, he wouldn't have stood a chance, Edward..."

I watched him fight his smile, tilt his head, and swallow thickly, before leaning in close to my ear. "If I had been around...you wouldn't have even known he existed. I would have ruined you for other boys, Bella."

"You still have time to ruin me, baby," I whispered against his lips. "Any ideas on how you plan to do that?"

He snorted, shook his head once as if to clear it, and gazed down at me with dark, lust-filled eyes. "Oh yes, ma'am," he rumbled, his top lip almost in a sneer, and fuck, if it wasn't sexy. "Remind me to give you my...hmm, game plan later, *sweetness*."

I laughed softly, diving into my father's backyard. My tree house was in the opposite corner of the yard, but the problem was that Charlie had installed motion lights.

"Never had to get to the tree house," I muttered, studying the yard. "I only needed to get to the trellis that led up to my bedroom window."

"Hmm, and it would have been the tree house I would've rather met you in," he chuckled, turning me along the inside of the fence. "Move slow, keep away from the sensor, and we should be fine."

We edged slowly around my old backyard, darting up the tree house's ladder as quickly as possible. I drew the blinds, before I flicked on a small flashlight.

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"Fuck, this thing hasn't changed one bit," Edward muttered, looking around the space where we'd hung out for the first and only time. "Did you ever get to see Alcatraz, baby?" he asked in a whisper, still staring around at all of my travel posters.

"No," I snickered, shaking my head and looking around for anything that might have been out of place - something that my father would have left. "I worked in San Francisco, but never made it to any attractions," I whispered, shifting through pillows, piles of magazines, and old CDs. "And Charlie promised to take me to Paris, but he never did..." I froze at just how bitter that sounded, my eyes flying to Edward's flinching gaze. "Damn it," I sighed, blinking hard to fight the tears.

"Hey," he whispered, crawling to my side. "What are we looking for in here? I want us out of this place ASAP."

"I don't know," I sniffled, sitting back on my heels, my eyes falling onto the bookcase. "He didn't tell me what to look for...just that he'd put something in here. The cryptic bastard..." I growled, suddenly and inexplicably angry with Charlie. Edward's silent kiss to the side of my head helped calm me down.

Edward was quiet as I ran through the titles and authors on my bookshelves, remembering every book like an old friend. My maturity could almost be tracked with the novels that lined my shelves - Beverly Cleary, The Hardy Boys, Stephen King, and Anne Rice. There were classics and non-fiction, but there was one title that stood out - *The Wizard of Oz*. My own worn out copy was with my things at Rose's apartment. This copy looked brand new.

I reached out and took the book down, noticing instantly that it wasn't a book at all. It was a storage box that was made to look like a book. My dad had chosen that particular title, because he'd called me "munchkin" my whole life, it seemed. It was the perfect fucking hiding spot, because only I would notice its appearance, its newness in comparison to the rest of my books.

"Oh, Dad," I sighed, shaking my head and cracking open the box at the same time.

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Inside was a manila envelope and what looked like a letter folded in half on top. I didn't even have to open it to recognize my father's heavy-handed script that raised up on the other side of the paper. I took it out with shaky fingers, but Edward's hands covered mine.

"No, baby," he whispered, shaking his head. "Not here. We'll go somewhere safe, but I'm not having you read this shit here. Okay?"

"Safe? Where?"

"Just...let's go," he commanded, closing the storage box and stowing it in the bag he had on his shoulder. "I feel like we're being watched or some shit, love. It's making me fucking nervous. I swear we aren't alone out here."

I nodded, swallowing thickly, and looked out the window, before scurrying back down the ladder. We backtracked around the yard, through the neighbor's garden, only to come to a halt back at the edge of the Crowder's side yard. I could see Edward's car, but I could also see what was making him completely still, completely silent, as he held up a finger to his lips. He pointed to the sidewalk just on the other side of his car, and I saw what he was talking about. A shadow. Someone was up at nearly two o'clock in the morning.

The person continued down the sidewalk at almost a leisurely pace, like they were waiting for something to happen. They seemed to be waiting for us.

Edward turned in front of me, his mouth right by my ear. "These streets," he whispered oh so softly. "Do they all end up at that main road we turned off of, Bella?"

I nodded, taking the bag he'd just taken off of his shoulder. "Yeah, what are you doing?"

"I'm going to run past this asshole. If he gives chase, we'll know he's watching for us. But that will also give you enough time to get in the car and take off. Meet me at that gas station on the corner."

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I frowned, but I knew better than to argue at this point, because he was right in his planning. If the guy took off after him, that gave me the clear to get in the car. It focused the attention on Edward, not me, and by the time the guy realized it was a ruse, I would already be picking Edward up two blocks away.

"You...be *fast*," I growled at him with a raised eyebrow, and then rolled my eyes when he grinned smugly.

"Oh, baby, I'm fast at everything except sex. With that, I like *taking my time*," he rumbled in my ear, before leaving an open mouth kiss to my neck. "I can't fucking *wait* to show you that..."

"He's the devil," I stated to myself, with the silliest of grins on my face, watching him run stealthily away. "But... fuck, I love him, anyway..."

I shouldered his bag, watching through the binoculars as Edward pretended to jog past the nighttime wanderer. The guy's reaction was instant. I faintly heard a curse, saw the guy reach for a gun, and take off after Edward, but the latter was indeed quicker than the former, and soon, I had the silent street to myself.

I darted from my hiding spot, hitting the button on the key to unlock the doors. I was in and had the engine cranked before the door was even closed.

As quietly as I could, I tore through my old neighborhood, not wanting to wake anyone, but also not wanting to leave Edward hanging too long. A right, a left, and another left, and I was back at the entrance to my father's community. I could see the gas station from there to my left, and I practically spun the wheels of the Charger when two shadows - one right after the other - darted across the street a few houses down.

I turned into the gas station, practically taking out Edward's pursuer as I spun the car between them. Edward barely had the door open, before he was yelling, "Go, go, go!"

What I noticed immediately was that, despite the gun in the other man's hand, he wasn't shooting at us. At all. At any point, he probably could have taken

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Edward out, but he hadn't.

"Fed?" I asked Edward, spinning the wheels to tear out of that gas station.

"No fucking clue," he said, maneuvering in his seat to look behind us.

"Tell me where I'm going," I said, turning out onto the main road, leaving the guy that had been chasing Edward in the dust.

"Take the highway south," he panted, taking off his hat and raking his hands through his sweaty hair. "Then take the 101."

"Where are we going?" I asked, looking away from the highway to look over at him.

"My house."

By the time Edward told me to slow the car down, the sun was trying to peak out over the trees. And that's all I saw - *trees*. When he'd told me that Forks was quiet, small, and nothing but surrounding forests, I'd only half believed him, because it had seemed unreal that I'd ever see it, but pulling off a deserted paved road onto what seemed to be a dead end, it all came to fruition.

Edward dug around in his glove box and pulled out a garage door opener, and what I'd thought was shrubs and a dead end was really a gate that slowly started to slide open. I was barely through it when he hit the button again, safely concealing us as I drove down a long, winding driveway.

"Park over there," he said, his voice soft, almost sounding unsure, as he pointed towards a smaller building. "Th-this is g-good, love."

I had to fight my smile, because his stutter told me everything. He was showing me something that was close to him, something hardly anyone saw, and he was nervous.

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I got out of the car, looking around as I walked to the back of the car to get my things. The air smelled so fresh, so clean. The building we were parked behind must have been his workshop, because there was saw dust and chips of wood around the doors. I tried to imagine what was in there - what unfinished projects he had waiting on his knowledgeable hands to pick up where they'd left off.

But it was his house my eyes fell on, almost making me trip on the way up the walk. To say it was beautiful wouldn't have been correct; neither would the word cute have given it the justice it deserved. It was just...perfect. It wasn't audacious, or too small, but it seemed to have its own personality. It was an older home - white, with dark blue trim and shutters, and a small front porch decorated with a few plants, a couple of rockers, and a swing. The roof was gray, but shaded by large trees with long overhanging branches. On the right side of the steps, an American flag hung still in the morning air.

"That's...really pretty, Edward," I murmured, looking up at him as he tugged his keys out of his pocket.

He smiled shyly, turning the key in the lock. "Thanks," he said, opening the door. "Let me give you the tour, then," he snickered, disengaging the security system, "and we'll get you somethin' to eat, 'cause I'm starving."

I smiled, looking around his home. "Kay," I sighed distractedly, because I couldn't quite figure out his taste.

It seemed to be an eclectic collection of just...stuff. I could tell he'd made most of his furniture, because the pieces seemed to fit him just perfectly. They were masculine, but with clean lines and dark stain. The living room was a mix of new, old, and just... *male*, because there was a ginormous flatscreen TV in the middle of a bookcase that took up the entire length of the wall. Every shelf was filled with something - DVDs, CDs, framed pictures, Air Force medals and memories, books, and a large stereo.

The sofa and chair were modern and leather, but the throw on the arm of the couch looked old and maybe handmade. The art on the wall was even more of

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a mixture. There was a large modern painting over the sofa that seemed to pull all of his colors together, but over the chair was what looked like a collection of aerial shots - not only of his home, but the farm in Alaska, the cabin in the mountains, and a few other places that I didn't recognize.

"My dad took those," he explained from behind me. "I'd flown him up with his camera. The first one...this one," he said, pointing to his own home, "was the first one we'd tried. We were trying to scope out how secure this place would be. It came out so cool that he wanted to add to them."

I smiled, turning around to the bookcase, but was stopped.

"You can snoop later, love," he chuckled, kissing my head and guiding me through the room. "I need a shower and food. What do you say?"

"You're giving me permission to snoop? Me? You know it's what I do for a living, Edward," I teased him, coming to a standstill in the kitchen.

"I'm aware of what you do," he snorted, rolling his eyes. "If I were hiding something, I'm pretty sure you'd have wormed it out of me by now. This is the kitchen."

It was stunning, modern, and a chef's haven. The cabinets, which I was sure he'd made himself, were a light cherry finish, topped with dark marble counters. Every appliance was shiny and silver, and looked brand new.

"Whoa," I huffed, my eyebrows raising up. "That's amazing."

"Told you that it was the first room I redid," he chuckled. "Keep going."

He guided me down the hall, showing me the guest room and the bathroom, but it was in the master bedroom, our bags finally dropped to the floor - and so did my jaw.

If a room could be described as sexy, then Edward's bedroom was the picture next to the description. It was manly and modern, and saturated with his smell -

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that clean, fresh cut wood smell that drove me crazy. His walls were dark blue, the furniture a light clear stain. His king size bed was covered in a khaki colored comforter, with navy blue stripes running up the center, a pile of fluffy pillows at the headboard.

Edward's stomach made a fierce growl, and I giggled, turning to look at him.

He grinned, shrugged, and pointed behind me. "Bathroom's right there, baby. Make yourself at home. I'm going to make something to eat."

"Seriously," I said, still giggling. "You'd better feed that monster..."

"Hush, *sweetness*," he snorted, rolling his eyes. "A man's gotta eat..." he muttered, leaving me alone in his room.

I gave Edward's bed one last glance, barely allowing thoughts of how many - if any - women he'd taken in it. I wasn't normally the jealous type, but looking at *that* bed, now knowing *that* man, I couldn't help but think about it. My fears had held me back for far too long, and I wasn't sure if I was jealous of the women Edward was with before me, or just their freedom from dark basements and wicked men, their freedom to be with him in every way.

I shook my head and took a deep breath, letting those thoughts go, because Esme was right. When I was finally able to be with Edward completely, it would be beyond amazing, because it would be a true loving connection.

The bathroom was just as gorgeous as the rest of the house. Again, it was modern, with real wood cabinets, marble tops, and silver accents. As I turned on the shower and undressed, I realized I still had my father's box to go through. With a deep sigh, I stepped under the spray.

~oOo~

EDWARD

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I wasn't sure what was making me more nervous - showing Bella my home, that I'd never really brought anyone outside of my crew to, or the looming necessity of reading Charlie's letter. I couldn't imagine anything more daunting for her, more terrifying. When she'd said that her father had left her something, I hadn't taken her seriously, until Emmett had mentioned it. But watching her face crumble at the sight of that "book" was almost too much to bear for me.

I'd probably been the only person to have seen that beautiful woman at her *very fucking worst*, and I swore to myself that I'd never let her hurt again, so allowing this next step was going against everything that I'd promised to protect her from.

I was almost sick with nerves as I set a light lunch in front of her so that I could grab a quick shower. I kissed the back of her head on my way by the bar as she opened the computer.

"Just tell them we're safe, baby," I whispered to her. "And that we're at my place for at least another day. You might want to send it to my dad, too."

"Kay," she sighed, looking up at me. "Are we safe here? I mean, does bringing me here pose a threat to this place...your *home*, Edward?" she asked, and I could see the worry written all over her face.

I snorted, shook my head, and said, "You're safe. Trust me. If you think my dad is paranoid when it comes to hiding his properties, then you don't know me. This house is in a name that doesn't even exist on paper." I chuckled at her sweet wry smile. "You're safe, love. My crew knows it, and you should know it, too."

Her smile grew as she turned around to face me. "So what you're saying is...if I don't send this message... *no one* will know where we are. Anything could happen to me...as in: my fate rests in your hands..."

I chuckled at her again, kissing her lips. "Hmm...and *there's* a kidnapping I'm sure you'd enjoy, *sweetness*. I'd make sure of it," I told her, walking away from her musical laughter.

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As I rushed through my shower, I felt a strange sense of *home*, knowing that Bella was in my house. It was so sudden and so very powerful, that I actually had to catch my breath, my forehead thumping to the tile wall. I thought at first it would be unnerving to let her see the real me, but in all reality, she already knew me. Just having her in the one place that I hid myself away from the world was so right, it was all I could do not to rush out to her and beg her to stay, to never leave, even though it wasn't the right time.

I tugged on a pair of old jeans, finding Bella in the living room. She was gazing at my bookcase with a small smile on her face. Everything was displayed in that damn thing - Air Force medals, pictures of my mom and dad, even pictures of Jasper, Emmett, and me overseas.

"You were so handsome in uniform," she muttered, not even bothering to turn around.

I grinned, shaking my head. "Thanks," I muttered, having heard that compliment before from many women; it seemed to mean so much *more* coming from her.

"Do you miss it? The military, I mean?" she asked, turning to look at me.

"No," I answered honestly. "I don't. I don't miss doing things that don't make sense, just because someone told me to..."

She tilted her head at me and nodded, like she understood it, but she couldn't possibly understand everything that went on. Maybe she understood the fighting, the politics, but she couldn't understand what it was like to be the monster that executed hundreds of people, just because someone in a big office wanted it done for whatever inane reasons they tried to justify it.

"You have...a beautiful home, baby," she sighed, sitting on the edge of the sofa.

I wanted to fall at her feet and tell her what was mine was hers, that she could stay. I knew it was crazy, that we *couldn't* stay, but fuck, I hoped for that future with her. I'd joked with Jasper that when this was all over, I was hiding Bella

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away for a year at this very house, and now, I wasn't sure I was kidding.

"This is...my escape from what I do," I told her, shrugging one shoulder and sitting down next to her. "It's where I come to..." I stalled, not knowing exactly how to put it, but she did.

"Recharge your batteries?" she chuckled, kissing my cheek as I nodded. "Everyone needs a place like that. Mine used to be Esme's house," she said, looking up at me. "Every fight with Jacob or rough job I had, I'd show up at her door with some sort of dessert in hand. We'd drink coffee or wine, sometimes talking it all out, or sometimes just ignoring the problems altogether."

I smiled, loving that she and Esme had that type of relationship, that she had found some sort of mother replacement. I had my Aunt Kate, but I was slowly learning to trust Esme myself, and I could see how easy it was to talk to her. She was good for my dad, yes, but she was so very patient and kind with me, which wasn't an easy task. In fact, she and Bella were the only women that had that kind of patience with my temper, my commanding ways, and my pig-headedness.

"Um, do you think..." she whispered, looking up at me, but pointing to the book that Charlie had left her.

"This is all you, love," I said, picking it up and handing it to her. "What we do with this is totally up to you."

I watched with fascination as she steeled herself to open the box, the same kind of determination all over her face that she wore when fighting her fear of touch. Her eyes darkened just a bit, but her shaky hands gave away her nerves as she pulled out a folded pile of papers.

I sat back against the arm of the sofa, rearranging her between my legs so that I could hold her, because I knew this wasn't going to be easy. Hearing the very last thoughts of a parent that was now suddenly gone forever never was. I ran my hand over her still damp head, placing a kiss to the back of it. My heart ached for what she was about to hear, and there was a part of me - the

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irrational, protective, angry part of me - that wanted to shatter that box and set it on fire out in my wood shop.

Bella set the box on her lap and opened what looked like a very long letter. She cleared her throat and started to read.

My Isabella Marie...

If you're reading this, munchkin, then something happened to me, and I'm so, so sorry. I never meant any of this to get near you, Bella. I swear. You have always been, even though I didn't always show it, the very best, most important part of my life. I know most men want sons to pass on their bloodline, but I had never been happier when we found out that your mom and I were having a little girl...

Bella's voice broke, and she passed the letter to me. "I can't, Edward... You have to do this..."

"Kay, love," I said softly, taking the pages from her and picking up where she'd left off.

I named you Isabella, because you were all the most beautiful parts of your mother made over, and I want you to know that I never meant to lie to you, keep anything from you, or hurt you. I really, really never wanted to hurt you, but if you're reading this, then there are things that I need to tell you that you don't know, and some things you aren't going to remember, because you were so young.

At the time, I considered it a blessing that you didn't remember, and I wanted to keep it that way. I know you think your mother left you, munchkin, but that couldn't be further from the truth. Renee didn't commit suicide, baby; she was murdered, and now that I'm gone, you need to know why, because in order to catch the guy that did it, you're going to need to see this through.

I wrapped my arm around Bella when her breath sucked in so fast, I thought she'd choke. "Easy, baby," I whispered to her. "Let's hear him out, okay?"

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She nodded slowly, leaning her temple to my jaw. Her grip on my forearm was almost painful, but I'd take that and more if it made this easier for her.

I never cheated on your mom, Bella. I know that's what you think, but it just isn't true. I wasn't always the best husband and father, but I loved my family, and I was always completely faithful to Renee. All I wanted was to provide you and your mother a future where you didn't have to worry about money. I wanted to give you everything, and in doing so, I made some huge mistakes in my career.

Before you were born, I'd met a man that was up and coming in the business world. He was young, willing to back me on a few technological breakthroughs - one of them being new software, because computers at the time were becoming more and more used in the business world. As time went on, I saw this man for what he truly was - a criminal - but by then, it was too late. I found out later that he was running prostitutes, gambling rings, and drug deals all over the city of Seattle.

Royce King met your mother at a Twilight Tech Christmas party a few years before you were born. He became obsessed with her, trying his damndest to take her away from me. He didn't care that they were both married, he didn't care that I threatened his life. He only cared about her.

Rumors started floating around about King, that he was using TT as a way to launder his money. He was using the computers and software we were developing for businesses worldwide to set up small phony check printing stations. He'd print fake payroll checks, using his prostitutes to cash them with fake identifications and giving them a percentage of each check they cashed.

When your mother was pregnant with you, munchkin, we thought Royce's infatuation with her was over, but we were wrong. Even after you were born, he still continued to pursue her, all the while using my company as a front. When you were six years old, he followed your mother to her car in the parking garage. Had I not needed to tell her one more thing, I do believe he'd have raped her right there at TT.

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Bella, you've told me before that you watched your mother fade away in front you, that you watched her start to drink, become so sad that nothing could reach her. That was the reason. I never cheated, munchkin; she was almost raped by Royce King.

Bella let loose a sob that shattered my heart, and I held her close, knowing there wasn't anything that was good enough to say to her. When she seemed to settle down, I turned her to face me with my fingers under her chin.

"Should I keep going, love? Or do you want to stop for now?" I asked her, kissing her forehead.

"No," she sighed, shaking her head. "Please keep reading, Edward."

I beat that man half to death, telling him that his life was over. It was then that the police started to catch on to King's illegal activities. Not my doing, but I felt grateful, all the same. By the time that Royce was busted for the fraud and I was called to testify in front of the grand jury, he had threatened my life and the lives of everyone I knew.

I testified anyway, because I naively trusted the system, and King still went free. However, I severed all contact and all business dealings; all accounts that he had brought into TT - whether they made money or not - were immediately urged to find someone else to do business with. I personally saw to it that he was removed from our lives.

If you're wondering why he wasn't arrested for your mother's attack, I couldn't tell you, other than it was her call. She didn't want anyone to know, she didn't want me in trouble for beating that asshole, and she was absolutely terrified what that knowledge would do to you, munchkin. You were young, but you were never, ever stupid. You listened to everything around you, and she didn't want your thoughts, your mind tarnished with the ugly things in the world.

It took a couple of years, but I thought I'd removed King from our lives completely. I learned later that he'd never really left. We attended some of the same functions, and one night at a charity event at the museum, your mother

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and I ran into him again. If I'd thought his obsession for her was bad before, I could see right then that it was worse.

Munchkin, this is where this is really going to get hard. You don't remember the night your mother died. At the time, the police and I thought it was a good thing, though we worried about when you would actually remember it. You never did.

Bella, you were there, and I need you to try and remember. You were eight years old, sweetie. You spent the evening with your mom, and I was out of town overnight at a conference. I know you found her the next morning, but you were there when Royce King knocked on our front door. From what the police and I could piece together, when Renee started to open the door, King kicked it in, because the chain was broken. We found evidence that she'd been raped and strangled, but not what happened to you. We asked you, but you said you'd been in bed.

My sweet little girl, everything you need to put Royce King away for life is in this envelope and in that brilliant mind of yours. The police officer on the case and I kept everything from you once we realized that you didn't remember a thing, that you saw it as a suicide and not a murder. Even as you got older, you never questioned why there was no note, why there was a bottle of liquor in the room that was a brand your mother didn't drink, and why there were pills there, when she'd never taken pills before. It is still registered as a "cold case," and with what is in that envelope, you will be able to put King away for life, because now, DNA is widely used.

After a while, I figured ignorance was bliss when it came to you, Bella. It became easier and easier to let you think I was the bad guy, that I was responsible for your mother's unhappiness, than to see you suffer with the reality of what really happened to her.

I want you to know that your mother loved you very much, that she spent the short time she had with you molding you into the amazing woman that you are today. And you are amazing, munchkin. I never wanted you to work for FBI, because I worried for your safety, but you could have done it. You would have

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shown them all just what a Swan could do, and I would have never been prouder.

I'm sorry I'm not there to tell you this in person, sweetie, and I'm sorry that you're finding out this way, but damn it, if I didn't love you too much to tell you the ugly truth. Be strong, munchkin. Stay with Carlisle and his crew, because they will take care of you, and always know that you were the best invention I'd ever had.

Love,

Dad

I dropped the letter on the table next to the sofa, pulling the sobbing girl into my arms. It was bad enough she'd lost her father, but to find out that everything she'd *thought* she knew was a lie was just too much for her. She wasn't even saying anything as I turned her around in my lap. Her heated forehead pressed into my neck as everything poisonous inside of her finally reached a boiling point.

All I could do was apologize to her, tell her that I loved her, and hold her just as tight as she was holding me. Suddenly, she sat up, grabbing the envelope from the box and ripping it open.

What she pulled out as she sniffled made me cringe. It was photos of what I could only assume was Renee the night she died. A woman with the same color hair as Bella laid haphazardly in a bed. On the nightstand was a half empty bottle of Jack Daniels, a prescription bottle of pills, and something that Bella never mentioned seeing when she talked about finding her mother the next morning - a used condom. Along with the photos, there was a police report, a CD, and the card of the investigating officer, Felix Michaels. There were a few other things that I couldn't possibly imagine were important, but Charlie apparently had - a key, a lighter, and a handkerchief.

"Baby? You okay?" I asked, trying to turn her face away from the awful pictures, but she wouldn't budge.

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In fact, she was frozen, completely still, except for the tears that continued to course down her beautiful face. She stared, open mouthed and barely breathing, as she studied a picture of her mother.

She started shaking her head. "No," she whispered, her brow furrowing. "No...how did I not remember this..."

"Remember what, love?"

"My mom..." she breathed, practically panting. "My mom and I were just finishing my homework, but we weren't in her room... We were in the dining room when someone knocked on the door."

"Bella, please don't do this to yourself," I begged, because I was completely terrified of what remembering this fucking shit would do to her.

"He...he kicked the door in!" she gasped, shaking her head slowly. "He told me that if I didn't get up to my room, he'd kill my mom..." she whispered, and then swallowed thickly. "I *heard* them, Edward..."

"Oh, baby," I sighed, again trying to get her to look at me. "I'm sorry, love."

"I sat against my door...I pretended that it wasn't happening! How could that possibly have fucking worked?" she asked, finally looking up at me, but I could tell she wasn't really *seeing* me.

"You were eight years old, and he threatened you, baby."

"I didn't do anything!" she gasped, covering her mouth with a shaky hand. "I just *let* him kill her, Edward! Why? Why would I do that? And then the next morning, I didn't remember a fucking thing? How is that fucking possible?"

I watched as she paled to a grayish-white and launched off of my lap. I followed her as she bolted into my hallway bathroom, losing everything in her stomach as she just cried and cried. I fell to my knees beside her, holding her hair as she continued to be sick.

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"I might as well have killed her myself," she said, her voice now barely above a whisper and slightly raspy.

"Don't you dare, Bella," I growled softly in her ear. "You were a child. This wasn't your fault. It was *never* your fucking fault. That's what your dad was trying to tell you."

"I let her die, Edward," she sobbed, gripping me fiercely as I reached for a towel that was hanging on the bar above her head.

"No, you didn't, sweetness. King killed her. If you want someone to blame, then you blame him, but not yourself. I won't let you. *Look at me*," I commanded, feeling like a real shit for being forceful, but she needed to understand. I made her look at my face as I cleaned her up. "You didn't do anything wrong. King did. Maybe your dad did by keeping it from you, but you didn't do anything wrong. Tell me that you know that!"

"She didn't leave me..."

"No, baby," I agreed with her, tucking her hair behind her ears. "She was taken from you."

"She told me to do what he said," she whispered, a hiccuping sob escaping her.

"She was protecting you, my love," I sighed, relaxing just a little that she was calming down as she nodded.

"He killed her, Edward," she cried, more tears slipping down her face. "He killed them both!"

"And the motherfucker will pay for it, Bella. I swear it!" I growled, because this one man had cause my girl way too much heartache. The fucker wouldn't live to see his next Christmas.

I gave her the once over, noticing that she was a mess, so I helped her to her feet. I guided her down the hall to my bedroom, making her sit on the edge of

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the bed. Carefully, I tugged off her shirt, jeans, and sneakers, leaving her in her underwear. With a cool, wet cloth, I cleaned her face, hands, and the tips of her hair.

I pulled back the covers, lifting her up and tucking her in, but she did something that she hadn't done since the night I'd pulled her from Miller's basement.

She panicked.

"Don't!" she gasped, grabbing at my wrists. "Don't leave me!"

"I'm not going anywhere, Bella. I'm right here, and I'll always be here," I told her, as I crawled in bed beside her, pulling her to me as close as she wanted to get. She pulled me in, burying her hot face in my neck and letting more tears come as I whispered, "There's no place else I'd rather be."

And that was the honest truth, because I'd hold her forever, as long as it made her feel safe, as long as it kept the monsters at bay.

A/N...I know, I know, I know... So King has been an ass even before Bella was born. Please keep in mind that Bella was 8 years old the night her mother was killed. It is quite possible for her to have completely blocked the entire event in her mind. And Charlie thought he was doing the best thing for her by letting her stay that way. I told you that poor Charlie was just misguided. However he thought he was protecting her.

The next chapter has become my favorite, because this Bella is strong, and nothing holds her down for long. And that's all I'm sayin'.

I want to thank JenRar for beta'ing this, for Goober_Lou for pre-reading it. And MedusaInNY for putting it on my blog, which will be important considering that Ffnet is back to having issues.

As far as the next post goes...I won't be posting 19 until FF gets itself back under control, so I am not sure when this will happen. Until then...Later.

Chapter 19

A/N...I am sorry that I didn't post on my normal Wed. It was a RL thing, not a FF thing. :)

Now...I want to say that this is my fave chapter so far... that it comes with an extreme LEMON WARNING. And I think you'll be surprised at just how strong our girl Bella truly is. It takes some serious shit to keep her down, I think.

CHAPTER 19

BELLA

I gasped, sitting straight up in bed. I was confused for just a moment as to where I was, but it all came back to me slowly - Edward's house, Charlie dead, Mom murdered. I took a deep breath, squeezing my eyes closed, and looked around. I was alone in his room, and it was dark. We'd arrived at his house in the early morning, so I must have slept the day away after reading Charlie's letter.

I looked down at myself, feeling gross, achy, and strung out. I was only wearing my underwear, I noticed, as the covers fell away from me. I got up and padded my way into the bathroom, turning on the water for a quick shower. I needed to wash the sleep, vomit, and tears away.

When my shower was over and my teeth brushed, I wrapped a towel around myself, walking back into the bedroom. The house was so quiet that it was almost creepy, and suddenly, I needed to see Edward. My whole body truly just *ached* to be in the same room as him. Finding his discarded black button down shirt from the day before, I pulled it on in a rush, just to at least have his smell near me. I was halfway down the hall, when I realized that I'd put nothing else on, and that caused me to almost trip.

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I was in such a hurry to find him that I didn't remember the safety of my underwear or the security that they usually brought with them; I *only* needed Edward. And with that thought, despite the sadness of my father's death that I was still feeling, I suddenly felt lighter, freer. I didn't need to hide from Edward anymore, because he was all things safe and secure, and warm and comforting.

I froze for just a moment, reveling in the freedom, the revelation that the only thing that mattered was the man that had done nothing but take care of me since he found me in Miller's basement. He'd fought me, pushed me, loved me, and wiped away tear after tear. My love for him was bigger than anything Miller could have ever done to me, and I knew that more standing there in Edward's hallway than I ever had before. I'd lost my father, and now my mother all over again; I couldn't lose him - and that fear was bigger than any punch, burn, or scar.

I found him in the kitchen, laptop open and papers strewn up and down the counter. He was wearing only the jeans he'd had on the night before, as he ran a hand through his hair roughly. He seemed to be studying...well, everything. Not only were the contents of my father's box on the counter, but some other papers, as well, including a picture of myself that I didn't recognize.

It was the man himself my eyes were drawn to, though, because just seeing him made the nerves in my stomach completely calm. He was pacing in front of the papers on the bar, his face grim and dark as he ran another hand through his hair. He braced his arms on the counter, completely oblivious to my presence, every muscle in his upper body stretching taut with the stance he took as he continued to look over what seemed to be the police report from my mother's...murder.

The idea that she hadn't killed herself was new and a little acute, and I inhaled sharply as that thought rattled through my brain. I felt like I finally understood myself, because my nightmares had never made any sense whatsoever. They were always confusing and strange, like I could never quite reach exactly what I was aiming for.

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Edward's gaze shot up sharply from the counter at the sound I made, his warm, evergreen eyes raking over me before he moved.

"Hey," he sighed, walking from behind the counter. "I'm sorry you woke up alone, but I w-was restless, a-and I th-thought I'd w-wake you," he stuttered sweetly as he pulled out a bar stool. "Come here and let me look at you," he said, changing from nervous to commanding and concerned. He swept me up, setting me gently on the stool so that he could look me in the face. "How do you feel, baby?" he asked, tucking my damp hair back behind my ears.

"Better now," I sighed, reaching up to touch his face when he sat in front of me.

In fact, I couldn't stop touching him, just to make sure he was there. My hands slid over his shoulders, down his arms, and then right back to his face again.

"I didn't want to leave you alone, baby," he sighed, pulling me closer so that his thighs were on either side of mine. "I just wanted you to get some rest, and I was too...wired to stay in there," he explained, lifting my face with the tips of his fingers under my chin to make sure I heard him.

"S'okay," I mumbled, feeling a strange sense of need just about swallow me whole. "What are you doing?" I asked, trying to fight it, because I felt unstable at the moment.

"Besides ogling you in my shirt?" he teased with a sexily raised eyebrow.

I snickered, shrugged, and looked back at him. "It smelled like you...you weren't there...I took it," I stated as fact, and not apologizing one bit.

He grinned and kissed my forehead. "Fine, take whatever you want, love," he snickered, turning to the counter. "I was sending all this shit to my dad and Benny," he said, turning back to me with the police report in his hand. "My dad had no fucking clue about any of this shit..."

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"Is he pissed at us?" I asked, wincing at the mere idea of an angry Carlisle, because that shit wasn't pretty.

"No, baby," Edward crooned, shaking his head and reaching for my hand to link our fingers together. "He said as soon as he relayed Charlie's last message to you, he figured it was something important. He would have been really fucking pissed had you run off to do it by yourself, though," he growled, giving me a pointed look.

"I know," I whined, looking away from him. "I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking straight..."

"He's coming down from Seattle to see you tomorrow, so we're staying a little longer. I've already let them know, Bella," he sighed, setting the police report down. "None of this shit matters, love. Are *you* all right?"

I nodded, and then shrugged. "I feel strangely... *okay*," I told him, but searched his face for answers - *any* answers. "I've had nightmares for years that just didn't make sense," I confessed softly. "But they weren't nightmares, apparently." I snorted humorlessly, pointing to the counter top. "They were memories. That kind of makes me feel better about my own mind. I still don't know how I'd forgotten it all..."

Edward studied my face for a moment, but took a deep breath. "I've been told that it's a defense mechanism," he started, picking up our hands with our fingers still linked and kissing the back of mine. "I've seen guys survive prison camps that way. I've seen them forget it all and still be able to function normally. My dad says that sometimes minds can only take so much, before it turns in on itself to protect you, and he's seen worse shit than I have."

I nodded in agreement, swallowing thickly. "I'm...I'm glad to know that she didn't leave me..." I whispered, tilting my head to look at one of the pictures from my dad.

"Don't look, love," Edward sighed, turning the stack over. "Don't remember her that way." He pulled his hand from mine and cupped both sides of my face,

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pressing his forehead to mine. "No one could figure out why she would leave you, and now we know she didn't, baby. She was stolen from you, Bella, and we all intend to make it right, okay?"

My gaze was locked with his, and I could see he meant every word in his almost black eyes, and he meant them with severe and unadulterated *malice*. He wasn't just sincere; he was *vowing* to me that anyone that had hurt me would die. If I didn't know him, didn't love him the way that I did, it would've scared me. This was the part of him that he considered the monster, but he was far from it. He was just protective, and angry, and so very loyal. My Edward was pissed that I was hurting, and he was reacting the only way that he knew how - he wanted, *needed* to just fucking *fix* it. And it was frustrating him all to hell that he couldn't.

"How long have you been up going over this stuff?" I asked him, standing up on the rung of his stool between his legs, so that I could wrap my arms around his neck, because my need was growing exponentially.

"A few hours," he sighed, relaxing in my arms instantly as his hands rested on my waist. His eyes never left mine. "I...I d-didn't know w-what else to do f-for y-you, love," he admitted softly.

"I know," I said with a nod, kissing his forehead, "and it's okay, Edward. I don't know what I'm doing about it, either. I can't think about it right now..."

Edward nodded, accepting my reply and leaning in to kiss my collar bone, which became exposed as his too-large shirt slipped down just a bit over my shoulder.

"Do you want something to eat, Bella? You didn't exactly keep down anything this morning," he mumbled softly against my skin, as his lips traveled up to my neck. "God, you always taste so fucking good..."

"Not hungry," I whispered, squeezing my eyes closed when his mouth opened warm and wet at the soft, sensitive part just below my ear. I felt myself slip deeper into that hole of need that I'd practically woken up in.

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I threaded my fingers into his hair, tugging him gently away from my neck, so I could look at his handsome face and his darkening green eyes. He licked his lips as he huffed a deep breath, his brow furrowing.

"I'm sorry," he sighed, looking so guilty over something he didn't need to be. "Sometimes, you're really hard to resist." His mouth turned up into the crooked smile that I loved.

"Don't apologize," I said, leaning in to barely brush my lips against his, "and *don't* stop. I...I need..."

"Tell me," he murmured, just before he lightly nipped at my bottom lip, dragging his tongue across it. "Tell me what you need..."

"Just...you."

All I wanted was Edward, with everything in me. I needed to finally give myself over to him completely, I needed to wrap myself in the safety and warmth of his strong arms, and I needed to finally throw away fears that were insignificant in comparison to the desire, love, and need I had for the man in my arms.

My hands cupped both sides of his face, and I leaned down to kiss him, trying to convey everything I felt, everything I wanted in just that kiss. When our tongues swirled together, Edward's hands gripped and caressed everything he knew was "safe" on the outside of the material. He still hadn't discovered what was underneath his shirt that was slowly slipping down my shoulders; that is, until he palmed my thighs, ghosting up to my ass.

Then, he froze.

"Bella," he panted, his head falling to my shoulder as he pulled me to his lap, and I wrapped my legs around him. "Baby...you have to say the words, not just... Oh fuck, you feel like heaven," he growled, his hands groping my bare ass with an erotic rhythm. "Not just show up like this. I need you to be ready...I need you to *say it*."

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"I want you," I stated, my own forehead falling to his shoulder. "I love you...so much," I whispered, skimming small kisses up his neck to his ear.

"I really want you, too, baby," he admitted, kissing roughly up my neck, only to pull back to look me in the eyes. "I need you to be sure. I'd die if we jumped the gun and fucked up, or...or if you wanted this for some other reason... God, I love you so fucking much, and I'd hate it if we..."

"No," I said, wriggling closer to him. "I...I'm ready, Edward. My only thought when I woke up was to get to you. So much so that I completely forgot medicine, and underwear, and...fears. So I'm asking you...please, don't stop."

"Fuck," he growled, his eyes darkening as he dove for my mouth, plundering it with his tongue.

Suddenly, I realized just how much Edward had been holding back from me. He was strength, power, and all things carnal that I'd never felt from him before that one moment, as his hands couldn't decide exactly where to be. He was under the shirt and over it, he was gripping the fabric at my sides to pull me closer, and then he was tugging the damn thing further down my shoulder, just to expose more skin.

"I want to do this right," he breathed against the skin of my shoulder, just before dragging his teeth sensually over my skin. His eyes locked with mine through his long, dark lashes, as his lips never left my shoulder. "I want to...mmm, savor you, every fucking *inch* of you. I want to...take my time, Bella," he said, swirling his tongue slowly over my shoulder and ending in one more open mouth kiss.

There was nothing to say to that, because he suddenly stood up with my arms and legs still wrapped around him. I couldn't help but kiss his jaw, dragging my teeth over its strong edge, weaving my fingers back into his hair.

"And I want you in *my* bed," he growled, striding down the hall, practically kicking the door closed. "You have no fucking idea how long I've wanted you... *right there*," he purred, as we fell across the bed in a tangle of arms, legs,

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lips, and tongues.

"How long?" I gasped, my head rolling back as he dove for my neck.

"Since our first kiss, love," he chuckled darkly, grinding his hips against me.

"Then I've got you beat," I teased him, dragging my fingers up his back and reveling in every muscle, every dip.

He laughed softly in my ear, raising up just enough to sit back on his heels between my thighs and tug roughly on the buttons of the shirt I was wearing.

"Tell me," he growled, tugging again and sending a button pinging somewhere into his bedroom.

"The first day I saw you cooking breakfast in just shorts," I giggled, reaching for his hands to stop him from ruining his shirt.

He grinned, and it was smug and lighthearted... and a touch embarrassed.

"Really, Miss Swan?" he asked, grabbing my hands and pinning them to the bed above my head. "Those stay there..." he commanded with a smirk and a sexy ass raised eyebrow, going right back to the shirt to send one more button sailing away. "You were thinking about me that soon?"

"Hell, yes," I snorted, breaking into more giggles when he popped off another button, and then another. "I thought you'd grown up to be damn hot, Edward. It's not like you don't know...and who can resist a half naked man that can cook?" I asked him, smiling when he let out a deep, sexy chuckle.

He left the bottom two buttons intact, and I could feel his demeanor change and slow down. Edward braced an elbow next to my head, lowering his body slowly, half on top of mine. Playing with my hair with the hand by my head, Edward gazed almost languidly down my body and back up to my face, the fingers of his free hand tracing the exposed skin he'd revealed.

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"I can't wait to touch you...to *see* you," he said, his voice sounding like smooth velvet, but also unsure, like he was confessing a secret.

"No more waiting," I sighed, pushing at him and pushing at him, until he finally relented, falling onto his back with a smirk and heavy lidded eyes, and with gripping hands and flexing abs. "We've waited long enough, Edward," I huffed, straddling his thighs in order to grip the front of his jeans.

As I ogled him underneath me, I couldn't imagine or remember ever wanting someone more. And for a moment, I wondered if this was what Esme was talking about - that feeling of being completely whole and wanting to share myself with only one person. Leaning over him, I braced my hands by his head and kissed the ink on his chest that represented who he was, and I gave my fears one last mental check as he caressed my thighs, my ass, and my lower back with slow moving, sensual hands.

There were no more fears.

There was only me - my real self. There wasn't panic, or the need to cover up, or even the knowledge that my scars were still visible, because when my eyes locked with his, I could tell scars were not on Edward's mind. He loved me, wanted me, and armed with that epiphany, I thought I would eat him alive.

I licked up his chest, dragging lips, teeth, and tongue over his skin. By the time my lips met his eagerly awaiting mouth, there were sounds in the room that I didn't recognize from either of us. It sounded desperate and damn erotic, and so fucking needy that it was almost distracting, but we were finally giving in. With a firm grip on my ass, Edward ground my center against his erection, and we both moaned into each other's mouths.

"Fuck, baby...so wet," he breathed against my lips. "But I want you wetter than that for me..." he growled, sounding almost threatening and nipping at my bottom lip.

I sat up, bracing my hands on his glorious stomach as his hands held my hips firmly, grinding me against him. I backed out of his reach, going once again for

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the button of his jeans.

"I want to see you," I told him, tugging each button on his jeans with a slow, teasing tug, just to watch him squirm.

"Bella," he groaned, his head falling back to the bed when his cock sprang free from the confines of the old, soft denim. "Baby...when these come off," he said, sitting up before I could yank the jeans down, "it's over. There's no going back."

I shirked out of his grasp, pushed him back down onto his back, and yanked down his jeans, giving Edward a pointed look. "All that talk about 'one day,' Edward...it's over. No more. 'One day' has arrived..."

"Fuck me," he hissed as his eyes rolled back, lifting his hips as I finally got rid of the material that I'd been struggling with for the last few minutes and dropped them off the side of the bed to the floor.

"Oh, most definitely, but... *later*," I purred, crawling up his now perfectly naked and artfully sculpted body, which I was now thinking was completely mine, trapping his substantial arousal between our stomachs. "Right now, I want you to make love to me, Edward..."

He wrapped an arm around my waist and slid a hand up to the base of my neck, rolling us again, so that he was braced over me. He kissed me hard, deep, delving his tongue into my mouth as my hips tried to find some friction against the thigh he'd slid between my legs.

His mouth broke from mine, only to lick and suck his way to my ear. "Do you remember what I told you, baby?" he asked, his voice taking on a husky, sexy tenor that just about made all my girly parts clench. "Do you? What I told you I'd do to you when the time came?"

"Sweet Jesus," I breathed, my hands gliding down his back and back up to his strong shoulders, only to pull him closer, because fuck yes, I remembered everything that he'd ever said to me, ever promised me.

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My shirt was a fucking twisted mess all around me, but it still covered the lower half of me when Edward pulled back a bit. One of my breasts was exposed, and he lowered his mouth to place a long suckle to my pebbled nipple, before pushing the fabric off the other breast, only to give it the same attention. My body arched off the bed, but firm hands held me still.

"Let me see if I can remind you," he murmured against my sternum, before his tongue snaked out to swirl over my skin. "I believe I said I'd kiss you... *everywhere*."

He slipped further down my body, opening the shirt more to swirl another licking kiss just above my belly button.

"I'm *pretty* sure," he crooned, sitting up just a bit and licking his lips, "that I said I'd taste you, that I wanted to feel you come on my tongue. Am I right, Bella?" he asked, and I swear he sounded like the devil making a deal for my soul, because at that point I'd give it to him if he made good on *any* of those promises.

"Edward," I groaned, squirming under him, but he held me still.

"Am I right, baby?" he asked again, a small smile curling the corners of his now kiss bruised lips.

"Uh huh," I panted, nodding frantically.

"Then I'm asking you one last time, love," he said, his voice changing from carnal and sensual, to caring and tentative. "Are you sure?"

I gazed up at him, and even though his eyes were heavy lidded and lust-filled, even though his fingers were tracing indistinguishable circles over my exposed breasts, and even though he was dragging his tongue slowly across his bottom lip like he was waiting to devour me, I knew for a fucking fact, he'd stop right then if I said the word. I suddenly - if it was possible - wanted and loved him more than ever.

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"I love you. I'm sure about *you*," I told him, hoping that said it all, because there wasn't anything more important than getting that point across right then. He was more important than scars and fears; he was my everything, just... *everything*.

Edward's gaze softened, and he leaned down to press his lips to mine. "Christ, Bella, I'm so fucking in love with you. So much," he breathed, pressing his forehead to mine, briefly locking gazes with me. "I want to show you...want to make you *feel* it..."

"Me, too," I whimpered, feeling almost overwhelmed with the emotions both of us were feeling. If it was this intense before, I couldn't even think about how intense it would be when we were finally one.

He kissed me one more time, before sitting up between my legs, his fingers gliding down the edges of his ruined shirt. It was make or break time for me, but there wasn't an ounce of fear left in me. I nodded at him, as his fingers gripped the bottom of his shirt. With one last swift tug, he yanked the shirt completely open, sending the last two buttons off into oblivion.

~oOo~

EDWARD

Jesus fucking Christ, she was beautiful! Every fucking inch of her. I didn't see fear in her eyes, and I never fucking saw her scars. I just saw the woman that held my heart and soul in her hands, looking up at me with the same desire in her eyes that must have matched my own.

As hard as I was, as much as I wanted to bury myself inside of her, I really wanted to touch her, taste her. No more clothes, no more panic attacks. Just the two of us.

"Did you know what you were doing to me when you came out in *my* fucking shirt, baby?" I asked her, tugging that sinful thing off of her and dropping it to the bedroom floor. "I thought I was fucking dreaming..."

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Bella snorted, biting her bottom lip. "No..."

Finally, she lay before me in nothing, completely naked. I shook my head to try and clear it, to try and slow down, because this was monumental for her. And she didn't look panicked one bit. That scar cream must have really been working, because the last time she'd been uncovered in front of me, I could still see the burns on her stomach and a few lines here and there. Maybe love was fucking blind, like they said, but all I could see was her glorious body sprawled out underneath me.

"You have to be..." I breathed, leaning over her just to brush my lips across hers, "...the most fucking gorgeous thing I've ever seen. *Ever*, baby."

Maybe waiting for her had made this... *more* - more intense, more important, more, more, more. I'd fantasized about this moment, about finally being with her, but I wasn't sure I'd come close in my mind, because my chest almost ached with the need to be inside of her. I'd never felt that way about any woman in my fucking life, and it was scary, but it was also comforting, because I knew I'd never want another for as long as I fucking lived.

I couldn't believe I was touching her, with open hands, brushing thumbs, and long, wet kisses to every inch of her. I slid further down her body, cupping her breasts, before trailing my fingers lightly down her stomach, and I finally saw her bare in front of my face. I could smell her want for me, and it was almost my undoing.

Glancing up at Bella, I made sure she was still doing fine, before I placed kisses to each scar on her hips, and one that was between her bellybutton and her mound. It was my first time seeing them, and I paid them the reverence and respect that I'd paid to every other scar of hers.

Trailing my fingers oh so lightly, I traced the edge of where her legs met her hips, placing a kiss to each thigh and inhaling deeply. I closed my eyes, following the same path with my nose and lips, but her legs were rubbing together.

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"Open up for me, baby," I purred, swirling my tongue where her skin creased. "I want to see this beautiful pussy, love."

I placed my hands on the inside of her thighs, moaning when they fell open for me. My thumbs caressed the creases between her legs, as my tongue finally met her wet heat for the first time without any barrier between us.

"Edward," she cried, her hips bucking up towards my face.

One of her legs fell to the side, while the other one went over my shoulder, digging her heel into my back to bring me closer. My girl wanted more.

The flavor of her, the *taste* was like nothing else on the planet. The heat and slick skin was addictive, as I buried my tongue as deep inside of her as I could. My thumbs continued to move, one at the tight muscle just outside of her lips, and the other now finding a rhythm on her clit that had her hips meeting against my face.

Her hands gripped sheets, her head fell back to my pillow, all of her hair around her like a halo of chocolate. But it was her panting, her cries of my name that had me hard as steel, because she was fucking stunning when she was about to come, even more so when it hit her hard, like I wanted it to then.

I dragged my tongue between her folds, from one opening to the other, twirling it hard around her clit at the same time that I sank two fingers deep within her.

"Holy fuck, Edward," she cried out through gritted teeth, her walls clenching once hard around my fingers.

"Don't you fight it, love. You look at me when you come for me," I commanded, almost smiling when she cursed a string of profanities, her heel digging just shy of painful into my back.

Her eyes locked with mine just as I deliberately snaked my tongue out flat against her clit, curling my fingers just right to find the spot inside her that would send her flying over the edge. I sucked her hard into my mouth, my eyes

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rolling back as soon as she completely shattered.

Her walls clenched down over my fingers, and I couldn't help but lick her, taste her, feel her as she trembled hard against my mouth. It was so fucking amazing, and she was so fucking beautiful that my forehead fell to her thigh in order to keep me from coming at the sight and sound of her. Turning my head, I opened my mouth to the inside of her thigh, sucking hard to mark her, to claim her, to give her a reminder of who had made her feel that good.

"Edward, please..." Her breathless plea echoed in the room, and my head snapped up to look at her, to make sure she was still okay. She pulled at my shoulders, tugging me up her body. "Please, baby...now...I want you inside now..."

My brow furrowed at the few tears that leaked down her face, and I couldn't help but kiss them away. "You okay?" I asked, unable to help myself.

"Not bad tears," she explained softly, cupping my face as I settled between her legs, almost groaning at how perfect she felt beneath me. "Please, Edward," she whispered, rubbing her thumbs across my cheekbones.

I went to reach for my nightstand for a condom - not that I kept them there for this bed, because no woman had ever been in this bed. The *only* woman that mattered stopped me, though, shaking her head.

"You don't need..." she told me, still shaking her head, but linking our fingers together. "I'm on the shot. I want to... *feel* you, baby..."

Nothing could have stopped the moan at that point as I kissed her in a frenzy, because fuck, if she wasn't killing me. I was clean; I was checked regularly, due to my traveling out of country, and I'd been completely celibate for over a month before even seeing Bella, but I'd never been with anyone without a condom, and just the mere thought of it was just one more thing that I'd dreamed about.

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Squeezing her hand that was still in mine, we kissed almost roughly with turned heads, warm, wet mouths, and gasping moans escaping both of us. My hips instinctively pushed forward, and my eyes rolled back into my head when I slipped through her wet heat.

I broke away from her mouth, pressing my forehead to hers. "I love you," I breathed, squeezing my eyes shut as Bella rolled her hips over mine, her breathing as ragged as mine as I lined up with her just right. It took all I had not to just push into her as deep as I could go.

However, the very second I began to enter her, the feelings were almost too much. I'd never felt as connected to someone as I did right then. And the *feel* of her without the thin latex barrier between us was in-fucking-credible. Who knew such a thin piece of rubber could take away that much sensation? She was warm, and tight, and so wet that my head fell to her shoulder once I was completely inside of her.

It was a feeling of... *finally*. It was a feeling of the other half of me now connected with its mate. It was the feeling of home and comfort, and the knowledge that every sexual experience I'd had before paled in comparison to that moment. It was as close to heaven as I could possibly fucking imagine. And I knew that none of it was completely physical, that it was emotional, as well, because my girl knew me, loved me in spite of all of my asinine behaviors, would kill for me. I had to bury my face in her neck to hide the tears that threatened to fall.

"Christ," I breathed, still unable to move inside of her yet.

"Edward," I heard her whimper in my ear, as her arm wrapped all the way around my head, her other hand still squeezing my fingers.

"I know, baby," I panted, turning my head to place a long, slow kiss to her neck as I pulled slowly back. "I've never..."

"Oh, God..." rushed from her mouth as soon as I pushed back in, and I kissed up her jaw so that I could see her face.

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I did it again and again, at an agonizingly slow pace, because her face was just stunning. Her neck arched back into my pillow, her cheeks flushed. Her mouth hung open as she tried to catch her breath, but it was those dark, chocolate eyes locked onto mine that caused me to pick up the pace, because even though love was written all over her face, she looked... *ravenous* for me. And fuck, if that wasn't hot as hell.

Bella pulled her hand from mine, weaving her fingers in my hair and scraping them down my back, and her hips rose up to meet mine thrust for thrust. I gripped the sheets by her head in order to not pound her senseless. Bracing myself on my elbow so that I could touch her, I ghosted my hand down her side, and hitched her leg up higher around my waist, so I could go that much deeper inside of her. I felt her walls started to clench around me.

"That's it, love. Come for me... *again*," I purred in her ear. "But I'm so not fucking done with you yet..."

"Fuck, Edward," she practically growled, "you feel so good... *right there*."

I couldn't help the smirk that crossed my face as she gripped my ass, guiding me where she wanted me, pushing me against herself just right so that I rubbed against her clit the way she wanted, the way she needed in order to get off. Gone was my fear-filled girl, and I didn't miss her one bit, because as soon as she came with my name slipping from her lips, I found myself on my back.

"Mmm, baby," I growled through gritted teeth as she rode me hard. "You're so fucking beautiful riding my cock, love..."

I watched as a carnal smile graced my girl's features, as she leaned back to grab my thighs in order take me in deeper. Her body was a graceful wave of motion, fluid and phenomenal in how she felt with every swivel of her hips, with every grip of her thighs at my sides.

"So good, Edward..."

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Sweat glistened on her body, her hair sticking to her face as she continued her movements over me, and I was so fucking *close*, just watching her. I gripped her hips, guiding her as she started to falter and thrusting hard up into her, because my girl was close again, too.

"Give me another one, Bella," I commanded, pulling her down over me.

Her damp forehead pressed to mine, as our bodies, slick and hot, slipped smoothly and erotically together.

"Together, baby..." she panted, her little hands planting hard on either side of my head. "I can't... I want... Come with me," she finally ground out.

I rolled her back over, because I knew she was so close that she couldn't even concentrate.

I captured a bead of sweat on my tongue that was dripping slowly down her neck, licking slowly up to her mouth. "Oh, Bella...your taste... I'll never get enough now, baby. Never," I growled, nipping at her bottom lip and claiming her mouth, as her legs wrapped higher around me and her hands gripped my shoulders.

I slipped my hand between us, my forehead against hers, as I slowly but firmly pressed the spot that would bring her one more climax, because fuck, I wasn't going to last much longer. The slow burn started in my stomach, blazing down to my dick, and my teeth bit softly down on Bella's bottom lip as her orgasm clenched around me hard.

"Shit," she breathed, her whole body arching up one more time before I finally gave in.

Her last climax was too much to fight, though I never wanted the feeling of been joined with her to end. Curses flew from my mouth as I finally came with an explosion, burying my face in her neck. My weight fell on her, because I couldn't move, nor did I want to leave her touch or the feeling of being inside of her.

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I was a ruined man. There was nothing that could keep me away from Bella now. Nothing.

~oOo~

BELLA

I awoke to a still, quiet, and dark room. I didn't move, though, because my heavy blanket was breathing softly in my ear. I was lying on my stomach and Edward was draped around me, our legs tangled together under the covers.

According to the clock, it was barely five in the morning. My body was deliciously achy - the kind of achy that reminded me exactly of what had taken place the night before. I had to fight an audible moan at just the memory of it, because we'd finally made love. It had been everything I'd imagined, and oh so much more.

I'd never felt as overwhelmed or as full as I had last night when Edward was worshipping me. And he had *worshiped* me, thoroughly. I thought my mind would actually snap with the feel of his mouth on me and with the emotions that came from finally becoming one with him. In all the activities prior, I'd wondered what the actual act would do to me once I was finally able to let go of my fears, and I'd gotten my answer - pure carnal, emotional, erotic pleasure, capped off with a cemented feeling of more than just love. In fact, I wasn't sure there was a word for it.

Edward shifted behind me, his hand sliding down from my shoulder, along my side, eventually palming my ass, and I smiled into the pillow, because I wasn't sure if he was dreaming or slowly waking up. I was glad he couldn't see my face at the moment, because I was afraid of one outcome from last night.

I was insatiable for him now.

I wanted him again, even though I'd just woken up. I didn't care that the sun wasn't even out. In fact, just his unconscious touch had me wet and fighting the urge to turn over in his arms. I wanted to wrap myself around him again, see

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his face when he came hard, watch his body when every muscle seemed to be stretched tight, rolling underneath his smooth skin, and I wanted to see his eyes go from the beautiful sweet, calm green, to the almost pitch black of want that they had the night before. I wanted him to enter me with that gratifying slowness that he'd done, but I also wanted to see exactly what would happen had he not been so gentle, not been so controlled, because I could tell he was holding back. Hell, he'd always held back with me, and I was happy to say he didn't have to anymore.

My fears were gone, leaving me with a strange sense of peace, because I could now focus on the situations that lay outside the bedroom we were in - something I'd not truly been able to do since Edward had found me in Miller's basement. I knew that something had to be done about King, about Miller, and now the responsibility rested with my memories, with Edward's crew and connections. I knew that Carlisle would be coming to Edward's house later, and I couldn't wait to see him, because knowing Carlisle, he was probably taking his oldest friend's death pretty damn hard, and had almost died himself trying to stop it.

I took a deep breath, fighting the heartache that rose to the surface, because a huge list of things to do just flew through my mind at lightning speed - funeral arrangements, meetings at TT, and not to mention the sorting through of my mother's case. Edward had been going over her file when I interrupted him, and I was curious as to what his opinion was, what he thought the next step should be. However, I had a feeling that was why Carlisle was coming in from Seattle today.

Edward's hand moved again, this time slipping around to my stomach and up to my breast, cupping it fully. I smiled again, now beginning to think he was really awake and always woke up with sexual intentions.

"So tense all of a sudden," he rumbled in my ear with a deep, sleepy voice, but it was the warm, wet, teeth-dragging kiss to my shoulder that had my eyes rolling into the back of my head. He was not helping my insatiable situation. At all. "It's too damn early to be this tense, love..."

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I bit down on my bottom lip to stop my whimper when his thumb brushed over my peaked nipple at the same time another kiss met my skin - this time, closer to my ear. Edward's hips shifted under the covers, pressing his very prominent erection against my ass, but it was his deep moan when I arched against him that practically had me begging for him.

"Tell me," he commanded, rolling me completely onto my stomach and dragging his fingers down my arms so that his hands could massage down my back. "Was last night too soon, baby?" he asked, placing a kiss to each of my shoulder blades as his thumbs worked the muscles down my spine.

"No," I sighed, my body practically shaking with the want for him; I felt like a cat in heat - primed and ready for him.

A moan finally escaped my mouth as his tongue swirled over my ribs and down to the small of my back.

"Should I stop, then?" he asked, slithering down my body just a bit in order to cup both of my ass cheeks.

I shook my head, finally glancing over my shoulder and meeting his gaze.

"No," I breathed, locking eyes with him.

I'd thought he'd looked like he'd wanted to eat me alive last night, but nothing compared to the look in his eyes right then. His hair was everywhere - the very definition of sex hair - and his crooked smirk curled up at the corner of his mouth. His face was covered in two day old stubble, his eyes were dark and filled with a deadly gleam, and his hands never stopped touching, caressing.

"What were you thinking about, love?" he asked, his eyes still locked with mine as he bent to press an open mouth kiss to a spot just above my bottom.

"I don't remember." I moaned the half truth, because Edward had a tendency to make me forget my very name, everything else be damned.

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"Good," he grunted, crawling up my body so that his mouth was by my ear. "God, I fucking want you so badly right now," he purred, suckling my earlobe at the same time his hand slipped between my legs. "Mmm, and I'm not the only one feeling... *needy* this morning," he crooned, smiling against the shell of my ear, before licking it teasingly.

His hand palmed me possessively, his fingers touched everywhere but where I wanted him the most, and I found my hips trying to raise up to meet him, to guide him to the right spot.

"I can help with this, baby..." he teased again, still avoiding where I wanted his fingers - or any part of him, really - the most.

"Edward," I growled, unable to take it any longer. "Stop fucking teasing, please..."

"It seems I will get to fuck you before the sun rises," he mused aloud, a dark chuckle escaping him.

"*Edward*," I pleaded again, looking back over my shoulder.

He moved back slightly, one hand weaving into my hair and the other bending my leg out to the side. Wrenching my head to the side by my hair, he pressed every inch of his body against mine, and I could feel him hard and ready between my legs as he braced an arm by my shoulder, kissing me senseless.

"Tell me to stop, Bella," he grunted in my ear after tearing away from my mouth.

"I can't," I panted, squeezing my eyes shut. "Fuck me, Edward..."

Edward exhaled sharply, driving into me with a sudden thrust of his hips, and we both cried out into the early morning darkness.

"Fuck, yes," he hissed into my neck, once again nipping lightly at my flesh with his teeth.

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It was rough, deliciously sweaty, and all consuming. It was two bodies acting completely on instinct, and it wasn't long before I was close - really close - because the feel of Edward filling me over and over, the sound of skin against skin, and taste of his deep, wet kisses every time he pulled my hair back was pushing me closer and closer to the edge; I couldn't stop myself from falling over, despite how much I wanted all those things to last.

"Holy fuck," I gasped, my head falling to the pillow as we both came with a fierceness I wasn't sure either of us was prepared for.

Edward's sweaty forehead fell to my shoulder, his breathing ragged as he panted, "Oh yeah...good morning, love..."

I snorted into a laugh that I couldn't stop, rolling my eyes as he joined me. I rolled in his embrace, wincing when we separated, not from discomfort, but from the loss of being connected to him.

He reached up with gentle fingers, brushed a lock of hair from my face, and leaned down to kiss me sweetly.

I smirked up at him, chuckling, "Good morning to you, too."

~oOo~

"Come, love," Edward ordered with a sweet smile, offering me his hand and leading me out his front door. "I want to show you something."

"Kay," I agreed, taking his hand and following him out to his shed. As we walked, I thought back to the last few hours.

We'd fallen asleep for another few hours, but had woken up absolutely famished. We'd showered, dressed, and made breakfast together, which had almost resulted in the christening of Edward's kitchen counters, because he'd thought it would be hilarious to make French toast, only to slam a bottle of maple syrup down on the counter. It had been a challenge, with his eyebrow raised and a wicked smirk on his face, but he hadn't been able to fight his smile

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when I'd exploded into laughter.

His grin had fallen when I'd picked up the bottle to tease him, by pouring it slowly over my French toast, licking my own finger with a moan, just to lock eyes with his. He'd licked his own lips, his gaze falling to my mouth as he'd watched me lick my finger clean.

The ping of an incoming email had broken our gazes, making us both jump. It had been Carlisle, saying that he would be there soon, that he was leaving Seattle then. The reminder of reality had been like a slap in the face for both Edward and me. We'd been almost lost in a haze of sex, love, and sweat for almost twelve hours, and Carlisle's email had brought us back to the truth.

We weren't finished with what we had to do. We weren't out of the woods. If anything, we were in more danger than ever, so we'd eaten our food in silence.

I was pulled out of my thoughts when we walked past the garage. Edward tugged his keys out of his pocket once we neared what I thought was a brush pile, but when I really took a good look at it, I could see that it was a tarp with limbs and leaves attached to it. Edward unlocked a padlock that was hooked to a cable, giving the thing a tug. It zipped cleanly through the eyes of two tarps, causing the cover to fall away. My eyes widened at the sight in front of me.

The whole time, Edward's helicopter had been sitting hidden in plain sight. As he pulled the cover away, dropping it to the grass, my mouth fell open. I don't know what I had pictured in my head, but it wasn't what was currently in front of me.

The front half of the helicopter was blue, the back part, white. It sat on a fairly large slab of concrete, and it looked fast and expensive, and Lord help me - sexy.

"Whoa," I breathed, walking around it, carefully reaching out to trail my fingers down its length.

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"W-we may n-need to f-fly back to Alaska, B-bella," he sputtered, running a hand through his hair, and then along his neck nervously.

"Oh?" I asked, looking from him, back to the helicopter, and then back to him. "You think so?"

"We've stayed away longer than I expected to, and my dad suggested that we leave my car here and take the chopper..." He shrugged, tugging the tarp out of the way.

I grinned, but he wasn't looking at me, because he was nervous for some reason. "Well, that will get us back fast..." I said, walking to him. "So...I get to see you fly?"

His head spun around, his face a little shocked. He nodded slowly, not saying anything else.

"Mmm, that's...really hot," I chuckled, cupping his face.

He fought his smile, but he couldn't stop his eye roll. "Just...grab that other tarp, love. I need to make sure she's ready, if we're gonna take her."

"Oh, she's a *she*, is she?" I giggled, dodging his grasping hands as I ran to the other side to pull away the other side of the cover. "You sound like me and my damn Mustang," I muttered, smiling when he chuckled.

It didn't take long for him to run whatever tests he needed to make sure *she* was ready to go, if that was what his dad wanted. Seeing him sit down in the pilot seat was almost too much for me to look at, because he looked confident, sexy, and capable as he flipped switches and checked gauges. He looked relaxed in the seat, wearing dark jeans and a gray t-shirt. When he finally hopped down to the ground, it was all I could do not to kiss him senseless, but he had something else to show me.

After closing the door, he grabbed my hand and walked us around to his garage, which really was his wood shop. He took his keys out again, unlocking

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the door and raising it up over his head. I looked around the garage, and then back to Edward's pensive face.

This was the real Edward. The Edward that didn't want to fight, didn't want to see people get hurt anymore, didn't want to shed any more blood than he had to. This was the place Edward came to, to completely lose himself in something he loved to do.

Lining the back wall was a work bench covered in tools, and standing in the center was an unfinished bar height table that had this cool storage thing underneath it. The chairs were already done and lined up like good little soldiers along the empty far wall; they were already stained a deep walnut finish.

I reached out, gliding my fingers over the surface of the unfinished table. It was smooth, sanded, but dusty.

I brushed off my hand, looking up at him. He swallowed thickly. "I had to stop what I was doing with that one...there was this girl missing..." he murmured, smirking when I smiled up at him.

"You'll finish it, though?" I verified, raising an eyebrow at him.

"Yes, Bella," he chuckled.

"This..." I started, pointing around the room. "And those birdhouses...that's more than just shop class in a freaking public school, Edward."

He laughed, shrugging and pulling me to him. "You're right. I did take a class from this old man in California about a year ago. The birdhouses...those were kits that I painted the way I wanted them to look...they were the reason I took shop to begin with," he explained, kissing the top of my head and gesturing to a shelf over in the corner. "Those have taught me a lot..."

The shelf was filled with books - all "how to" books - but for a moment, I wondered how much of his hobby was learned, and how much was just pure

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talent, just one of those things people were born to do.

A beeping sound started coming from one of the cabinets over the work bench, and Edward let go of me to walk to it. He opened the cabinet door to reveal a few CCTV screens. I recognized Carlisle's BMW instantly.

"My dad," he sighed, running a hand through his hair.

I was not prepared for the emotions of seeing Carlisle. Not at all. I wasn't prepared for the flash of what had been shown on TV - a bullet through his shoulder as he tried to protect my father; the second bullet had hit Charlie anyway. I wasn't prepared to see him step out gracefully from his car, his arm wrapped in a sling.

I sat down hard in one of Edward's chairs, barely focusing on Edward greeting his dad, asking him if he was okay. I was shockingly jealous for just a split second, but it wasn't fair of me. He could just as easily have lost his father that day. The bullet could've been six inches the other way and taken Carlisle. I felt so very guilty, because in the time that he'd been taking care of me, I'd come to truly love Carlisle, and that went all the way back to the day he'd helped me open Gravity.

"Bella?" I heard Carlisle call me, and I looked up into his face.

He was shattered and sick with guilt. He looked heartbroken and weary. His skin still looked a little ashen, from what I could guess was blood loss and pain. His normal smart, sharp eyes were liquid, soft, and slightly afraid.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," he whispered, cupping my face, and all I could do was nod, my tears threatening to fall. "I'm so sorry...I *tried*..."

"I know," I said with another nod, unable to look into his stricken face.

The dam burst on my emotions when he pulled me into a one armed hug. He smelled like a dad - not quite the Old Spice and tobacco smell of my own father, but it was so close that it hurt my heart to its very core.

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"Are you okay?" I finally managed, pulling back to eye his sling, and then back up to his face and swiping at my tears with the back of my hand.

"I'm fine. I've had worse," he said simply with a shrug, and he sounded so much like his son that I couldn't help the small smile and a nod of acceptance. He cupped my face again, kissing the top of my head. "I'd like to look at the things he...left for you, if that's okay."

I took a deep breath, finally relaxing when Edward's hand caressed the back of my neck. I nodded, saying, "Yeah, okay. I'm sorry we left...I just...I *had* to go..."

"I understand, Bella," Carlisle sighed, stepping back when I slid from the stool. "I would've done the same thing."

We made our way back into the house, spreading everything we had out in front of Carlisle on the kitchen counter. He read my father's letter, his head shaking back and forth, as if in denial, as he read every word - twice. He looked over the photos, the police report, and the rest of the things that had been inside the box that was left in my tree house, finally taking a deep breath and pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Why didn't he tell me this shit?" he growled softly.

"Maybe because you would have killed King sooner for him...out of loyalty, and he didn't want that?" Edward suggested from the other side of the counter, his arms crossed over his chest as he leaned closer. "It sounds like he wanted revenge of some sort, but that he was also protecting Bella. I don't think he ever wanted her to remember...if she didn't have to."

"Do you remember?" Carlisle asked, his head spinning to face me.

"Yes, but not until a few days ago," I said softly, nodding as I pulled the police report towards me. "It was King. He broke the door down, made me leave the room..." My breath caught in my throat, but I recovered quickly, gazing back down at the report in front of me.

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"The thing I don't get..." Edward started, his finger jamming down onto the stack of pictures of my mother. "I don't get what Charlie's saying about DNA. There's nothing in that box that could help us with that. I mean, it's just papers and this shit," he grunted, fiddling with the key, lighter, and handkerchief that had been in the manila envelope along with everything else.

Carlisle studied the letter again, frowning, and then looked over the contents of the box one more time. He picked up the key, spinning it around between his thumb and forefinger, holding it up to me.

"Do you recognize this?" he asked, laying it in my hand.

"No," I sighed, "but that doesn't mean anything. I know he has a safe at the house. I know he has a locked cabinet and drawer in his desk at the office. There's no telling how many safety deposit boxes he had..." I trailed off, because as we all knew, my father was very wealthy.

Carlisle took another deep breath, but closed my hand over the key. "Keep it...for now. I'm not sure what to do with it right this second. Guard it with your life, though, Bells. It may be the end of all of this shit." He shook his head, fighting a smile. "Charlie sure was a cryptic bastard."

We all chuckled, because I'd said the same thing when we were in the tree house.

"We have a problem, sweetheart," Carlisle began, turning in the stool next to mine to face me completely. "Benny says they'll release King if the state can't prove their case. And without Charlie, there's hardly a case, except for his recordings...and they may be thrown out, because the defense is screaming about it. I think King suspects you could remember all along, and Charlie has kept you quiet for all these years about what happened the night your mother was killed. I think that he targeted Charlie from the get go. And I *think* that King was using Billy Black to keep tabs on Charlie for *fucking* years."

"Right," I agreed, nodding slowly. "But...this makes me now the prime target...with *you* next, Carlisle."

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"Exactly," he snorted, rolling his eyes. "We thought the trial would be over after Charlie's testimony, and that King would end up in prison, where..."

"I know about Sam," I growled. "That seems too easy for King."

"Sam is...deadly," Carlisle said with a smirk. "He wouldn't be so kind as to just stab him. He would make him suffer, because that's what he does..."

I snorted, because again, father sounded just like son. "So what now?"

"I want you two to get your asses back to Kate's," he said, glancing between me and Edward. "I want you to fly there, because we never know if the chopper may come in handy, and I want it at the ready."

"Sir," Edward grunted with a nod. "Kate's fuel tanks are full, so we should be good there..."

"Excellent," his father agreed. "I know I can't stop you, so have your girls get to work on these things." He waved a hand at counter. "Especially that key. I have to go back to Seattle before I can join you."

"No!" I growled, grabbing his uninjured arm at the sleeve, because I couldn't bear it if I lost him, too. "You're gonna get fucking killed!"

"I'm with her," Edward snapped. "You need to come with us, Dad."

"I will join you, but I think it's time to pay a visit to Billy Black before I do," he stated, his voice not so nice. In fact, it sounded like he meant to do more than just talk. "And I need to meet with Benny before I do. They'll put a wire on me. They want to get this done, just in case King gets released, because if he goes free, we may all have a problem. He'll rally his men around him, and it will be an all out war on us. He may only have a few left, but Miller is still out there."

I grimaced, shaking my head. "All the more reason for you to come with us, Carlisle. Please!"

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He sighed, shaking his head. "I promised Charlie that I would stick by you though this whole thing, but that means... *ending it*." He growled those last two words, and I knew there was no changing his mind. "I also want to know if Benny thinks you should come forward."

"Absolutely fucking not!" Edward growled. "I can't watch her if the Feds take her into custody. She'll get killed! Not a chance in fucking hell!"

Edward looked like he wanted to punch his father at that last suggestion, and I got up from the stool to walk to him. There wasn't anything that could separate me from Edward now, and he needed to know that.

"Look at me," I snapped, grabbing his face to make him turn to me, but he fought me as he glared at Carlisle. "Edward," I said softly, and he finally turned his fiery eyes to mine. "They can't make me do anything."

He seethed for a minute more, but finally nodded at me, relaxing just a bit as he stared down at me with his eyes softening a bit.

"Bella, you've witnessed too much," Carlisle noted, shaking his head sadly. "Miller, King..." He paused, seeming to be thinking, but he said nothing more on the subject. He simply turned to us with a resolved expression. "Get back to Alaska. I'll join you soon. And let me know what you come up with as far as that key goes." He held up his hand when Edward and I started to protest again. "I promise to be careful. Please, just do as I say..."

We both nodded, but I could tell neither of us liked watching him walk back to the car. We spent the next couple of hours closing up Edward's home. We packed, locked down the garage and Edward's car, loading up the helicopter. And of all the places we'd been, of all the houses I'd seen since being on the run, I was the most upset watching Edward lock his front door after setting the alarm, because *that* house felt like home.

Edward lifted me into the co-pilot seat in silence, buckling me in. He climbed in on the other side, handing over a headset to put on. Before I could put it on, he stopped me, his brow furrowed as he swallowed thickly.

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"W-when this sh-shit is o-over, love, you are coming home... *with me*," he started with a nervous stutter, but ended in his commanding voice, and I smiled up at him, because that was the pure sound of my Edward - a paradox of shy, but in control.

"I planned on it, Edward," I told him, and he leaned in quickly, kissing me deeply. It was over too soon.

He smiled sweetly, nodded once, and put his headset on, gesturing that I should do the same. The chopper started with a sound of pure power and noise, and the ground slowly disappeared from underneath us as we lifted off.

A/N...I know it got a little emotional with Carlisle, but Bella loves him, and I could well imagine that seeing him would have brought a roller coaster of emotions with him.

And Bella finally broke through the last of her boundaries. Her first thoughts were of Edward...not fears, covering up, or scars. She finally realized that she was safe, loved and secure. She finally beat the Miller that's in her mind. Now it's time to beat him and King in reality.

Got a little Pilotward for just a brief moment. I promise that's not the end of that hot image. LOL However, the next chapter will catch back up with everyone at the farm in Alaska, and it's not so heavy either. After Charlie's letter, we could use a break, though she still has to reveal to everyone what was left for her.

I want to thank JenRar, who cracks the whip everyday to make sure I'm not slacking...which lately has been more often than not. Oh and who asked for a mop after she beta'ed this chapter LOL! Thank you to Goober_Lou for pre-reading this story and telling me exactly what will bring tears, and what lines just about made her fall out of her chair. And to MedusaInNY for all the amazing work she does on my blog. Love you all.

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Okay, so I'm gonna beg for reviews now, because I'm hoping that FF will let you this time. Was this a "Holy crap, they finally did it!" or "Shit, this was too soon!" or "She should have taken him in his chopper!" LMAO... Oh well... whatever you have to say, I can't wait. Love to you all, and the next post will most likely be Monday. So until then...Later.

Chapter 20

A/N... I'm glad that you all liked Edward and Bella's first time. Although, I maybe should have given a "Cold Shower Warning" or a "Change of Undies Warning" and apparently a "Street Sweeper Warning". LMAO Sorry about that. I wasn't aware that it needed such things.

I'm posting earlier than expected. Sundays are just easier, and I was able to get another chapter finished.

Anyway...let's get back to the farm. I'm sure we have some catching up to do.

CHAPTER 20

BELLA

"Okay, watching Edward fly that thing had to be the hottest thing I've ever seen... and I was at firefighter calendar photo shoot once..." Makenna mused, falling back into the hay.

I giggled, shaking my head, because it had been damn hot. "When were you at a photo shoot?" I asked, trying to get her attention away from Edward.

"Some charity thing at UW," she laughed. "Mmm, that was some hot shit right there," she said, fanning her face.

"You didn't go to UW," Alice pointed out with the silliest of smiles, and Mickey just snorted at us.

"I know," Mack huffed. "But I had friends that did."

All of us girls were in the barn, hanging out in the hay loft the day after Edward and I returned to the farm, because we'd just finished setting up a place in one of the stalls for Tia to have her puppies. She was about two weeks away,

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and every one of us was excited. We were just about finished with all of the animals for the day, but we'd decided to finish what Tom and Obie had started for Tia. It was the first time since Edward and I had returned that it was just me and my girls, Mickey included.

~oOo~

Edward flew smoothly over the Denali forest, but low enough that I could make out trees, deer, and the farm in the distance. He hadn't said much since we took off, but I hadn't exactly been talkative, either.

As Aunt Kate's place got closer and closer, I glanced over, trying not to swoon over him, because he was seven levels of hot flying that thing. Wearing a face filled with concentration, his dark blue jeans, a dark jacket, and a gray t-shirt, Edward screamed sexy.

I looked down when he started to descend, watching as everyone poured out of the barn and the house to come out to greet us. I took a deep breath and turned back to Edward.

"Did you tell them? About my mom, when you emailed?"

"No, baby," he said over the headset. "I figured you would...go over it with your girls when you were ready."

I nodded, catching a glimpse of a worried Esme, practically pacing in the background. "Not yet, okay?"

"They need to..." he started, but stopped and studied my face for a moment as he shut the chopper down.

"I know...Alice, the key, but...not yet, please."

I felt his fingers under my chin, and he turned me to face him. "You can't avoid it, love. They need the information, but I won't say a word until you're ready, I promise."

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I nodded, watching every move he made as he released his belts, and then did the same to mine. Once the blades stopped, my door was yanked open, and Emmett and Jasper were there to help me down, each hugging me fiercely.

But it was Esme's arms I fell into, almost emotionally spent. "Carlisle's okay, I saw him," I told her in her ear. "He's tired, stubborn, and in pain, but he's fine."

She pulled back, smiling warmly at me. "Thank you, Bella, but how are you ?" she asked, tilting her head at me, her brow wrinkling. "What happened, pretty girl?"

I didn't know what to say to her, and just shook my head for the moment. I wanted to tell her about my mom, the next step that Edward and I had taken, and just how worried I was about Carlisle, but I was too tired, and so not ready yet.

"Edward Anthony!" Aunt Kate called from the front porch. "Get that girl in here and get her fed, child!"

The whole group of us chuckled when he rolled his eyes, sighing, "Yes, Aunt Kate!" as he grabbed our bags and my hand, tugging me towards the house.

~oOo~

Rose's voice brought me back to the present. "What a job that must be..." she thought aloud with a smirk on her face. "Getting buff guys to look hot. How hard is that?"

"I don't know, but it would be hotter in military cammo..." Alice muttered, and we all died laughing, falling over one another in the hay. "I'm just sayin'."

It was official. Alice and Rose were *with* Jasper and Emmett, and my girls had embraced all things military, something I wasn't sure was possible for shopaholic Rose and my computer nerd Alice. Makenna, on the other hand, just loved the eye candy that was Edward Cullen. She was in love with the

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mere idea that he wasn't exactly what he appeared to be on the outside, though she didn't quite know what he was truly like. Her imagination about us ran wild, I was sure of it. I think she read too many romances.

Mickey chortled, picking up a piece of hay and wrapping it around her finger. "You have no idea what those three did to the girls on base overseas..." She huffed a laugh, shaking her head back and forth slowly.

I grinned over at her, thinking they probably drove them crazy.

"Spill it!" Rose and Alice gushed, sitting up to look at her.

Mickey looked around at us, smiling mischievously. "I should tell you that sometimes, they did it on purpose," she started, and then turned to me. "Not Edward, though. He didn't go after military girls...ever. But the other two..." She laughed, her head falling back. "They knew if they brought Eddie into the mix, the girls would flock over. They'd help out the motor pool, washing Jeeps and Humvees... *shirtless*. It was hilarious!"

"God...I'd pay money..." Alice murmured, shaking her head and blushing a deep crimson.

"No shit," I laughed, biting my bottom lip, because Edward was shirtless most of the time.

Rose shoved my shoulder with a hearty laugh. "Listen to you!" she guffawed. "That boy would dance in a tutu for you. Ask him to wash your car and see what happens..."

"Umm, no," I stated, snorting into a giggle at the thought of it. "I've already..." I started, but trailed off in order not to stick my foot in my mouth.

I hadn't exactly explained to my girls - or even Esme - how far Edward and I had gone while we were away, nor had we all sat down to discuss what my father had left me. It seemed everyone was going at my pace - especially Edward. I could tell they were afraid to broach the subject of my father, but

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apparently the topic of Edward was free game.

"Isabella Marie," Rose urged, making me turn to her. "Spill it..."

"Don't middle name me, Rosalie!" I growled, but I was grinning at her. "I have to feed the horses..."

"Oh no, you don't!" Makenna laughed, pulling me back down to the hay when I started to stand. "You've already... *what?*"

"I was merely going to say that he's always shirtless, and no one touches my car..." I lied smoothly, but they didn't buy a word of it.

"Uhhh, no. I don't think so," Rose laughed, tugging me down again. "Spill it, Swan."

"Spill what?" I asked innocently.

"Spill why you look like the cat that ate the canary," Alice snickered, crossing her legs and leaning her elbows on them. Her smile was ridiculously all knowing.

Rose's eyes narrowed at me, and I knew she'd know instantly. "You...totally hit that, didn't you!" she gasped, a smile breaking out on her face, but she sobered up quickly. "He can touch you now..."

I looked over at her, nodding slowly. "Yeah," I sighed in pride and contentment.

"Yeah...as in you hit that? Or yeah...as in he can touch you?" Alice tried to clarify.

"Yeah," I smirked, looking over at her.

The squeals just about burst my eardrums as they all lost their minds, high fiving one another as I shook my head.

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"I'm glad my getting laid makes you all so happy," I muttered, starting to stand one more time, because if I wanted to be teased, I'd hang out with Emmett.

"Whoa, hang on," Mickey laughed, raising her hands up before I stood. "It's not that, Bells. We're just happy you have...overcome that shit Miller did... Seriously," she said with a sincere smile. "Getting laid... *that's* a perk!"

I laughed, my head falling back, because somehow, Mickey had found her way into our little girl group, and she fit in perfectly - just one more different personality type to add to the mix.

"Oh God," Makenna breathed, her mouth hanging open. "Did you *really*?" she asked, looking off the hayloft towards the door, and then back to me. "Was he...I mean...did he? Were you...scared?"

I chuckled at her, because I knew that she had built up this whole romantic thing between Edward and myself in her mind, some whirlwind romance, and she thought he was the hottest thing she'd ever seen. It was like dating a celebrity when it came to Makenna. She completely hero-worshiped Edward, and to be honest, I think it totally went back to his saving me from Miller's basement.

"No, not scared," I told her. "I just..." I took a deep breath, trying to figure out how to word it. "I just...couldn't let Miller win anymore, not when I had..."

Rose nodded, taking my hand. "Not when you had Edward there..."

"Yeah," I agreed, looking up at her. "And the things Charlie left... I just..." I stopped, shook my head, and closed my eyes at the memories.

Three sweaty, shirtless men came running into the barn, looking up at us.

"The hell was the screaming?" Emmett growled, scanning the place.

"Squealing, you dolt," Rose snorted, rolling her eyes. "There's a difference."

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"Fine, *squealing*," Edward huffed, relaxing just a bit. "Any reason you want to scare the shit out of us?"

"Cause it brings you running looking like that," Makenna muttered so that only we could hear her. It just caused us to snort into another round of giggles, which caused three men to fold their arms across their chest in frustration.

"Sorry, Edward," I sang, leaning over the hayloft. "Girl talk gets..."

"Loud," Alice finished with a laugh.

I grinned over at her, but turned back to Edward's now amused face. "We didn't mean to scare you. *They*..." I snorted, jerking a thumb behind me, "...got a little loud."

"Mmhm," he growled, rolling his eyes. He pointed up at us, saying, "Well, don't. We didn't know what the hell happened."

"Don't blame me, cranky," I chuckled, shaking my head. "I need to feed the horses anyway."

I got up, brushing off my jeans and making my way towards the ladder down to the barn floor.

"Wait, Bells!" Makenna called. "Aren't you gonna tell us?"

"No," I laughed, stepping off the hayloft onto the ladder. "Not a chance..."

I squeaked when two firm, strong hands pulled me off the steps, setting me gently on the floor.

"Tell them what, love?" I heard softly right in my ear, and I had to fight the shiver that wanted to run through me.

"Nothing," I sang, turning in his arms and looking up at his handsome and amused face. "Thanks for the lift down."

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He chuckled, looking up when the rest of the girls followed me.

"It wasn't 'nothing,'" Makenna pouted, giving me an icy glare from the loft. "We wanna know!"

"Tough," I bit back, walking to the stalls where Goliath and Samson were watching everything with interest. "Hello, boys..." I crooned, rubbing their noses, before grabbing the bucket.

Mickey laughed, hopping down to the barn floor, and said, "It seems Bella is as against kissing and telling as you are, pretty boy..."

I rolled my eyes as they all exploded into laughter. "So not having that conversation," I mumbled to myself and Goliath, pouring feed into each horse's feedbag and rubbing Ruth's and Mary's noses as well. They were sweet, but I liked the boys better.

"Kids!" Aunt Kate called from the front porch. "Come eat a bite of lunch, will ya?"

"Sure, Aunt Kate!" most of us called back, because she treated us all like her own children - like she treated Edward - and we loved her for it.

"You're going to have to talk to them eventually," Edward said softly from behind me, as I ran my fingers through Goliath's mane.

"They don't need *details*," I snorted, turning to face him as everyone made their way to the house but us.

"Not that! I don't care what you tell them about us," he laughed, shaking his head. "I meant about Charlie's letter, love. You have to tell them, so Alice can get to work..."

I grimaced, but let him pull me closer by cupping my face. "I know," I huffed, smiling when he squished my cheeks. "Stop," I laughed, gripping his wrists in order to pull myself up to kiss his lips. "Is everyone here?" I asked, thinking

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even Alec needed to hear it all.

"Yeah," he whispered against my lips.

I pulled back and took a deep breath. "Fine. Now is as good a time as any, don't you think?"

"Whatever you want, baby," he conceded, kissing my forehead. "You'll be fine."

As we made our way back to the house, Edward stopped me. "And just what details did they want, sweetness?" he asked, a smirk crawling up his face.

I couldn't resist messing with him, because there was about to be a really serious conversation at lunch, but for now, I wanted to play.

"Oh, you know," I sighed dramatically, waving my hand at him. "All things girls wanna know...is the guy a good kisser, how many orgasms there were, and how *big* the guy is," I purred, allowing my eyes to deliberately rake down his hard body to his jeans and back up, licking my lips on purpose.

Edward's eyes widened for a fraction of a second, before he stepped closer to me. "And...um, what did you say, love?"

Inside, I gave myself a fist bump for capturing his undivided attention, but I said nonchalantly, "I told them...good enough to make a girl's toes curl, too many to count, and... *huge...enormous*, really, but that I wasn't sure of the *inches*."

Despite the fact that every last one of those things were true, I hadn't said any of it to my girls. Edward had once said that he had wanted me to be able to feel him all day long after. Fighting back a moan, I realized he'd achieved his goal. I could still feel all of our activities with every move I made, despite the fact that it had been over twenty-four hours.

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I started to walk away, but stopped and turned to a now frozen Edward.
"Oh...and I told them I suspected you could breathe out of your ears."

He snorted and shook his head as he stared at the ground, finally snapping his attention back to me. "Y-you...t-told th-them all of th-that?" he sputtered sweetly, glancing at the house, and then back to me.

I had to fight my smile, because I could almost read his thoughts. He would have to sit at the same table with four women that knew these things about him. I lost my fight and broke into a giggle.

"No, baby," I laughed, shaking my head and backing away when he started to stalk forward.

"Not funny, Bella," he growled, catching me quickly and tossing me over his shoulder. "Not funny at all!"

~oOo~

EDWARD

"So...Charlie just kept this shit from you?" Rose growled, looking up from the letter to Bella's impassive face. "You saw it all?"

Bella nodded, but said nothing, and I couldn't help but grasp her hand under the table.

We were finished with our lunch, but none of us had moved when Bella had said she had some things to say. I could tell that she was gradually moving from upset and grieving, to pissed off and determined. She didn't have to tell me, because I knew my girl. I could tell when she resolved herself to do something, because her chin would raise, her eyes would grow dark, and she would take a deep breath before she did anything. Of course, that was all after she teased the shit out of me in the barn.

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Everyone had a different reaction to Bella's story. Aunt Kate got up from the table and paced back and forth, shooting glances at the things that had been left in the tree house, which were spread all over the table. She would then shake her head and continue to pace. Esme walked over to Bella, kissed her head once the story was over, and sat on the other side of her. She said nothing, but her love for my girl was obvious. Alec and Emmett studied every picture, before sliding them down to Jasper and Mickey.

But it was Alice that was fascinating to watch. She took the police report, the key that Bella had barely let out of her sight, and the lighter that Charlie had left, opened her computer, and sat in silence, with Jasper on one side of her and Makenna on the other.

"What's the key to?" Mickey asked, holding her hand out for it. Alice slid it down the table.

"No idea," Bella sighed, sitting back in her chair.

Mickey picked it up, turning it over in her hand. If anyone could answer what type of lock it opened, it would be Mickey. In New York, her father was a locksmith, and his daughter had developed quite the talent for not only helping him, but breaking into anything he worked on, from safes to front doors. What was once a hobby and a family joke, became a necessary talent when she joined the Air Force, even more so when she started working for me.

"Alice," Mickey said, looking down the table. "Is there any way to find out if Charlie recently had any construction work done at either his office or his home?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Alice chanted in her usual three time manner, nodding the whole time. She typed furiously away at her computer. "But if he paid someone under the table to do it, there won't be any record."

"Yeah, I know," Mickey sighed, studying the key again. "But he wouldn't have just left this without any guidance. Maybe he knew Bella would have you to look..." she mused, but trailed off, standing up to go look over Alice's shoulder.

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"What are you thinking, Mick?" I asked, squeezing Bella's hand.

"I'm thinking this looks like an in-cabinet lock box. They're usually custom built and hidden. Umm, kind of like your dad's at the mountain cabin in that cellar, but without a combo lock...just a key," she rattled off distractedly as she watched Alice work. "I don't know, though, because it has this number on it. I want to say it looks like a safety deposit box, too, but it's not long enough."

I sighed, shaking my head and looking over at Alec, who was still looking through every page and every picture with a slowness that was almost disturbing, like he was memorizing it - something that wouldn't shock me, really.

He looked over at Bella, like he wanted to say something, but shook his head and stayed quiet.

"Just say it, Alec," Bella snorted, rolling her eyes.

"King had the hots for your mom, right?" he verified, and she nodded.

"So...why kill her? Or was it a revenge thing at this point? I'm just trying to understand why this asshole would risk a little kid witness telling all. He - and I don't mean this in a bad way - in all reality, should have killed you, Bells. He could have kicked down your door, done what he came to do, gotten rid of the one person that saw him come in, and then left without anyone the wiser. I just don't get it."

"My dad said that when my mom was pregnant, he left them alone, but then after I was born, he started coming around again," she sighed, shrugging one shoulder. "Maybe he has one redeeming quality...he doesn't mess with kids..." She snorted humorlessly and shook her head at our chuckles, smiling wryly. "But I would bet revenge, because my dad had testified against him by then...cut him off of TT business, basically black-balled him in the legit business world."

"Oooh, that's a lot of fucking money Charlie yanked away from him," Emmett huffed, shaking his head. "Legit or not. King would have been a millionaire by

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now, had he stayed at TT. Now he's a millionaire, and not one dime of it is clean. It's all gambling, prostitution, and drug money."

Bella nodded, but again, didn't say anything. When Alice's computer pinged an alert to an email, we all turned to the end of the table.

"Carlisle," Alice stated, taking a deep breath, her face pained. "He said that he's fine, that he's getting ready to go see Billy Black, but that he and Benny are about to Skype us. They've secured enough time to call..."

"Aw shit," Bella breathed to herself, looking up at me. "I don't want to testify, Edward," she whispered, shaking her head.

"Then you don't," I stated with a shrug, because if she didn't want to do something, she didn't have to, as far as I was concerned.

Alice pulled up the video, turned the computer around, and everyone took a seat in front of it. It didn't take long until my father's and Benny's faces filled the screen.

"Benny, you little shit! How are you?" Emmett boomed, chuckling when Cheney rolled his eyes.

"Fine, Em," he snorted, looking over the screen. "Edward, it's good to see you, bud."

"You, too, Benny," I said with a smile, because despite his nerdy look - skinny, light brown hair, and glasses - he was a tough little shit and smart as hell. Plus, he had more pull at the FBI than he was willing to admit. "What's gotcha slumming it and breaking phone silence, just to talk to little ole me?"

He grinned, holding up his middle finger. "You would have made a great agent, you asshole."

I laughed, my head falling back. "You wish. You need someone to keep your scrawny ass safe?"

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"Hell no," he huffed, still smiling. "And I'm not calling to look at your ugly face. I need to see Isabella."

"Bella," I corrected, and sobered up instantly, turning to my girl next to me. "This is Ben Cheney, love. Without him and Alice working together, I'm not sure we would have found you."

She smiled, turning to the computer. "Then thanks," she said, waving at him.

"Yeah, she's much better looking than you are," he teased, giving her a wink, and she giggled softly, along with the rest of the table. Then he got right to the point. "Bella, I know that you've been through some rough shit, and Carlisle has already told me you don't want to testify against Royce King, but I'm asking you one more time. If we don't get your statement, then he goes free."

"And Miller?" she asked, her voice tight, but her mouth was in a sneer.

"Oh, darlin', we're so looking for him. Trust me," he growled, shaking his head. "He's...underground, at the moment, but I've got a man with him. I just can't get anything to stick...without you."

Bella stood up quickly from the table in a huff, walking back and forth and it was all I could do to not to pull her away from it all - the phone call, the trial, Miller, King, just everything - and fly her away to someplace safe and just as beautiful as she was.

"Bella, with your testimony, we'll not only close the case on your mother, but we'll put King in prison for life - not to mention Miller," Benny continued to urge, but looked at my father when he snorted. We both knew King wouldn't survive prison. "We can charge King with first degree murder and rape...and Miller..."

"Don't!" she yelled, her fist coming hard down onto the table. "Just don't!" she snapped again. "I could give two shits about your case or your trial or whatever keeps King in jail. As far as I'm concerned, you can let him out...let him come for me. But I'm not leaving this group of people right here. I'm not safe with

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you," she yelled, pointing to the computer.

"Bella, we can put you in witness protection. You can..."

"Oh... *fuck* no!" she laughed humorlessly. "I want my fucking life back. I'm not gonna just fucking run away from this cocksucker anymore. I'm not. I'm not going to leave my life, my friends...to run off and pretend to be someone I'm not. Not a chance in hell! Let him out. Let him come for me."

I stood up from the table, giving my father and Benny a pointed look and a head shake. "The girl says no, Ben," I growled, walking to her and pulling her to me. She was shaking like a leaf, but she was putting on a hell of a front for them.

"This will mean war," Benny muttered to my father, who was already nodding and seemed slightly amused. "When he's released, he'll hit the streets running. He'll gather up all he has, and he'll come for you, her...all of them."

"I know," my father said, looking up at Bella. "Bells, you don't seem to be looking all that frightened about that...have you got something in mind?"

I wanted to argue with him, but she smirked up at him. "We were in hiding to give my father a chance to testify. That's over," she sighed, leaning into me just slightly. "I'm tired of hiding. If King goes to jail for killing my mother, it'll be because he confessed to it..."

My eyebrows rose up, because I could almost see where she was going with this.

"You want to fight, *sweetness*?" I asked her, giving her a wink when her head spun to glare at me.

"I want him and Miller out of my life, whether they're wiped off this planet, or they're in jail," she answered sharply, fighting her smile at my use of the nickname. She turned back to the computer. "Carlisle, we need to make arrangements for my father's funeral, explain to his employees what happened.

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These are responsibilities that are now mine," she said, her voice hitching just a bit. "But a memorial for my father will draw out King..."

"Once he's released," he finished for her. "Does anyone in my crew have a problem with this? Because if we go to war against King, it will be ugly."

"No, sir," they all grunted.

"We don't, either," Alice growled, shaking her head. "I'll never complain about hotel searches for boring cheating husbands again," she muttered, looking up at a chuckling Jasper. "We can end this..."

"We can, darlin'," he snorted, kissing the side of her head.

"Son?" my father said from the computer. "It's your call..."

"No, it's *hers*," I corrected, pointing to Bella. "We would need a plan, we would need to know where Black stands, and we would need Benny's help. If all of us are doing this, we can't lose, but I need to know *everything*."

Benny nodded, taking a deep breath. "I'll get back to you. I'll find out when they will release King, and see where we stand on locating Miller. Charlie Swan's funeral will be a media frenzy, due to his money. And King may not be able to stay away. He'd come, just to be a prick."

"Exactly," Bella agreed, her lip curling in hatred.

"Last thing," my father said, looking around the room. "Any ideas on that key?"

"We're working on it," I told him.

"I'll secure a line in three days," Benny told us. "I'll have more information, and we'll compare notes."

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Bella put her hands on the table. "Benny, wait," she called. When he looked up on the screen, she asked, "How's Jake?"

"He's had two surgeries, but he's holding steady, Bella. The docs think he'll be fine after some physical therapy. His father is still clueless as to his condition, but not for long," he said wryly, giving my father a glance. "We'll talk to you in a few days," he stated, before the screen went black, leaving the room in silence for a moment.

"You want to bring King to you?" Alec verified with Bella, not in shock, but it looked like he was thinking aloud. When she nodded slowly, he continued, "Okay, well Benny's not kidding. With King and Miller both leaving a witness out there, they will be forced to hunt you down. They may not do it at the funeral at the risk of everyone seeing, but they will get their sights set on you. At least, King will. This Miller...he sounds like a coward and a pig, so I bet he'll stay underground for as long as possible."

"You want to come out of hiding?" Rose asked, leaning on the table.

"I'm just... *done*," Bella huffed. "There can't be all that many of them left."

"That's true," Jasper mused, rubbing his temple as he watched whatever Alice was doing on the computer. "Alice stop," he said, pointing to the screen. "What's this address?"

"Charlie's apartment at Twilight Tower," she replied, narrowing her eyes at the screen. "And looky here...he had a little construction work done there about six months ago."

Bella walked out of my arms and joined Mickey, Mack, and Rose over Alice's shoulders.

"Hmm, and cabinet work, at that," Mickey smirked, looking up at Bella, who smiled at her. "That's where your key goes, Bells."

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Rose stood, looking around the room. "You know...there's no one that knows about that apartment outside of me and you."

"And possibly Billy Black," Bella added. "What's your point?"

"The memorial service can be held in the TT auditorium," Rose stated, raising an eyebrow. "We can use every security camera in that place to watch. There won't be a moment when we won't see them, or where you'll be alone," she said, jerking her chin towards me. "You come to the funeral, and the search for you two is over. You're no longer a missing person, and that puts you in the media spotlight."

"Once King finds out where the services will be held, he may step into action. He may try to end it there," Emmett mused. "Can we get plans of that building?"

"Yes," all the girls answered, because Alice had already pulled them up.

"Send those to my printer, sweetie," Kate crooned, patting Alice on the shoulder on the way by.

Bella looked up at Rose. "You think we should move to Charlie's apartment? Stay there...hidden?"

"Yeah, definitely. I think we could use it as the next safe house if we had to be in the city," Rose answered with a nod.

Kate came back with a stack of pages, handing them out, but I walked to Bella, looking over her shoulder.

"Show me this apartment," I said, pointing to the pages.

"Kay." She pulled me down to a chair and leaned on the table next to me, flipping through floor after floor, finally spreading the sheets out in front of me. "Look," she pointed. "It's through a secret door of his office that's on the top floor. He used it when he worked late, or when we went out in the city and

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didn't want to drive home. I actually used it just before I moved into Rose's...right after I left Jake. It was a weekend, and no one knew I was there."

"And no one knows about it?"

"I'm not sure about Billy," she replied with a shrug. "He and my dad were close, and if Carlisle's theory is correct, he may know every place my dad had." She frowned, looking down at the pages and back up at me. "Miller asked me where my father would hide," she sighed, shaking her head. "I never even thought of this place..."

"Charlie didn't hide, that's why," Rose huffed from the other side of the table.

"Yeah, that's what I said," Bella sighed, grimacing at what must have been awful memories. I picked up her hand, kissing her fingers. "We could stay there, Edward. Charlie had a private elevator and everything. We'd hardly be on the street. We could practically take over that building."

I took a deep breath, swallowing thickly as I thought about it. I looked around at my crew. Mickey was still talking quietly with Alice over whatever was on the computer concerning that key. Alec and Emmett were studying the plans of Twilight Tower, but Jasper was watching me.

"What'cha thinkin', Ed?" he asked, a small smile on his face.

"I'm thinking they'll play hell trying to get Bella if she knows that building like I'm guessing she does," I muttered, giving her a glance out of the corner of my eye. She nodded quickly. "I'm also thinking that bringing her out of hiding and into the fucking spotlight is dangerous as shit!" I growled, holding up my hand when she opened her mouth to argue. "I'm not saying no, Bella, but I'd like to hear what they find out about Billy Black, when King will be released, and just how many men King still has trolling around out there," I finished, raising an eyebrow at her, because I wasn't fighting her. I just wanted all the information I could get before making a damn decision that affected all of our lives.

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Bella bit at her bottom lip, but took a deep breath, letting it out. "Okay," she conceded, turning to Alice. "Pixie, email Benny, please. I want to know how many men are still working for King and would come to his aide if he asked for it. I want backgrounds and pictures, too."

"Got it, got it, got it," she chanted, nodding the whole time she chanted. "Mack, I'll need you for that one...names, faces, places."

Emmett cleared his throat, leaning his elbows on the table. "You know, Ed..." he started, looking to Alec, and then back to me. "We could so end this. Go back to Seattle, hunt every last motherfucker down, and completely clean up that town."

I snorted, but my laugh caught in my throat when I realized that Alec was with him on that idea. "You're serious. You want to take them head-on? Not just protection, but a complete war on the mafia?"

"Yeah, sure," Alec snickered. "You've got the brains, brawn, and definitely the beauty here, kid. These girls would draw some of those thugs in like flies."

Bella chuckled, rolling her eyes. "Hmm, bait them?"

"Gee, we've never done that," Makenna murmured, but every last one of the girls laughed. "Just like a cheating husband in a nightclub, right, Bellsy?" she giggled, giving Bella a fist bump.

Alec looked up at me with a raised eyebrow, as if saying, "See?"

I snorted, shaking my head. "A month ago, man, I would have said no way to having them out in the open...but you have no idea what they can do," I snickered, pointing to Bella and her girls as they cheered and high-fived one another.

Bella laughed, kissed my cheek, and whispered, "I love you," where only I could hear her.

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I grabbed her face lightly to make sure she was looking at me, smiling at her silly giggle. "We. Still. Wait. Got me?"

She nodded and smiled. "Sir," she crooned, pulling my hand away. "Just...think about it, Edward. I need to feed the dogs," she muttered, standing up straight, and then disappeared out the front door.

~oOo~

The next few days were filled with so much activity that most of us collapsed at the end of the day, completely exhausted. The farm still needed its daily chores done - the animals fed, the fences checked, and Emmett, Jasper, and I were still fixing a few things around the place. Today had been the horses' paddock, and we'd spent most of the day replacing rotten fence posts and cross boards.

There were also plans to make, keeping us all up to the wee hours of the morning, only to get back up early to start all over - except for Esme, who had taken Bella's car, saying she had to go into Anchorage for some reason. Even without a word from Benny or my father, we studied, planned, and mapped out how we could possibly end this for good. Bella's girls studied every file that Benny had sent, marking on a map of Seattle exactly where each individual hung out or lived, while Bella taught us every fucking inch of that tower. If we were doing this, we were going to take down the heart and soul of them, leaving King with nothing.

The problem was Miller. If we couldn't find him, then Bella would never be safe. She would forever be looking over her shoulder, and I would never feel comfortable letting her out of my sight. And that...I just couldn't fucking have. I wanted so badly to give her back her life - with me in it - but I was terrified that I would fail. It was why I stalled on moving on with this plan, on moving us from Alaska back to Seattle, where all of this shit started, because I knew without a doubt that King was a walking dead man, but if I couldn't find Miller, we couldn't kill him. And he needed to fucking die - preferably a slow and tortured death, and hopefully at my hands, because I still remembered how my girl had looked when I'd found her in his fucked up dungeon.

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"Whoa, Eddie! What the hell?" Jasper yelled, jumping back when I hit the board I was hammering so hard that the fucker split into two pieces, almost slicing his hand wide open.

"Fuck," I growled, throwing the hammer down to the ground. "Sorry, Jazz," I sighed, sitting down on the edge of the feeding trough and burying my hands in my hair.

He set a new board, hammered it in, and plopped down beside me. "You okay, bro?"

I just shrugged, gripping my hair before looking over at him. I didn't know what to say, because on the one hand, I was stressed to capacity with worry over my father, my crew, and my girl. On the other hand, I was never better, because I finally felt whole in my relationship with Bella.

"You've never needed this long to make a decision on a mission before, Edward," he noted in a quiet voice, but Jasper never needed to be loud to get his point across. "What's the deal?"

We both turned our heads when the barn doors slammed open and the girls led all the horses out into the yard and started grooming them, Mickey showing Alice what to do. I smiled when Goliath tried to nuzzle Bella too hard, causing her to stumble forward a step or two. When she called his name in admonishment, he hung his head low so she could scratch his ears. He was shameless, but he liked her, and that was his way of showing it.

"This is no ordinary mission," I sighed, not taking my eyes off the girls as they began to scrub down all four horses. "This is their lives, J."

"Those are no ordinary girls, either," Jasper countered, standing up and hopping up on the fence. "They know what they're getting into, and they've done it before...though this is a little higher risk, but the concept is still the same."

"I know."

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"If you're waiting for your dad..."

"I'm waiting for Benny," I told him, finally breaking my gaze away from my laughing girl, "because I need to know where the hell we stand with Black."

He nodded. "That's not the truth, Ed. Or at least, not the whole truth."

He was right, but I didn't know what I was feeling at the moment. My dad had already given the all-clear to take every last one of them down. Hell, he'd given it the night we found Bella.

"What are you doing when this is all over?" I asked him, getting up and grabbing my hammer up off the ground.

"Taking Alice to Texas," he said with a cheesy ass grin, hopping down so we could finish the fence. "If this does go down the way I think it will, then we'll all need to lay low for a while. I figured a month. Mickey's coming back here, and Emmett and Rose have talked about California. I'm willing to bet you hide away in that house of yours."

"And just how do you think this will fucking go down?"

He snorted, rolled his eyes, and shook his head. "*I think* we'll go into Seattle, bringing hell with us. I think that we'll clean up *years* of fucking organized crime, and the police, the Feds, and the local community will be grateful. I *think* - and correct me if I'm wrong - that King and Miller will be... *unrecognizable* once you've punished them for every wrong deed they've ever done to that girl... *right fucking there*," he growled, pointing towards Bella, who was walking around Goliath to rinse him off.

I nodded, as I pried off the next rotten board, dropping it to the ground. Jasper hopped down and helped me nail a new one into place. We replaced three more, before he finally spoke again.

"You know, if it were me," he started, looking past me towards the girls, "I'd want to kill them all. Bella didn't deserve that shit..."

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I spun in front of him. "You think I don't know that?" I asked, narrowing my eyes at him. "You have no idea what I'd like to do to them for hurting her. Dismemberment, evisceration, and decapitation doesn't even come fucking close to what I'd like to do, because they wouldn't be... *satisfying* enough," I sneered, shaking my head. "She's just *now* starting to feel normal. I can't imagine what it would do to her if one of her girls got hurt, or if something happened to my father, and you have no fucking clue how she clings to me in her sleep."

Jasper grimaced, but only nodded.

"I want to end this for her, man," I groaned, running a hand through my hair. "I want to..."

"Keep her safe," he finished for me in a low tone.

"Yeah," I sighed, looking up at him and thinking hard about what I needed to say next. "If we do this...every plan is perfect, flawless. If we do this...we don't stop until they're all gone."

He nodded his head once. "Yes, sir," he grunted. "I didn't expect anything less. We can do this, you know. End it. We've had tougher jobs; it's just that this one...means more."

I studied his face, knowing he was right. In the past, with other jobs, this would have been a no-brainer, because we'd taken down small villages to eradicate assholes that had taken over for lesser offenses. This was personal, which made it fucking dangerous, because I'd die protecting the girl that was laughing with her friends a few yards away.

"I still want to hear from Benny and my dad," I added, calming down a bit, because my girl was now walking a sparkling clean Goliath my way, followed by the rest of them. "I want every last piece of information I can get before I put her in the spotlight, because we have to account for the fucking media, too."

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"Sure, Ed," he said with a nod. "We'll do it right, just like always."

"This is my last fucking mission," I vowed the truth finally aloud, shaking my head. "I swear to fucking God."

Jasper smirked, snorting into a light chuckle. "Oh, I knew that," he said with a grin. "I knew that the minute you laid eyes on her."

~oOo~

BELLA

The TV droned on in the background, but I hardly heard a word of it. Edward and I were lying on the couch, melted into one another, supposedly watching some show, but I don't think either of us was paying attention. He was on his back, knees up, and I was straddling his stomach, fitting against him perfectly as my head rested on his chest. With long, slow, gentle strokes, he ran his fingers through my hair and down to my bottom in a comforting pattern. We were dressed for bed, but hadn't said much as we showered and pulled on boxer shorts, and I stole a t-shirt of his.

Edward's heartbeat was steady and strong, his breathing deep and even as I traced every line of his tattoo by the dim light of the television. I shifted, trying to get closer - not that there was any space between us to begin with - but I wasn't the only one, because firm hands gripped my ass, also searching for the elusive *closer*.

I turned my head, pressing a kiss to his neck and receiving a hum of appreciation against my lips, which only made me smile against his skin when his hands gripped the fabric of my shorts.

"Are you going to steal all my clothes, Bella?" he asked, chuckling when I snickered against his cheek.

"Maybe." I sighed dramatically. "They're comfy, and they smell like you," I explained for the umpteenth time.

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"Hmm," he mused, looking up at me with dark green, but very warm eyes when I finally pushed myself up over him. "When you come home with me, you may lose your entire wardrobe, then."

I grinned, loving the sound of "home" coming from his lips when referring to us. "Kay," I said, biting my bottom lip. "Are you saying I have to walk around your house naked all day, Edward?" I teased with narrowed eyes.

He barked a laugh, wrapping his arms all the way around me as I braced myself on his strong shoulders - shoulders that held more tension than I originally noticed, until that moment, because they almost sagged in relaxation under my touch.

"Now there's an idea I could get used to," he chuckled, leaning into my hand that was cupping his face.

"That goes for you, too, you know," I giggled, thinking a naked Edward was something I'd never get used to. "Except..." I started, holding up a finger, "not in your wood shop. Heaven forbid you cut something... *really* necessary off."

"Right," he conceded with a chuckle and a nod, as he finally reached for my face, rubbing his thumbs across my cheeks. "Safety first. Got it, *sweetness*."

I wanted to lose myself in him. I wanted to be connected to him so deeply that it would be impossible to tell where I began and he ended. I wanted to take away the stress that stayed tight around his eyes and had caused his shoulders to almost bow under its weight ever since we returned to the farm, even more so since the Skype call from his dad and Benny. I wanted to help him make a decision on what to do, but I knew the battle he fought inside. It was why I hadn't argued with him, why when he'd said to wait, I let it go. But I knew this was different, that this would mean the end of things. If they followed the plan that Emmett and Alec had suggested and the rest of us sharpened, then not only would we take out all of King's men, but King himself. It was Miller that was the issue. Unless we knew where he was, I would always be a loose end that needed to be taken care of. Carlisle would have a target on his back forever, despite whatever role he chose to take at TT.

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Everyone that Edward loved was in danger, and it was killing him that he couldn't fix it easily, that it would take walking out into the open to end it.

I reached up and rubbed the worry wrinkle between his brows, taking a deep breath. "Right, safety first," I murmured with a nod, thinking those were poignant words for the shit we were in. "Do you think about what will happen when this is over?"

He nodded, pulling me closer so that I was practically sitting on his chest, but his hands continued to glide over my thighs, my sides, my arms, finally picking up my feet, causing me to recline against his bent legs behind my back. I smiled down at him as he rubbed my arches.

"I do," he finally answered. "Talked to Jasper about it earlier today. This...w-well, i-it's m-my l-last m-m-mission," he sputtered nervously, his eyes raking over my legs and up to my face. "No more after this. I can't...I won't do this. If something happens to me..." He shook his head and changed the direction of that sentence. "I can't think clearly if all I'm thinking about is getting home to you, and that could get someone or myself killed, love."

I nodded, figuring he had finally come to that decision, most likely weeks ago, because when his crew talked about future missions, he stayed quiet.

"What will you do?"

"I don't *have* to do anything, Bella," he stated, rolling his eyes. "I didn't exactly get paid minimum wage..."

I giggled, ruffling his already messy hair. "That's not what I meant, Edward."

He huffed, fighting his smile and shaking his head. "I know, but to be honest, I have no idea. I just know that I haven't been happy for a long time, and I am now. When my dad came to me with your file in his hand, I wasn't going to take another job, but...he forced it. And had it been anyone else, had it not involved you, Charlie, and my dad, I still wouldn't have taken it." He sighed, bringing my ankle up to his lips and placing a long kiss there, leaving his lips

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against my skin as he continued. "I want...I want to give you a life back, Bella. I want to take care of you, give you a home that's permanent." He smiled when I snickered at him.

"Are you talking about this whole 'safe house' thing? Or Jake?" I laughed.

"I would never fucking cheat on you, and he was a pig for throwing away the most beautiful fucking thing," he growled, his eyes darkening as he rubbed my legs - up my calves, outside my thighs, and suddenly, inside my thighs, spreading my legs wider. "Why would I need anything other than this?" he whispered, smirking when a moan escaped me as his thumbs traced the center seam of the boxers I was wearing.

He jerked me by the hips, bringing my center closer to his face. "You deserve the world, baby. You deserve better than wondering whether or not I'm going to come home. You deserve better than me, but I want to spend the rest of my existence earning your love."

He pushed at my t-shirt, until I relented and tugged it off over my head, dropping it to the floor. He grasped the sides of my boxer shorts, quickly yanking them down, so I sat completely bare on his torso, still reclined against his bent knees and my feet now on either side of his head.

"Edward," I panted, not from just where his lips were now gliding up the inside of my thigh, but from his words. No one had ever vowed their life to me, not even Jake, and he claimed to have loved me his whole life.

"I love you, Bella," he whispered. "I've n-never f-felt this w-way about anyone, the way that I f-feel a-about y-you. I won't take it for granted, I promise. And I will make it so that you're safe..."

I felt tears well up into my eyes, and I had to close them when his tongue snaked out against the inside of my thigh, swirling over my skin. He was so close, but my emotions were getting out of control.

"Love you, too, E-edward," I stuttered.

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"Good," he replied, leaving another open mouth kiss to the other thigh, his eyes locked onto mine when I finally was able to open them without fear of tears.

Edward let out a sensual moan when he breathed deep, inhaling my skin, my center. "Fuck, love. You always smell good enough to... *eat*."

I huffed a laugh at his play on words, but just about fell off the couch when a pounding knock on our door resounded through the room.

"Oh, you're fucking kidding me, right?" Edward muttered, looking up at me and licking his lips like he was a hungry man and I was dinner. "What?" he growled, turning his head towards the door, his hands holding me still when I started to get up.

"Ed, get out here," Emmett growled. "Esme's back...and she's brought three fuckers we don't know with her."

Edward frowned, looking up at me. "Did she tell you where she was going?"

"No, only that she had an errand to run," I said with a shrug, and he finally let me up off his lap.

"We'll be right there, Em," Edward yelled, tugging on a t-shirt and jeans as I got dressed, leaving the boxers and opting for jeans myself.

"Why the hell would she bring someone here?" I asked, tying my sneakers.

"I don't know," he said, holding his hand out for me. "It's not that I don't trust her, but I guess we'll find out."

I stood up and made my way towards the door, but was tugged back against his chest, his mouth right at my ear.

"Don't think I'm done, Bella. Not a fucking chance. I saw how wet you were for me, and I intend to take...mmm, advantage of it, *sweetness*," he crooned, licking the shell of my ear.

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I reached back to the hardness that was pressing into my ass, giving his erection a long, slow rub on the outside of his jeans. "Yeah, you might want to put this monster in its cage before we go out there, Edward."

He chuckled darkly, planting a long kiss to my neck. "I'll show you... *monster*, love."

"Come on," I sighed, turning in his arms. "Esme, guys we don't know..." I reminded him with a raised eyebrow.

He snorted into a low chuckle, planting a kiss to my forehead. He took a deep breath against my hair, finally pulling back, adjusting himself as best he could, and rolled his eyes at my giggle.

He tucked his glock into the back of his jeans, grabbing my hand. "Get yours," he ordered, jerking his chin towards the table where my nine mil lay. Once it was secure in my waistband, he lifted my face by my chin. "From now on...no matter what...you're armed. Got me?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Got it."

"Good. Now let's go see what this shit is all about, love. And then I'm going to teach you a lesson in monsters," he muttered, chuckling as I laughed all the way down the hall.

A/N... Yeah, a slight cliffie. So it's getting down to the major planning stages. Hunt down King's men and King and end it. Planning a memorial for Charlie will place them all in the spotlight...or at least Bella and Edward, considering they've been "missing" for some time now.

I know, I know, I know...you guys are worried about Carlisle. He's a tough guy. Have faith in him.

We had a little girl talk, a little more information to bring us closer to the truth about that key Charlie left, and a little further in the planning.

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Next, we'll see who Esme has brought into the lion's den...

I want to thank JenRar for beta'ing this. To Goober_Lou for prereading it. And MedusaInNY for her huge help with my blog. Not to mention ALL you reviewers, because you make writing this worth while for me. I say it all the time, but I love you all.

Last chapter brought a lot of reviews, and I thank you! So let me hear what you have to say about this one. Review cuz I'm posting early for you. :) My next post will most likely be around Wed. Chap 21 is already off to the beta, so I'm back on track. Hopefully, FF will behave. Until then, later!

Chapter 21

A/N... Okay, I know! You want to know who Esme has brought into the house. Well, you're about to find out. In fact, there's not much more I can say about that without giving something away...so let's get to it. I'll see you at the bottom.

CHAPTER 21

EDWARD

Bella and I made our way down the hall and out to the front porch, where there seemed to be a standoff between everyone inside the house and Esme and her company. I was pissed off and wanted nothing more than to go back to my room and finish what I'd started with Bella, but the fact was, I couldn't. Not that it stopped me from thinking about it, planning for it, because we hadn't done anything like that since we'd left my house in Forks, and I needed her - like I've never needed anything else in my life.

No one on the porch said a word as we watched them get out of Bella's car. Esme looked uneasy, as she was flanked by three fairly large, but somewhat older men. If I had to guess, I would have said they were around my father's age. All three were in decent shape, dressed in either black or navy blue pants, but I couldn't tell for sure. I took a deep breath, shaking my head, because all of the men looked serious about being here, even though they seemed to be waiting on Esme to say something. However, it was my girl that spoke up.

"Esme, what are you doing?" she asked almost in a whisper, shaking her head and wincing a bit, most likely for breaking the silence.

"Bella, Edward, come meet my brother," she said, gesturing to the man at her side, who happened to have the same color hair as Esme.

Bella huffed, glancing up at me, and we both walked forward.

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"Esme, I don't know if you should have done this," I said with a frown.

"Relax, Edward," Esme chuckled. "I told you at one point that I had my own connections, and I figured that we needed all the help we could get when we go to Seattle." She turned to her brother. "Eleazar Platt, this is Carlisle's son, Edward Cullen. And this is Bella Swan," she told him, tugging my girl closer.

Eleazar shook my hand firmly with a nod and amused smile, asking, "She didn't tell you, did she?"

"Not at all," I snorted, giving my dad's girlfriend a pointed look.

"Ezzy, I told you to tell them," he chuckled, rolling his eyes. "Look at the crew behind them. They'd have shot first and asked questions later. Carlisle probably trained them that way - *I* would've trained them that way."

We all turned to look at the porch, and I snickered at the protective stance everyone had taken. I didn't even have to ask to know that every last fucker up there was at least carrying a weapon, if they didn't have a hand on one already that I couldn't see.

"Stand down," I stated, waving a hand at them and turning back to the men in front of me.

It was then that I saw the ink on their forearms - every last one of them. They were Navy Seals - or at least, they had been at one point.

I narrowed my eyes at Eleazar. "Seals?"

"Retired," he said with a grin. "Now we're...something else," he chuckled, gesturing to the other two men, who had stood quietly in the background. "Felix Stuart, Eric Yorkie...meet Carlisle's kid."

Nods passed between us.

Then he turned to Bella. "And Miss Bella," he introduced.

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Both men shook her hand, murmuring their condolences.

"Thank you," she responded quietly. Her eyes narrowing at all three men, my girl continued, "What do you mean... *something else*?"

Eleazar smiled warmly at her. "We're CIA. And when I spoke to Ezzy here, she said you guys might need some help."

"Why don't we go inside, and I'll explain everything," Esme suggested.

We all made our way up to the front porch.

"Everyone, dining room. Now," I ordered, waving them all in.

I wasn't sure I'd ever seen so many people in my aunt's dining room at one time. My crew stood along the walls, while Eleazar and his two men took a seat at the table with me, Bella, Esme, Rose, Alec, and Alice - the last one with her ever present computer in front of her. Aunt Kate stood in the kitchen, watching everything with a keen set of eyes.

"Edward, please don't be cross," Esme sighed, rolling her eyes. "I know that I should've said something, but I wasn't sure El could come, and then I also didn't know if he would be needed. He saw the events with Carlisle and Charlie on TV and emailed me."

"I'm not here to step on toes," Eleazar stated with raised hands. "I'm simply offering to help. We've been aware of the situation with Royce King for some time. In fact, we were just about to take matters into our own hands, until I realized Carlisle was involved. I worked with your father overseas years and years ago, Edward, and he saved my ass in a sticky situation, so I owe him a favor...or two," he muttered, giving Esme a wry smile.

I took a deep breath, looking around to Jasper and Alec. Both were wearing unreadable expressions on their faces, most likely matching my own. CIA was a different level of shit altogether, in comparison to what we'd already been dealing with.

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I turned back to Eleazar and Esme. "What kind of help? I'm not saying I don't trust you, Esme, but this was a little unexpected," I stated with a shrug. "CIA is..."

"Untouchable, in this case," Eleazar interrupted. "Royce King is about to be released back out onto the streets of Seattle. From what I hear, there's a target on this one, especially," he pointed out, gesturing to Bella. "You and your dad, too, kid. Which includes all of you, if you stand up to protect them."

"We know that," Bella said, shaking her head.

"Oh, I'm sure you do, Miss Bella," Eleazar chuckled. "Word on the street is that there's a pretty penny on your head... *alive*. They are willing to go to war to get you, willing to kill everyone that knows you. What you also fail to realize is King has been buying and selling weapons outside of this country for years to people we don't want to have weapons. We were hoping that Swan could testify against him to put an end to it, but unfortunately..."

"He died," Bella growled, her eyes turning almost black with anger. "I'm sorry you lost your...easy out."

"Easy, sweetness," I whispered in her ear, caressing her thigh under the table. I sat up and faced Eleazar again, but spoke to Bella. "He was just stating facts, love. Perhaps he could keep in mind that Charlie Swan was your *fucking father*," I growled, raising my eyebrow at him.

"I'm sorry, Bella," Eleazar winced, shaking his head. "I'm so used to just dealing with good, bad, black, white...I forget sometimes that it's people and not just a name in a file, okay?"

"Whatever," she muttered under her breath, but she entwined our fingers together on her lap.

I rubbed her knuckles with my thumb, because my girl was fierce. I didn't need her going off on anyone...yet.

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"Homeland Security has been watching King, but we called them off," he continued, his tone a little softer now. "We can't nail him now...well, *legitimately*," he said, sneering on the last word, but there seemed to be a sharp, smart look to him that reminded me of my father, my crew.

This guy wanted in, because he thought King was not only a slug, but deserved more than just a prison sentence.

I smirked, shaking my head. "The Feds want Bella to testify against King in her father's place...another charge, another issue. And it's Riley Miller that wants her alive. If they want a war, we can give them one, but I haven't decided whether or not we're going. I was waiting for a little bit more info from my father and our contact with the Feds. What did you have in mind?" I asked, leaning my elbow on the table.

"Whatever it takes to take him down," Eleazar said with a shrug. "I'm not here to take over, kid. I'm here as a favor to my sister, as a help to your father. My job at the CIA was to get rid of him, by any means necessary," he stated, going on to explain that he knew just about everything we'd been through.

I didn't know if Esme had told him these things, or if he'd been privy to the information, due to where he worked, but he was as up to speed as everyone else in the house. The only thing he didn't know was what my next steps would be.

"And them?" I grunted, gesturing to the two guys with him. "I may know and trust Esme's judgment, but how do I know if I can trust them? King's assholes are fucking everywhere. You must understand my concern, Eleazar."

Felix sat forward, opening his mouth to speak, but it was Alice that shocked us all.

"Felix Stuart, former Navy Seal. He's decorated with a Purple Heart, having been shot in the arm during a conflict in Panama, which is supposed to be classified, but yet...here it is," she sang, giving him an impish smile, before continuing. "He retired from the Navy - honorable discharge, only to take the

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occasional paycheck from... Hmmm, Eleazar Platt. After two years, his identity comes to a complete stop, and yet, he still manages to trade stocks on Ameritrade. He owns a home in Portland, drives a Porche Cayenne, and occasionally vacations in Malibu."

The whole room had come to a standstill, except for my girl, who was watching Alice with a pride-filled smirk on her face.

"Now...Eric Yorkie, on the other hand," Alice sighed dramatically, rolling her eyes. "Blackbelt in karate, explosives specialist, also retired Navy Seal. He prefers a motorcycle to his classic Thunderbird, but he has temporary custody of his niece, Chelsea. Chelsea is currently residing at your Olympia home, with your wife, Janet. However, he's not *Yorkie*. His last name is really...Hunter. Well, now...isn't that interesting?" she mused, looking over the top of the screen.

"Holy fucking hell," Makenna growled. "You're related to Victoria Hunter, aren't you?"

The whole room became still - eerily so - as we waited for a fidgeting Eric to answer the question. Jasper moved before I could stop him, and suddenly, Eric had a forty-five pressed to his temple.

"You'd better start talkin', asshole, because that name isn't exactly a favorite around here. She wreaked a whole bunch a havoc not long ago," he growled, shaking his head at Eleazar and Felix when they stood up. "Nu-uh, boys...I want answers first, because I specifically remember a redhead by the name of Victoria Hunter makin' a phone call at a law office...almost getting Bells and Eddie killed, so I want an answer *fucking first*."

Deep down, I was laughing, because not much ever rattled Jasper, but when it did, it usually revolved around betrayal or someone getting hurt over stupid decisions. It was quite possible he'd shoot this guy if he didn't like the answers he heard, and at this point, I almost didn't care.

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"She's my sister," Eric growled. "She got wrapped up in some shit a long time ago. She dated King's nephew, and he got her hooked on coke, man. She lost custody of Chelsea to me, she owed King more money than she could pay back, and he makes her..." He stopped, shaking his head and not finishing that sentence, but I could very well imagine what the asshole kept her around for. "King's been keeping her under his thumb ever since, because he tells her she owes him!"

"Yet," Alice added, giving him a wary glance, "Victoria has a new apartment, a new car, and regular trips to the spa."

"Right," Eric huffed angrily. "All given to her by King, but it isn't without its price. If King is gone, she'll be free to get the help she needs."

"Enough!" I growled, unable to take another fact about that asshole, King. "Jazz, stand down."

"Ed..." he started to argue, but I interrupted him.

"Lower your fucking weapon, Jasper!" I ordered, starting to stand. "That's enough, man."

Jasper reluctantly lowered his forty-five to his side, but didn't step far away from Eric; neither did his eyes leave the back of the man's head.

Eleazar and Felix took their seats again, looking a little rattled. I ran a hand through my hair, rubbing my face, before turning back to them.

"You see we're just a little on edge around here," I sighed, gesturing around the room. "The death of Charlie Swan was a shock, and only made us circle around Bella tighter." I couldn't help but squeeze my girl's hand just a bit at that last statement. "My father said he would be joining us soon, but he was checking into someone that worked at Twilight Tech. I'm also waiting on the release date for Royce King from our inside man at the FBI, who also happens to be trying to track down Riley Miller for me."

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Eleazar took a deep breath, shaking his head. "You've got a plan, though. You wouldn't be Carlisle's kid if you didn't."

"I do."

He nodded, leaning back in his chair just a bit. "Who are you going after first?"

I studied the man's face, finally deciding that I had no other alternatives. I turned to Alice and said, "Send a message to my dad and Benny. Tell them both what we have here, and tell them that we need as much information as they can hand me ASAP. I'll make my decision after that."

"Sure, sure, sure," she chanted, giving me a second look, before looking over at Bella, her fingers typing away when she wasn't even fucking looking.

"Just do it, Pixie," she sighed, her brow wrinkling at the pressure we were under as she stared at the table. She finally lifted her gaze to me. "We're going, aren't we?" she asked, her voice almost a whisper.

"I'm afraid so, love," I told her, and then looked up at Eleazar. "If we do this, what are my limits with you? I don't want to go into this, and then have me and my crew end up in jail or in front of a firing squad at the end of the fucking day."

"None," he snorted, wearing a wry smile. "I'm off the grid on this, but my supervisors don't care how King is disposed of, just as long as he's gone. As far as this goes..." he started, circling his finger around the room, "...it never happened, just like any other job your father has pulled for the government before."

I turned to Bella, who was studying Eric with sharp, narrowed eyes. She took a deep breath and asked a question I totally wasn't expecting.

"Chelsea is James' kid, isn't she? She's Royce King's grand-niece."

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Eric paled, looking at Eleazar, and then back to Bella. "We're not sure," he whispered. "And we don't want to test her, because if King knew..."

"She'd be an heir to the biggest mafia fortune since the Gotti's," Rose snorted, rolling her eyes. "And he'd totally take her from you."

I smiled at the surprised look on the faces of all three men. I wanted to tell them this was what those girls did for a living - worm the truth and ugly secrets out of people - but I was enjoying their worried expressions too much. Bella's crew added an element of intelligence and cunning that I'd never had before with my boys and Mickey, and I was becoming spoiled to it.

Felix laughed, though, his head falling back as he guffawed. "You've got quite the crew here, Edward. I'm surprised King is still walking around the prison yard."

I snorted, shaking my head. "He's been in solitary confinement since the trial; otherwise, he wouldn't be."

Eleazar grinned, shaking his head. "Oh, kid, remind me not to piss you off. And just where the hell did you find this little thing?" he asked, pointing to Alice.

"She was hatched," Makenna giggled. "Alice is made of fairy dust and a fucking wicked fast computer processor."

The whole room cracked the hell up, including Alice, who just shrugged and looked back to her computer when it pinged an incoming message.

"Well, here we go," Emmett muttered to Mickey, who snorted and nodded.

Alice swallowed thickly, finally looking up at me. "Your dad said to tell you to trust Eleazar, that you should be able to utilize his skills. He also said he's leaving Seattle now, to expect him in two days. Benny says that King isn't due in court until after the weekend, where at that time, they'll schedule a released date. He said look for King to be on the street in less than a week. He also

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said..." She stopped, grimacing and looking over at Bella.

"Spill it, Alice," Bella told her.

"He said that the agent that he had with Miller was just found under an overpass, hanging by his own belt..." Alice's voice trailed off, and I could hear Bella inhale sharply.

"Fuck," I sighed, looking over at my girl, who had gone white as a sheet.

Without a man on Miller, we wouldn't have a clue as to where to find him. Bella's hands shook a bit as she pushed her hair out of her face.

"We'll get him, baby," I whispered to her, cupping her face.

She nodded, gazing up at me with tired eyes, but it was her firm grip on my thigh that let me know she was done with this conversation.

I looked around the room, my gaze finally landing on Alec. His eyes were warm and sad as he gazed at Bella.

"Alec, please bring these guys up to speed on everything," I told him. "Any ideas they may have, take note."

"Edward," my Aunt Kate called from the kitchen. "Call it a night, child," she crooned sweetly. "It's been a long day, and it looks like the next few will be, too. The plans can wait. You won't be going anywhere until Carlisle gets here, anyway." She turned towards Eleazar and his men. "I have plenty of room, so let's get you settled in, boys."

"Yes, ma'am," I agreed, standing up and offering Bella my hand. "Come on, love. Let's go."

~oOo~

BELLA

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I think there was a part of me that was relying on Benny's contact too much. I'd hoped that at some point - maybe after King was released - that we'd find out where Miller was and it would be over, but the news Alice read was like the last thread of hope snapping under the weight of all the shit I'd been through.

Now we had no idea where Miller was, who he was working with, and without an undercover agent to eventually tell us, we might never know. And he was the type of monster that wouldn't stop until he finished what he'd started with me.

Eleazar and his men seemed sincere, and I completely remembered Esme threatening Carlisle that she would call her brother if things didn't get better. Apparently, her patience with Carlisle's tentative safety and this upcoming last mission was too much for her, because she'd called him anyway. I could almost understand. The man she loved had continuously put himself in danger in order to gather as much information as he could, but she was scared, calling the only person she thought could help an already deadly group of people. In all reality, we could use it. Her timing just happened to be a little off; or hell, maybe it was perfect, since my father was gone. We had to change everything, since we were no longer hiding for his protection.

As Edward led me down the hall to the room we shared, I studied his strong back and shoulders - shoulders that still carried the weight of the world on them. I wasn't worried about Miller getting to him, because they couldn't be two different men, physically. Riley Miller was thin, though strong, with a mean streak a mile long. He'd beaten Alvarez' man to death in front of me without so much as a single weapon, so I knew he could fight, but he had also run at the first sign of trouble, which made him a coward. And that's where he and Edward differed so much. My Edward wasn't a coward, he wasn't weak, and if I had to take a guess, he stood about four or five inches taller than Miller.

In a fair fight, Miller would lose to Edward. Hands down. However, there was the problem, because I'd be willing to bet that Miller had never fought fair. Ever. Miller would use me against Edward in order to gain power over him. And that was the thought that caused a shiver to wrack my entire frame,

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because despite how far I'd come with all my fears and scars and memories, the thought of Miller ever laying another hand on me made me sick.

It also made me yearn for Edward's touch - touches that negated all the bad things - with an all consuming fire. I needed him to almost brand me with his touches, his kisses, and his words.

We found ourselves back at the sofa that we'd been on when this whole evening started, and I was standing between Edward's legs. He was gazing up at me with a worry-filled face, his eyes dark and his brow wrinkled.

"You're too quiet, love," he stated softly, reaching up to tuck my hair behind my ear. "When you're quiet, I worry. I know you have opinions on all this shit, so let me hear it."

I took a deep breath, shaking my head. I leaned in, brushing his now too long hair from his forehead, pressing my lips there.

"You need a haircut," I murmured softly, smiling at his chuckle.

"Fine, I'll tell Aunt Kate in the morning," he snorted, rolling his eyes. "She gives one helluva military buzz."

"Not too much off the top," I growled, running my fingers through his unruly locks.

He grinned and nodded, wrapping his arms around my waist. "Yes, ma'am. Now talk to me."

I traced my fingers over his handsome face, down his nose, and along his jaw line, before I spoke. "It's time to go to Seattle. We should get there before King is released, making a show of it, but only give them a brief glimpse of my protection...you and Emmett. Carlisle will have to be there, as well, to guide me through the memorial process and the meeting with Charlie's employees. Everyone else - Eleazar and his men, included - should be underground, out of sight. We follow the rest of the plan to the letter. We find every last one of

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King's men, either set them up to be arrested, or take them out completely."

"You want to let some live?"

"Some may be stuck...like Victoria," I replied with a shrug. "They may have had no choice but to work for King, out of fear or necessity. There's no telling how many people he extorts from, Edward."

He nodded, but stayed quiet for a moment, letting me continue.

"By night, we hunt them," I told him. "By day, I play the dutiful, grieving daughter, with two rather large, rather handsome, but grumpy looking guards. I'd have to attend to TT business, as well as Gravity, considering it's been burned to the ground."

"You think Em's handsome?" he snorted, rolling his eyes.

"No, Rose does," I giggled, smacking at him. "That's not the point, baby! Figures that would be what you'd focus on," I muttered, smirking at his sexy chuckle.

"Just checkin', love," he snickered, grinning up at me. "A man's got to know where he stands, you know."

"Shut it," I growled, rolling my eyes. "You stand with me."

"Yes, ma'am."

"We can bait King at the memorial service. Let him think I'm alone when I go up to my father's office and apartment," I continued with a shrug, because in all reality, I didn't know how King would react to my coming out into the spotlight. "If he doesn't take the bait then, he'll take it eventually, because he's going to want to know how much I remember."

Edward frowned, leaving one hand on my waist, but the other reached up to touch my cheek with the backs of his fingers. He swallowed thickly, shaking

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his head slightly.

"What about Miller, love?" he asked, his voice gruff at the mention of that name.

"One of those motherfuckers has to know where he is," I huffed, "so we ask a few questions - *urging* them to tell us how to find him. He'll also be tempted once I get home. I'm way too much of a threat to him, since I got away."

He sneered, shaking his head. "I'll kill that cocksucker before this over, Bella," he vowed, turning his head to kiss my palm that hadn't left his face. "He won't touch you again - or anyone else, for that matter."

"I know."

Edward was quiet as he studied my face, touching it with soft caresses. He took one more deep breath, before saying, "I don't like it... Wait, baby!" He held up a hand when I started to argue. "I said I didn't like it, not that it wasn't the only way. It *is* the fucking *only* way to do it. I don't like it, because it puts you way out there in the spotlight, and I just can't have anything happen to you."

"That's why you'll be by my side, Edward."

"The whole fucking time," he growled, his forehead hitting my stomach.

"They'll pay for what they've done to you, Bella."

I shivered at the menace in his voice, and he pulled back to look up at me.

"Does that scare you?" he asked, frowning at another shiver.

"The only thing that scares me is the thought of Miller touching me again," I whispered as honestly as I could, but those words seemed unfitting to say aloud. I cupped his face, bringing his lips to mine. "I never want anyone else's touch again but yours. And I need that... *now*."

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I was done talking about all the shit we had to do, should do, needed to plan. I was tired of every name we discussed, every plot, every scheme, every what-if scenario, because I wanted to lose myself in the man that was in front of me.

For one fucking minute, I wanted to pretend nothing was happening outside the four walls we were locked behind. I wanted to drown myself in his skin, his smell, and his touch. I desperately wanted to go back to his house, to those precious hours we'd lost ourselves in making love for the first time, giving ourselves over to something that was bigger than just the two of us.

Edward didn't even question it, and for a split second, I wondered if he'd been feeling the same way, too, because his hands slipped slowly underneath my shirt, gathering the material up around my breasts, finally tugging it off and dropping it to the floor. My sneakers, jeans, and ponytail holder all joined it.

Reaching behind his head, he grasped a fistful of his t-shirt and shirked his own shirt off, and soon, I was being pulled into his lap, skin to beautifully smooth skin.

I watched as a sexy crooked grin quirked up his face as his hands ghosted over every inch of my flesh.

"What?" I snorted, drowning in his darkening eyes that gazed up at me through his long eyelashes.

"I remember having you like this, but there were pajamas in the way..."

I smiled at the memory of the cabin, where I'd woken him up. He'd been sleeping on the sofa in his room at the time, and had called me over. We'd started testing my boundaries more and more after that. He'd touched me intimately for the first time there, even though it was over the material of my pajama pants.

"I want nothing between us," I breathed, pulling myself closer to him as I straddled his thighs.

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His erection was trapped between us as I leaned in to kiss him. He met me halfway, one hand gripping my hair at the neck, the other skimming his fingers lightly down my spine until he reached my ass. Gripping and kneading my cheek, he ground me against him as the room soon filled with gasps and moans, and hums and murmurs of love.

I practically growled in appreciation when his hand gripped my hair harder, pulling my head back so that he could kiss roughly down my neck.

"I was going to taste you earlier, baby," he purred, suckling my earlobe and dragging his teeth over it.

"No," I huffed, weaving my fingers into his hair. "Not this time. I need...I want... I want you inside. I need to feel you, Edward."

The most beautiful sound rumbled from his chest, maybe a moan or a grunt, possibly a combination of the two; knowing I'd caused that sound and the twitch of his cock between us made me feel powerful and beautiful.

I slipped my hand between us, wrapping my fingers around him and glancing up to his face. Lifting up, I was just about to position myself over him, when he stopped me.

"I want you to come one good time for me, sweetness," he commanded, taking advantage of my raised position to glide his fingers between my legs. "I'll get my taste, love, even if I have to lick it off my fucking fingers," he growled, and my whole body practically lit on fire when two of his perfect fingers slid deep inside of me, his thumb pressing on my clit with such precision that I cried out.

My hips bucked forward, trapping my hand around his cock between us as he played my body perfectly. Leaning in, he flicked his tongue out to circle around my nipple, his hand holding my back as my whole body arched in his lap. The hand between my legs never stopped, never relented as his mouth captured my other nipple, suckling it hard enough to make me call his name.

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I didn't know what was hotter...the feel of him practically surrounding me, coaxing my orgasm closer and closer, or the sound of just how wet he was making me as his fingers worked in and out of me. And I wasn't the only one that noticed.

"Mmm, my, my...aren't we wet, love?" he asked, smiling against my breast, looking up at me. "That's giving me more than just...fingers to lick, Bella," he crooned, cupping my sex fully so that the heel of his hand hit my clit at just the right place.

"Fuck," I hissed, grabbing both sides of his face and pressing my forehead to his. "Don't stop, don't stop," I chanted in a whisper, squeezing my eyes closed, because everything in me felt like it was about to explode.

When the heel of his hand lifted, replaced by his thumb swirling just right, I gasped a string of curses, because I was damn close.

"That's it, baby," he urged, cupping my breast and grazing his thumb over it, but his eyes never left my face. "Come on my hand so I can have it all. I might even share it if you're good," he said, his voice husky and full of sensual promise.

"Damn it," I gasped, my head falling back as his words, his fingers, and the pinching of my nipple were too much to fight against.

My center ground down onto his hand, clenching around his fingers as I shattered in his arms. Before I'd even calmed down from my climax, Edward lifted me, sheathing himself deep within me. He held me still as he brought his hand up between our faces, capturing his middle finger in his mouth and sucking it clean.

"So fucking good, love," he rasped, looking up at me through heavy lidded eyes. "Do you know how delicious you are?" he asked, licking his palm with a flattened tongue that caused a whimper to erupt softly from my mouth as I licked my own lips in anticipation.

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As his tongue made another pass over the inside of his hand, I wrapped my lips around his ring finger, reveling in the dark look that crossed his face as he stopped to watch me, a sexy ass smile curling one side of his mouth. Rolling my hips over him just once caused us both to moan, both to start moving, and suddenly, I needed more.

I could feel every inch of him twitch inside of me, I could feel his hands - one still wet - gripping my hips in order to match his rhythm, and I could feel just how perfect we fit together.

"Fuck, Edward, that feels good," I breathed, gripping his shoulders for leverage, "but I want... *more, harder.*"

An evil grin spread over his handsome features, making him even more deadly sexy - if that were even possible. He wrapped an arm around my waist, rolling us on the couch, so that I was the one sitting and he was looming beautifully over me.

Strong arms shot out, grasping the back of the sofa on either side of my head. His whole body was taut, with every muscle tensed, as he growled, "You wrap those perfect legs around me, love. I can give you harder."

I hitched one leg up around his rib cage, the other around his ass, digging a heel into him to make him move, to pull him in deeper, because it was never fucking close enough. When he finally pulled back, thrusting back in with force, we both made sounds I didn't recognize. It was a cross between desperate and feral, between needy and satisfaction, because he was so deep, I could feel him hitting places I never knew I had. And it was heaven - not because of how much force he was using, but because of how connected to him I felt at the moment.

I thought the first times we'd been together were emotional, physical, and amazing expressions of how we felt about one another. I wasn't prepared for it to happen *every* time, but it was happening again. Despite what we were doing could be considered fucking, the love I could feel from him was immense. It was more than last time, and I wondered just how many times it would take for

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the overwhelming sensation of our feelings to settle down - if ever.

Edward was fucking gorgeous looming over me, his arms gripping the back of the sofa, every muscle in his torso flexing with each thrust of his hips. An errant curl had fallen to his sweaty forehead, giving him a wrecked look. His shoulders were wide and strong, begging to be held onto, so I reached up to grab one, the other grasping his ass, feeling it flex with every movement. For a split second, I wished we had a mirror, because I'd be willing to bet his back was fucking phenomenal as he took me hard on that sofa.

"Come with me, Bella," he panted, squeezing his eyes closed. "I'm so close...fuck, so close," he breathed, swiveling his hips and making me cry out. "Touch yourself, love. Help me make you feel so good...one more time..."

I bit my lip as my hand left his shoulder, dragging my fingers down his stomach to where we were connected. We both hissed when my fingers grazed against him and my clit at the same time.

"Oh fuck, baby, please," he begged, "come for me again. Show me you love me, 'cause I fucking love you so much..."

I barely had to touch myself in order to fall over the edge. I was dangling over that precipice already with the best visual stimulation looming over me, but his desperate declaration of love was what caused my whole body to arch, to clench down on him, and my legs to pull him hard against me, bringing his own climax at the same time.

I don't know how he had the strength to move, much less pick me up and carry me to bed, because I sure had nothing left in my arms and legs. He nestled us under the covers, wrapping himself around me as close as he could. Nuzzling his neck and inhaling deeply the scent that made Edward...Edward, I placed a kiss to the juncture of his neck and shoulder.

"I love you," I whispered, closing my eyes to the weariness that finally was taking over.

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"More than my own life," he murmured, placing a kiss to my forehead. "No one will ever touch you again, but me, Bella. *No one.*"

With that said, we both succumbed to sleep, letting new visitors, looming missions, and scary men fade into the background.

~oOo~

I awoke with a start the next morning to booming voices, loud curses, and bright light in my eyes. I also woke alone in Edward's bed. After burrowing my face deeper into the pillow, trying to fight waking up and inhaling Edward's sheets without shame, I rolled my eyes at the sound of loud voices again.

Slipping out of bed, I took a shower, dressing quickly, in order to find out what the hell was going on in the other part of the house. I was almost through the bedroom door, when I came to a stop, remembering to grab my gun. Tucking it into the small of my back, I bolted down the hallway, because the voices were louder, and they sounded angry.

What I discovered when I made it to the living room and dining room area was not what I was expecting. It wasn't angry voices - just excited, passionate. The table had plans, papers, and photographs all over it. As I stepped closer, I expected to see my mother in those pictures, but they were shots of different men in different parts of Seattle. My head spun when Alec stood up abruptly, jamming his finger down onto the table.

"I'm telling you, start with the Savage brothers, and you'll clear the way for cell phone usage, Edward," he said emphatically. "Communication in that city is the key. We need to know exactly where everyone is...every minute of the damn day."

Edward nodded slowly as he leaned against the wall on the opposite side of the room. He looked worried, but as he ran a hand through his now shorter locks, I could see determination now taking root. He looked fierce and focused, angry and indecisive, but all that faded away when he caught sight of me in the doorway, melting into the sweetest, most adorable expression.

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"I thought you'd sleep all day, sweetness," he snickered, pushing away from the wall.

"I could have, but I lost the teddy bear I was holding," I muttered, smirking up at his chuckle.

"Hungry?" he asked, and I nodded. "Good, because Aunt Kate lost her mind this morning."

I giggled when he set me at the kitchen counter, conversations still continuing loudly in the living room. Aunt Kate had outdone herself, because there was a ton of food. Everything from waffles to a mountain of scrambled eggs, to piles of bacon and sausage.

Edward set a plate in front of me, along with the bottle of syrup, causing me to glance up at him with a raised eyebrow. "Don't start," I growled, unable to not smile up at him.

He grinned, winked, and kissed my forehead, dragging his lips to my ear. "One day," he whispered sexily, "you'll teach me all about the ways of syrup."

I laughed, my head falling back, feeling a wet kiss to my neck. "One day, Edward."

We were both still chuckling, when Rose stormed into the dining room, pissed off more than I'd seen her in a long time.

"Emmett, I'm not fucking kidding. I have to be there. Charlie was my boss, Bella is my best friend...and it's fucking stupid if I don't show," she said as she walked away from him, but he was pissed and hot on her trail.

"Rosie, please see fucking sense. You can hide in that apartment, in Charlie's office, but you can't attend the service. The press, King, and who the fuck knows who else will be there..."

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"Can't?" Rose and I asked as I turned in my seat to look at him. Rose leaned against the counter next to me.

"Did he really just say that?" I muttered to Rose.

"Yeah, the idiot won't listen to reason."

"Huh," I huffed, taking a bite of eggs and chewing slowly as I glared at Emmett.

He was looking uncomfortable now, but it was Edward's amused face that almost made me crack.

"She goes," I told Emmett, holding up my hand when he started to argue. "I respect that you guys order each other around, but she really is going. It's ridiculous to think otherwise, Em. She was Charlie's right hand. It wouldn't make sense for her not to help with the arrangements."

"Emmett, you'll be right there!" Rose added, rolling her eyes and folding her arms across her chest.

"Don't like it," he growled, mirroring her stance by folding his own arms over his chest.

"You don't have to fucking like it, Em," Edward said with a shrug. "It's the way that it has to be, though. Bella's right. If they're coming back to set up this memorial, then Rose has to be a party to that. To be honest, man, I'd rather both girls be there."

"Why?" Emmett scoffed, looking at Edward like he was betraying him.

"They see through bullshit, Emmett!" Edward barked, rolling his eyes. "They'll spot someone that doesn't belong a mile away."

Emmett glared at Edward, shaking his head, but Edward didn't flinch as he stared right back at him.

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I took a bite of bacon, watching with fascination the battle of wills between the two boys, which Edward eventually won.

"I'll be fucking glad when this shit is over," Emmett sighed. "King can't die quick enough for me."

"No shit," I snorted, shaking my head and taking another bite of eggs. "But thank you for helping, Emmett," I sang after swallowing.

"Only for you, Bellsy," he harrumphed, walking back into the living room.

Edward walked around the counter to lean on it, facing me. "Don't sweat it, guys. He's just worried."

"And you aren't?" Rose countered with a laugh.

"Fucking A, I'm worried," he growled, shaking his head. "All I want is to keep you guys safe, but as long as these assholes are out there, *safe* will never happen. And it requires everyone to get it done. I hate it, but it is what it is," he sighed, but a smirk crossed his features when I poured syrup on my waffle.

"I like the hair cut," I teased, reaching up to ruffle the shorter locks on his head and running my fingers along the sides that were now really short.

He grinned, pushed himself away from the counter, pointing at the syrup. "One day."

"Shut up, Edward!" I laughed, shaking my head.

"When you're done, come into the living room. We need to run through the plan one more time before my father gets here," he stated, before leaving the room.

We spent the rest of the day going over every single detail of the plans. Parts of it were going to be hard, like sneaking most everyone into the building late at night, setting Alice up in the security office the day of the memorial, and

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making sure no one was seen coming and going.

Then there were parts that were similar to things my girls and I did for a living, like scoping out dance clubs and bars that King owned or hung out in, tailing people, and setting up criminals to get caught red-handed. There would be surveillance, recon photos, and stake outs.

Finally, there were the things we weren't really sure about. Rose said we could call the media and tip them off about my arrival - or *our* arrival - making a grand entrance on the street, but Edward didn't like the idea. It was Jasper that suggested that we call the media, but that we arrive by Edward's helicopter. That idea was accepted, so Edward would fly Rose, Emmett, and me to the roof of Twilight Tech, supposedly "meeting" Carlisle on the helipad.

I finally had to take a break from it all around sunset. Even though Tom and Obie had taken care of the animals all day, I decided to feed the dogs. Sitting on the porch steps, I ran my fingers through Tia's fur as she rested her head on my lap. Her belly was getting bigger by the day, and it seemed her puppies were due any time now. There was a part of me that was a little upset that I would miss it.

I heard the screen door creak open, and I expected to see Edward standing there, but instead, I saw Aunt Kate. She smiled down at me and Tia, shaking her head.

"She likes you, child," she noted, groaning as she lowered herself to sit next to us.

"She's sweet," I snickered, gazing down into ice blue eyes.

"She tore up a pair of Edward's sneakers once. Did he tell you?" she laughed, running a hand flat down Tia's back.

"No," I giggled, shaking my head.

"Yeah, she was a puppy, and God, what a handful she was from the get go!"

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"What did he do?" I asked, looking over at her.

"Nothing," she snorted, rolling her eyes. "He argued with her, tried to pull them away from her, but gave up and let her have them."

We were quiet for a few minutes, just watching the sunset. The air was cooling off, and the breeze blew my hair from my face. I felt a sense of unease, despite the beautiful scenery around me. I knew that as soon as Carlisle arrived, we'd be getting ready to head back to Seattle, back to where shit had fallen apart. I took a deep breath and let it out, turning to Aunt Kate when she finally spoke softly.

"I'm sorry about Renee," she said, reaching up to tuck my hair behind my ear when it fluttered in my face. "It makes better sense to me that she was taken from you, that she didn't leave you. I always wondered why she would have done that."

"Me, too," I said with a shrug. "I used to think she'd left a note, but that my dad had hidden it from me, like there was some awful truth as to why she left. I would sit for hours, going over every little thing in my mind that I'd ever done wrong and wondering which one of them had made her go away."

"There was an awful truth, Bella," she said, a warm smile caressing my face. "But it wasn't what you thought. I understand *why* Charlie did what he did. He wanted to spare you. The last year Elizabeth was sick was tough. She wasn't herself, but she tried to be okay for Edward. My hope is that he remembers her from before, not those last few weeks. We want people to remember the good things about us when we're gone, never the bad."

"I don't know if he remembers her being sick. He's never mentioned it, but he has told me some...really beautiful things about her."

"She was a beautiful person. Inside and out," she agreed with a smile. "Just so you know," she started, cupping my face, "Renee and Elizabeth couldn't wait for you two to meet. They talked about when Carlisle would retire, so they could move closer. I couldn't have children, but they wanted someone their

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little ones could grow up with."

I smiled, because Edward had stepped out onto the porch to join us, sitting down on my other side, placing me and Tia in the middle.

"That would've been interesting," he chuckled, pulling me closer to his side.

"There you are!" She beamed at him, reaching into the pocket of her jacket. "I found this. I thought the two of you might be interested."

She handed over a photograph, and Edward and I put our heads together to look at it.

"Oh, wow," Edward whispered. "Is that...is that from when they met?" he asked, looking over at Aunt Kate.

"Yup," she snickered. "Can't you tell from their watermelon-sized bellies?"

We both chuckled, going back to the picture. It was just the best picture. Ever. Our mothers were side by side on what looked like these very steps, laughing, with their hands on their big pregnant bellies. I could just barely make out Charlie and Carlisle in the rocking chairs in the background, but my eyes couldn't stop staring at Renee and Elizabeth.

They were two very pretty women at what looked like their happiest time. They had everything at that point - husbands that loved them, their health, and two healthy babies on the way.

"God, that's so...perfect," I whispered, leaning my temple to his. "They look so happy."

"You really look like your mom there," he said, pointing to my mother's laughing face. "When you laugh like that."

I smiled, biting my lip. "And you have your mom's smile. It's crooked, like yours," I giggled.

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Aunt Kate stood up, smiling down at the two of us. "Keep it. They would love to know you have it."

"Thanks, Aunt Kate," we said in unison.

"When we finally go home, Bella," Edward said so softly in my ear, placing a sweet kiss there, "we'll frame this and put it in a good spot, okay?"

"Kay," I sighed, liking the sound of that. A lot. "It was the *real* first time we met," I laughed, looking up at him.

"Exactly," he chuckled, kissing my head, but we both turned when Jasper threw the screen door open.

"Oh fuck, Ed. We've got some shit hittin' the fan," he growled. "Your dad *fucking called*. Not emailed, *called*. He's in Juneau...and he's got a tail he can't shake."

Edward and I stood up, running into the room as Eleazar talked to Carlisle. "Here, Cullen, talk to your kid, man..." he growled, handing over the phone, and Edward immediately turned the speaker on for all of us to hear.

"Talk to me, Dad. Where are you?"

"I just crossed into Juneau. I can't shake a black sedan. Four men. If I hadn't been so tired, I would have shaken them by now. There's a hospital not far from here, Edward. It has a parking garage..."

"You drive around until you hear from me, Dad. I can be in the air in minutes," he growled, snapping his fingers at Mickey and Emmett, who bolted out the front door. "When you hear from me, you get to the top of that garage, and I'll pick you up."

I ran to Alice's side, whispering, "You follow that cell signal. Edward may need the coordinates, Alice."

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"On it, on it, on it," she chanted, nodding and typing. "Good thing he bought a throwaway phone," she mumbled to herself.

"Edward, be safe, but bring backup. I may not be able to shake them by the time you get here."

"Sir," he grunted, looking around the room. "Jasper...Bella...Eleazar...chopper, two minutes!" he snapped, closing the cell phone.

I bolted down the hall to our room, grabbing one of the forty-fives that we still had from when we'd gone to the tree house. I ran back through the house, out the front door, and across the yard to the chopper, where Emmett and Mickey were prepping her for takeoff.

Jasper ran up beside me, his rifle cases in his hands. He slid them across the open side door, waving me over.

"Bells, in the back with me," he said, lifting me into the open space. "When we open these doors to let Carlisle in, we're gonna shoot anything that heads our way. Okay?"

"Got it," I answered with a nod, helping move his things out of the way for Eleazar to get in. Edward was right after him.

"Bella, you follow Jasper's lead on this. I need your sharp shooting skills, baby. Okay?" he asked as he tugged his baseball cap on backwards, falling into the pilot seat and starting the chopper up.

"That, and he couldn't bear to leave you behind," Jasper chuckled in my ear, handing me a headset and dodging my elbow.

"I heard that, J. Fucking focus, man. We'll get this done a helluva lot quicker! I want to get into Juneau and get out!" Edward barked, turning out the window. "Have Alice patch into the radio so you can hear us, Mickey. You know what channel. Em, if anything fucking happens, we'll meet you in Seattle. Got me?"

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"Sir!" Emmett and Mickey both grunted, backing away quickly as the blades on top picked up speed.

Before we lifted off, Edward said, "Jasper, buckle her in and watch her."

"Sir," Jasper said, reaching over and adjusting my seatbelt.

He then turned to Eleazar, his face grim from the side. "Guess we'll find out if you can be trusted now. Fuck up, and you won't see the flight back."

Eleazar smirked, shaking his head.

"Eddie, let's get this bird in the air, man," Jasper growled, kicking the back of the pilot seat. "I want to get back to Alice by bedtime, asshole."

I chuckled, rolling my eyes at the two of them. I half expected Jasper to start talking about target practice again, but he didn't. He just sat back, watching the farm fall away. And for a minute, I wondered if we'd be coming back there, or going straight to Seattle after we got to Carlisle. Either way, I just hoped we got to him in time.

A/N... Yes...A huge cliffie. And by now, I'm pretty sure you think my goal is to torture poor Carlisle. I assure you, it's not. He just happens to be out in the open too much.

Okay, so no need really to explore this chapter, except with the three men that Esme brought in. Eleazar is her brother that she threatened Carlisle with a long time ago. Esme's "connections" are the CIA. Pretty hefty connections, if you ask me. We'll see more of them in the next chapter.

Speaking of next chapter...we will find out how Daddy C is doing, I promise. We also see the last of the farm...the next chapter will be the last before they head to Seattle.

Now...thanks to JenRar for always making this shit easier, smoother. To Goober_Lou, who tells me how badly everyone will want to hurt me for

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every cliffy and helps me bounce ideas off of her left and right. And to MedusaInNY for helping with my blog, among many, many other things! :)

Thanks to everyone who reviewed last chapter, please let me hear you this time. I'm sure you wanna yell, so just spit it out! LOL Love you, though. The next chapter is on schedule for Sunday as usual, so review and I'll see you then. Until next time...Later.

Chapter 22

A/N... You know... I get it. You don't want anything to happen to Daddy C. :) Some of you know my writing, and trust my evil ways...but some of you are new, so I'll calm your panic just a bit. I love this Carlisle... Mmm'kay? 'Nuff said.

Well, let's find out how Pilotward handles this situation. I'll see you at the bottom.

CHAPTER 22

EDWARD

Land drifted out from underneath us as I flew over the water. I wanted to stay over American soil, so coming in from the west was just easier. I pulled the throwaway phone that Aunt Kate had given me out of my pocket and tossed it to Bella.

"Call my dad. It's the only number programmed in there. Tell him we are minutes away," I told her, and she pulled off her headset to put the phone to her ear.

"Carlisle, we're almost there," I could barely hear her say, and that was only because she was sitting next to Jasper and it carried over his microphone. "Are they still on you?" she asked, looking up at me and nodding as she heard his answer. "Get to that garage...no, we don't need to know where it is," she said with a sigh. "Just get there, Carlisle."

She hung up, pulling back on her headset. "He's around the corner from that garage."

"Good," I sighed, hoping our timing was right.

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If he was trapped up on the top of that garage without a way out, he was a fucking sitting duck. I had no choice but to land illegally to pick him up, but I wasn't going to do it any other way.

"Edward," Alice said over the radio. "I tapped into your radio signal and Carlisle's phone. I've got his coordinates for you."

"Perfect. Let me have them, Alice," I barked, nodding once she'd rattled them off. "Anything else?"

"Benny has Feds heading Carlisle's way, so watch out for the good guys, he told me to tell you. Your dad was technically working for them, so he gets protection," she explained. "Also, I've cleared your air space, Edward. Your flight manifest is as fake as a three dollar bill, but at least at first glance, no one will be the wiser to why you're flying over the city so low. Technically, you're with the press."

I smiled, shaking my head. "You're beautiful, Alice...facial grid bullshit or not. You hear me?"

She laughed, as did everyone else in the chopper. "Thank you, Edward. Be careful, and we'll be listening."

I don't know what my dad had been thinking driving so long without a break, driving until he was too fucking tired to pay attention. I knew why he was driving, instead of flying into Anchorage, because flights could be tracked, but we were getting down to the ugly bare bones of this situation; there was no room for fucking mistakes. Fucking mistakes could lead to getting my girl - or someone else, for that matter - killed, and I couldn't have that. I didn't know if I could survive it if something happened to her now.

Jasper hadn't been kidding Bella when he told her that the reason I took her with us to get my dad was because I couldn't bear to leave her behind. I couldn't. I trusted no one but myself when it came to her safety. No one. But I hadn't been lying, either, because my girl was a damn sharp shooter, and that shit could come in handy once we located my father.

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We came up over the city of Juneau, and I turned sharply, growling, "Hang on. This is going to be quick and tight."

"That's what she said," Jasper snorted, grinning at Bella's laugh, but my girl's eyes were sharp out the window.

"Edward, there's the hospital," she said, pulling out her nine mil and kicking Jasper's bag towards him so he could pull out his rifle.

He kept that shit at the ready, only needing to lock the sight onto the top and pull the shoulder brace down.

"Are you armed?" she asked, and she must've been talking to Eleazar, because he was the one that answered her.

"I'm good, Bella," he grunted, and the whole chopper was filled with the sound of locking and loading. "Don't miss with that thing," he chuckled.

"I don't fucking miss!" she snapped, and I couldn't help but smile, because my girl was well aware of what she could and couldn't do. "I've lost my own father. I won't lose this one."

Jasper pounded on the window. "Target in sight, bro! Drop her down," he said, taking off his seat belt and sliding open the side door. Cool air burst into the cabin of the chopper.

The view from where I was coming in was scary. I could see my father's BMW squeal up from the level below onto the top platform of the garage, practically spinning in a circle in order to park the thing off to the side. His car door flew open at the same time his trunk popped, and I set down as close to him as I could without getting too close, putting us between him and the entrance to the top of the garage.

Bella launched out of her seat, sliding open the other door so that my father could sling his shit in and we could get the hell out of dodge. She started to get down to help him, but I couldn't let that happen.

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"Bella, don't you dare!" I growled, shaking my head at her when she turned to face me. "You keep your sweet ass inside this cabin!"

"Someone has to help him, then," she countered, pointing at my dad. "He's still injured, Edward."

"I've got him," Eleazar growled, hopping down to the garage blacktop. "You just watch that entrance up here," he said, pointing through the chopper at the same fucking time a black sedan came flying up to the top of the garage.

"Goddamn it! Dad, get your ass moving!" I snapped, pulling out my glock and readying it to fire.

The problem was the space I'd put between the chopper and my dad's car, simply for safety sake. The sedan may just beat the two men to us.

Jasper dove onto the floor of the cabin, while Bella knelt beside him, both aiming out the side door, but Jasper wasted no time. He took aim at the car's engine, and after three loud pops, the car's hood blew up and off the car, causing the driver to skid to a complete stop.

"They're gonna scatter, Bells," he told her. "Take our left; I'll take the right."

"Yup," she sniffed, squeezing an eye closed to aim down her straight and stiffened arms.

I had my own gun up out my window, but I was also watching the progress of my father and Eleazar. The second the bags were tossed up into the cabin, the men from the other car jumped out, guns firing.

"Cover us," I ordered, and I spun in my seat, opening the co-pilot door for my dad, but it was the blood on Eleazar's arm that shocked me.

"Now!" Bella snapped, pulling her trigger at the same time Jasper did, and four men fell to the blacktop as their bullets zinged through the cabin.

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"It's just a graze. Don't even worry about it," Eleazar grunted, climbing back into the cabin and falling into the seat.

"Let's go, son," my dad sighed, putting his seat belt on.

"Nice to see you, too, old man," I snorted, rolling my eyes at his smile. "You could have just called for a fucking ride, you know. No need for such...theatrics."

"Shut the fuck up, you pain in the ass. Go!" he laughed, punching my arm.

I chuckled, fell back in my seat, and turned to look in the back. "Everyone okay back there?" I asked, but my eyes were on my girl as she ripped a part of Eleazar's shirt to tie it around his upper arm.

"We're fine, Edward," Jasper said with a nod. "Let's go."

I lifted slowly into the air, just enough to turn around to face the back of the sedan. Aiming my gun out my window, I shot the gas tank of the goons' car, sending a fireball into the air.

"Mine, too, son," my father commanded.

"I got it," Bella stated, aiming out the side door that just happened to be facing the BMW.

One bullet, one pull of the trigger, and the BMW erupted into fire and smoke, just as the Feds' car came screaming up to the top of the garage.

"Damn, you *don't* miss," Eleazar chuckled.

"She told you that," I laughed, turning just enough to give my smirking girl a wink. "Close that door, baby. Your's, too, Jasper."

Once all doors were shut, I banked to the west, heading back out over the water and back towards the farm.

~oOo~

BELLA

It was chaos when we landed back at the farm. I think there was a part of them all that expected us to go straight to Seattle, unable to return back to Aunt Kate's, but they all rushed to us, helping unload the chopper.

Esme fell into an exhausted Carlisle's arms, holding him close and telling him things we couldn't hear. It was utterly intimate, and I found myself tearing up and looking away from them, because I understood her worry, her fear. I couldn't imagine how she'd handled being apart from him this long to begin with. I would've been sick and useless if Edward had been away from me and that close to the source of all our problems.

"That's it!" she growled at Carlisle as I walked by, leaving Edward to power down and care for his helicopter. "That's the last time!"

"Yes, ma'am," he conceded wearily, and he sounded just like his son, which caused me to snort and roll my eyes.

Eleazar smiled warmly at them as we all made our way back into the house, but paused long enough to tug on the makeshift bandage that I'd tied around his arm, hissing in pain.

"Stop that," I told him, shaking my head and tugging him to the dining room table. "Let me clean it."

"Esme can do..." he started, but shut up when I raised an eyebrow at him.

"Let them have their moment," I chided with a snicker. "I know a thing or two about wounds, anyway," I added with a grimace and a sigh.

"Here, Bells," Rose said, rushing into the room and handing me one of many first aid kits we had lying about the house.

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I worked quietly, untying the bandage that I'd secured around his arm in the chopper and tearing his shirt sleeve away to give me a better look at what I was dealing with. Eleazar was right; it was just a graze, but it was still an open wound.

People drifted in and out of the dining room. Eleazar's men asked if he was fine, and he told them that he was. I concentrated on cleaning the wound, stopping the bleeding, and making sure he didn't need stitches.

He was a broad man, with honey colored hair, like his sister. They had the same sweet, wry smile and calm demeanor. He radiated intelligence and sage wisdom, and he still looked like he could hold his own in a fight with a power and strength that probably matched Emmett's.

"Esme could stitch this," I told him softly, "or I could put butterflies on it...your call."

"It'll scar either way," he chuckled. "Just wrap it up and send me on my way, Miss Bella."

I smiled up at him and nodded, applying the butterfly strips in order to pull the wound closer together and wrapping gauze around his bicep.

"How'd you learn to shoot like that?" he asked, ignoring everyone that was walking into the room.

"I was at Quantico for a while," I snickered, tying his new bandage on, "but I didn't graduate."

"And the wounds?" he asked softly, but he looked like he really wasn't ready for the answer, or that he already knew it, and just wanted to hear it from me.

"Miller," I stated, noticing that everyone in the room was silent, except for us. "He had me for three days...strapped to a table. He tried to get information about Charlie from me, and he wasn't... *gentle*."

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I felt a kiss to the back of my head, and I leaned back against Edward, who had taken the seat beside me. Eleazar looked over my head to Edward, and then to Carlisle and Esme, who had taken the seat across from us. I didn't know what he was looking for, but I felt the need to explain these people to him.

"Everyone in this room has busted their asses to keep me and my girls safe," I told him. "Mickey and Emmett picked up Charlie before King could get to him. Jasper grabbed my girls from my office, *after* they'd located me, and if Carlisle and Edward had been ten minutes later arriving to Miller's, I wouldn't be here now..." My voice trailed off, because my girls were nodding their heads as Edward wrapped an arm around me.

Alec cursed softly from across the room, shaking his head and looking down at the floor, his face grim. He muttered something that sounded like, "Fucking pig..." I wasn't sure what details he knew, but he had become quite the huge help.

"Miller has an interesting history. We know all about him through our intelligence on King," Eleazar muttered, giving me a dark but sad look before continuing. "He was born into a wealthy family in Portland, his father was killed in a car accident, and his mother went from country clubs and reading circles to... *church*. Her faith became an addiction, changed into an obsession, eventually morphing her into an abusive parent, finally putting her in the loony bin. What started as a fairly happy childhood, became a nightmare for Riley Miller. He was punished for watching TV, unless it was the religious channels. He was punished for talking to, kissing, or even *thinking* about girls. And by punished, I mean beaten with a broken broomstick."

"So he was taken from her," Alice added, looking over the top of her laptop. "He entered the foster care system at the age of sixteen, and things didn't get any better. He was passed from home to home, never staying in one place longer than three months, with over fifty trips to the emergency room. He never said a word as to what was happening to him. In fact, he almost died."

Eleazar nodded in agreement with her. "He finally aged out of the system, finding work with King. He started as a drug runner, but when he beat the shit

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out of a prostitute for stealing from him, King knew he could use his... *skills*."

I snorted, shaking my head. "Skills...right. Now he takes all that bullshit out on every woman he comes across."

"Easy, love," Edward soothed in my ear. "He'll never lay a hand on you again, Bella," he continued to whisper so only I could hear him. "You *stay* fucking angry at him, baby. Keep it, feed it, because when we find him, you can *use* that anger. Got me?"

I swallowed hard and nodded, finally turning away from Eleazar to face forward in my chair. Edward had no idea just how much his voice, his touch to my arm, and even his mere presence helped keep me calm.

"Someone will know where to find this asshole," Alec growled, looking around the room. "When we get to Seattle, more than one motherfucker will be asked, Bells. I promise."

I nodded, but turned to Carlisle. "How'd it go with Billy Black?"

"I think that was where I picked up my tail," he stated with a shrug, but went on, "I arrived to his house unannounced and wired. Not that it did much good, but I'll get to that. He was scared shitless to see me on his front doorstep, because he'd avoided me at the office the entire time I was there. When I told him I had news about Jacob, he let me in. I told him I'd tell him all about Jake and Charlie, if he'd answer a few questions for me." He turned towards Alice. "Can you pull up his financials again? I want to show you guys something."

"Sure, sure, sure," Alice mumbled, typing away, and then spun the computer around for us to see.

"These deposits that we'd seen the last time we looked him up...we didn't really look where they were coming from, so Alice, if you would, please..." he requested, turning the computer back towards her. "It'll take you a minute to actually trace it, but the results are...interesting."

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Alice's little brow furrowed as she furiously typed away, suddenly rising up into her hairline as she discovered something interesting. "Charlie was paying him once a month? On top of his salary? Why?" she asked, and we all turned to Carlisle for the answer.

"That monthly payment was so deeply buried in TT's accounts that it was untraceable at first glance," he said, smiling almost in pride, before turning his attention to me. "Bella, did you know Pearl?"

"Aunt Jane's sister? Yeah, she was living in an assisted living facility when Jane passed away. She was younger than Jane, but was showing the first signs of Alzheimer's and dementia. Jake made special arrangements to have her brought to the funeral, but we weren't sure she really knew what was happening," I explained.

"Right, well, shortly after Jane's death, Charlie made arrangements for Pearl's care to continue. I guess Jane had been taking care of her all her life. Billy volunteered to handle it, so he's been paying the nursing home for Charlie."

I sighed, shaking my head. Charlie was not the man I'd thought he was, and that bothered me, because the more I found out about him since he'd died, the more I wished that it had been *that* man I'd known growing up.

"Unbelievable," I muttered, glaring back at Carlisle, but Alice interrupted again.

"Yeah, but there's another monthly expense that's coming out of that same fund, and it's new, Carlisle," she huffed as she typed away, suddenly to come to a complete stop. "Oh, hell no..." she snorted, looking up at me, and then Rose. "Guess who's pregnant..." she giggled, rolling her eyes and turning the computer back around.

Rose and I stood up and leaned forward to read the screen.

"You've *got* to be fucking kidding me," Rose laughed, looking over at me. "Lauren?"

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"Wait, wait!" Edward snickered. "Isn't that the girl that Jake..."

"Yes!" my girls and I laughed, as Mack darted in from the kitchen to take a look.

I fell back into my chair with a laugh. "You're kidding me with this shit, right? Jake's dumb ass is going to be a daddy? Oh, please let me be the one to tell him!"

"It's funny you should say that, because Billy actually suggested it," Carlisle laughed, joined by everyone else in the room. "He's none too pleased with his son, though he is worried about him, once he found out where he was."

"Humph, I bet not," I growled, folding my arms across my chest and rolling my eyes. "So let me get this straight... Billy isn't working behind our backs?" I asked, and Carlisle shook his head no. "And he's been loyal to my father - and apparently, me - all this time?" I continued, and he nodded slowly. "Well, thank fuck. One less asshole to fight against."

Edward snorted into a loud laugh, pulling me to him as everyone joined him.

"But wait!" I said, sitting forward. "Why was he avoiding *you*?" I asked Carlisle.

"He knew about my backing Gravity," he started to explain. "He is also aware of what I do outside of TT - thanks to Charlie - so he assumed with Jake betraying you, your father going missing, and your disappearance that he was in trouble with me and that I would fire him...or worse. He assumed I was accusing him of trying to take over - which, had I not showed up when I did, he could have done - but that wasn't what he was up to. He was the person that reported you missing, Bella, but it was out of concern, not malice."

I took deep breath and let it out.

"But how did you pick up a tail at Black's house?" Edward asked, frowning.

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"The local police are still looking for you and Bella, so they're watching everyone she knows, everyone her father knew," he said, leaning back in his chair. "And if the police are still looking for you..."

"So is King," Edward grunted, rolling his eyes. "Which leads us to what we have planned, Dad." His face was grim when he looked up at his father.

With that said, the plans were introduced to Carlisle. This was the last person that needed to be clued in as to what we were doing - and the most important, as far as I was concerned, because he played a huge part at TT. With Carlisle now permanently back with us and Billy Black deemed nonthreatening, we could take this next step with more focus. We could take on Royce King.

~oOo~

EDWARD

"We're going to have to call a press conference," my dad said to Rose. "You'll have to pull that off, but it's Bella they'll want to hear from. They'll want to hear it from her that she wasn't just missing, that she was away on business or something."

"We could say she was on a case in California, that she couldn't just walk away - and that makes her reasons private, because she can't discuss a client," Rose agreed, making notes, because she was the one that had to walk back into her old job and basically step into Charlie's shoes for what may be the last time. It was something she was taking very seriously.

"What about you?" he asked, sitting forward in his chair.

"I think it would be best to say I was handling a family issue out of state," she stated, noting that as well, as he nodded in agreement.

Bella was quiet as I held her close. Aunt Kate had wanted to feed us all one last time before we left. We'd studied and planned for two solid days. Some of us were leaving tonight, and others in the morning. Emmett, Rose, Bella, and I

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would be flying out late tomorrow evening - or really early the next morning, depending on how you looked at it. We would arrive at Twilight Towers as soon as the business day started. As soon as we arrived, Rose was to call a press conference, announcing the death of Charlie Swan and the return of his daughter. By that time, everyone should be moved into Charlie's apartment, set up in the security rooms, and placed throughout the entire building for the arrival of the press.

It was then that a memorial would be announced, because by the time we arrived in Seattle, Royce King would be preparing for his release back onto the streets. We wanted to time his release with the memorial, baiting his ass. We all had a suspicion that someone still inside TT was working for him, besides one of the Savage brothers that ran the cell phone division. My father even had a short list he was looking into that he wanted Bella's and Rose's opinions on once we arrived.

But for the moment, we were just enjoying the evening outside as a fire burned, steaks grilled, and conversations ranged from what we were about to partake in, all the way to fucking sports. Bella and I were camped out on a few bails of hay. She had stayed quiet the entire time, staring into the fire, but I knew her well enough by now to know that she was still listening... *to everything*.

"You have no opinion on this?" I asked her softly in her ear.

"No," she sighed, shaking her head and leaning it back to my chest. "I trust them both with whatever story they come up with."

It was interesting to see the dynamics that everyone now brought to the table, brought to the relationships between my crew, Bella's girls, and now Eleazar and his men. Alec was telling old stories about my father to Rose, Alice, and Makenna, who were eating it up with a fucking spoon. Eleazar, Felix, and Eric were trading stories with Emmett and Jasper, concerning all sorts of government secrets. It seemed they didn't care who knew, and in all reality, who were they going to tell?

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My father was grateful for Eleazar and welcomed him wholeheartedly. In fact, they were the perfect addition to the mission, because they were willing to volunteer for things underground, while the rest of us still had to maintain a facade at TT.

I looked around the fire, watching smiles, the trading of funny stories, and for Mickey, a temporary goodbye to Obie. He was livid she was going, but she couldn't be budged. I offered her an out, never wanting to trap a member of my crew in this life if they didn't want to be there, but she said no, that she would see it through to the end, that she would be needed inside that building. She did have plans to come back to Aunt Kate's when it was all over. And as she held his hand, I could see her trying to be strong, encouraging, yet the worry was written all over her face.

How she could plan that far ahead was beyond me. As much as I'd love to plan out mine and Bella's future together to the very minute we died of fucking old age, I swear to God, I couldn't see past Seattle. I knew I was bringing Bella home to Forks with me. That was all I knew, all I could hope for. Anything other than that scared the shit out of me, because it was like asking for too fucking much.

I was broken out of my thoughts by Bella turning slightly to look at me, wearing the silliest of smiles.

"Why do you wear a backwards baseball cap?"

I laughed, shook my head, and pulled her closer so I could whisper in her ear. "It's a secret," I told her with a smirk, but she pouted too adorably not to tell her. "It's a silly reason, really. My hair, love. It's easily seen and pointed out, even if they can't tell the color. It's never sat flat. Ever."

She grinned sweetly, biting her bottom lip and reaching up to run her fingers through it. "You're too handsome to miss...hat or not," she told me softly. "I guarantee it was Tanya that gave out your description to the police..."

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I huffed, rolling my eyes and feeling like a jackass for my behavior with the receptionist at Spencer, Wyatt, and Townsend, the law firm that Bella had to turn the pictures of her last case into. I'd been so confused about my feelings for the little brunette in my arms that I'd had no idea what to make of them, because we'd only known each other for a few weeks. I'd reacted like an chauvinist asshole.

"I'm sorry about that..." I murmured, running a hand through my hair.

She giggled, rolling her eyes. "I wasn't worried about that," she snorted, shaking her head. "I was just curious. Every time we've had to do something, you've put one on, and it's always backwards."

"I aim better without the bill," I explained with a shrug, "but it covers my head, and now it's more like a good luck charm. I started using one when we'd have to navigate jungles and forests. I didn't want bugs and shit in my hair."

Her laugh was contagious, her head falling back. "Big, bad, mean Edward doesn't like bugs?" she teased, writhing and squealing on my lap when I tickled her.

Pulling her ear to my mouth, because everyone was watching her with amusement, I whispered, "I can show you... *big, sweetness...*"

"Mmm," she hummed, still fighting her smile as she licked her lips. Her eyes grew darker in the firelight. "Don't I know it."

I glanced around the fire, noticing that she was getting certain looks, mainly from my crew and her girls, not to mention the amused, but proud smiles from Esme and my father. I could almost see what they were thinking. How different she was now, compared to how we'd found her. How open, honest, funny, and brilliant she was when she wasn't full of anger and fear. And there as a part of me that hated to think what this next and final mission would bring. Would she stay strong? Or would something knock her ten steps back to where she was before?

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Then there was the pride that welled up within me, knowing that *I* had caused that laugh, that moment of silliness, and that it was *me* that she trusted and needed and wanted there to protect her, because Bella reminded me of those sparrows my mother loved so much. She was wild and free, beautiful and unattainable, fragile and strong, all at the same fucking time, but I was the tree she'd come flying home to. I needed to be that tree for her, needed to be steady for her, just in case something went terribly wrong.

"I need you to promise me something, love," I said softly, cupping her still smiling face.

"Yeah, sure. Anything," she vowed, her brow wrinkling now in worry.

"I need you to promise me that you'll do what I tell you when it comes to your safety, that you'll work *with* me, not against me, because I need you, and I couldn't bear it if something happened to you."

She swallowed, nodded, and turned her head to kiss the inside of my hand. "Despite how we butt heads occasionally, we make a fucking good team, baby," she stated, her face completely sincere. "We've disagreed before, but never when we were actually out in the field doing it..."

I paused, studying her face, and nodded, because she was right. We'd never argued when carrying out a plan, except for the law office thing, but that was all my testosterone-filled, bone-headed fault. I swallowed thickly, before making her promise me one more thing.

"I also need you to stay strong, Bella. If something happens..." I faltered, because I just couldn't give anything specific; I didn't need that sort of fucking bad luck. "...to any of us, I need you strong."

"Nothing happens to you," she hissed, her eyes lighting on pure fire as she grabbed my face. "Fucking nothing. I'll die before that happens," she vowed, and her honesty scared me, because she meant that shit.

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"That's what I'm afraid of, baby," I sighed in defeat, because I couldn't fault her for thinking the same thing I was, "but I get it." I frowned, leaning in to kiss her lips briefly, before pulling back to gaze at her. She was all things good and perfect and beautiful to me, and she'd made me a better person ever since I'd pulled her out of Miller's fucking basement. "Th-then w-we w-work together on a-all of it. D-do y-you hear m-me?" I sputtered, not even giving two shits at this point.

"Yeah, I hear you, Edward," she soothed, running her hands through my hair. "Loud and clear. Now it's your turn to make me a promise," she sighed, looking around the fire to make sure we weren't heard. When I nodded, she continued. "I need you focused, because even though I'm a target, so is everyone sitting here. I *will* do what you say, but you need to keep your mind on finishing this, on keeping to the plan. Everyone here needs to be safe, and they need your experience, your strength, and your intelligence, baby. Not just me. Our lives depend on all of us working together, not for just those we can't live without.

"When this is over," she said, grasping my face and pressing her forehead to mine, "you never have to do this again, if you don't want to. Hell, you can make tables and chairs the rest of *our* lives, if that's what you choose."

I grinned up at her, chuckling a bit, because that shit sounded like fucking heaven. "Yes, ma'am."

"Or..." She smirked, pulling back to look at me with a raised eyebrow. "You could always bring that experience and brains over to the dark side. You could work for me..."

I smirked up at her as she shifted in my lap, wriggling closer like she did when she wanted something.

"It's safer work," she went on to elaborate, "and finding a lost kid is damned rewarding, not to mention how funny some cheaters are..."

"We'll see, sweetness," I laughed, cutting her off and kissing her pouting lips. "You plan on reopening Gravity, then?"

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"I do," she sighed, looking over at her girls, and then back to me. "Would that bother you?"

I was shaking my head before she even finished that question. "Hell, no, but if we live in Forks..." I started, thinking that was a helluva commute.

"Maybe I'll reopen it there," she said with a shrug. "It's safer than Seattle, and I could move the girls..." She sighed, looking over at them again. "I don't know. I guess you're right; we'll see."

"Where'd the name come from?" I asked, tilting my head at her, because it was a question I'd been meaning to ask.

"Gravity?" she giggled, and I nodded, unable to not smile with her. "Something my mother said once... People may not always live by the same creeds or rules, but we all have to follow the law of gravity, because we all fall on our asses when we mess up."

I chuckled, thinking that was fucking perfect, considering what my girl did for a living. It also seemed perfect because it was for Renee that Bella wanted vengeance.

Eleazar stood up, checking his watch, and his men followed suit. It was time for the first of us to part ways for now. There were handshakes and goodbyes, not to mention well wishes and hugs from the girls.

"We're starting with the Savage brothers," Eleazar told my father. "We'll clear the way so that you have open communication. One runs a pawn shop, although really, it's an information exchange, along with a revolving drug dealing facility. The other is the cell phone jackass, and he goes first. Your little one over there has already secured a boxful of damn phones, and supposedly, they'll be delivered to Twilight Towers tomorrow. I didn't ask, but I'm pretty sure you wouldn't be able to track those sum-bitches, anyway," he chuckled, rolling his eyes as Alice laughed from beside him.

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"You're probably right," my father laughed, squeezing Alice's shoulder. "Jasper, Alice, Esme, and I will leave in the morning, and Mickey and Makenna will follow us. The rest will fly out several hours later," he said, gesturing our way. "Alec is coming with you. He's going to see what information he can drag out of the Savage brothers before they...disappear."

I grinned over at Alec, who looked like he was getting an early Christmas present as he cracked his knuckles and neck, smiling evilly, but he gave all the giggling girls a wink and another round of hugs.

"Let's get this show on the road, shall we?" he asked, pointing to the SUV he'd driven.

After all the bags were loaded and most of the men were seated, Eleazar turned to us. "Don't use a phone until you've heard from us. Once it's clear, you'll be free to start communicating, and that will make this shit fucking easier," he snorted, shaking my father's hand one more time, before climbing into the truck. "We'll see you on point in three days," he said, holding up three fingers. "Everyone be careful."

With that, Alec drove out of the farm, taking the first wave of our offense with him.

That night, Bella's nightmares were at an all time high, and I wondered if the closer we got to leaving, the worse they would become. Once everyone else left, I begged her to get some rest, but I was right; her nightmares did get worse. Not that mine were any better.

I used to dream about the little girl in Iraq that pulled the grenade on us. Then it changed to always hunting, always chasing Bella. But these were different; these were a combination of the two. The little girl pulled the pin, like so many times before in my dreams, but this time, instead of Mike Newton falling on her, it was my Bella.

I awoke with a start, my whole body shaking with fear and revulsion, looking over at the beautiful girl sleeping in my bed. She was still there, still perfect,

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still in one piece. I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding.

I leaned over, pressing a kiss to her forehead, inhaling deeply the scent of her and relishing the sound of my name that ghosted from her lips.

"Don't you dare get yourself killed saving me, love," I whispered to her - or maybe it was a prayer to whoever was listening. "I'm not worth it, baby."

"You're everything, Edward," she breathed, turning over in her sleep and curling up into an adorable little ball.

Squeezing my eyes closed to fight the tears as a result of her unexpected answer, I kissed her temple one more time, before getting up to grab a shower. She had a few more minutes before I needed to wake her.

~oOo~

BELLA

I ran and ran down the endless corridors of Twilight Tech, looking for something I just couldn't quite wrap my mind around. I had to find this *something*, because there was someone chasing me. I needed to be safe; I had to find shelter.

As I turned another corner, I finally saw what I was looking for - Edward - but the faster I ran, the further away he seemed to get. He was wearing my favorite crooked smile, running a hand through his hair, and just when it seemed I could almost reach him, a hand grabbed my arm...

"Shit!" I gasped, sitting straight up in bed, looking to the empty spot next to me, but it was then that I heard the sounds of the shower.

I scrambled out of bed, practically tripping myself on the covers that had wrapped themselves around my ankle, and hurried into the bathroom.

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I could see him, plain as day, through the frosted shower doors, but I needed to hear him, touch him. I needed to make sure the safety and security I'd been searching for in my dream was attainable in reality - that it *was* just a fucking dream, and that any time I needed to feel safe, I just had to find Edward, knowing he'd always be there.

Tugging off my clothes - Edward's t-shirt and boxers - dropping them to the bathroom floor, I couldn't imagine a more gorgeous or sexy silhouette ever created, as I ogled him in the shower. It was muscles, a defined ass, and his impeccable cock - all perfectly outlined through the shower door. It didn't help that that he was scrubbing his hair, so everything took on a completely different and flexed look.

Unable to stay away from him any longer, I slid the shower door open.

"I was wondering how long you were gonna stare, love," he chuckled, as I wrapped my arms around him from behind him.

"It was a fan-fucking-tastic view," I muttered into the skin of his strong back, smiling when he chuckled again, but my whole body shuddered when I could finally feel him, smell him, touch him.

"Hey," he soothed, pulling me around to his front. "Why are you shaking?" he asked, guiding me under the spray. "Here...get warm."

"Not...cold," I mumbled, blinking water from my eyes and wrapping my arms around him again, this time from the front. Every bit of my skin that touched his lit on fire.

Edward was warm, wet, soapy, and smelled so good as he kissed the top of my head. I was still shaking, still scared from my dream as I pressed a kiss to the center of his chest in return.

As if he knew my thoughts, what I'd dreamed, he whispered, "I'm right here, Bella."

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"I know," I whispered against his skin, wishing like hell I could express in words what I was feeling about leaving the farm, starting this next step, even what the dream made me feel, but I was out of words.

I was filled with worry and fear for everyone I knew and loved - especially the man I was desperately clinging to at the moment. I felt his fingertips pulling my chin up so he could look at me, and I locked eyes with his, which were green, warm, and comforting. I couldn't even say his name at this point, but I *could* kiss him.

Stretching up onto my toes, I pressed my lips to his, trying to calm my heart, my breathing, my nerves. I slipped my hands up and over his shoulders, pulling myself closer, as if it were possible. We kissed under the spray, tasting tongues, water, and lips.

Edward's hands slid over my wet skin with easy, long, deep caresses to my arms, back, and ass. When he finally broke away from my mouth, he took his time with open mouth kisses to my neck, seemingly drinking the water from my skin.

"Turn around, Bella," he ordered softly, placing his hands on my waist and spinning me carefully around to face the spray. "Let me make it better..."

With careful, but firm hands, Edward proceeded to wash every inch of my back, bottom, and legs, only to turn me around to rinse off. He knelt reverently in front of me, his hands still on my thighs as his darkening eyes raked over every inch of me. It seemed he was looking at every scar I had, even the little ones that had now faded, thanks to time and the scar cream Esme had given me.

"You can barely see them now," he mused, finally looking up at my face.

His finger traced the one along my thigh - which was still the worst one - then both of the burns on my stomach, and finally, the one on my sternum. He lifted my leg, kissing the outside of my ankle where the bullet had ricocheted off of the tree when we were at the mountain cabin. It was a scar I didn't even care

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about, didn't even bother to put cream on, but he remembered it.

Perhaps Edward was out of words, too, because I wasn't even sure he was aware he'd spoken out loud. After leaning in to place a kiss to my belly, he continued his task of washing me. He was so gentle when he washed between my legs - not sexual, but caring. As much as I wanted him - probably more in that sweetest of moments than ever - I'd never felt more loved, more cherished as I did right then.

When he finally stood up in front of me, he grabbed the shampoo and massaged my hair from scalp to tips, doing the same thing with the conditioner. I smiled when he shut the water off, grabbing a towel to wrap around me. With one swift motion, he set me on the bathmat outside of the tub, securing his own towel around his waist.

"Come here," he finally said, lifting me up onto the vanity counter. He cupped my face, bringing my lips to his for a brief kiss. "I love you so much," he whispered, pressing his forehead to mine and stepping between my legs. "I'm...scared, too, love. More scared than I've ever been on any mission I've ever done, because this means too much to fuck up," he confessed softly.

I nodded, tugging open his towel and letting it drop to the floor. The steam from our shower wafted around us as I pulled my own towel open.

"I love you, too," I whispered, wrapping my legs around his waist. "I don't want to leave this room, leave this house without you knowing that."

"I know, baby," he said, practically groaning the words, because his arousal was now trapped between us.

I could feel him shift just enough, and then slide languidly into me. A whimper escaped my mouth as he completely filled me, his head falling to my shoulder. We clung to each other for just a moment, our breathing ragged, our hands gripping hard onto one another.

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Edward's hand drifted down my side, along my thigh, to my knee, where he suddenly lifted it between us, sinking even deeper into me than before. I'd never been in that position, and it was fantastic. I could feel everything inside of me clench down on him.

I gasped when he pulled back, thrusting in with a touch of force. It was a taste of what was to come. He was not going to be gentle; this was something I would be feeling way after we landed in Seattle.

"I want you to come so fucking hard, baby," he growled into my neck, dragging his teeth across my skin. "I want you to feel me into next week. I want you to know that I'll always be... *right here*," he grunted, thrusting into me again.

Edward began a rhythm that was deep, with swiveling hips and long pushes into me. His forehead pressed to mine as his mouth quirked up into a breathtakingly sexy smile. I leaned back on my hands, my hips meeting him with every press of his hips, and more than once, I cried out his name, and more than once, his hands gripped too tight at my hips, but it was the kind of pain that felt good, that added to the entire experience.

My first orgasm hit me hard and fast, causing my leg to slip off of his shoulder and down to the counter top.

"One," he growled, suddenly pulling out of me and dropping to his knees.

Before I could say anything else, his mouth was hot and wet on my center, licking, sucking, teasing, and biting. He forced my legs apart, my hips to stay still as his mouth expertly dragged another climax from me, my hands gripping his hair like a lifeline.

"Two," he snickered darkly, licking his lips, before wrapping his arms all the way around me.

I found my back pressed into the bathroom door, my head thudding against it when he entered me again with a little less force this time.

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"Edward," I hissed, as he drove into me with a delicious rotating of his hips.

"You can fucking do better than that, Bella," he chuckled, as I wrapped my arms and legs around him. "I want more... Don't you *want* another one, love?"

"Fuck, yes," I growled the truth, because I did. I wanted whatever he'd give me at that point. Grabbing his face, I begged, "Together..."

"So close, love...so fucking close," he said with a nod as a drop of water or sweat dripped from his brow to his chin.

My heels dug into his ass, my fingers threaded into his wet hair, and my breathing was erratic, but my whole body just about fell over the edge when I caught a glimpse of us in the mirror.

"Oh, Christ," I panted, my eyes squeezing closed for just a second.

I wasn't sure I'd ever seen anything as fucking phenomenally sexy as what my eyes took in at that moment. I'd watched my share of porn, been with men in front of a mirror, but nothing... *nothing* came close to what I saw right then.

Every muscle in Edward's back writhed under smooth skin. His ass flexed with every pump into me, and my God, his legs were like cut steel as he braced us against that door. His arms were taut as they gripped my cheeks with every push. Add in my legs wrapped around him, and the flushed look of being thoroughly and satisfyingly fucked by the most gorgeous thing I'd ever laid eyes on, and I was done.

"I'm coming, Edward," I breathed in his ear, my teeth locking down onto his neck.

"Fuck, B-bella," he stuttered, before finally pressing me into the door with all of his weight as he came hard inside me. He placed a long, slow kiss to my shoulder, looking up at me through those deadly long eyelashes. "Three," he purred, giving me my favorite crooked smile and a wink when I couldn't stop from laughing.

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It wasn't long before we were dressed and packed, carrying our things out to the chopper. Rose and Emmett were loading their things as we approached, with Aunt Kate following.

"Aunt Kate, you really should be in bed," Edward chided, shaking his head as she waved him away.

"Oh, pooh," she scoffed, rolling her eyes at him and pulling me into a hug. "You take care of each other, you hear me?" she whispered in my ear, and I nodded. "He's a good boy, but don't let him frustrate you to death, Bella."

I snorted, pulling back just enough to kiss her cheek. "I won't. I promise," I giggled.

She hugged Rose and Emmett, finally turning her gaze onto her best friend's only son. "Edward Anthony, you come give me a hug, child."

I could tell she was whispering to him, as well, because he nodded, smiled, and kissed her cheek gently.

"Come on, ladies," Emmett said, offering us a hand. "Let's get you buckled in, okay?"

"Thanks, Em," I said as he lifted me, and then Rose into the back of the chopper.

"How is it with him flying this thing?" Rose chuckled as we buckled up and watched the boys ready the chopper.

"He's...amazing," I chuckled, feeling proud of Edward. "Like you won't even feel like you're moving."

She snickered and nodded, looking out at the farm. "You scared?"

"Yup," I snorted with a nod. "You?"

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"A little," she sighed, turning to me when the boys climbed in the front. "We're in good hands, though," she whispered, giving me a wink.

I looked up front, smiling as the boys put on their headsets and Edward flipped a few switches. We'd told them to dress in all black as our bodyguards, and they had. They looked big and scary and mean to someone that didn't know them, but they were far from it. They'd do anything for us, and we knew it.

We were all about to step into a world of crime and chaos, of death and lies. The two boys up front in that chopper, as well as the ten people that were already on their way, just wanted to help us get our lives back. They'd already given blood, sweat, and tears, and I wasn't sure how they found the strength to give more, but I would be forever grateful to each and every one of them.

I turned back to Rose with a soft laugh. "Yeah...definitely good hands."

A/N... Okay, so they've left the farm. I know some of you have pointed out that just going to Seattle and hoping King shows was strange. Lemme explain. These people...ALL OF THEM...do this for a living in some form. Bella and her girls know surveillance and intelligence. Carlisle and Edward know what it takes to draw someone in. And now with Eleazar, they know exactly what they're doing. They all know criminals, how they think, but they've been studying THIS criminal long enough to know him. King isn't the type of guy to hide, in fact, he's the kind of man that likes to tear his enemies down to their very essence. He takes down not only the enemy, but their friends, families, and their careers. He kept taunting Charlie, so he won't stop until they're all done.

Now...Seattle. Some new characters, some new players in this game. One is someone you've been asking about...interestingly enough. I wonder if you'll remember. Edward, Jasper, and Emmett...all bodyguards, and corporate bullshit to deal with. Also, some clues as to who was the leak inside TT. So...BIG chapter coming up for probably Wednesday.

OKAY! Some of you know me well enough to say I don't normally recommend a fic very often. But I do occasionally when something totally

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grabs me. I'm going to tell you about *Firefly in Summer* by primarycolors. **HOLY CRAP!** I wasn't expecting this story. At all! It's a little angsty, which isn't my normal thing, but it paints such a beautiful picture of a small town on the Gulf coast of Florida. It's a broken Bella living next door to an Edward that just returned from living the fast life in NY. Bella has secrets, and they will break your heart, but there's a twist to this story that I just can't explain without ruining it. When I tell you to read it, push through the tough shit, and keep going...**DO IT.** It's so worth it, because your mind will explode with curiosity and theories. This author is not getting the recognition she deserves on this fic, so go... please! [www . fanfiction . net/s/6672297/1/](http://www.fanfiction.net/s/6672297/1/) ...And maybe, you can tell me what's going on! **LOL**

On that note, review for me. I know this is the last time Carlisle will be separate from them...Bella even mentioned it, so you can be rest assured that he's safe for now. But reviews are better than a hot flying Edward... yeah...not even **CLOSE!** LMAO But let me hear from you anyway. Until next time, Later!

Chapter 23

A/N...Okay, so we left off with everyone traversing towards Seattle...but Emmett, Edward, Rose and Bella were flying. They'll all arrive about the same time, though the chopper goes the fastest.

Please keep in mind that this is the first time that Bella has set foot in her father's office since her fight with him, and since he's died. Plus, there is more to deal with than just the plan.

I'll see you at the bottom, because trust me, there is more to talk about.

CHAPTER 23

BELLA

There was no way to wrap my head around the feelings that went with seeing Twilight Tower again - from the air or not. I took a deep breath, letting it out slowly, but Rose looked over at me, clearly hearing it over the headset. She said nothing - she didn't have to - but she did take my hand in hers as Edward set the chopper down gently on the helipad of my father's building.

My building.

I snorted, shook my head at that thought, and looked over where Carlisle, already dressed impeccably in his business suit, was coming out of the rooftop door, even after driving for two days. Jasper followed him, wearing black dress pants, a black t-shirt, and his handgun in a shoulder harness, just like Edward and Emmett. We wanted them - and they had agreed - to look like hired bodyguards, which they did. All three exuded power and no-nonsense.

Both men stood away until Edward shut his chopper down.

Rose and I, on the other hand, were not dressed for work; we were in jeans and t-shirts. I was fairly certain there was something I could find in Charlie's

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apartment from my last stay there, and Rose knew for a fact that she had left some dry cleaning in her office. We were going to change in Charlie's office before we saw anyone.

Once the blades slowed down, I unbuckled my seat belt and slid the side door open, only to be met with a stern-faced Edward, offering me a hand down to the helipad. As much as I wanted to cling to him with everything in me, I let my hand slip from his the second my feet touched the roof. After grabbing my bag and slinging it over my shoulder, I let him guide me towards his father with a hand at the small of my back.

Carlisle immediately took my bag and wrapped an arm around my shoulders, his lips at my ear. "Just remember, you've been out of state on business. Out of contact. Rose has been with her parents in Oregon on leave. You both were contacted by me with the news of Charlie's death. Make sense?"

I pulled away when he did, nodding. "Yeah, no problem, Carlisle."

Luckily, the employees didn't have access to the roof, so Charlie's personal elevator sat open and waiting for us by the time we left the helipad behind us and descended a short flight of steps. Jasper and Edward took the far corners and Emmett stood in front of us, as Carlisle turned to face me and Rose.

"Bella, besides the...obvious," he started, sounding completely uncomfortable, "we have to sit down with Charlie's lawyer today, too. He has to go over your father's will."

"Kay," I whispered, swallowing thickly. "Don't you take over here?"

"If that's what you want," he answered, taking my shoulders. "Charlie left it up to you in the end, Bells. If you wish to hand it to me, I would be honored, but paperwork has to be signed first. We'll set that meeting up later this morning, before the press conference."

"It's going to be a long fucking day," I sighed, shaking my head.

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"My suggestion," he said, just as we came to a complete stop at Charlie's office, "is that you keep it in your name until this is over. Temporarily. It will have an element of surprise. That way, you can change things as you see fit...like who's in security," he urged, tilting his head at me. "Like how many guards you want, and what measures you want to take for the memorial."

"Perfect," Rose snorted. "My best friend is now my boss. For real!"

I grinned over at her, totally and utterly grateful for her wry sense of humor, because I needed it.

"Also," he continued, before letting us out of the elevator, glancing around at all of us, "Charlie's office - and I assume the apartment, too - are the only security camera and audio free zones for now." He kept his voice quiet as he said, "Watch how you interact with each other in front of employees, lawyers, and the press."

"Yes, sir," we all muttered, following him out into the executive office.

That was when my heart broke, because memories, upon memories flooded me - times my mother had brought me here as a child, times I'd visited after school, times I'd visited when home from Quantico, and times I'd fought with him. It still smelled *exactly* the fucking same, like leather and furniture polish.

I barely registered Alice, Makenna, and Mickey sitting in Rose's reception area, because suddenly, I needed to see my dad's office. Pulling my keys out, I rushed through the dark, heavy wooden doors, inhaling deeply the smell of my father's office. It was Old Spice, tobacco, and leather.

To my right, his bar sat, with crystal decanters gleaming in the morning light from the wall of windows directly in front of it. Next to that were heavy, dark wood bookshelves, filled with everything from tax reports to whatever John Grisham novel Charlie was obsessed with at the moment. On the other side of the room were a black leather sofa and a couple of matching chairs situated around a large oval glass coffee table. It was there my father would read the newspapers. In fact, there was a stack of them there now. My breath caught at

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the thought that the dates on that newspaper would be forever frozen from the last day he was here.

And finally, my father's desk. It was heavy and antique, the stain matching the bookshelves across the room. Behind it sat Charlie's big leather chair - a chair I'd spun in more times than I could count as a little kid.

"Dad," Edward growled low from behind me, "I'm asking you nicely to just give her a *fucking minute*."

I heard the doors shut behind me, and I spun in one spot to see Edward leaning against the closed doors. He looked heartbroken for me and wary, but he stayed quiet.

I walked slowly around my dad's desk, noticing that there were still files open, his computer was still on, and his favorite pen lay on the desk pad. My fingers glided over the soft leather of his chair, before turning it around to sit down hard in it.

"I used to come here after school," I started, staring out over the busy city of Seattle. I swallowed thickly, trying to keep my emotions in control. "It was easier for Aunt Jane to pick me up from here, because she didn't have to fight the PTA moms, and she liked the little grocery store right around the corner..." My voice trailed off for just a moment, but I swallowed again. "I don't know how many times Charlie would call her, tell her that she didn't have to, because he'd bring me home with him, and he would stop and pick up Chinese. Or how many meetings he'd come back from, and I'd be camped out in this chair playing GameBoy or doing my homework at his desk, no matter how many times he asked me to sit on the...sofa..." My voice cracked, and suddenly, Edward was kneeling in front of me, his thumbs wiping away tears I didn't even know had fallen.

"The last time I was in this office," I sobbed, "I accused him of cheating on my mom. I swore to him that I would never speak to him again..."

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"But you did, baby," he soothed, tucking my hair behind my ears. "You spoke to him at the beach house. You've read his letter, love. He knew what he was doing by letting you think he was the bad guy. He had no choice, because he didn't want you to hurt. Of all his faults, I can respect him for that the most, Bella."

I fell into his arms at that point, letting out the grief that I'd fought so hard against, grief that was easy to not feel, unless you were looking at the pure images of what you were trying so hard ignore. I couldn't ignore it here; my dad was *everywhere*.

He let me cry for a several minutes, until my tears ran dry, finally pulling back to look at me. For the first time, I realized that if anyone knew what it was like to lose a parent, it was the man currently kissing away the last of my tears. His eyes were bright green, due to the light from the window, his sadness for me written all over his face.

"How did you know that I'd need a minute?" I asked, taking a deep, cleansing breath.

He smiled warmly, kissing my nose. "Because I could see your face the very second you got off the elevator. You looked like the little girl you just described to me...only so sad."

I nodded, kissing his lips. "We'd better get this weird ass day started," I sighed, shaking my head. "Your dad's probably pacing a groove in the floor out there."

He snickered, cupping my face and kissing my forehead before standing up. He offered me a hand to help me up.

"Yeah, let's get this shit started," he muttered, pulling me in for a brief hug and placing his mouth to my ear. "Just for the record...not touching you when I want, be damned of who is looking, is going to be fucking torture for me."

I smiled, but stepped out of his embrace to open the door to see several worried faces. If they saw the redness in my eyes, they made no sign of it.

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"Come on, let's open up the apartment, Ro," I sighed, pulling my keys out of my pocket.

Walking to the bookcase, I reached behind the stack of tax reports on the third shelf and twisted the lock.

"Shut up!" Mickey chuckled, rushing forward to peek behind it. "Fuck, I haven't seen one of those in person. Ever. That's fantastic. My father always wanted to build one, but no one ever asked for it."

I snickered at her, shaking my head. "Well, then, you'll love this..." I pushed on the side of the bookcase, sliding it to the left to reveal a door. "My dad was a nerd to his very bones," I giggled, pointing to not only the key lock, but the pin pad, as well.

Mickey looked like a kid at Christmas as she studied the whole mechanism. "Oh, now I wished I'd asked Charlie more questions..."

I entered the code and turned the key, finally opening the door to let everyone in.

"Yeah, he didn't just run the company...he played with every fucking toy," Rose laughed, waving everyone in to follow us.

"I think it would be best if Charlie's office door was closed before anyone enters or exits the apartment," Carlisle warned, making sure that we all acknowledged him.

"When you're inside the apartment, you can see what's outside this door," I told them, closing the apartment door; the bookcase on the other side rumbled back to its original position. Pointing to a small CCTV monitor mounted on the wall, I said, "You can see anyone moving around on the other side. Just press this lever,"--I pushed down on the small lever next to the light switch--"and you can get out."

"Damn," Edward said, his eyebrows rising high.

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"No shit," Jasper chuckled, shaking his head. "Charlie was cooler than I originally gave him credit for."

Carlisle laughed, patting his son's shoulder. "He was an original, that's for sure. Ladies," he said, still snickering, "it's time for you two to get ready. Once we've seen the lawyer, we'll call for the press conference, and then you can set up security the way you see fit."

I nodded and took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "Make yourselves at home. There's plenty of room," I said, walking down the hallway to the room that had been mine since I was like three years old.

"This isn't an apartment; it's a freaking penthouse," Emmett muttered, getting chuckles from everyone.

I opened the door, dropping my bag down next to a few boxes of my things from the house Jake and I had shared. I'd stored them there, because Rose didn't have room at her place and I was pressed for time to get out. As I looked around, warm, strong arms slipped around me.

"That's a *lot* of purple, baby," he laughed, looking around my room.

"Shut it," I giggled. "It *was* pink."

"Um, no. I can't see you doing pink," he chuckled, kissing the back of my head, before exploring my room. "What's with the boxes?"

"Stuff from Jake's," I mumbled, walking into my closet to look for something appropriate enough to wear for all the shit I had to do. "I stashed them here."

"Are these like...full of fucking pictures of you two?"

I smiled, hearing the jealousy loud and clear. "Nope, left that shit with him."

"Good," he grumped, and muttered something about, "That's all he fucking gets."

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When I walked back into the room carrying a simple black dress and heels, I saw that he was already rummaging through my stuff.

"Nosy much?"

He grinned and shrugged, but completely ignored me, pulling out my gray FBI sweats, only to drop them and move on to the next box. "Not nosy, just...curious."

"I suppose that's only fair," I snickered, turning towards my dresser. "You let me pilfer around your house." I smiled at his deep, sexy chuckle. "Careful, though...you may find things you don't want to see," I warned him, knowing damn good and well that he was zeroing in on a box of items of a...personal nature.

"What? Sex tapes?" he laughed, cracking open another box.

"Nope, got rid of those," I countered, raising an eyebrow at him when he gasped, his head spinning like it was on a swivel.

"Really?" he asked, his mouth hanging open, and I couldn't tell if he was disappointed or shocked.

"No, you ass," I scoffed, rolling my eyes at hearty laugh. "Like I would let someone tape me."

"Even me?" His face was turned away from me, but I could hear the quest for knowledge in that question.

"Huh," I laughed out loud, unable to stop myself, because there was a part of me that would do anything he asked, and just the thought of his sexy self on DVD had my mind racing, my hands sweaty, and my girlie parts tingly. When he looked up, wearing his cocky, crooked smile and a raised eyebrow, I couldn't help but laugh. "I don't think so..." I sang, walking into the bathroom.

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I knew the very second he found a specific box, because, "Fuck me!" came out of his mouth from the other room in a combination growl and whisper.

"Something wrong, Edward?" I asked innocently from the bathroom.

"Um, no," I heard him mutter, and then heard the slamming of a box lid.

I pulled on my underwear and bra, picking up my nine mil and securing it in the waistband of my boy shorts on my way out of the bathroom; I would need to hide it somewhere on my person on a day like today, because Edward had made me promise that I keep it on me at all times. I leaned in the door, watching Edward run hand through his hair as he stared down at my box.

"Do sex toys scare you, Edward?"

He just about jumped clean out of his skin, but froze when he saw me in the bathroom door. "Jesus, Bella. You're killing me here!" he groaned, shaking his head. "Th-these..." he started, pointing to the box, "a-and y-you...I-looking I-like th-that!"

I fought my smile at the stutter coming from him, because by God, I loved it. It was sweet, sexy, and so perfect that I could barely stand it. It didn't help that his eyes were drinking in every inch of me.

"Those," I snorted, rolling my eyes at the box at his feet, "were from before Jake. They're kind of a joke between Rose and me. Her collection is frightening. You should ask her, because we tried to out-do one another with each one. Do they scare you?" I asked again, and this time couldn't stop the giggle.

"No," he said, recovering quicker than I expected, because his eyes darkened, his tongue dragged across his bottom lip, and he gave one last look at the box before walking towards me. "I'm not threatened by them, if that's what you mean, love," he crooned, tilting his head at me. "Have you used them?"

"Some," I told him, feigning an innocent expression.

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"Do you have a favorite?" he purred, placing his hands on my waist, as he continued to ogle me unabashedly.

"Nothin' beats the real thing, baby."

"Hmm, true..." He licked his lips again. "What are you wearing? And are you gonna wear it all day underneath that?" he asked, pointing to my dress hanging on the back of the bathroom door.

I looked down at myself, realizing it was the first time he'd seen me in something other than cotton, something other than Walmart since we'd been in hiding. I had quite an extensive collection and addiction to lingerie. I was wearing a black set, with hot pink lace.

"You don't like it?" I asked, stepping closer to him so that my body pressed fully against his.

He swallowed thickly, his hands ghosting down my back to my ass. "I w-wouldn't say th-that, love," he sputtered, but chuckled at the same time. "I wouldn't say that... *at all*," he growled, skimming his nose down my cheek and neck. "Uh uh, not at all..."

His mouth opened to my skin, his tongue swirling and licking the sensitive spot behind my ear. His hands roamed my body, over lace, over skin, and finally, my thighs and up to my stomach.

"Not a good place for this, though, *sweetness*," he whispered softly against my flesh, wrapping his fingers around the butt of my gun. "You can't get to it..."

Chills rose up over my whole body, as he pulled me closer, trapping his hand and my gun between us.

"I know," I whispered, nuzzling his amazing smelling neck.

He pulled back to look at me, a frown darkening his features. "You *have* to fucking wear it, Bella. I want you armed at all times."

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"Relax," I snorted, rolling my eyes and pushing him back. I reached into my bag, pulling out a holster that wrapped around my thigh, and then strapped it to my leg and attached my gun.

He grinned, shaking his head and letting it fall back as he sighed at the ceiling. "This is going to be a long ass day," he groaned, looking back up at me. "So fucking sexy, Bella... I swear to fucking God, I could tear you the fuck up right now looking like that...and I can't even imagine what it'll do to me to see you in those." He pointed to the heels I had tossed onto the bed.

"Edward," I groaned, wanting nothing more than for him to do whatever had popped into that deviant, sex-god of a mind of his. "We can't, and I'd be willing to bet that all I'll want when we get done is a beer, a bath, and you snuggled in bed."

His eyes went from completely carnal, to warm and sweet and sympathetic, pulling me back into his arms. "I love you," he sighed, burying his nose in my hair.

I closed my eyes, letting the feelings he always brought out in me take over. He was the essence of calm and sexual energy combined, and was my safe haven. I fed off of it, and he let me, preparing for all the shit I was about to do - Charlie's will, press conferences, employee assemblies, security, not to mention a sit down with my girls and Edward's crew, but for that brief moment, I just melted into his arms.

"So much, Edward."

~oOo~

"Miss Swan," Mr. Wendell, my father's lawyer started, his voice obnoxiously smooth and filled with what seemed like false sympathy, "your father made sure that you were completely taken care of, and wanted you to know that you have a choice when it comes to Twilight Technology. He was pretty certain that you'd turn it over to Mr. Cullen here, but wanted you to make that decision."

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He went on to say that Charlie had left me pretty much everything - the house in the suburbs, a boat that I'd never even seen, and more money than I'd ever know what to do with. He'd left Carlisle his old Camaro that he'd had for as long as I could remember; I didn't even know if the thing even ran. He'd also left him an open ended contract concerning any equipment, software, or weapons that he needed for his "outside hobbies," as it was worded in the will. Rose, Billy, and Jacob were also remembered; all three received money.

It didn't take but about ten minutes into the reading of Charlie's will before I was numb with it all. I didn't care about the money - I never had - because in all reality, I'd have given every dime to have my parents back. Mr. Wendell seemed to drone on and on in legal-ese about things that meant even less to me than money.

It didn't help that I didn't like the guy. That feeling had been instant. He seemed shifty, smarmy, and money hungry. He had sweaty palms and had paled at the first sight of the "bodyguards" that had entered the room the same time Carlisle and I had, which had made Jasper and Edward smirk at each other.

I sighed, my gaze slipping just past the weasel-like lawyer to the unusually bright day of Seattle...and the silhouette of Edward as he leaned against the glass. He looked just as bored as I was, which took everything in me not to get the giggles, because my emotions were everywhere since I'd walked into TT.

"So whatever you decide, Miss Swan..." Mr. Wendell urged, meaning I'd totally zoned out.

"Hmm?" I asked, sitting up straighter.

"Do you want to assign Mr. Cullen as the CEO of Twilight, Miss Swan?" he huffed, clearly frustrated that I wasn't hanging on his every word.

"No," I stated curtly with a shake of my head. "He's staying on as an adviser to me, and he'll maintain his position on the board, but it stays in my name."

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Carlisle's face stayed impassive, but Mr. Wendell's was shocked, which caused both Jasper and Edward to pay more attention.

"Miss Swan..."

"Isabella," I corrected sharply, because this guy was rubbing me the wrong way.

"Yes, of course, Isabella. I've been privy to Mr. Swan's affairs for about a decade, and he was fairly sure that you wouldn't want it, that you'd sign it over to Mr. Cullen, or in *his* absence, Mr. William Black. He was aware of your... *lack of interest* in this company, and I'm sure he'd hate to see it run improperly."

"I'm sure he would, but he also left the decision up to me. I don't see *Mr. Cullen* contesting this decision, either," I pointed out, gesturing to Carlisle, who hid his smile quickly and shook his head no solemnly. "Mr. Wendell, you're getting paid to read me this will, follow any instructions I have, and move on. That's it. If I need you for anything else, I'm sure *Mr. Cullen* knows how to contact you."

"Yes, he does," the now put-out man sniffed. "My only concern is for you, Isa...Miss Swan. I promised Charlie that I would look out for your best interest, and with all the...unsavory business that your father has done throughout the years, I'm just not sure that you're capable of...handling TT."

"You would be surprised at what I can handle, Mr. Wendell!" I snapped, starting to stand at the same time Edward pushed away from the glass wall. I wasn't sure who he was going for first - the lawyer for his attitude, or me, to stop me from doing anything I might have regretted later - but he stood still and quiet behind the unaware Mr. Wendell.

"That's quite enough, Bella," Carlisle soothed, putting a hand on my arm and turning towards the flinching weasel at the head of the conference table. "Mr. Wendell, I will make sure that the *integrity* of this company maintains its... *impeccable* reputation, along side Miss Swan here. I think that's all we'll be

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needing from you for now."

Mr. Wendell's eyes narrowed at Carlisle, and then at me, but he slid the will our way, as well as the paperwork that would give Carlisle complete control of TT. He slammed his briefcase shut with a deep sigh and stood up, practically stepping on Edward's toes as he loomed near him threateningly. When he spun around, he almost sat back onto the tabletop to get away from Edward.

I had to bite down hard on the inside of my cheek to keep my smile and laugh under control. One reason was because I didn't trust this guy any further than Edward could pick him up and throw him - which sounded like a helluva a lot of fun to watch. And the other reason was Edward looked like he was seeing right through to his mind - and he didn't like what he saw.

In fact, Mr. Wendell looked nervous as hell as Edward allowed him to slowly and carefully pick up his things and walk out of the conference room.

With my hands still braced on the conference table from when I'd stood, I turned to Carlisle. "It's *you*." I fell down in the chair next to him. "Someone wants you in charge. Why?"

He stood up and started pacing, as Jasper and Edward sat down across from me and Rose. Emmett was guarding the conference room doors just on the other side.

"Who would you have pissed off that much to want to take out... *everything*?" I asked him, watching his face frown and darken. "They don't just want revenge, they want..."

"Retribution," Carlisle finished with a groaning sigh as he turned to Edward. "Alistair Corbin."

The name didn't mean a thing to me, but Jasper and Edward both frowned.

"We talked about him when we started this shit," Jasper stated. "All I know about him is that he's heavy into the Colombian drug trade - that he works with

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King on getting the shit to the States."

"We've never dealt with Corbin, Dad. What could he want with you?"

"*You've* never dealt with Corbin, but Alec, Sam, and I have," he sighed, bracing his arms on the table.

"Fuck," Edward groaned, shaking his head. "What the hell did you guys do, Dad?"

"No time," Carlisle countered when there was a timid knock on the door.

"Come in," he barked, his brow still furrowed.

A thin, brown-haired girl with glasses stepped into the room, her arms filled with files and papers.

"Ah, Angela." Carlisle smiled warmly. "There are a few people just outside the door. Could you please ask them to come in with you?"

"Yes, Mr. Cullen," she said, her voice soft, but she didn't seem intimidated by him - not that he was ever mean to anyone but people that tried to hurt the ones he cared about.

Angela returned with Alice, Emmett, Makenna, and Mickey, who took seats around the conference table as Angela walked to Carlisle.

"Frank called from downstairs to say everything was set up out front for your press conference," she told him, setting down her stack of paperwork. "He said that the podium is in place, but he wants to know where security should be."

"Call him back, tell him I have my own security, and we'll stop by on our way out."

"Yes, sir."

"What else, Angela?"

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"Well, I wanted to let Rosalie know that all her contacts at the media confirmed, and they'll all be here," she stated, glancing around the room. "Also, a Mr. Eleazar Platt called for you..."

Every head in the room spun to look up at her, making her obviously really nervous.

"Did he leave a message?" Carlisle asked, tilting his head at her, his voice maintaining calm when I was pretty sure he wasn't a bit calm on the inside.

"Yes, he said that his cell service is working like a dream," she quoted off of a notepad, looking up at him quizzically.

"Sweet," Emmett hissed, giving Mickey and Jasper a fist bump.

"Good," Carlisle snorted, glancing up at all of us at the table. Angela started to turn, but he stopped her. "Angela...I'd like you to meet these people." Starting with his son, he introduced everyone at the table, and when he got to me, he introduced me as Charlie's daughter and new CEO. I hated it, but it had to be that way. "Everyone, this is Angela Weber. She's been given the the gruesome job as my assistant," he chuckled.

We all groaned, but snickered, saying, "Hi, Angela."

"Ignore the peanut gallery, Ang," he growled playfully, giving us a pointed look. "I need you to set up a meeting with security. I need to see them before we head downstairs for the press conference, so...fifteen minutes?" he said, but the last part came out like a question.

"Yes, Mr. Cullen," she smirked, giving us a smile and a wave before leaving the room.

"I love her," Rose chuckled. "You couldn't have gotten a better PA, Carlisle."

"She's great. I hardly have to remember anything," he snorted, shaking his head. "So, Alice...cell service is ready to go..."

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"I know, I know, I know," she chanted, setting a bag on the table. She unzipped it and pulled out a handful of cell phones, sliding them down to everyone, along with earpieces to go with them. "I took the liberty of programming only a few needed numbers: each other, Alec, Eleazar, Benny, and Esme."

"Nice, Alice," Edward mumbled, flipping through his phone and nodding at the same time, but he hadn't forgotten about his father. He turned his head, saying, "Corbin? Are you going to tell us?"

"Not now, son," he sighed. "We don't have time. I'll get with Alec, have him come here...we should all talk after today's events. Besides, I think we should have an update from Eleazar, don't you?"

"Yeah, but..." I started, but stopped, knowing it was useless to prolong this shit anymore. "Fine. Security," I mumbled, standing up. I pointed to Carlisle, giving him a raised eyebrow. "You're so taking this shit back when this is all over."

Edward chuckled, kissing my finger as he stepped between me and his dad. "Easy, *sweetness*. Don't kill him; we need him."

Carlisle laughed, but motioned for all of us to follow him out of the room. "Come on...security..."

~oOo~

EDWARD

I knew my girl was nervous, was doing the best she could taking on tasks that she normally wouldn't do, but you wouldn't know it, unless you *really* looked in her eyes. Those brown, sweet chocolate pools were tired, wary, and just plain over it all by the time we'd made it to the first floor and into the security department - and it wasn't even lunchtime yet.

I wanted to hold her, tell her she was doing fine, but I knew that we were being scrutinized by every employee, every visitor to that damned building. It didn't

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help that I fucking suspected *everyone*...especially that rude, weasel-like lawyer, Wendell. The very second he kept urging Bella to sign over to my dad, I knew he was iffy. A fucking lawyer shouldn't give two shits, as long as he's getting paid, and that asshole was way too opinionated for my taste - ten years with Charlie or not.

And Bella saw it, too. I wasn't sure which one I needed to get to first- the dumbass that had insulted her, or the girl that was about to toss his sorry self out a twenty-something story window.

But it was Alistair Corbin I couldn't get off of my mind. Something about that name - besides the fact that we knew from the beginning that he worked with King - was bugging the shit out of me, but I shook my head to clear it. Questions could and *would* be answered later with Alec and Eleazar, but right at that moment, my focus needed to be on Bella, the press conference, and the security team that was now eye balling the lot of us as we walked through their door.

"Frank," my father greeted an older man in a nondescript rent-a-cop uniform. "I'd like you to meet Charlie Swan's daughter, Isabella. Isabella, this is Frank Watson. He's the head of security down here."

"My pleasure," he said, his voice raspy and his smile genuine as he took her hand. "I'm so sorry to hear about Mr. Swan, dear."

"Thank you," she said with a sweet smile.

"Well, what can we do for you, Mr. Cullen?"

"Frank, we're going to be making some temporary changes for the next few weeks. Due to the...circumstances surrounding Charlie's death, we need to up the security a bit. I've brought a few people in to help you," my father explained, and Frank looked around the room.

"Yes, sir. Well, it's your house...we just live here. Tell us what you need," he chuckled, motioning for the other guards on duty to step forward. One was

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young, probably fresh out of high school, with light brown hair. The other was possibly my own age, looking skeptical, but willing, with blond hair and blue eyes.

"Actually, it's Isabella's house now," Carlisle chuckled, squeezing her shoulder when she sighed. "I'll let her explain."

Frank turned his undivided attention to Bella as she started to explain. "Frank, this is Alice and Makenna. They'll be taking over your video and audio monitoring. They'll need complete access to all of your equipment, not to mention an internet connection. Edward, Jasper, and Emmett..." she continued, pointing us all out, "are personal guards for us. They'll need unlimited access to everything...every floor, every door, every key entry. Mickey here will be working with you on rounds and any calls you're needed on. I need every last one of these people to be included in anything that seems suspicious, unusual, or even just a little off. You can consider them a part of your team, but any and all questions or concerns need to go through either myself, Edward, or Carlisle."

"Okay, then, Miss Swan," he chuckled, clapping his hands together one time. "First things first...let's get you guys some key cards and identification. That alone will let all employees know that you are clear for any floor, any office, and you'll use those to open all doors." He turned to the youngest guard behind him. "Ralphie, could you please show Alice and..."

"Makenna," she beamed, stepping forward. "Or Mack..."

"Right, Mack," he chuckled, shaking his head at her enthusiasm most likely. "Could you be so kind as to show Alice and Mack to the monitor room and help them set up. Get them anything they may need, okay?"

"Sure, Frank," the kid said with a nod, opening the door to the left of the counter for the girls to go on in.

"Darren, we need to get those IDs set up for these gentleman and lady quickly," he told the other guard, who was already pulling out the camera and motioning

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Jasper, Emmett, Mickey, and myself forward. "Isabella, while they're doing that, tell me what you need for this shindig you've got goin' on out on my front steps," he said with a grin.

We all snickered at him; he was quite the likeable old man.

"I can do that," my dad said, slapping Frank on the shoulder. "Come with me, Frank. I'll show you where my men will be and where I need you."

Within twenty minutes, we were clipping key cards onto our belts, pulling on sunglasses, and waiting for Rose, Bella, and my father to get their stories straight.

"Come on, Bellsy," Rose said, nudging her with her elbow. "You can play the spoiled rich daughter. Let's go."

"Shut it, Rose," Bella growled, smirking at her friend's boisterous laugh and looking up at me once more. "She says that, because we made fun of those rich bitches when we were in school," she huffed, rolling her eyes.

That comment only caused Rose to cackle louder, her head falling back. The rest of us joined her.

"I hate this," my girl sighed. "This shit isn't me, Edward."

She sounded worried and frustrated, and I wanted to hold her, touch her, but my options were limited, because I couldn't do either of those things, not when someone could see, not when there were so many eyes on us.

"I'll be right behind you the whole time, love," I murmured, placing my hand at the small of her back to guide her out the door, and letting my thumb caress her over the material of her dress.

She was dressed to absolute distraction, and just knowing what she was wearing under that dress was not helping me. At all. She was beyond beautiful; she was stunning, making me want to protect her from not only the bad guys,

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but now all the men that she was completely oblivious of their hungry stares.

The entire sidewalk was filled with paparazzi, video cameras, and news journalists. Flash bulbs went off, cameras' little red lights lit up, and a soft murmur roared toward us, but they quieted down as my father took the podium.

Rose and I stood on either side of Bella, and Jasper and Emmett each took the far ends of the roped off area. I used the fact that my eyes were hidden behind sunglasses to scan the crowd that had gathered on the steps of the building. Frank was just inside the lobby, Ralphie was checking identification before letting visitors and employees into the building, and Darren was walking slowly back and forth behind the cluster of news people.

However, Mickey was across the street. She was planted there just in case someone pulled something stupid. She was the only one of us dressed as a civilian. We'd all agreed that hid her better. While Emmett, Jasper, and I all needed to make a statement with our presence, Mickey could stay as a hidden pawn. As she paced back and forth on the sidewalk, it merely looked like she was texting someone on her phone.

I tapped my earpiece when it beeped. "Yes, Alice. How do the cameras look out here?"

"You look handsome as ever, Edward...at least, that's what Bells tells me," she snorted, "but Jazzy beats you, hands down. I'm diggin' the sunglasses, boys."

I grinned, looking over at Jasper, who was shaking his head and fighting a smile, but blushing forty shades of red. "I do believe you embarrassed the Southern gentleman, Pixie."

"Yes, yes, yes," she snickered, and I could hear her typing. "Cameras look good. They've got a sweet setup up here. I should tell you I've only got one blind spot. It's the end of the block, but that should be fine, because Mickey should be able to see that corner from her position."

My eyes shot across the street to where Mickey was nodding slowly.

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"Any familiar faces, Mack?" I asked over the earpiece.

"Nope, not yet, but I'm looking the crowd over now, next the corners, and then across the street." Her voice sounded distracted, but I recognized it from when she would draw. She would concentrate on several things at once. "King's not out yet, but I'm still looking for any of his flunkies."

"Keep me posted," I told them, continuing to scan the crowd.

My father cleared his throat, took the note cards that Rose had prepared for him, and set them onto the top of the podium. The entire crowd went silent when he started to speak.

"I want to welcome the Seattle press, and also thank you for coming on such short notice. As we all know, Charlie Swan, CEO and founder of Twilight Technologies, was killed last week. The brutal nature surrounding his death has left Twilight Tech, its employees, and Charlie's friends and family in a state of shock.

"There will be memorial services held here at Twi Tech and another undisclosed location. These - I'm sorry to say - will be closed to the public and the press due to increased security measures. One will be held here at the tower for employees, and the other in a private location for close friends and family. Since Charlie requested to be cremated, there will be no need for a burial.

"We're calling you here today to announce that Charlie's daughter, Isabella Swan, will be assuming the role as CEO of Twi Tech and taking over his position. It was what her father wanted, and we were waiting on her arrival in order to make those final arrangements, and announce when the memorial services would be held. We're happy to welcome her, and look forward to continuing the long tradition of Twi Tech success."

It was utter bullshit, of course, but the man did have a way with words. My father stretched his arm out for her, and Bella walked to the podium, standing by his side. More flashes practically blinded me as they took hundreds of pictures of her.

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"I'm sure you all have questions, and we have time for just a few, so let's get started," my father said, suddenly bombarded with his name being called out in shouts and yells. He pointed to a young lady in the first row.

"Mr. Cullen, is it true that Charlie Swan's death was a mob hit?"

"That isn't for me to say," he answered smoothly, "but I've been assured that the police are looking into the man that was responsible. Next," he said, choosing an older man off to the left.

"Isabella," he called, "why has it taken you so long to come forward? Did you know that you'd been reported missing?"

She smiled at him, tucking her hair back. "I have only recently discovered that I was a missing person. However, I had my own business to run and had been out of contact for the last month. I wasn't missing...just on a case. When I finally was able to check in, it was Carlisle that told me about my father."

Left and right, for a solid ten minutes, the press spat questions at her and my father, and they both handled them smoothly. Some were interesting questions, others about King and the trial, but I found myself watching her, and then scanning the crowd, only to allow my eyes to fall back to her again. By the time my father announced that the young man up front and center had the last question, I noticed that my girl's stance had frozen. Completely.

Her face had paled, her hands were shaking as she reached to grab my father's coat sleeve. In fact, it looked like her knees were about to buckle.

"Something's wrong," Rose whispered to me. "Look at her. And look where she's staring, Edward."

"I know," I said with a nod, trying to find patience for that last question asked - some inane fucking thing about profits and losses, and would this change in power be beneficial.

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When my father answered the question, I could tell he knew something wasn't right with her, because his answer was stilted and generic.

"That's all the questions we have time for, but we want to thank you for coming," he rushed out, immediately trying to turn Bella around, but she wouldn't be turned.

"Bells, what is it?" he asked her as I walked to them.

"Baby, you okay?" I asked her, trying my damndest to make her look at me.

Maybe I wasn't really expecting anything to happen the first day, but I was wrong. Of all the names I expected to hear her say, it sure as fuck wasn't the one she barely squeaked out.

"Miller," she breathed, her eyes staring across the street. Not just staring, but it looked like she was fucking *hypnotized*.

"I'm going to kill that motherfucker," I hissed, looking around, as I placed a hand on Bella's shoulder.

"Oh-shit, oh-shit, oh-shit," Alice whispered in my ear. "She's right. He's *right there*."

"What?" my father asked her, but I was already on it.

"Fucking talk to me now! All of you!" I growled, trying to look around the scattering press and onlookers. I turned to Bella, making sure she actually saw me. "Baby, we've got you," I told her, but in the earpiece, I wanted answers yesterday. "Alice, talk to me. Where the fuck is he?"

"Across the street. Under the awning..."

"Mickey, Jasper..."

"Already on it," Mickey muttered, making her way down the block.

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Jasper strolled slowly to the crosswalk, acting casual, but as I started to take off, my father grabbed the front of my shirt.

"You bring that fucking son of a bitch... *to me!*" he snarled, his eyes on fire. "Go, Edward. He doesn't get away..."

"No!" Bella gasped, looking up at me, and then Carlisle.

"I've got you, Bells," he said, trying to soothe her, but I knew she wouldn't be okay until I got back. "Go, Edward. The fucker hasn't even moved. He has no fear. Teach him about it," he commanded. From his reaction, I could tell Bella was scaring him.

I glanced up, looking for Emmett, but he was already there. "They go straight upstairs. No one goes in, no one fucking comes out!" I gestured to my father, Rose, and Bella - my poor girl was just about to shake to death - and Emmett nodded, looking like an angry giant. With one last lingering touch down my girl's arm, I took off.

"I'm gonna need you, Alice," I stated, forgoing all crosswalks and darting around the remaining members of the press, who by now had noticed something was going on.

"I'm already in the Department of Transportation website. We're gonna use the red light cameras, Edward, but the asshole hasn't moved. He's just..."

"Staring," I growled, finally getting my first real glimpse at the monster Bella fought in her dreams.

He was leaning casually against the brick wall of a small cafe across the street. He was thin, with light hair and a scar across his chin - all things that Makenna had made sure she drew to perfection, so that we would recognize him. The asshole had hidden himself in the shade of the cafe's awning. The worst part of looking at him was knowing for a fucking fact that he'd touched my girl, that he wanted to kill her. It made me sick. It made me murderous, and I couldn't wait to get my hands on this fucker.

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When I turned to follow his line of sight, I could've snapped right there in front of the press and civilians. He was just glaring Bella's way, as my father, Rose, and Emmett guided her inside Twilight Tower. The very thought of him reliving, relishing all the fucked up shit he'd done to her, made my stomach churn and my fists clench.

To my left, Mickey was making her way down the sidewalk, and to my right, Jasper had just crossed to the corner, turning towards us.

The asshole finally broke his eyes away from the front of the building, looking up at me, to his right, and then his left, but it was Mickey that got his attention. It wasn't all that surprising that Mickey got his attention. She was just about the same size as Bella, with a shade darker hair, and much more curly.

"Hey, *pal*," she sneered, walking a little faster. "Rumor has it you like beating up girls!" Her smile didn't come anywhere near her eyes. "Come on, give me a go, why don't ya?"

Miller stood up straight with wide eyes, slinking along the wall when he realized he was being closed in on. Just before Mickey could get to him, he backed up two steps and bolted for the alleyway.

"J, take the other street! See if we can't corral him," I commanded, pointing for him to go the other way.

Mickey and I took off, giving chase.

"If he turns, you gotta tell me, man," Jasper breathed as he ran.

"We're heading west up this alley, and he's a fast little slimeball," Mickey told him as we dodged dumpsters and piles of garbage.

Miller took a quick right, cutting across a parking lot; it looked like he was heading for a small park.

"North, J," I panted, running as fast as I could. "He's head towards the park."

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"Yes, sir. I'll cut up."

"Edward," Alice said in my earpiece.

"Go ahead," I grunted, hurdling a flower planter to enter and landing next to some picnic tables. I could still see the asshole ahead of me, pushing women and little kids out of his way to get through.

"Alec isn't far from you. He wants to know where you want him. He and Eleazar were on their way back to the tower, and they want to help you get that monster."

"Heading northwest through the park. I need him ahead of me. He needs to cut him off!"

Miller exited the park, taking a left into another alleyway between two rather tall buildings.

"We just crossed Pine," Mickey panted. "He's trying to lose us in the apartments, Alice."

"I see him," Alice replied, and I could see what the little pixie was trying to do; she was manipulating the lights so that traffic would slow Miller down.

We crossed one more street, and I was almost hit by a taxi as we continued down another dark alley. In fact, I had to slide across the hood of it just to keep from getting clipped. Just as we came out on a fairly busy street, an SUV came out of nowhere, just barely catching Miller's leg and causing him to roll in the street, but the fucker launched to his feet and kept running.

"Dammit!" the driver growled, and when I ran by, I saw that it was Alec.

"Keep going, keep going!" I snapped, gesturing for him to go around the block, because the truck wouldn't fit down the alleys.

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My legs and lungs were on fire, but I pushed on, because ahead, I could see a dead end. I thought we had him, until he dove for the fire escape and scrambled his ass up.

"He's going up!" Mickey and I yelled.

Mickey rattled off the address as we passed the front of the building.

I jumped up and grabbed the ladder, reaching for her and practically throwing her at it, but she took it all in stride and hurried up to the first level, with me right behind.

"Jasper," Alice called over the radio. "Take the building you're next to, climb to the roof. You should only be three buildings away from them. Maybe you can catch him in the middle."

"On it," he answered her.

"Eddie," Emmett crackled in. "We're where we need to be. And we're good, just...get a hit in for me, will ya?"

"Got to fucking catch his ass first, Em," I growled, looking up to see Miller clamber over the roof wall. "If we can get a clear shot, I'm gonna shoot is feet off so he can't run any-fucking-more."

I heard chuckles from Em and Alice, and breathless snorts from Jasper and Mickey. We were running out of steam and places for Miller to go.

"Then...I'm gonna recreate every fucking scar Bella has..." I sneered, looking up at Mickey as she pulled me up onto the roof.

"Strap his ass to a table for three days?" Mickey asked.

"At least," I grunted, catching a glimpse of the little fucker jumping to the next roof. "Dammit," I growled, shaking my head. "Jasper, he's heading your way, man."

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"I see him," he whispered, but I heard him grunt hard. "Fuck, that was close! I'm getting too old for this shit..." he mumbled. "Jumping buildings, chasing assholes, and a partridge in a pear tree..."

Mickey laughed, slamming into the far roof wall when we reached the other side. "He's right there," she whispered, pointing to the next building. And I see J. We've trapped him in the building between us."

I pulled my glock, but I didn't have a shot. I was too far away.

"J, we need to get onto that roof at the same time. You got one more jump in you?" I asked him over the headset.

"Yeah, on three, Ed," he huffed, taking a deep breath. "One..."

I backed up, trying to get the best spot to jump over. "Two..."

"Three!" we yelled together, and I took off, leaping at the last possible second in order to make it to the next rooftop.

Jasper and I both landed with a grunt, but my tired legs gave out and I rolled once, before standing back up. We were able to both converge on Miller, who was looking over the side of the building.

"By all means, jump," Jasper panted, pulling out his gun, flipping off the safety, and arming it with swift, practiced movements. "It makes shit a helluva lot easier on us."

I pulled back the hammer on my gun with a loud click, and Miller's eyes shot to mine. "On your knees, asshole," I snarled, taking another slow step towards him.

The jackass wasn't even scared. He had two guns aimed at him, by two men that outweighed him by at least forty pounds each, not to mention were several inches taller than him, but the fucker smiled. *He fucking smiled.* It was slow and creepy as he backed up against the wall of the roof.

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"You think this is fucking funny?" I snapped, but he ignored me, looking once more over the edge of the building.

"I really hope he jumps. For his sake," Jasper snorted, still catching his breath. "I do not envy what you'll do to him."

"I haven't decided yet," I chuckled stiffly, my lungs still feeling like they were filled with lead. My legs were shaking as Miller turned again to look over the side of the building.

"And that's where you've made your first mistake," Miller finally spoke, turning to face me. "You should have killed me when you had the chance, but now...I'll still get to finish what *I* started with *Miss Swan*."

"I don't fucking think so," I said, losing my last thread of patience with this guy. I took one more step and pulled the trigger. Wanting to only maim him, I aimed low at his leg.

Miller cried out, falling to one knee as he held the through and through wound.

"You don't get death your way! You get it... *mine*!" I snapped, walking towards him.

There was a part of me that didn't even want to touch this pile of shit, but the other part of me, the man that saw every scar, every tear, and every nightmare of the beautiful girl he loved, wanted to tear this man apart slowly, painfully, and with so much fucking pleasure, it scared me.

Jasper and I walked to him, and just as we were about to reach for his shirt, he flung himself over the edge. We rushed to the side, expecting to see his splattered remains in the alley below, but I watched in fascination as he slid down one of those construction chutes, landing roughly and ungracefully right by a waiting car. He was in it and down the street before we really comprehended what we'd seen.

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"Alice," Jasper growled in the earpiece, "he's in a blue Toyota, heading south down the alley between Ocean and Fourth."

"I see him," she said, typing away. "Alec, you're two blocks from him. Turn left, then turn right!"

"Fuck!" I snarled, balling up my fist and punching the closest thing to me, which thankfully, wasn't the brick wall, but an air conditioning vent. It collapsed under my punch.

I listened with fascination as Alice tried her damndest to guide Alec, but the guy slipped down a few alleys that were blind to her, and they lost him when he finally came out at a main intersection, lost in downtown traffic.

Miller was fucking gone.

"Goddamn it!" I growled, running a hand through my sweaty hair. I pulled my sunglasses off, and they shattered in my fist, so I tossed them to the rooftop.

My father's voice came over the radio. "Edward, get back here. Have Alec pick you up, son," he said, his voice calmer than I expected, considering the fact that I'd failed to do what he asked.

"Yes, sir..." I muttered, getting a pat on the back from Jasper.

"Hurry, son...Bella needs you..."

"Fuck! Bella," I sighed, feeling like an asshole as I looked over at Jasper, because I'd totally forgotten about her reaction to seeing Miller. "You tell her I'm coming. Put the radio in her ear if you have to, okay?" I asked, somehow finding the strength to run to the fire escape.

"Just...hurry, Edward," he urged, as Jasper and I made our way down to the street.

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Alec pulled up a few minutes later, and Eleazar, Eric, and Felix made room for me, Jasper, and Mickey to climb in. I sat back, my head falling to the head rest as I took a deep breath and let it out.

"He'll come back, kid," Alec sighed, pulling out on the street. "Sounds like he couldn't stop himself from coming."

I nodded, just looking out the window.

"Hey," Eleazar said beside me, placing one of his large hands on my shoulder. "Bella's safe, and that's the most important thing... *right now*. Got me?"

"Yeah," I muttered, nodding again and suddenly feeling an ache to see her that I couldn't even express. "Just...get me back to her."

Alec grunted that he'd heard me, taking the next turn. "You got it, kid."

A/N...I know, I know, I know... Miller got away. Again. But at least Edward got a shot in. No, it definitely wasn't enough. Just rest assured, I have something... *special* planned for him.

So...Mr. Wendell was quite the little weasel. Our boys are all set up in security, and the first day isn't even over yet. Oh yeah...and Angela finally made an appearance. From the very first mention of Ben Cheney, you guys have asked about her, so there you go. She's Carlisle's personal assistant.

Now, coming up is BPOV of that whole thing, which is a little rough, I just wanted to warn you. And we'll try to get through the rest of the day. There are a few more meetings, and we still have to hear from Eleazar and Alec.

I want to thank JenRar for all her help on this chap. Goober_Lou, who threw the pages at me when Miller got away. LOL And MedusaInNY for her help on my blog. And MessyBar for her help finding me some fantastic pic teas that I've been Tweeting... come play with us. You can find me under Drotuno.

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Okay, review for me. I'm fairly certain that you have something to say about this chap, so let me hear it. The next post will be Sunday, so hang in there until then. So until next time, Later.

Chapter 24

A/N...Yes, maybe Edward *should* have aimed a little higher. LOL But nevertheless, Miller got away. Now...it's time to see poor Bella's POV on this situation, and I wanted to warn you that it isn't pleasant, so please think back to those chaps when she was in the basement. I warn you that the beginning of this chapter isn't easy.

I also want to welcome some new readers/reviewers. I want to thank you for reading this story - some of you in one sitting! O.O And thank you for reviewing. For you newer readers, I don't normally reply to reviews, but I *do* try to post twice a week instead...

Now, let's get to Bella...

CHAPTER 24

BELLA

I took one last glance up at Edward, before stepping out into the sunshine and in front of a ton of fucking people. He looked so damned handsome wearing sunglasses, but so very focused on what we were about to do, what we were about to step out into. The podium was directly in front of us, and Carlisle stepped casually to it as I stood between Edward and Rose.

As Carlisle spoke to the press, I barely heard Edward speaking softly into the radio. I wasn't wearing one, but they'd assured me I didn't need one this time. They wanted me to concentrate on just getting through the questions from the press. I needed to follow the story and give them nothing about King, the mafia, and the fact that this CEO shit was a ruse.

When Carlisle finished his speech, beckoning me to him, I nervously stepped forward, flinching a bit when the cameras went off at rapid speed. I expected chaos, but he kept their questions controlled and quick, not allowing follow up questions and answering for me when I didn't have the information.

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I gazed out over the sea of cameras, microphones, and recorders as Carlisle answered a question about rising stock prices, when chills broke out down my neck. Despite the large crowd of people in front of me, I felt like I was being watched. Really *watched*.

I caught a glimpse of Mickey across the street. She was walking casually down the sidewalk, pretending to text, or listen to music, or something else nonchalant, but it was just behind her as she passed an alleyway that I saw him.

My whole body froze in fear. Miller was right there, right across the street, and so close to Mickey that he could have reached out and touched her as she passed him by. Everything he'd ever said or done to me was locked between us as he stared at me, leaning against the brick wall. But it was his slow, greasy smile that crept up his face that made me reach out for Carlisle's arm, not only to try and alert him, but to hold myself up, because it felt like my knees couldn't hold me when flashes of three days strapped to a table flooded my mind.

I tried so hard to hear Carlisle, to feel Edward's touch, but the ice blue eyes across the street were too close, closer than I'd ever thought they'd be to me again. It took all I had to say the name, before Edward's touch left me, leaving me feeling cold and alone.

~oOo~

A hard slap to my face woke me up out of whatever daze or sleep or trance I was in. I was tired, hungry, so very thirsty, and all I wanted was sleep - not that he'd let me. I spat out the blood that filled my mouth, trying not to smile when it hit him square in the face.

"Time is running out for you, Miss Swan," he purred, wiping his face slowly, like it hadn't even phased him. "Soon, you'll have fulfilled your usefulness," he whispered, picking up my hand that was laying on the table.

I balled my hand into a fist, knowing what he was about to do, because it wasn't the first time that he'd let me feel just exactly what hurting me was doing

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to him. Instead, he gripped my wrist just right so that my fingers loosened. He bent my pinky back all the way, until I couldn't fight the scream.

"You can't fight me, Isabella," he sneered, his hand still holding my wrist with severe force. "Feel that?"

"Feel what?" I taunted him, which only resulted in another slap from his free hand.

"Keep it up, and I'll fuck every hole you've got," he growled, leaning over so that he was hovering over my face. "And I'll start..." he yelled, spittle landing on my face, "I'll start with that foul mouth of yours..."

~oOo~

"Hold still, Miss Swan," he ordered, but his voice was barely above a whisper by my ear. "It's time to get these clothes off of you."

"No!" I sobbed, struggling and fighting against the straps that were holding me down to that table, but it was no use.

"I said...still!" he snapped, poking the tip of the knife to my throat.

With slow, deliberate slices, he slid that knife across my tank top, the very tip nicking my skin with each cut. The sting wasn't as bad as being exposed to him, because I wasn't wearing a bra. The feel of blood trickling down my skin, from my sternum, my stomach, and my hips, didn't make me half as nervous as Miller walking to the end of the table and slicing up each leg of my sweatpants.

"You're lucky I'm not ready for you yet, Isabella..." he whispered in my ear. "You can keep your underwear...for now..."

~oOo~

The feel of steel slicing skin.

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The smell of burnt flesh.

The panic when water was poured up my nose.

The feel of a rat crawling over and around my bare feet and legs.

The sound of a man dying from a beating so bad, he could barely take a breath.

Cut underwear.

Alarms sounding.

Explosions from above.

~oOo~

"Maybe she's sick."

"She might be in shock."

"No, she's just scared..." I heard Carlisle's voice say at my side. "Bells? Bella? Look at me, sweetheart."

Reality came back to me in bursts. I remembered the press conference, the sunshine, the questions, and pictures. I remembered seeing Mickey across the street, Jasper and Emmett on either side of the roped off areas, and the feel of Edward's hand slipping down my arm.

"Edward?" I rasped, blinking rapidly to clear my vision, frantic to see him.

"Easy, Bellsy," Emmett crooned, wrapping a big arm around my shoulders and guiding me towards the elevators.

We were no longer outside, but in the lobby of TT. I saw Carlisle, Rose, and Emmett, but Edward was nowhere to be found. My breathing came out in bursts as I spun around looking for him.

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"Bells, look at me," Rose said, pulling me close to her. "He's coming, sweet-pea; just give him a second."

"He's gone after Miller," Carlisle told me, tilting my head up so that he could look into my eyes. "We have to get you upstairs, okay?"

I nodded, swallowing thickly, because I was on the verge of losing it. Too many memories were coming back - things I'd laid to rest, things Edward had helped me through. I needed him - and only him - to tell me it was okay, because he was the only one that truly *knew* what I was feeling.

"Too close, too much," I whispered, shaking from head to toe.

"He won't touch you again, Bella," Carlisle said, holding me close. "And Edward will be back soon, okay?" He guided me into the executive elevator, and I held him tightly, because he was as close to a father, as close to Edward as I could get.

Carlisle ran a soothing hand up and down my arm as we all rode in silence up to the floor that held his office, my father's office, and the apartment. When the doors opened, Angela was standing there, waiting to go downstairs, still carrying a giant stack of files in her arms.

"Ah, Angela," Carlisle greeted her with a forced smile. "Could you please go to my office and tell Miss Platt to come to Char...Isabella's office?"

"Yes, Mr. Cullen. Will there be anything else?" she asked, blinking up at him through her thick glasses.

"Actually, yes. Would you please get us something to eat from the deli across the street? And make sure you take security with you."

"Security?" she gasped, her eyebrows raising up almost to her hairline.

"Just humor me, Ang. Please?" he chuckled.

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"Yes, Mr. Cullen. Anything in particular?"

"Whatever is good, and enough to feed...an army," he snorted, rolling his eyes at his own poor joke.

"Sure thing," she giggled, turning around to head to Carlisle's office.

We walked into Charlie's office, and it wasn't thirty seconds, before Esme was rushing through the door.

"What happened?" she asked, pulling me from Carlisle's arms and into a warm hug.

"Miller was there," he growled, running a hand over my head as I clung to her warmth.

"What? No!" she gasped, holding me tighter in her embrace.

Carlisle turned to Emmett. "I want you to stay in here for when Ang gets back with the food. I want you to listen to every word that comes over that headset. I need to call Alec, but you keep me posted."

"Sir," he grunted, but his brow wrinkled. "You know...Eddie may kill him."

"So be it," Carlisle huffed with a shrug, his eyes softening as he looked over at me. "Can't say as I would blame him, really," he muttered, pulling out his cell phone.

"Bells, let's get you something to drink," Rose urged, opening the bookcase to let us all into the apartment.

I spun around when Emmett spoke into the earpiece.

"Eddie, we're where we need to be. And we're good, just..." He paused, glancing over that me. "...get a hit in for me, will ya?"

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He smiled at whatever Edward must've said back, shaking his head and leaning close to me. "He's fine, Bellsy. Hear him?" he asked, pulling the earpiece out just enough that I could hear Edward and Jasper yelling instructions back and forth.

"Thanks, Em," I whispered, kissing his cheek.

"Sure thing, kiddo."

As I made my way inside the apartment, I found myself reliving the last few minutes - the panic, freezing, the fear. I fell down in the sofa with a deep sigh, because I should've been angry. I should've been comfortable enough with the people around me to realize that they wouldn't have ever let Miller touch me. The longer I sat there, the angrier at myself I became. I'd come so far after all the things he'd done to me; I should've never let him get to me.

A warm cup of tea was pushed into my hands. Esme sat down beside me, brushing my hair from my face and tugging my lip from my teeth.

"You'll make yourself bleed, pretty girl," she sighed, tilting her head at me. "Talk to me."

"I shouldn't have frozen up like that," I whispered, shaking my head. "I could've said something sooner."

"No one's blaming anything on you, Bella," Rose soothed, sitting on the edge of the ottoman. "Hell, if it were me, I would've done the same thing."

"You have nothing to beat yourself up about, sweetie," Esme added, urging me to drink the tea. "You are so very strong. And with all that you've been through..." She stopped, taking a deep breath when Carlisle walked through the room, muttering on the phone. "Miller's a monster, Bella. You have every right to be afraid of him."

I frowned, looking down at my cup of tea, before taking a small sip. "Edward told me that I couldn't let him win, to stay angry at him. To use that anger,

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instead of fear, to...use it against him."

Esme snickered, smiling sweetly. "Of course he did. That's what Edward does. He feeds on his anger in order to right the wrongs in his life. Not everyone can do that. It doesn't mean you failed yourself or Edward. It just means you're different."

I looked up when I heard the bookcase in Charlie's office slide open. Emmett opened the door, carrying a big box of food.

"Hungry?" Rose asked, getting up, but as I shook my head no, Emmett erupted into a string of loud profanities.

"Cocksucker...motherfucker...son of a bitch!" he snarled, slamming the box down on the kitchen counter. "Carlisle!" he yelled, shaking his head.

Carlisle emerged from the hallway, holding up his hand as he listened on the phone. "I know, Em. Just settle down."

"What happened?" Rose asked Emmett.

"The fucker got away from them!" he hissed, and I gasped.

"No," I breathed, bringing my knees to my chest and gripping my hair.

Miller was still out there.

Suddenly, Edward's absence felt so fucking apparent, leaving me feeling exposed, no matter how many people were in the room. It didn't matter that Emmett could have crushed Miller to a pulp, or that Carlisle looked like he was willing to move the whole building to find him, or even that Rose and Esme were wrapped around me, whispering words that I couldn't hear through my ringing ears.

I felt like I was in a nightmare that I couldn't wake up from. I felt like I couldn't catch my breath. This was a true panic attack - something I hadn't felt since we

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were staying in the mountain cabin. I'd forgotten how powerful and debilitating they were. I'd forgotten that they were out of my control, no matter how much I tried to be strong.

"Edward, get back here. Have Alec pick you up, son," Carlisle voice said softly from the kitchen. "Just...hurry."

Warm hands rubbed my arms, pulling my arms from around my head. I looked up at Carlisle, who was looking like he was fighting his temper, but staying calm for me.

"He's on his way, sweetheart, okay?" he whispered, cupping my face and wiping my tears away with his thumbs as I nodded.

I stayed curled up on the sofa for I don't know how long, but my head jerked up when the rumbling sound of the moving bookcase echoed through the room.

Edward was the first one through the door. He was dirty, sweaty, and looked pissed off as hell, but I didn't care. He looked like a hero incarnate. His pants were ripped at the knees, and his shirt had come untucked. His sunglasses were gone, leaving his piercing green eyes free to search the room.

He looked fucking perfect.

Pushing off the couch, I darted across the room, dodging Emmett and Carlisle along the way. Sweeping me up into his arms, I finally heard what I needed to hear - his voice. That perfect, smooth, calming sound that had pulled me out of my worst nightmare.

"Love, are you okay?"

~oOo~

EDWARD

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By the time I stepped into the lobby of TT, I was beginning to feel every step of that chase with Miller. My old knee injury throbbed from my jump from one rooftop to another. My back was stinging from where the roof gravel had scraped it when I rolled, and my hand was bleeding and sore from where I'd punched the shit out of an air conditioning vent.

But none of those things mattered; I had to get to Bella.

"Go take care of Bells, Ed," Jasper muttered, squeezing my shoulder. "I'm gonna check in with Alice," he explained, pointing towards security. "I'll see what she got on tape."

I nodded, leading Alec, Eleazar, Eric, and Felix towards the executive elevators. After swiping my card, it opened immediately, and we all stepped in. Before the doors could close, a thin, feminine arm shot through to stop it, which caused all five of us to jump to pull the doors open.

A disheveled, but obviously grateful, Angela trudged through the door, her arms never empty, it seemed.

"Thanks," she sighed, looking up at me. "Oh, Edward. Um...I need to see your father. Is he up there?"

"Yes, ma'am," I told her, trying not to sound clipped, because it wasn't her fault that the elevator wasn't going mach speed. "I believe he's in Charlie's office. I'll send him out to you."

"Well, really, could you please just let him know that a Ben Cheney left him a message?" she asked politely, pulling a small square piece of paper off the top of the stack of papers in her arms. "I know he's busy today, so I won't bug him, but tell him to let me know when he's ready for the employee assembly."

"Just...stick around, Angela," I sighed, taking the note from her. "He may need you. I don't know."

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"Does Carlisle run you ragged, sweetheart?" Eleazar chuckled, shaking his head.

"No! Gosh, no!" she laughed, blushing a bit, and I couldn't help but like the girl, because she seemed sincere and hardworking. "Mr. Cullen is very kind. Actually, he's one of the nicer supervisors I've had."

"We won't tell him that," Alec snickered, rolling his eyes. "It'll go to his head."

We all laughed, looking up as the elevator dinged and the doors slid open.

"Angela," I said, before exiting the car. "This is Alec, Eleazar, Felix, and Eric. They'll need security clearance like I have. When you have time, could you let Frank know?"

She nodded, pushing her glasses up with her free hand. "Um, yes, sir," she answered. "I just delivered lunch a few minutes ago, so when you gentlemen have eaten, have Mr. Cullen call me. I'll take you down myself."

"Thank you, Angela," all of us said as one, which caused her to laugh, going on into Charlie's office.

As I opened the bookcase and then the door, Alec snorted. "Damn, Bella's dad was something else. Check this shit out..."

"Mmhm," I hummed distractedly, because I couldn't get inside quick enough.

I glanced around the apartment, but a blur of brunette hair heading towards me almost caught me off guard. I caught her, my lips immediately at her ear.

"Love, are you okay?"

She didn't say anything; she just squeezed me closer, burying her face in my neck. With one arm wrapped around her, I handed my father Benny's message, muttering that Angela was waiting for him.

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My dad's face softened as he looked at Bella. He squeezed my shoulder, whispering, "Next time, son. Get her out of here for a minute."

I didn't even look back as I carried her to her bedroom, ignoring everyone's looks of sympathy and worry. My girl was strong, but I knew this had really fucking scared her. It didn't help that I'd let the fucker get away.

I sat down hard on the edge of the bed, keeping her firmly planted in my lap. She wriggled closer, her breathing deep as she shook a little in my arms.

"Baby, answer me. Are you all right?" I asked, pulling at her until she sat up to look me in the eye.

Her face crumbled. "I tried to stay angry, but he was... *right there*," she sobbed, swiping at her tears with the back of her hand. "I...I couldn't stop from looking at him...he was...and...I..."

My heart broke for her, because I'd seen up close just what a fucked up creep he truly was, and I couldn't imagine just how nasty he could be when he truly was unleashed, especially on a woman. He had no fear, no remorse, and certainly no shame. I had no doubt that Alec was right; the asshole would come back for her. He couldn't fucking help himself.

"Hey," I said, cupping both sides of her face. "It's okay, he's gone. Not gone like I'd like him to be, but he won't touch you, love. Please, please stop crying."

"Tell me what happened," she sniffled, trying her damndest to settle down.

"We chased him to the roof of an apartment building. Jasper and I thought we had him cornered, and hell, I even shot the motherfucker, but he jumped," I told her, shaking my head at how fucked up it was that asshole got away from us.

"I thought you said he got away," she accused, narrowing her eyes at me.

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"He did, baby," I sighed, brushing the rest of her tears away. "He slid down one of those construction chutes, and there was a car waiting for him."

"Oh," she huffed, and then took a deep breath, her brow still furrowed.

"It's my fault," I groaned, running a hand through my hair. "I shouldn't have hesitated, but I was so angry that he was there, sick of all the shit he'd done, and the way that he was staring at you...that I couldn't even begin to figure out what the fuck I wanted to do to him. And that cost me..."

My girl wrapped me up in a tight hug, murmuring, "Thank you for trying," but I hissed when her hand pressed against the scrape on my shoulder blade. She pulled back quickly, eying me intently. "Bathroom. Let me see," she ordered, scrambling down off of my lap.

I groaned, but followed her into the bathroom, my legs now stiff from my fall to the rooftop.

She spun in front of me, hands on hips. "Strip, mister."

"If you wanted me naked, you just have to say so, Bella," I teased her, but she wasn't having it.

"Not funny, Edward. Let me see."

Carefully, I tugged my shirt over my head, kicked out of my shoes, socks, and pants, and stood before her in my underwear. I felt like an admonished child, until her eyes welled up.

"Baby, please don't," I begged her, pulling her to me. "It's just some scrapes. I'm fine."

"Your knee is swollen, Edward," she bit back, pointing to the shower. "Shower. I'll get you some clean clothes and something for pain and those scrapes."

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"Nothing more than over the counter, love," I grumbled. I'd experienced pain meds after my chopper crash, and I didn't need to be anything other than alert.

"Kay," she sighed, pointing to the shower. "In, Edward."

By the time I'd hissed and winced like a pussy through my whole shower, I got out to see she was waiting for me, with clean clothes, a bottle of water, two pills, and a first aid kit.

"This shit is not necessary, Bella," I growled, rolling my eyes at her wry smile.

"Tough. Put these on and sit," she commanded, ignoring my grumpy look and handing me a pair of underwear.

She was so fucking cute, all commanding and serious, that I couldn't help but just do what she asked, because I got the feeling this was something that she needed to do... *and* she'd stopped crying, so whatever kept her tears at bay was a good thing.

I'd watched her the night we'd returned to the farm with my father. She'd been so careful with Eleazar, cleaning his wound and wrapping it. My father, Esme, and I had stopped to watch her, and Esme had whispered that it was therapy for Bella to help someone else with an injury, that it helped her forget her own wounds that she'd suffered through.

"Here, take these, please," she pleaded, putting two pills in my hand and handing me the water. "It's just acetaminophen, but it'll help, okay?"

I nodded, downing the entire bottle of water at the same time.

She worked quietly, her eyes focused and concentrated on my injuries. Both knees were scraped up - and the one was swollen - so she cleaned them and medicated them, but I stopped her from bandaging them.

"Leave them open," I said, shrugging when she looked up at me, but she didn't argue.

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She stood up and gently turned me so that she could take a look at my back, which actually stung worse than my knees, and I couldn't help it when I hissed the second she started to clean it.

"Did you fall, Edward?"

"Not really. I'd run like six or seven blocks and climbed the fire escape, so by the time I jumped from one roof to another, my knees were tired. I landed okay, but I had to roll to soften the impact," I explained softly, flinching again when she swiped at it one more time.

"Here," she giggled, leaning forward and blowing softly on my skin to take the sting away.

That simple, innocent gesture shot straight to my cock, and I had to bite my lip to keep from letting out a groan, because I could just imagine her lips, her breath, her mouth other places.

"I'm going to cover this one, baby, so your shirt doesn't stick to it," she whispered in my ear, which didn't help my current situation, and she totally busted me adjusting myself as she leaned forward to kiss my cheek. "You're insatiable, Mr. Cullen," she purred with a giggle against my jaw.

"Your fault," I said, finally giving in to the groan I couldn't fight. "Bella, please hurry..."

She smiled against my shoulder, placing a long kiss to my skin with another little giggle coming from her.

"Keep laughing, *sweetness*," I growled, but her laugh as she put medicine and a bandage on me just made me smile, because I'd rather her laugh at me, than to be upset any day.

"And your hand?" she asked, raising an eyebrow at my scraped and red knuckles.

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"I-I... I s-sort of p-punched an A/C v-vent," I sputtered, looking at my hand as she cleaned it up, as well.

Once she was finished, she turned me back around, still fighting her smile. "As much as I'd like to take care of that situation you've got going on there, Edward, your dad wants us to eat before we head down to the auditorium for the employee announcement."

I grimaced, but nodded. We knew this plan would revolve around keeping up appearances, but I missed the carefree ways of the farm. I even missed the mountain cabin, where we ran perimeter checks together. Fuck, at least I could touch her when I wanted, but not here, not when we weren't sure who was watching, who could benefit in knowing what we were up to. The fact that she was being pulled in several different directions with no free time just made it worse - and it was only the *first fucking day*.

"I want you," I pouted, but snatched my clothes out her hands. "I won't apologize for that."

She cupped my face, kissing my lips fully. "Nor would I want you to, but we can't. Believe me... After this morning, there's nothing I want more than to just hide away in here with you," she said, her teeth gnawing away at her bottom lip and her brow furrowing. I could tell this Miller shit was still fucking with her.

I'd known my presence made her feel safe, but I hadn't realized just how much. Her panic attack was probably a result of my absence and Miller's presence - an enormously bad combination for her.

"I'm sorry he scared you," I told her honestly, "but I'd rather chase him away from you, than to let him anywhere near you again, okay?"

She swallowed and nodded.

"I'll chase him until I catch him, love," I vowed, meaning that to my very bones.

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"I know, and thank you," she sighed, kissing me again, before backing away when my father's voice called from her bedroom door.

"Bella, Edward...we need to get moving," he said, but I could tell he was uncomfortable bothering her after what had happened earlier.

With one last forlorn look to me, she sighed, calling, "Five more minutes, Carlisle."

~oOo~

"Who are these jackasses?" Emmett huffed as we stood off the side of the stage.

I snorted, looking over at him. "Every supervisor of every department in Twi Tech," I told him with a shrug.

"I suppose bringing everyone in here would shut the whole fucking company down, huh?" he chuckled.

I shrugged again, barely paying attention my father's speech, because he'd already introduced Bella to them. She'd handled herself well, even though she really wasn't into it, but my father took back over, droning on about keeping true to Charlie's vision for TT, until he said something about security.

"I'd like to direct your attention to the gentlemen in black, standing in different parts of the room," he said, pointing towards the back doors, the stage, and the two sides of the auditorium.

Eleazar, Felix, Alec, and Eric had been taken down to Security by Angela to get their identifications. They'd changed clothes at my father's request, because he wanted to make a statement at this employee meeting. He wanted to let everyone know that they were being protected, as well as being watched.

"This is a new and higher level of security. They're here to help us, considering the events surrounding Charlie Swan's death. It's come to my attention that

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there is information being leaked and there are breeches in security, and we're trying to put an end to it. If you see these gentleman, and lady," he snorted, when Mickey, who was now dressed like the rest of us, cleared her throat from behind him on the other side of the stage, "they are just there to protect you. If you see any suspicious behavior, report it to any one of them." He braced his hands on the podium, looking out over the filled seats. "Ladies and gentlemen, this isn't about long lunch breaks, or the theft of office supplies, because everyone here has taken home a notebook or a pen. It's about being careful who you talk to, who you let in the mail room, who you see driving around in the garage. If they aren't someone you normally see in your department, if they aren't wearing an employee ID badge... *report it.*"

Bella stood up one more time, walking to the podium. This was the final step in the plan - the announcement of Charlie's memorial. Telling this group of people would ensure that King would eventually find out when it was, and with that thought, my eyes shot to Mr. Wendell in the front row.

"I'd like to invite you all to an employee only memorial for my father. I know that some of you had been working for him for many years. In fact," she said, smiling warmly around the room, "I recognize some of you from when I used to run around this place as a kid."

I smiled at the chuckles in the room, and would have loved to have seen her - pigtails, knobby knees, and all - running around this building without shame or fear of consequences. It made sense when I thought back to our one and only meeting fourteen years ago as to why she was so outgoing, so at ease with meeting new people. Her playground had been a twenty-something story building with constant new faces that knew *exactly* who she was - the boss' daughter - and catered to her every whim.

"I thought it fitting that we have it here," she continued with a nod, tucking her hair behind her ear. "My dad would've wanted it here. He considered you his extended family, people that he surrounded himself with on a daily basis. He told me once there wasn't a single useless employee at Twi Tech, because everyone pulled their weight. He said if it wasn't for you guys and everyone in your departments, he wouldn't be where he was. He would've wanted to thank

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you for that.

"So please, let your departments know that the memorial will be held here on Friday, at two o'clock in the afternoon," she concluded, folding her notes. "Once the memorial service is over, you'll all be free to take the weekend early." She grinned when they clapped, clearly excited about the idea of a long weekend, but not too excited, because of the reason for it.

"She's kinda good at this shit," Emmett chuckled, still looking around the room.

"She's hating every second," I laughed, looking up at him as he snorted into a harder laugh. "She can't wait to hand this shit to my dad."

"You wouldn't know it, dude."

"No, but she's used to 'playing a part' in her own work, so that's what she's doing," I explained, using my fingers for the air quotes. "She's treating this as any other under cover situation."

"Makes sense."

My gaze landed back on Mr. Wendell as he walked by us, and I glared at him. It wasn't only that I didn't trust him; it was also how he'd treated Bella in that conference room as he read the will. He'd treated her like she was stupid, and she was far from it. I wanted to teach him about respect.

"He's the leak," I whispered to Emmett. "I guaran-fucking-tee it."

"Yeah, he looked all sorts of nervous when he shot out of that meeting," Emmett sighed, his eyes narrowing on the little weasel. "I just about knocked him on his ass when he called Bellsy a spoiled, rich kid..." he said loud enough that Wendell heard him.

I wanted to laugh at the lawyer's reaction, because he knew immediately that Emmett had just ratted him out, but I also wanted to punch the guy in the face.

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Bella was far from spoiled.

"Next time, go ahead," I told Emmett, just loud enough that Wendell heard me.

"I'd be glad to do it now," he chuckled, cracking all his knuckles and flexing his arms. "I've missed out on the last few exciting things."

I chuckled, but stopped when my father's hand landed on our shoulders. "As much as I agree, let it go for now, boys," he murmured low. "Now, go get the girls. We've got one more meeting back in security with Eleazar and Alec."

As we walked up to the girls, I noticed Rose was trying to get Bella away from an older woman.

"Bells, we have one more meeting, sweetie," she whispered, but smiled indulgently at the old woman.

"Look at you, Isabella!" the woman gushed, cupping Bella's smiling face. "You've grown into such a beautiful woman. I bet Charlie's just all kinds of puffed up with pride, smiling down on you!"

Bella giggled, shaking her head. "You're just saying that because I used to drive you crazy, Miss Evelyn."

"Oh, hardly. I had kids of my own, you know," she scoffed. "It'll be a nice change to see you around here more often. Thought Charlie's heart would break when you went off to Virginia..."

Miss Evelyn glanced over Bella's shoulder, looking nervous as Emmett and I approached them, but Bella smiled, taking her hand and leading her to us, with Rose following.

"Miss Evelyn Arthur, meet Edward Cullen and Emmett McCarty," she introduced. "Guys, this is Miss Evelyn. She works in payroll."

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"Sweet," Emmett beamed at her, which caused the old woman to chuckle. "The lady with the cash!"

"Ignore him," I snorted, rolling my eyes and shaking her hand. "It's nice to meet you."

"You, too," she said with a smile.

"Bells, one more meeting," Rose urged. "We've got to go talk to security one more time."

"Okay," my girl sighed, turning to Miss Evelyn. "I'll come up to see you tomorrow. We'll catch up, okay?"

"You'd better!" the old lady ordered, pointing a finger at her. "But I'm hiding all of my highlighters. You used to color until they went dry!"

Bella laughed, hugged the lady, and kissed her cheek. "I'll bring my own."

~oOo~

BELLA

I fell into a chair in the security monitor room, waiting for everyone else to come in and sit down. I looked up at the screens, noticing two headlines. One was the fire in a pawn shop not far from here, and the other was a car explosion, killing four men, just outside a cell phone company. Both happened the same night, and both were within miles of each other.

The Savage brothers were no more.

I snorted, but moaned when a warm hand started to massage my neck and shoulders.

"How are you holding up, love?" a silken voice crooned in my ear.

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"I really need that beer and bubble bath," I whined, rolling my eyes at his deep chuckle.

"Oh, now you need bubbles, do you?" he laughed softly, kissing the top of my head.

"Uh huh," I sighed, leaning back to look at him. "Please, please say you'll join me."

"And miss getting to undress you? I wouldn't miss it, baby," he purred in my ear, leaving a quick kiss, before the door opened.

I grinned, elbowing his stomach as he stood behind me, but it was Eleazar that I spoke to. "Your doing?" I asked, smirking at his innocent shrug.

"Don't know what you're talkin' about, Miss Bella," he chuckled, shooting a wink my way.

Once everyone was in, Carlisle shut the door. Alice and Mack took their seats in front of the monitors, Eric and Felix stood against the wall along the side, and the rest of them sat around the few tables. Alec, however, sat next to me. Frank and his two men were apparently not invited to this meeting.

"Those fucking cowards," he whispered, glancing up at the headlines on the computer screen. "They sang like little pretty birds, kiddo. They sang songs about Miller's mother, where she lived, that she occasionally gets visited by her son." He raised an eyebrow at me. "Now, it's up to you, *bellissima*," he said, letting his Italian roll off his tongue with practice and ease. "We can go check out... *Mom*, or we wait until this... *mostro* comes to you."

The whole room was quiet, watching me and Alec. He was completely serious as he studied my face. I swallowed, looking up at Edward, and then to Carlisle, and finally, back to Alec.

"You think he'll come back for me," I stated, grimacing when he nodded slowly. I took a deep breath, shaking my head with what I was about to say. "If

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he hasn't shown by the time we're done here with King, then he's yours."

"And mine," Edward growled, and Alec's head spun to look at him. "Fucker won't get away again," he snapped.

"Sure, kid," Alec said with smirk, a nod, and a handshake between them.

Carlisle cleared his throat, bringing all of our attention to him at the front of the room. "There's two things that we need to go over in this meeting. The first thing is...King," he said with a nod. "Benny left me a message earlier today, stating that King's release is set for tomorrow. That's Wednesday. So he will be out in time for the memorial."

"Oh, and he's definitely planning on attending," Alec snorted, rolling his eyes. "The little fucker at the pawn shop...he made sure to tell us all kinds of info before that unfortunate fire broke out."

There were a few chuckles throughout the room, before Carlisle went on.

"I figured as much," he sighed, looking older than I'd seen him - but hell, I understood it; it had been a shit day. He looked up at Makenna. "Mack, how many does that leave us?"

"Four, including Miller." She got up and passed around four pictures.

"Victoria, of course, though I wasn't sure whether to include her or not," she said, looking over at Eric.

"I'd like us to try to save her," Eric urged, looking up at Carlisle. "I honestly believe that she just needs to get away from King. I know she loves Chelsea..." His voice trailed off, but Carlisle nodded in understanding.

"Next, Dale Young," she said, turning to the next photo of a young man crossing a busy street.

"Dale Young is currently the owner and operator of a club that most of King's goons like to frequent. It's damn popular in Seattle," Alice huffed, rolling her

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eyes over the top of her laptop. "It's rumored, though no one has been able to prove it, that Young runs a prostitution ring in the upstairs of this building."

She turned the computer around so that we could take a look at it. It looked like an industrial building had been renovated. The first level or two looked like the club, where the next few floors were offices or apartments. The name over the front entrance was *Club 13*.

"Rumor has it, that's his lucky number," Alice snorted. "Which I just don't get. There is no scientific proof that any number can hold any significance to random things. There are a finite amount of numbers, and why anyone uses the same set of numbers expecting to say...win the lottery..."

"Alice!" I snapped, rubbing my temples, too tired to deal with a math lesson. "Pixie, please go on..." Despite the chuckles around the room, Edward's warm hand met my shoulder again.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," she sighed. "Sure. Okay, so Young, though not innocent, does have a wife and two kids - a boy and a girl. He keeps a residence in Canada for them. He'd applied numerous times for his business license, only to be turned down time and time again. However, the last time, with King's signature on the paperwork, it was cleared through."

"And this guy?" I asked, holding up the next photo of a rather handsome guy.

"Wes Michaels," Mack answered. "Hot, isn't he?"

"Oh my God, Mack," I growled, looking up from the picture. "I don't want to have to shoot you both today..."

Everyone laughed, but Alice started talking in order keep Makenna's raging hormones out of trouble.

"Right, so this handsome thing is completely blank," she said, looking up at Carlisle. "I think we've found our other Federal agent. I know that Benny said he had two - one with Miller, and one with King. I think this is the...surviving

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one."

"What makes you so sure?" Carlisle asked, leaning over her.

"This," she said, pointing to the screen. "Wes Michaels has only been on the grid - finances, drivers license, insurance, check cashing, internet - for the last three years. Yet, he's pretty high up there. He runs a shooting range at the edge of town."

"It's where I'd put a man," Eleazar said with a shrug. "I mean, our whole goal was to stop King's gun sales, so what better place than a shooting range? We were aware the Feds had guys out there; we just weren't sure how high up. That's impressive if he's that trusted, but that means he's in *deep* undercover."

"Okay, so the girls and I will be needed for *Club 13*," I snorted, rolling my eyes. "And someone else can take the shooting range."

"You won't be at the club alone, Bella," Edward growled, spinning me to face him.

"He's right," his father agreed. "In fact, as big as that place is, we'll need everyone on that one."

We all nodded in agreement, all of us following his every move.

"But the shooting range," he sighed, looking around at us. "I'm thinking Eleazar, Jasper, Emmett...Mickey and Makenna," he said, holding up his hands when everyone started to talk at once. "Wait," he huffed, rolling his eyes. "There's a reason I picked those. Eleazar can spot a Fed a mile away. He can go in like he's treating the boys and their girls to a round of target practice. Jasper can keep an eye out for the illegal guns, while Makenna gets in there to remember every face. Mickey and Emmett are there in case something goes wrong."

"Oh," I snorted, thinking that was brilliant.

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"Now...I want to know about Alistair Corbin," Edward grunted, folding his strong arms across his chest.

Alec and Carlisle exchanged an unreadable look, but it was Carlisle that started speaking.

"Corbin would be the only person that would want revenge on me. And apparently, he's using King to do it," he began, as he paced slowly from one end to the other. "Edward, you wouldn't remember this, because you were in military school when I took a job down in Colombia."

I looked to Edward, who was nodding, as his father continued.

"We were hired by Roger Donnelley to recover the survivors of a small plane crash," he stated.

"Donnelly...the airplane mogul?" Alice asked, typing away on her laptop when Carlisle and Alec nodded.

"That same one. He'd apparently paid for a group of colleagues to vacation down there, but there was a severe storm, which caused the plane to have to emergency land in Corbin's territory. He's a paranoid fucker to begin with, so when this plane went down, he immediately took them hostage, using it as an opportunity to extort money - quite a bit of it - from Donnelley."

"The problem wasn't getting in," Alec said, clearing his throat and shaking his head. "It was getting out, and we knew that before we even went over there, but these were innocents he was holding. Not drug dealers, or hitmen, or even illegal gamblers...they were a banker, a restaurant owner, and their wives and kids."

"Oh, damn," Jasper whispered, sitting forward so that his elbows rested on his knees. "What went wrong?"

"Corbin, actually," Carlisle growled softly, shaking his head. "His residence was on the same property as his cocaine processing plant and the farm. It was

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all... *right there*." He sighed, shaking his head. "We didn't know. So once we were down there, located where he was keeping the hostages, and had worked a plan to get them out, we decided to take down...everything."

"Oh, fuck," Edward groaned, wincing at what he thought might be coming next.

"We blew it all up," Alec snorted, rolling his eyes. "We took out the farm, the plant, and...the house."

"And who was in the house?" Edward growled, looking between them.

"Corbin's wife and child," Carlisle replied. "They never made it out."

"We never knew they were there," Alec defended. "I mean, we left the workers quarters, because we considered them innocent of the whole thing, that they were just working for a living. We would never have rigged the house had we known that they were in there. Corbin wasn't even on site."

"Jesus," I breathed, shaking my head. "And somehow...he's tracked you back to Charlie...to me...to all of us?"

"Yes," Alec and Carlisle said at the same time.

"This whole thing is personal?" Edward growled, running a hand through his hair.

"I didn't think it was against me, son," Carlisle countered. "I always thought this was between King and Charlie."

"Okay," I huffed, standing up quickly. "I'm done. I've had about as much super-villain bullshit as I can take today. King will be out *two fucking days* before Charlie's memorial. Tomorrow, I imagine, is the shooting range; tomorrow night is the club?" I verified with Carlisle, who was looking rather admonished as he nodded slowly. "Fine," I sighed, turning to Alice. "I want everything you can dig up on Mr. Ivan Wendell. That little shit's hiding

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something, and I want to know what it is before I throw him off the roof."

"Sure, Bells," she murmured, typing away.

I was walking around the tables, knowing for a fact that Edward was following my every step, when Carlisle called me.

"Bella, wait," he begged. "Please..."

I took a deep breath, before turning to face him. "I'm not mad, Carlisle. I can't be mad about something that happened when I was in the eleventh fucking grade," I snapped. "But it does add one more element to this whole thing. You pissed off the boss of the man that my own father pissed off. It's an uphill battle now."

"Corbin isn't allowed to step foot inside the United States, Bella," Eleazar stated. "Once he's lost his pawn in this situation, he'll flounder for a while."

"The Corbin situation is my mess, guys," Carlisle sighed. "Once we get King, we'll finish off what we started in Colombia."

"Well, maybe *you* should clean up *your* mess," Edward grumbled, guiding me the rest of the way out the door. "I'm not cleaning up anymore messes after this one..."

Edward and I were quiet as we made our way upstairs. I stopped by my father's liquor cabinet in his office, opening the little fridge underneath and grabbing the eight bottles of beer from inside. I smiled up at him when he snorted into a laugh.

"You weren't kidding."

"Nope, sure wasn't," I sang, letting us into the apartment. I didn't even pause on my way to my room, locking the door behind us. "And I was serious about the bath and you in it, too."

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He smirked, taking the pack of beer from me and setting it down by the bed. He grabbed two, cracking one open and handing to me, only to do the same for himself. But it was his toast to me as he tapped his beer bottle to mine that caused me to laugh - really laugh - for the first time all day.

"Here's to parental mistakes," he snorted, grinning when I doubled over.

We drank at the same time, but I stepped closer to him, kissing his lips softly. "No shit."

Alec's Italian translations: *Mostro* = monster and *bellissima* = beautiful

A/N... Don't judge their attitudes at the end just yet... like Bella said, it had been a shit day. A person can only take so much...

Bella's flashbacks were sad...and I can understand how she could be so very afraid. Her panic attack was understandable, even though she was upset with herself that it happened.

So there are two more bad guys out there besides Miller. King will be released in a few days, and Charlie's memorial is coming up. Bella is uber-suspicious of Wendell, and it will be interesting to see what Alice digs up on him.

I am sorry I didn't have any teasers or pics this week on Twitter. RL has been a little busy. The next few days should be better. And I'll have 2 pic teasers this week...

I want to thank JenRar for her master beta skills on this one...Goober_Lou for pre-reading it. And to MedusaInNY for her upkeep of my blog... go check it out. [drotuno\(dot\)blogspot\(dot\)com](http://drotuno(dot)blogspot(dot)com)

Now...let me hear you...Review for me. The next chapter will be up on Wednesday. And I think you'll like that one... so review and tell me what you're thinking. Until next time...Later.

Chapter 25

A/N...Okay, let me see if I've got this right... You're all in agreement that Edward is right...Wendell is a snake. You're all in agreement that Bella's reaction was justified when she caught sight of Miller. And you all loved Carlisle telling Edward that Miller had no fear, to teach him about it. LOL Got it. All of that is duly noted.

Now, this chapter comes with a LEMON WARNING. A couple, actually. Not that you pervs care, but still... (And God, I love you all for it!) And if you follow me on Twitter, I had a few pic teasers this week.

Anyway, let's get back to work. I think Edward comes up with a fantastic idea as to how to help Bella gain more confidence... you tell me...

CHAPTER 25

BELLA

"As you can see, Miss Swan," a woman, whose name I'd already forgotten, droned on, "our internet sales rose last quarter, where our in-store retail sales stayed level."

I nodded, but barely heard her. My eyes were on the gorgeous, pacing, caged animal currently right outside the glass doors of the room we were in. Edward was on the phone, his face fierce as he ran a hand through his hair and continued to pace.

Eleazar, Emmett, Jasper, Mickey, and Makenna had all left a few hours ago to head over to the shooting range, and I was pretty sure that he was either listening in, or having everything relayed to him by Alice. In all reality, I would have rather been dealing with that situation, than currently listening to Miss Way-Too-Much-Perfume. Hell, she made my nose itch, and it didn't help that she ogled Carlisle, Alec... *and* Edward.

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It wasn't that I blamed her, because Carlisle was very distinguished, and Alec had that whole suave Italian thing going for him, but even though Edward didn't act it in the company of employees, he was mine, damn it.

I bit back a groan and blindly took another report slid my way, as my eyes moved back to Edward, who was now sitting in a chair with his elbows braced on his knees. Our eyes met, and despite the fact that he was probably worried about his crew, his eyes softened and he shot me my favorite crooked smile and a wink.

I fought my own smile and won, but it didn't stop the memories of last night.

~oOo~

We drank two beers together before we even filled the bathtub with hot water and bubbles. Neither one of us was truly upset with Carlisle, but we were over the day itself. I couldn't take one more meeting, one more story about bad guys, or even one more plan added to the mix. And I couldn't take one more minute of fighting the urge to touch Edward, especially after my panic over Miller earlier. I needed him on a level that would probably scare him, if he knew.

He didn't say a word as he took my beer from me and set it on the side of the tub next to his own, as the water slowly rose. He turned me around carefully, dragging the zipper of my dress down slowly, placing random kisses to newly exposed skin on my shoulders. He sat down on the edge of the tub, tugging me with both hands on my waist to stand between his legs as he just...looked at me.

He traced every strip of pink lace, every edge of my black stockings, and let his fingers drag over my gun in its thigh holster. He shook his head slowly, licking his lips as his eyes ghosted all over my body, down to my shoes, and back up again.

"You look so fucking sexy like this, love," he breathed, shaking his head again and gripping my waist to pull me a little closer. "I can't even think straight right now, looking at you, because you're every fantasy I've ever fucking had about you..." His voice trailed off as he leaned in to circle my bellybutton with

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his nose, only to drag it up to my sternum and across my breast to my neck, where he left a long, languid, open mouth kiss, swirling his tongue over the spot just below my ear that made me gasp and brace myself on his strong shoulders.

"What did you do to me, Edward?" I asked. "In your fantasy..." A part of me was afraid to know the answer, because God, I wanted whatever he wanted. All of it. Everything.

"In my dreams, the shoes stayed...on..." he rasped, his eyes gliding down my legs, and then back up to mine, looking up through his gorgeous eyelashes. "These..." he added, licking his lips again and tracing a finger around the tops of my stockings, "...stayed on."

I smirked, reaching behind me to unclasp my bra, and then I let it join my dress on the floor at the same time his fingers grasped the top of my underwear almost roughly.

"And these," he said, his voice practically growling and his eyes almost black, "didn't fucking survive."

A rush of air escaped me as the sound of ripping lace tore through the bathroom. "Then what?" I whispered, weaving my fingers into his hair as he leaned forward again, this time placing kisses to my thighs, the sensitive skin where my legs met my torso, and lifting one of my legs over his shoulder.

"Then...I make you...mine," he purred, his tongue snaking out to just barely trace over the slick skin between my legs.

"I am yours," I told him in a whisper, my brow furrowing.

"Not in my fantasy," he chuckled darkly, licking lightly again, which caused my breathing to stop momentarily. "In my mind, I take you. I steal you from...everyone."

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My head fell back when he kissed my center in earnest - a tongue exploring, lip nibbling, heavy breathing kiss. My fists gripped the sleeves of his t-shirt as his kisses were so deep, I could feel his tongue inside me.

His mouth popped off my clit, his fingers replacing his lips as he looked up at me. "Do you want to come, Bella?"

" Yes," I barely whispered, pulling at his shirt.

" Then you call...my fucking name," he rasped. He licked his lips and attached them back to my now throbbing clit as two of his fingers slipped into me.

" Edward..."

~oOo~

"Bells," Rose hissed, poking my leg under the table. "Star wants to know if you want to change anything in this department," she hissed in my ear, her voice letting through more amusement than she allowed to be seen on her face.

Star? Really?

It took all I had not to roll my eyes at her, her ever so obvious stares out the glass windows, her ridiculously smelly fragrance, and her stupid name - especially considering that I was just getting to the good part of the evening, where we climbed into the tub and I rode Edward slow and slick, our bodies covered in bubbles as our hands couldn't keep a grip on skin. Smiles and chuckles at our slippery - and probably inebriated - predicament had just finished out the day the best way the two of us could even think of, falling into bed and finishing our beers, still laughing.

"Oh, no," I sighed, when Rose poked me again, looking to Carlisle and shaking my head. "If its still the same next quarter, then we'll make some changes," I said, knowing it was utter bullshit, because I couldn't care less.

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I looked up when Edward started pacing outside the room again, his phone back up to his ear. I sighed, wishing to hell and back I knew what was going on. Even Alec looked concerned as he watched Edward walked back and forth in front of him.

The meeting broke after Carlisle's attention was also drawn outside the room to his son. He made a few notes on Star's report and slid it back to her, calling the meeting over.

We all came out of the room at the same time Edward hung up the phone, clearly frustrated, as a hand ran roughly through his hair. He barely gave an ogling Star a second glance, looking to his dad.

"We have a problem," he muttered, but we all kind of looked over at Star, because she was still hanging around.

"That will be all, Star," Carlisle dismissed with a single nod.

"Sure, Mr. Cullen," she sighed, gathering her things and heading down the hallway.

"That's a stripper's name," I muttered, smiling when Rose snorted into a laugh as she leaned into me.

"I know, right?" she guffawed, covering her mouth when our giggles got out of hand.

"Sorry," I said, clearing my throat and fighting another fit of giggles, because Rose was barely keeping hers under control.

As the men looked over at us, smiling in spite of themselves, Alec bent between me and Rose. "I actually *knew* a stripper named Star," he whispered, smiling when the two of us lost it all over again.

"Jesus, Alec, you're not helping," Edward chuckled, rolling his eyes.

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"You're just pissed, 'cause she thought I was hotter than you," he growled, punching Edward in the arm.

"Actually, I'm pretty sure she was staring at all *three* of you," Rose pointed out, wiping her tears away from her eyes, careful not to smear her mascara.

Carlisle sighed, rolling his eyes, but he was smiling, nonetheless. "You said... *problem*?" he urged, trying to get us back on track.

"Right," Edward snorted, giving me and Rose, who were grinning like fools, an amused, yet stern, glare, before turning to his father. "Eleazar said they arrived to the shooting range just fine, and they weren't noticed at first. They saw... *plenty* going on back there, when Jasper asked about something you just couldn't buy over the counter. That was when Michaels showed up, and he figured out Eleazar immediately."

"Shit," Carlisle hissed, pointing for us to start towards the elevators. "What happened?"

"Michaels asked him to back away, that this was his case, but when El told him who he was with, Michaels begged for more time, because they were waiting on one more huge sale in the next few days. He was guessing that King's release probably coincided with this sale," Edward explained, as the elevator doors slipped closed. "Michaels treated them as personal friends when it came to selling something to Jasper, so they were able to take the conversation into a back room."

"Jasper bought another gun?" I asked, smiling at Edward's smirk, nod, and eye roll.

"He sometimes can't help himself," Carlisle chuckled, "but it made them come across as legit to the other patrons in the building, I'm sure."

"Exactly," Edward agreed, and we all stepped out on the executive level of the building. "But the best part..." he said, stopping in front of us, "is the sale is to Corbin's man from Colombia. Marandola or Maradala or some shit."

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"Hmm, two birds with one stone," Alec muttered, frowning over at Carlisle. "Eleazar could take down Corbin for us. He not only stops whatever local gun running is going on, but an international threat, as well."

Carlisle seemed to think about it for a moment, but just nodded. "We'll talk to him when he gets back, but for now, I have to check in with Benny."

Edward didn't flinch at the mention of Corbin, or at the train of thought of Alec and his father. I could tell by his impassive face that he'd been serious about not dealing with the Colombia situation. I knew that he wanted to quit working for his father after all was said and done with King, but Carlisle would need Edward's help.

"Bella, you promised Miss Evenlyn lunch with the ladies in payroll," Rose reminded me, looking at her schedule book and grinning up at me. "If *Star* thought the boys were cute..."

"The payroll ladies are gonna eat you two up," I chuckled, looking between Edward and Alec.

Edward huffed, shaking his head and rolling his eyes at Carlisle's laugh. Alec, on the other hand, seemed unruffled by that little jab, as he smiled smugly.

"Learn to embrace it, kid," Alec chuckled, slapping Edward on the shoulder. "Just because your heart and soul belong to a beautiful woman, doesn't mean she doesn't enjoy seeing other women want you."

I giggled, looking over at Carlisle, whose amusement couldn't be contained if he tried. He just shook his head as he whispered to Rose and me.

"Esme *loves* it," he snickered, giving us a wink.

"Don't think I won't ask her," I warned him with a snort, pointing a finger at him and turning to Rose. "Let Miss Evelyn know we're on our way. I promised her, and I could use a break from numbers, reports, and just stupid, smelly, staring girls with stripper names."

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They all laughed as we left Carlisle to head down to payroll. Just as we were about to walk in through the doors of the department, I stopped Edward, but looked up at Rose.

"Go on, we'll be there in a sec," I told her.

She and Alec nodded and left us in the hallway.

"If you ask me to strip for these old women..." Edward chuckled with a smirk and his arms folded across his chest.

"You wish," I snorted, rolling my eyes. "Hell, you'd probably get a few bucks tucked on you, baby," I teased, smiling at his grin. "No, I want to talk to you about your dad, Edward. I know that you want to quit this after...well, me, but he's going to need your help with this Corbin guy. I know we were both tired of it all by the end of yesterday, but he will need you."

He frowned and leaned back against the wall. "That may require leaving you...leaving the country to finish, Bella. I swore I would never do that..."

"Do what?"

"I can't just..." He took a deep breath, frowning down at his shoes. "I can't just leave you behind. I'd be worthless on the ground, in the sky... I'd worry about what would happen to *you* if something happened to *me*. I wouldn't be able to concentrate, which would put others in danger..." He sighed, running a hand through his hair. "I l-love y-you t-too much to d-do that t-to you," he stuttered, almost looking like a pouting child, but I knew he meant every word. I also knew that had been his problem with relationships for a very long time, but this wasn't any relationship; this was me and him, and we were different.

"No one said you had to leave me behind," I stated, raising an eyebrow up at him when his eyes shot to mine and folding my arms across my chest. "But if it had been *you* that had made the mistake, he would *totally* have your back, Edward."

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He studied my face, and I held his gaze, but he didn't say anything.

"I'm just saying," I said with a shrug. "Come inside when you're ready. I'm sure Miss Evelyn would love to spill stories about me as a kid..."

With that said, I left him in the hallway.

~oOo~

EDWARD

I don't know how long I paced outside of that door, before I finally went inside. Bella was right; there wasn't anything my father wouldn't do for me - and had done for me in the past. Maybe I was looking so forward to bringing Bella home with me, that anything that interrupted that plan pissed me off.

I navigated around empty cubicles, aiming towards the sound of chatter and laughter that seemed to be coming from the back of the large room. I found them all congregated around a little break area. Apparently, Miss Evelyn was so happy Bella was coming to see her that she'd arranged for some sort of potluck lunch.

I came around the last cubicle to see two younger women, Miss Evelyn, and one older man sitting with Bella and Rose at the tables. Alec was leaning back against the wall, overflowing plate in hand. He just smiled and shrugged at me as he took a huge bite of what looked like lasagna.

"Edward," Miss Evelyn gushed, "fix yourself a plate. There's plenty!" She started to get up, but I stopped her.

"I can get it. Sit, please," I said with a smile.

I piled my plate up, feeling starved for the first time in days, and took my place next to Alec.

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"Miss Evelyn apparently grew up in an Italian neighborhood in Brooklyn, God bless her," Alec chuckled, stuffing another bite into his mouth. "Tastes like my grandmother's cookin'," he mumbled happily.

I snorted, shaking my head, and took my own bite. It was fantastic. The woman could cook, which made me miss cooking.

"I should make something tonight before we go to that fucking club," I muttered over the din of chattering ladies.

"Oh, we're not going tonight. We're going tomorrow night," Alec said, turning towards me, but shooting a look across the room to make sure we weren't heard. "Your dad just called. Apparently, Benny wants to wait until King is actually out. He thinks he'll go there for a drink and... *fun* once he's released."

I grimaced and took another bite. "Did he say if the rest were back yet?"

"Yeah, they were on their way. Should be back by the time we're done in here," he said, glancing over at the table, and then back to me. "You sure do make an entrance, kid," he chuckled, shaking his head. "Between you, Em, and Jazz, every woman in this whole building has gone into heat."

I glanced over at the table, and while Miss Evelyn was telling a story about Bella running to her when she got in trouble with Charlie, the two younger women were looking our way. We weren't the only ones that noticed, either. Bella was nodding to whatever Miss Evelyn was saying, but her eyes were locked onto the two girls, only to drag her gaze up to me, a sexy ass smirk playing on her face.

The only man at the table chuckled. "I think the last time I saw you, Miss Bella, was when you had just gotten home from Virginia. Did you ever go back?"

"No, Mr. Harold," she said, shaking her head and smiling warmly. "I ended up staying."

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"Are the rumors true? About Lauren and Jacob?" one of the girls that had been staring at me and Alec asked, her head spinning to Bella, but Miss Evelyn scoffed.

"Jessica, that's rude," she chided, setting her fork down. "Goodness, girl, what will I do with you?"

"I was just curious, because Jacob and Lauren are both gone," Jessica countered with a shrug and a pouting face.

Bella's face ran the gamut of emotions - anger, amusement, sadness - before she took a breath to answer. "Lauren was fired by my dad," she said with a shrug. "Jacob is on leave for his health."

Rose snorted and gave Bella a raised eyebrow, but said nothing.

"Who's this Jacob I keep hearing about?" Alec asked, finally throwing his empty paper plate into the garbage can.

"Bella's ex," I muttered, rolling my eyes. "He used to work for Charlie, but he had to go with Charlie into hiding with the Feds. He got shot," I told him, throwing my own plate away.

"And Lauren?" Alec asked with a grin, because he missed nothing.

I huffed a laugh, shaking my head. "His secretary...or assistant... or whatever. Bella totally busted Jacob cheating with her," I snorted, nodding when Alec's mouth fell open. "Hell, I bet this room could tell you that she not only busted them, but took a picture of it, blew it up to like movie poster size, and hung that shit over the reception area."

Alec busted out laughing, holding his sides. "That's fantastic," he snickered, looking over at Bella with what seemed to be renewed respect. "I hope you're serious about her, kid. 'Cause she reminds me of your mom. When I first met Elizabeth, I was fresh out of the service, and damn, if she wasn't spunky. Like this one," he said with a grin, pointing towards Bella.

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I smiled, nodded, and sighed. "I am serious," I told him. "I just have to keep her alive until I can start a life with her, you know?"

"Miller fucked her up, showing up like he did," he stated with a sigh. "She needs some self defense..."

I laughed, looking over at him. "She's a blackbelt," I snorted, shrugging. "He fucked with her head, too. That's the problem."

"I swear to God, death isn't good enough for this... *mostro*."

"Exactly."

"King's easy. A hit, and we're done. But this asshole, he's slippery, and I want to make sure she gets a hit or two in," he growled low. "You know, for healing and closure purposes." He grinned at my chuckle.

"A hit or two..." I mused, looking over at Bella, and back to Alec. "You know what she needs?" I asked, and he shook his head. "A fucking workout. She needs to remember what it's like to kick ass."

"There's a gym in this building, kid," he told me. "Put her up against Emmett."

"He'd love that," I snickered, pulling out my phone to call my dad.

He answered instantly. "Edward. What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Is the crew back?"

"Yeah, they just got here. Why?"

"Do you need Bella for anything the rest of the day?" I asked, looking over at Alec.

"Well, Benny was stopping by..."

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"Holy shit, he's perfect!" I gushed, and quickly explained what I wanted to do for Bella. "Benny's the right size and everything. Plus, he'll work well with her, I think."

"Hmm, you might be right. And that may give her a little confidence when it comes to Miller, so next time, she knows she's not...helpless. And it might not be a bad idea for all of her girls to get in there." He paused for a moment, answering a question from someone in the room, before focusing back on me. "Good job, son. Set it up. Get her ready. We'll meet you down there in like an hour, but I want the gym empty of all employees."

"Sir," I grunted, closing the phone. "He's for it, but he wants it clear of employees."

"I'll call Eric and Felix. They can get down there," he said, pulling his own phone out and walking away a bit.

I looked up at the table when my name was called.

"Edward, you're Carlisle's son?" Miss Evelyn asked, her face beaming a smile.

"Yes, ma'am," I chuckled with a nod.

"If you're his son, why are you in security?" Jessica scoffed, but her eyes looked me over.

I tried my damndest not to roll my eyes, but Bella answered for me. "Edward is former military, as are all the guys, and they're just helping Carlisle out for a bit."

"Military? Is the threat that bad, Bella?" Harold asked her.

"It's Royce King," the other young girl stated. "That's pretty bad. I'm sorry about Charlie. I was watching the TV report when it happened."

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"Well, kick his ass out," Alec growled into the phone, drawing everyone's attention his way. "You know that little shit is working his way on pissing everyone off. Emmett and Edward both have a bet on who gets to smack him around."

Bella and Rose glanced up at me, laughing out loud when all I did was shrug. I wouldn't confirm or deny that statement, but I did shoot Bella a wink.

"Five bucks says he's talking about Wendell," Rose snorted, nudging Bella with her elbow.

"There's no telling," Bella giggled, looking up at me again.

"I hate that man," Jessica growled, her nose wrinkling in disgust. "He thinks he can order anyone around, just because he was Charlie's lawyer."

That statement got everyone's attention; the payroll employees froze, but the rest of us turned towards her. Bella's and Rose's eyes narrowed on the girl, which caused her to squirm under their gazes.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"No, don't be," Rose said, consoling her. "What did he say to you?"

"He brought me paperwork on a guy he wanted paid. Here, I'll show you," Jessica explained, getting up from the table. She was back quickly, slapping a file down on the break table. "I told him I couldn't pay anyone unless they had gone through the right measures. They have to go through security, the human resources department, and not to mention a freakin' drug test. I can't just start paying someone, just because he says so."

"That's very true," Bella muttered, dragging the file closer to her. Rose and I leaned over her shoulder to look. "Sean Morris," she read, flipping through the paperwork. "This doesn't even say what he'd be doing."

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"Exactly," Jessica huffed, "and he got so pissed when I told him no, that he had to bring me his whole hiring packet."

Rose flipped through the file herself, finally looking over at Bella. "Has Alice gotten back to you about this guy?"

"Not yet, but I was going to go see her after we leave here," she said, shaking her head. She turned back to Miss Evelyn and Jessica. "May I keep this file?"

"Sure, Bella," Miss Evelyn said softly, glancing between Bella and Rose.

"Yes, ma'am," Jessica muttered, her brow furrowing when Alec joined the room again, "but what do I tell him when his...guy doesn't get paid? He's kind of got a temper."

Bella thought for a moment, and then nodded, a small, wicked little smile curling up her lips. "Do this... Email him, tell him his employee's record was pulled... *by me*. If he wants to discuss the hiring of someone new, he'll have to come see me. His pal, Sean, won't get paid until he does."

"He'll be pissed," Jessica whispered, her eyes wide. "He got loud and foul when I tried to explain policy to him."

"Then you call *me*," I stated, jerking a thumb towards my chest. "Or you call him," I pointed to Alec. "Any of us would be... *glad* to take care of it for you."

Alec nodded solemnly and slowly at that statement.

Harold's eyes narrowed on me, and then Alec, finally falling to Bella. "This is why they're here, isn't it?" he guessed, pointing towards me and Alec. "That's what Carlisle meant yesterday about leaks and being careful who we talk to."

Bella smiled warmly at him, placing a hand on his shoulder as she stood up. "You're too sharp for accounting, Mr. Harold. I should've made you a PI, like me," she snickered, smiling up at me when we all laughed. "I want to take this to Alice," she sighed, stepping back from the table.

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The girls hugged Mr. Harold and Miss Evelyn, promising they'd return soon. They told them to be careful, and not to worry about Wendell, that it was under control.

On the way down the hall, Alec spoke up. "The room is ready for us, and Carlisle will be there in a few minutes. You can give it to Alice there."

"What room? Bella's schedule is clear most of the day," Rose said, pulling out her notepad and stepping onto the elevator.

"It is clear, but knowing you girls, you'll like this. When we get upstairs, I want you guys to change into something more comfortable," I told them.

"What are you up to, Edward?" Bella asked, smirking up at me and folding her arms across her chest.

"You'll see."

~oOo~

"You want me to beat up Benny?" Bella gasped, looking over at me once we were in the gym and the doors were locked.

I laughed, turning her towards him. "Benny may be a skinny fuck, but he can hold his own in a fight. Right, Ben?"

"Screw you, Cullen," he laughed, waving Bella forward. "Come here, Bella. Edward thought that maybe you're a little out of practice when it comes to self defense, so Carlisle wanted all you girls to run through a course."

"Then maybe it's Edward's ass I should be... *practicing* on," Bella sneered, spinning in front of me as everyone in the room cheered her on, but I saw her smile curling up on her face. "How's that knee, baby?" she whispered, raising an eyebrow at me.

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I grinned, shaking my head. "All of my... *parts* are just fine, *sweetness*," I whispered back. "Want a demonstration?"

She laughed, her cheeks flushing a bit. "You know, that counts as a workout, too," she whispered, turning towards her girls.

"If you want to sweat, love, I can make that happen," I chuckled in her ear, feeling the effects of this little banter already hitting my groin. "But do this for me first, baby."

"Think it'll help?" she asked seriously, turning in front of me one more time as Emmett pulled out some mats for the floor.

"It can't hurt," I countered, shrugging one shoulder. "I want you to have every advantage over your enemies, Bella. If not for you, do it for my peace of mind."

"Okay," she sighed, nodding. "But just so you know, all my girls can fight," she giggled, walking away from me.

It seemed she wasn't lying that all her girls could fight. Apparently, she'd enrolled them all in some sort of kickboxing class or martial art, because they all held their own against Mickey, Emmett, and Eric, who was a blackbelt, as well. But watching Benny coach Bella was hard, because he wanted her to know the lengths at which Miller would go to get to her.

"I don't have to tell you, Bella," Benny stated, walking up behind her as Jasper and Alice stepped off the mat to give them their turn. "He'll use anything to get to you. He'll use your friends, Carlisle...even Edward. He'll tell you that he'll kill them if you don't do what he says, but he really only wants you. He wants to shut you up, erase the mistake he made by letting you get away. Don't let him use them as leverage, okay? No matter what he comes at you with...just remember, he's no bigger than me," he told her, and she turned around in front of to look him over.

"Kay," she finally agreed.

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"Good," he praised her with a smile. "I have a feeling that if he'd taken you at that hotel, we wouldn't be having this conversation. Randall Chapel was a former cop, trained...and you fucked him up pretty good. His blood was all over that hotel room," he chuckled, shaking his head at her girls' cheering.

"Hell, yeah," Mack whispered with a nod.

"If Miller had been the one in that hotel room, and you'd defended yourself like that, he would've either run away, or not gotten up again," Benny chuckled.

"He's not trained. He's just mean, crazy, and dangerous. But he's only dangerous when he has something on his enemy, or he's restraining them in some way. Make sense, Bella?"

"Yeah," she breathed, nodding fervently.

"He's going to come for you, but next time, I want you to remember something for me...for all of us," he said, walking around her. "He's only as powerful as you let him be. If he can't touch you, if he can't get a grip on you, if you *break his fucking hands*, then he's useless." He paused, stopping right behind her again, but this time, he set his hands on her shoulders. "He lives for control. When you're scared of him, when you panic, when he's holding you down, he's in control. When you're kicking the fucking shit out of him, *you're* in control. When you're yelling for help, when you're fighting him every second... *you are in control*. And he...loses."

Bella let out a shaky breath, but she nodded, her eyes straight forward. I started towards her, but a hand shot out to stop me.

"Don't," my dad whispered. "She needs this."

I glared at him for a split second, hating anything that made my girl uncomfortable, but instead of going to her, I leaned back against the wall, waiting to see what Benny did next.

"He knows you're protected now, so he'll try and sneak up on you. He won't use a gun; he'll most likely come at you with a syringe. He'll want you quiet,

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malleable, docile, and you need to expect it, darlin'."

Benny looked up at me and my dad one more time, and we nodded. We knew he was going to really work with her, but he didn't want to hurt her in any way, either. He swore he'd leave it up to us, and he held true to his word.

Nodding, he turned back to her. "If I came at you, Bella..." he started, slowly placing a hand at her shoulder, while the other started to wrap around her neck, but she never let him finish that sentence.

With just a few blurred movements, my girl's elbow shot back, her leg twisted with his, and her free hand gripped his arm. She pivoted her hip, and Benny was suddenly flat on his back, grinning up at her, and her girls were losing their minds, Mickey included.

"Aw, hell yes!" Emmett crowed, pumping his fist in the air. "Me next, me next!"

"Fine, Emmett's next, but..." He raised an eyebrow at her. "Bella, where's your gun?"

"Shit," she hissed, shaking her head and pulling from the waistband of her jeans. "It's been a long time since I was in Virginia," she giggled, shrugging.

He grinned and waved Emmett over. "Straight on attack, Em, and take her gun from her," Benny instructed, stepping back a bit.

"Oh shit," Rose snorted, rolling her eyes. "Bella, don't break him, okay?"

Bella just chuckled, stowing her gun back into her waistband, just as Emmett stalked towards her. She crouched down, making herself seem smaller than she was, and I could see what she was doing. She was taking away the majority of Emmett's target. She deflected every swing he took on her, and he allowed her one, two, three rabbit punches to his torso, before she jabbed two fingers into his throat. But it was when she spun away from him that he made his move, taking her gun right from her waistband.

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The click of the hammer echoed through the room, but Bella froze, her eyes wide.

"Fuck," I breathed, taking in the look of pure fear all over her face and pushing away from the wall.

Benny and my father went to stop me, but I held up my hand. I had a feeling I knew what was holding her back.

"Em, freeze," I ordered, walking to them and taking the gun from his hand and his place behind her. "It's me, baby," I whispered to her, and she nodded. "Chapel got you just like this, Bella. What would you do different?" I asked, lightly grazing the muzzle of the gun next to her right temple so that she would know where it was.

She panted from exertion, but didn't say anything, and for a moment, I thought she was too scared.

"I have plenty of vulnerable spots, Bella. Just because there's a gun here..." I said, showing the gun to her in her peripheral vision, "doesn't mean you can't still take me by surprise. I'm still open here," I instructed, taking her left hand and bending it at the elbow. "You can swing this arm right to my face, my gut, my balls."

I frowned and shook my head at the chuckles around the room, because she didn't need to think of this as me. She needed to focus on any and all escape possibilities.

"This left leg," I continued, nudging the back of her knee with my own. "Bring it up slowly at the knee." She did as I instructed. "If you do that with force, I'd be singing in a boys' choir. Got me?"

"That's standing," she countered.

"How did he get you?" I asked, and noticed that the whole room had gone silent.

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"I was on my knees. My gun had fallen," she panted, her fingers clenching at her sides. "When I went for it, I wasn't quick enough."

"Show me."

She knelt down on one knee, reaching up to position my hand to where Chapel had put the gun to her head.

"There," she whispered, barely looking back over her shoulder.

I took my own gun out of its holster, tossing it to the mat in front her. "Disarm me, Bella. You *can* take me down, because I'm even more vulnerable with you there. Take back your fucking gun..."

"Edward..."

"Do it!" I growled, knowing that she needed to be pissed off to get this done. "Now!"

I watched as her hands balled into tiny fists and her breathing picked up. What I didn't expect was her rolling onto her back and kicking me in the chest, which knocked me flat on my back. The next thing I knew, she was planted on top of me, both my gun and hers aimed at my face.

"That's what I'm fucking talkin' about!" Emmett cheered behind us.

"Nice, Bells," Jasper praised.

I barely heard him above the chanting and singing from her girls, but our eyes were locked.

"Don't ever do that again, Edward," Bella panted, dropping the guns like they'd burned her. "Ever. Are you okay?"

"Okay?" I huffed, rolling my eyes and rubbing my chest. "Baby, that was fucking perfect," I whispered, shaking my head and grinning up at her. "Stay

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fucking angry, love," I reiterated to her, raising an eyebrow.

I sat up, reaching for her face, but she gripped my wrists to stop me. She was still breathing heavily, her eyes squeezing closed.

"You're focused and sharp when you're angry, Bella," I told her. "Please remember that."

She nodded, and then scrambled off of my lap. I stood up, picking up both guns and handing hers back to her. She popped the chamber, closed it back, and secured the safety, stowing it back in her waistband, only to look up at Benny for whatever he wanted next.

"That was perfect, Bella," Benny approved with a nod and a hand to her shoulder. "Eddie's right...you're more focused, less scared, when you're pissed. Use it, darlin'." He paused, looked around the room. "Okay. Who's next?"

~oOo~

BELLA

I swallowed thickly as Benny talked to Edward and the rest of the men, going over what had gone wrong when they'd chased Miller. Everyone was in the room, except for Eric and Felix, who'd left to take a security round for Frank before the end of the business day.

Benny was adorable in his own way. He was thin, smart, with a quick smile and a positive nature. He was stronger than he looked, and quite capable of taking down an enemy, whether by hand or by gun. He loved to poke fun at the boys, but you could tell there was a mutual respect and love between them. With light brown hair and brown eyes, he came across looking younger than he probably really was, but his sure footed steps and confident knowledge gave him away. He'd earned his position in the FBI with hard work and a sharp mind.

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When they started talking about what to do the next time Miller showed - or anyone for that matter - practicing moves, holds and fighting each other, I had to look away. My mind, my emotions, and my hormones were still reeling from when Edward had taken over from Emmett. His voice, his commanding tone had just about sent me over the edge. He'd pissed me off, and at the same time, turned me on to the point of shaking. Had he touched me after I'd dropped both guns, I'd have kissed him stupid right there in front of everyone, because adrenaline had been coursing through my veins, and he'd looked amazing underneath me. But I'd scared myself with not one, but *two* fucking guns pointed at him. I'd lost sight of *him*, and had only seen an enemy that needed to be taken down.

There was a side of Edward I just couldn't get enough of. Maybe it went back to the time he'd stopped me from shooting Jacob, *ordering* me to lower my weapon. He hadn't flinched, but had been cool, calm, and in control. Maybe it was because I was already worn out from Twi Tech. Being in charge of something I had never wanted, nor had the desire to run - or even the talent to do - was making me tired, weak, *needy*. Whatever the reason, it was all I could do not to run to him, push him down onto the weight bench, and fuck him until I couldn't see straight.

"You okay?" Alice asked, leaning against the wall next to me.

We both slid down to the mat as I nodded.

"I found out about Wendell... Wanna know?" she continued.

"Yeah, sure, Pixie," I sighed, my eyes unable to stay away from a shirtless, sweating, fighting Edward.

He was practicing with Jasper, but I watched as he flinched a few times when he would land certain ways on his old injured knee. He wouldn't admit it, but it had been bugging him since the rooftop with Miller. I didn't know if he'd actually hurt himself, or just over-exerted it, but it was bothering him. If he didn't say something soon, I was going to make Emmett sit on him so Esme could take a look at it.

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"Wendell - as you know - worked with Charlie for ten years," she started, staring in the same direction as I was.

Rose, Mickey, and Makenna joined us along the wall, sliding down on either side of us.

"Guess where he used to work?" she snorted, looking over at me.

"No idea, Alice," I said with a shrug. "Where?"

"Spencer, Townsend, and Wyatt." She chuckled when my mouth dropped open. "He still visits there. In fact, a certain redhead calls him occasionally."

"Aw, damn, and Charlie never knew?" Rose asked, her mouth hanging open.

"Well, I don't know if he knew or not," Alice replied with a shrug, looking up when everyone gathered around us. "What I do know is...he's been receiving additional money in his overseas account for fucking years. He's most likely the one that tipped King off to Charlie's deal with the Feds, because a phone call was made from his phone that very day to a throwaway. He's also stupid enough to use TT email, like I can't pull it from the server going back *years*," she giggled, rolling her eyes.

"Good job, Pixie," I said, nodding. "Now I'm justified when I throw him out the window..."

Edward chuckled, shaking his head as he knelt across from me, his elbows resting on his knees, but it was Eleazar that spoke up.

"Not yet, Bells," he snorted. "If we can get him to call Victoria, we may just be able to get her away for Eric. *Then* you can toss his ass off the roof."

I grinned up at him, and he shot me a wink. "Sure, El. Fine. And just when are we doing this *Club 13* bullshit?"

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Benny sniffed, nodded, and looked around at all of us. "We've wanted to trap Young with the prostitution ring and the possession of drugs with intent to sell for years. It's time, but we'll have to wire a few of you...especially the girls. Tomorrow night would work, because maybe we can catch King in there, making it a bonus."

"Fine," I said, holding up my hand when Edward started to argue. "Edward, it's what we do. Only this time, we'll be wired. *And...*we'll have some phenomenal backup..." I raised an eyebrow at him, gesturing at the group of people in the room, and he nodded, swallowing thickly, but conceded the decision to me.

The elevator ride back up to the executive offices was a din of conversations, laughter, and animated descriptions of how this person took that person down. They'd needed this little stress release, and I had a feeling I knew who to thank for it. I leaned back into Edward as we stood at the back of the car behind everyone.

Warm breath met my ear. "You okay, baby?" he asked, wrapping his arms around my waist, and all I could do was nod and lean myself back into him a little more, my ass pressing against his groin, which reacted instantly to the contact.

A deep, sensual moan vibrated at my back, and fingers spread across my hip, pulling me back even closer. His other hand slipped between us from behind, caressing my center with knowing fingers over the material of my jeans, but it was his plea that just about caused my knees to buckle.

"P-please, Bella," he begged in barely a whisper, drawing out the "please," once it sputtered sexily from his mouth.

And I swear to God, that was the end of my control.

I nodded frantically, reaching back to grab his ass just as the elevator came to a stop and the doors opened to see Angela standing there. She was waiting patiently, her arms full as ever, and her eyes went wide when we all piled out at once. Edward's touch left me immediately, leaving me aching for it.

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However, he didn't wait to hear his father's instructions to her for the end of the day, or his introduction of Benny, and he barely waited until the door of the office had slammed shut behind a handful of us that were all heading into the apartment, before he unlocked the bookcase and punched in the code.

"Shoes off, all of you!" Esme growled, pointing to our feet. "I'm mopping!"

Snorts, grumbles, and chuckles erupted from six people as they kicked out of six pairs of sneakers, boots, and sandals, only to thump away to different parts of the apartment. I heard TVs turn on and showers start, just like the end of any other day. I even heard the rumble of the bookcase open again and the sound of Alec and Eleazar talking to Esme about dinner.

But it all faded into the background when the door closed to my room. I leaned back against the door, making sure the lock was turned, but my eyes never left the strong back in front of me. Edward's hands clenched and unclenched, before he finally turned around to face me, but I was already walking to him.

His hands grasped at my shirt first, pulling me roughly to him, buttons coming undone unexpectedly. My own hands shot up his t-shirt as our mouths met, wet, warm, and desperate. Still gripping the side of my shirt, Edward's other hand shot to my neck, his thumb caressing my face as he turned my head, his tongue claiming my mouth.

Weaving my fingers into his hair, I moaned when he swiftly released my shirt, only to expertly flick open the button of my jeans.

"Off, baby," he growled against my mouth, only to claim it again as we struggled with his t-shirt and my jeans, while trying so damn hard not to stop kissing.

A whimper of frustration left me as I finally pulled back, seizing the bottom of his shirt and pulling it over his head. I dropped it to the floor, just as his hands slipped inside the top of my jeans, pushing them down so that I could kick out of them.

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Edward grabbed my shirt again - this time, rough enough to send buttons flying through the room.

"Sorry," he huffed against my mouth, "but fuck, baby..."

"I know..." I moaned, reveling in the feel of his bare torso and touching all I could, from abs to pecs, to his strong shoulders, back down to the light dusting of hair just above his waistband.

Breaking away from his mouth, I pressed my lips and tongue in an open mouth kiss to his tattoo, at the same time my hand finally pressed against the front of his black jeans. He was hard, ready, and almost to the top of his waistband. Tugging open the button of his jeans and barely pulling them and his underwear down enough to release him heavy and warm into my hand, I finally knelt at the altar I'd been dying to worship.

"Shit, Bella..." he breathed, but didn't stop me. In fact, his hands wove into my hair as our eyes met, deep green to dark brown and both glazed over with need and want.

I hadn't done this much for him, not because I didn't want to, but because we always ended up in other positions. There was something to be said for the beauty that I could see from that angle, the pure sexiness that seemed to permeate every inch of Edward as I slipped my mouth down over him. Every muscle would tense, every cord in his neck would tighten, and every finger in my hair would grip that much harder as I'd meet his gaze. It was gorgeous and sexy and all things that just made me want him that much more.

I hummed around him, just to hear him hiss sharply through this teeth. I swirled my tongue over and around his tip, savoring the flavor that had already leaked just a bit, and I scratched my nails lightly down his stomach at the same time that I grabbed him by the ass to pull him in deeper.

I knew when he was close, because his thumbs caressed just behind my ears and his hips jerked forward just a bit as I wrapped a hand around his base, which only caused me to speed up. I wanted to watch him fall apart, to come

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for me, because for the last few days, I'd watched women of all ages eye fuck him as he ignored it, and I wanted that power, that control. To me, he was more than just a pretty face; he was strong and sweet, loyal and loving - all carefully hidden behind a stern, controlled mask - and for whatever his reasons, he wanted me, loved me.

"Damn, love...I'm gonna fucking come..." he warned, his fingers sinking farther into my hair and fisting in a deliciously painful way as he came hard down my throat. "So good... *fuck!*"

I found myself back on my feet, and Edward dove for my mouth as I walked him backwards towards the bed. We fell in a heap - still partially clothed - with me on top of him as we scooted to the center together.

I braced my hands on either side of his head, my legs straddling his stomach. "Fuck, Edward...I want you..." I breathed, squeezing my eyes closed as his hands reached for the cups of my bra, but I sat up, gripping his wrists like I had in the gym.

"Bella, let me fucking touch you," he growled, but a crooked, carnal smile was spreading slowly over his face as my hair fell around us like a curtain. "I feel how wet you are, *sweetness*," he crooned, licking his lips as his hips raised up underneath me.

"I need you," I whispered, my brow furrowing as I slammed his hands down to the bed, pinning them on either side of his head. And I meant those words so far beyond what we were currently doing, that tears stung my eyes, because somewhere between Miller's basement and that moment, he'd become another limb, another organ, another heartbeat that thumped inside my chest, and he made me strong and weak at the same time.

He made me...better - in every single definition of the word.

He overpowered me by sitting up, and this time, I let him cup my face as he pressed his forehead to mine. "I love you," he whispered, nipping my top lip, bottom lip, only to lightly graze his tongue in the same pattern. "And fuck...I

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need you, too," he grunted against my neck, scraping his teeth along the skin. "Christ, you're everything I never knew I could have..."

I wanted to roll my eyes at that statement, because Edward was the type of man that could've had anyone he wanted, but the mere idea that it was me that he wanted, just sent me into a frenzy, trying to get closer, shed more clothes, and connect to him as quickly as possible.

I shrugged out of my shirt, and he ripped it away, tossing it somewhere in the room. My bra and underwear never stood a chance.

"Hmm, sit up on your knees, baby," he ordered huskily, and I did, watching with panting breaths and nips to his jaw as he struggled out of his jeans and underwear, finally kicking them off the side of the bed. "Now, get that sweet ass back here," he huffed, smiling a bit when I giggled softly and wrapped myself around him completely.

Skin on skin had to be the best, most amazing feeling in the world, because we both moaned and touched anything we could get our hands on as our mouths met again. My hips rolled instinctively over him, coating him with a wetness I couldn't help, because I wanted him so badly that it was almost painful. His tip brushed just right against my clit, and my breath caught in my throat, sucking the air from his mouth.

"So many ways to make you come, love," he purred in my ear as his hand guided my hips. Another hand slipped up my back and into my hair at the base of my skull so he could pull me back to expose my neck. "But how do you want it?" he asked, and I wasn't sure I was capable of speech as he bent me back further, still guiding my hips over him.

My eyes rolled back into my head when his tongue circled around my nipple with a slowness that was just this side of pure, unadulterated torture, and I rolled my hips again over his renewed arousal, just to feel him slip through my folds that were so slick, there was barely any friction.

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"How, Bella?" he asked again, switching to the other nipple. "Look at me," he growled, nipping his teeth just enough that I cried out his name.

My eyes shot to his, and I whimpered as I watched his tongue slowly flatten against my peak.

"I want to make you come so fucking hard, baby," he said, just before he sucked hard on my nipple, coming off of it with a soft pop.

"Yes, Edward... *please*," I begged, unable to take it anymore. I found myself on my back, with him looming over me, perfectly placed between my legs. "I don't care... *how!*" I grunted through gritted teeth.

Taking a page out of my own book, he wrapped his fingers around my wrists and planted them on either side of my head.

"Let's see how you like it when you can't fucking touch," he chuckled darkly, burying his face in my neck as he sheathed himself so deep within me that we both gasped at the feeling.

My head pressed back into the bed as he started a slow, sensual rhythm, his fingers linking with mine above my head. My hips met his thrust for thrust, but it was the swivel of his hips that had him touching a spot deep inside of me that made me squeeze his fingers and my whole body arch up to him.

Releasing my hands, his fingers tickled down my arms to my breasts, his thumbs brushing over my nipples, before he finally sat back on his knees, gripping my hips. My legs locked around him, my heels digging into his ass, as my shoulders were all that were touching the bed. Raising up on one arm at the same time he pounded into me created a whole new feeling, a deeper, fuller feeling that I knew I would feel well into tomorrow.

My head fell back as I realized that we were so perfectly matched sexually, it only got better and more adventurous the more we were together like that. We never held back, there were never any nerves or shyness, and I wondered - if only for a split second - if that was because we'd worked our way through some

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damn tough shit. That we'd taken our time and savored every fucking touch, every kiss, every orgasm.

Using my legs, I lifted myself off of the mattress, with my arm braced firmly. My free hand grasped his shoulder, as he pulled me to him over and over.

"Fuck, look at you," he growled, with a sexy half smile that just about screamed for me to come. One hand left my hip to cover my breast, as we managed to move as a knot of skin and limbs and sweat. "Drop back down, baby," he ordered, his hand flat on my stomach. "I want to see myself fucking you."

My shoulders met the mattress one more time, as his gaze fell to where we were connected, his hand still flat on my belly, but his thumb met my clit with a pressure that made me gasp. His eyes darkened as he slowed his rhythm down, just watch his cock push in and out of me, starting shallow, only to increase to deeper, harder thrusts.

"Damn it," I breathed, still using my heels in his ass for leverage and feeling every flex of his thighs, but it only took a few swirls of his thumb across my clit, before I was clenching hard around him.

"Not yet, Bella," he growled, sitting up on his knees. The sound of slapping skin softly echoed through the room. "Hold it back, love..."

I finally saw from that angle the perfectness of our connection. Every time he'd pull out, his cock would glisten with my wetness. Feeling it was one thing; *seeing* it was a completely different erotic experience.

"God, Edward... *I can't!*"

He fell over me, bracing his hands on either side of my head, his lips brushing against mine. "Try," he whispered silkily, but breathlessly, as one of his hands slid down to my ass to lift my hip up off the bed. "It's worth it, I fucking promise..."

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I had to bite my lip, dig my fingers into the muscles of his back and bicep, and practically hold my breath in order to not let my climax pull me under. I wanted to drown in the euphoria that I knew only he could give me, but he held my gaze with dark eyes, the green practically gone. When I clenched hard around him, I reveled in his mouth falling open and his eyes rolling back.

"Oh shit, baby...now!" he growled, his teeth latching on to where my neck met my shoulder.

I wasn't even sure I made a sound when I finally let go, but my limbs pulled him in as they locked in my release. My body arched and shook as it throbbed at the same time he spilled into me, a string of curses leaving his beautiful mouth.

Edward lowered my hip, his elbows bracing on either side of my head, as his kisses, now softer, brushed up my neck, across my cheek, finally caressing my mouth with gentle sweeps of lips and tongue.

I relished his weight on me, the feel of our legs tangling, and the heavy thumps of our heartbeats between us, as he kissed me down from my spasms that hadn't stopped.

"I should let you kick my ass more often, if this is how you react," he chuckled softly in my ear, before his head fell to my shoulder.

I grinned, unable to keep my fingers out of his hair or inhaling deeply the scent of him where his neck met his shoulder. "'Kay," I sighed, a shiver of post-coital bliss wracking my frame, which only caused Edward to hold me tighter, closer, and roll us to our sides. Even through the movement, we stayed connected in the most intimate of ways.

Bright green eyes met my gaze, and I couldn't help but kiss his lips softly, as his hands ran flat over my side, ass, and thigh, only to ghost right back up. I wanted to thank him for reminding me I wasn't helpless, for knowing exactly what I needed, but no words were good enough, except for, "I love you, Edward."

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Lips pressed to my shoulder, as I buried my face in his neck, just relaxing in his arms. I knew we'd be called for dinner soon, because I could smell something wafting through the apartment and I could hear conversations picking up down the hallway.

"When this is over," Edward started, his voice soft and comforting as he pressed another kiss to my bare shoulder, "I want to show you off...and take you to those places that hang in your tree house."

I giggled, pulling back to look at him. His face was shy, but so fucking sweet, I could have just kissed him everywhere. "What?" I asked, just to make sure I'd heard him correctly.

"Y-you've always w-wanted to s-see shit...but n-never c-could. *I* want to do that," he said, starting in that sweet stutter and ending in true Edward commanding form.

"O-okay," I said, dragging out the word, because this conversation seemed to come from nowhere.

"We'll most likely have to hide a bit when this is done, so it wouldn't kill us to enjoy it," he snickered, giving me my favorite crooked grin, which only caused me to laugh. "And then after that...God, I can't wait to fucking take you home with me."

"Me, either," I sighed, feeling my heart clench at the word "home."

"Good," he chuckled again, pressing a kiss to my nose, "because my kitchen needs to be broken in properly...like with syrup..."

He grinned when I completely lost it, my head falling back as I laughed. Some things were never forgotten between us. He chuckled against my throat as he left a loud, open mouth kiss to my skin, at the same time Esme's voice called from the other side of the apartment for dinner.

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We groaned, but separated anyway, getting up and redressed. I had to opt for another shirt. Just before we left the bedroom, Edward's hand stopped me, turning me to look at him.

"You're right about my dad, Bella," he said softly, his brow furrowing in worry as he looked to the floor, and then back up to my eyes. "But I won't leave you behind to worry. I just can't. I saw what my mom went through with my dad being overseas all the time, baby. I can't do that to you...it would kill me. Hell, I'd rather you be with me anyway. At least I'd know you'd have my back..."

I nodded, taking a deep breath and kissing his lips quickly. "I'll fight with you, until the end, Edward. You and Carlisle have fought for me, so I have no problem doing the same for you. No matter what we have to do, okay?" I asked, looking into his eyes so he knew I was serious. "You guys are my family now...all of you."

He hesitated for a moment, but finally nodded solemnly, opening the door to loud laughter and conversation coming from the kitchen, causing both of us to chuckle. I couldn't wait for the time when it was just the two of us, but until then, living with a large "family" wasn't so bad.

A/N... Um, yeah...adrenaline can do funny things to people... LMAO Just sayin'.

Okay, so a little more info on Wendell. Now we know who leaked to King when Charlie was wired for the Feds. He also might be the key to getting Victoria out.

Let's see...oh, yeah, Benny finally shows up in person. I love his character, and he was good with Bella. But Edward was... *better*. He knew exactly what she needed...on many, many levels.

Now, Edward helping his dad...Bella was right. If the roles had been reversed, Carlisle wouldn't have thought twice, but Edward was too focused on ending this whole thing. He wants his future with Bella and he wants it...yesterday. :)

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Coming up in the next chapter... The girls hit the club. One of you asked...and you know who you are...if this would be an open mic night or at least would Edward get a dance in... God, I love ya! But this isn't Angelward... or the answer would be yes! :) As far as Mercward goes, we'll see. That's all I'm sayin'.

I want to thank JenRar for beta'ing this massive chapter...For Goober_Lou who pre-read it...telling me that the fight scene with Edward and Bella was damned hot. And for MedusaInNY who helps so much with my blog... go look: [drotuno\(dot\)blogspot\(dot\)com](http://drotuno(dot)blogspot(dot)com)

Now, you can't help but notice that things are starting to come to a boiling point. The club, the memorial for Charlie, even the shooting range, not to mention King's release from jail. So...let me hear what you have to say. I love hearing "I don't trust this person" or "This character is totally ratting them out..." So keep the theories coming. The next chapter looks like it will be ready by Sunday, so until then, Later...

Chapter 26

A/N...I have to agree with most of you... Edward in the training room was just damn hot. But Bella kicking his ass was hotter! XD

I want to welcome some more new readers... to the story and to Twitter.

This chapter has a huge question finally answered. Not to mention a few little ones. And they get to the club. I'm not gonna keep you here...just get on with it, and I will see you at the bottom.

CHAPTER 26

EDWARD

"Did you guys ever figure out what this goes to?" Benny asked, holding up the key that Charlie had left Bella.

"No, we haven't had exactly had a lot of spare time," Bella muttered, looking out the window at the damn early morning.

Benny had shown up way too early for my taste, wanting to talk about that night, and he had gone over the plan for *Club 13*, but he'd gotten curious when someone mentioned King, Charlie, and the letter. Bella had silently handed everything over him and walked away to the window.

I frowned, thinking something was wrong.

"Don't worry," Rose whispered, coming to stand next to me. "She gets quiet when she's about to go 'undercover,'" she said, using her fingers for the air quotes. "She's always been that way. Something about going over every step in her head, not wanting anyone to get hurt. Since Mack, Alice, and I are in on it, it only makes her that much more focused. In a few minutes, she'll tell Mack what she needs from the store."

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I took a breath and nodded, understanding that completely. And in all reality, this would be the first time I would see her work. Really work. There was a part of me that was worried how I'd feel when she was flirting with other men, hearing it over the headset, but knowing she didn't mean it. I didn't know how I would react if something went wrong, or if some motherfucker touched her inappropriately.

The only reasons Bella was even going were because the girls felt comfortable with her experience in this sort of thing, and she really hoped that King would show and it would be the end of it all. Personally, I think she just trusted herself more with the task than she was willing to admit, but we were a lot alike that way.

The whole group of girls, Mickey included, were to go into the club together, posing as a "girls night out." My dad, Felix, Alec, and I were going to break in from the roof to be inside the building, in case something went wrong. Jasper and Eleazar were going to be in the buildings to the north and east of the club, with sniper rifles set up; both were hoping for a shot at King. Benny would be taking Alice's place as our information feed over the radio. He would be in a parked van a little farther down the street.

Eric and Emmett were actually going inside the club as patrons, but they were there to make sure no one roughed up the girls. If someone got a little touchy, they were going to pretend to "pick up" the girl being harassed.

Bella and the girls were to flirt their way into catching Dale Young's attention. The rumor was he propositioned girls into thinking he was going to take their picture, or use them in an advertisement for the club, but once the pics were snapped, they had to "work off" the price of agent fees that he'd suddenly spring on them.

The fees never got paid. He'd basically keep girls in sexual fucking servitude in order to make money. Apparently, that worked on some girls, but I couldn't imagine this guy trying that shit for real on the women who were about to walk into his club tonight. If this wasn't a sting, wasn't a setup, those girls would tear his ass up.

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I shook my head at that last thought, looking around at each of the girls. Rose, Mickey, and Bella turned heads every time they stepped into a room, because Rose was a tall, classically stunning blonde, Mickey was Italian, with big, hazel, almond-shaped eyes and curly, dark hair, and Bella... well, Bella exuded a sexiness with a touch of little girl thrown in, just to drive men crazy, and her big brown eyes could make a man's heart stop - or maybe that was just me. Alice and Makenna both had that really cute, spunky-chick thing going for them, with huge, innocent eyes and big smiles, and Makenna being so young just made her a big draw. I could understand why Bella was so worried. Their safety rested on all our shoulders, but there was no other way to do it.

"Relax, Edward," Rose whispered as Alice and Mickey started to help Benny look for the elusive locked cabinet - everywhere. "We can do this. We've done it before...and this time, we have huge backup." She nudged me with her elbow.

"I know," I sighed, running a hand through my hair.

"You'll see," she chuckled, pulling me back away from the entertainment center when the girls started to rummage through that, too.

"Give me the key," Bella ordered suddenly, looking frustrated as she held out her hand.

We all turned to face her as Benny handed over the key. Mickey, Alice, and Mack all froze in various spots in the living room, but Bella walked silently into a room off to the side. It was the master bedroom.

I followed her as she walked directly into the enormous walk-in closet.

"I'm such a fucking idiot," she hissed to herself. "I completely forgot that Charlie had someone rebuild this closet. I mean, we talked about construction here, but still..."

I leaned in the closet's doorway, watching her shove a large amount of Charlie's business suits away from the corner of a built in set of drawers. Just to the

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back, she revealed a cabinet door with a lock on it.

"Holy shit," she breathed, looking up at me. "Do I even want to know what he fucking put in here?" she asked, her brow furrowing.

"He wanted you to know, love," I whispered, tilting my head at her.

"You do it," she huffed, stepping out of the way and offering me the key.

"You sure?"

"Yeah," she whispered, looking like the lost child I'd seen when she first stepped foot in her father's office after his death.

I didn't say anything, but I did kiss her forehead as I took the key from her. I so wanted this shit over for her. I couldn't wait until it was just the two of us - no more running, no more super-villains, as she called them, and no more fighting.

What I noticed immediately as I got closer was that the corner of that closet hummed, which made me stop dead in my tracks.

"Mickey!" I called over my shoulder. "Get in here."

"Yeah, Ed...what's up?" she asked, popping into the closet.

"Why would this...hum?" I growled, pointing to the locked door.

Mickey walked quietly around the closet - into the corner, around to the other side, and bending low along the baseboards.

Standing up, she said, "It's refrigerated."

"Huh?" Bella and I both gasped at the same time.

"Yeah, like a locked mini-fridge," she chuckled.

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"O-okay," I snorted, dragging out the word and stepping forward. "Well, let's see what he's got."

I pushed the key into the lock and turned it, looking to Bella and Mickey, both of whom were nodding encouragingly. I pulled it open, revealing two levels. The top one, indeed, was refrigerated. The other wasn't, and that was the one I reached for first.

I pulled out a manila envelope - the only thing in there. On the top shelf were two zip-seal bags. In one, there were two shot glasses, and the second was...

"A fucking condom?" Bella growled, stepping forward.

"Oh, shit," I hissed, stopping her from reaching in. "Don't touch it! It's evidence," I warned her, remembering the photos from Renee's death. I turned to Mickey. "Go get Benny. Now!"

Mickey darted out of the closet, but wasn't gone long, bringing Benny with her. He said nothing as he reached into his pocket, pulling out latex gloves and tugging them on. He reached in and gently picked up the bag with the two shot glasses, and then the bag containing the used condom.

"Well, I'll be damned," he snorted, shaking his head. "You know, I've been studying the file on Renee Swan, and this never turned up. It was in the fucking pictures, but we all assumed it was lost over time during storage."

"I guarantee Charlie hid it," my dad said from the doorway. "He was well aware of the importance of DNA, even way back then. In fact, we can all thank him for getting it to the public by the early nineties."

"Yeah, Twi Tech invented the machines that we use down at the labs," Benny murmured, pulling out his phone. He dialed a number and put the phone to his ear. "Hey, it's me," he said, bracing the phone between his ear and his shoulder so that he could look at the two bags in his hands. "Meet me downstairs at Twi Tower. I've got a rush to the lab." He paused for a moment, closing his eyes in frustration. "Yes, we're still on for tonight, but this is first priority. Tell

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Goodman to rush this shit..." He paused again, and then said, "Ten minutes, and I'm not kidding. I don't care that you're eating breakfast, Kirk. Fuck, I had my breakfast fucking two hours ago..."

I chuckled, shaking my head, because he talked to his underlings the same damn way that I talked to Jasper and Emmett sometimes.

"What else did Charlie leave?" my dad asked, pointing to the manila envelope in my hand.

I turned it over, saw Bella's name on the front of it, and handed it over to her. She took it, biting her bottom lip, her brow wrinkling.

"Let's bring it out to the kitchen," Benny suggested gently. "'Cause I'm going to send that handkerchief and that lighter that he left you off with this shit, too. Okay, Bella?"

She took a deep breath and nodded, and we all made our way to the kitchen. I pulled out a stool for her, swinging her up onto it, but didn't step away from her. Knowing how she'd reacted the last time Charlie had left her something, I wasn't about to leave her side. There was no telling what was in that envelope.

She slipped a finger under the flap and ripped it open, dumping its contents onto the counter. There was a letter and what looked like a photo album. She opened the letter first, and I read it with her over her shoulder.

Munchkin,

If you've gotten this far, then you know everything, baby, and I'm so sorry. I'm sorry that I had to hide this from you, but it kept you safe for as long as possible. I would rather have you as happy as you were, than for you to remember the truth of your mother's death.

The two bags that you found along with this will be enough to put King away for a long time, or you can use it as leverage. It's your choice, Bella. I know that you'll make the best decision, no matter what.

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This album is for you. It's your history, as well as mine and your mother's. It's the history of TT, our friends, and family. I wanted you to have it, to keep it, so that you'll also have proof of just how proud your mother and I were of you. I'm not sure there's a major step you took that your mom didn't take a picture of, and I damn well tried to follow in her footsteps, munchkin. I did my best, Isabella, but it was no secret that your mother was better at it than I was.

My only regret is not being able to walk you down the aisle at your wedding, or hold my first grandchild, but I hope that when those things happen, you give them every bit of love that your heart holds, Bella. Please don't make the same mistakes I did, because I wish someone had told me some of the things I'm about to tell you. Don't hold back, don't work too hard, and don't put your work before your love or family. Ever. Tell them every day that you love them, that they are the best things that ever happened to you. No client, meeting, or job is worth hurting the ones you love. Money can't fix everything, no matter how much you make. Good friends are better than family sometimes, Bella, and that's the God's honest truth, because without Carlisle and Billy, I would have turned out to be a true bastard, so you keep those girls of yours close.

Speaking of Carlisle, I hope that you listen to him, that he's keeping you safe, and even though you're all grown up, he is your godfather and has always cared about you. I know you'll most likely hand TT over to him, and if you don't want it, then you should, but I still left it up to you. He's longed for a reason to settle down in a normal career, something he can retire from. And he so deserves it, because he's been protecting us all his whole life - especially me. From the first bully that kicked my ass the first day of seventh grade, to protecting you and me now. He's been there, and he's never complained. Not once. Hell, I was going to hand it all over to him the very second I finished testifying against King. So if you grant me one wish, Bella...take care of my best friend.

I'll always love you, munchkin.

Dad

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Bella set down the letter, and both of us looked up at my dad, asking him two questions at the same time.

"You stopped a bully from beating up my dad?"

"You want a normal job?"

My father snorted, looking up at the two of us with raised eyebrows. He smiled, pointing to Bella. "Hell, yes. He was a nerd, even at twelve, carrying books and wearing glasses, but he got me through a helluva math test..."

Bella giggled, shaking her head.

My dad turned to me, and only countered with one question. "Don't you?" He raised an eyebrow at me, waiting patiently until I nodded silently. "Now, what did he say?" he chuckled.

Bella slid the letter over to him, a warm smile playing on her face as she gazed up at him, but she pulled the photo album to her chest and slipped down off the stool. Silently, she placed her hand into mine, linking our fingers together.

"Okay, well, I'm going to run this stuff downstairs, so we can get it off to the lab," Benny said with a nod. "I guess we'll see everyone tonight."

We all waved goodbye, watching him leave through the bookcase. Bella tugged me along, stopping by my dad, placing a kiss to his cheek on her way by.

"I'm not working today, Carlisle," she told him, smirking up at his chuckle. "I guess we're taking the night shift at this club tonight."

"Yes, ma'am," he snorted, placing his hand on the top of her head and kissing her forehead. "Whatever you say, Bells."

I smiled at the two of them, because I loved that they were close, that the two most important people in my life adored each other just as fiercely as I cared

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for them.

On our way out of the room, Bella stopped and turned to Mack and Rose. "We need clothes for tonight," she started, but it was Rose's raised eyebrow at me that made me fight my smile, because she'd been right about a shopping list. "I want to look good, but I don't want to look like a fucking hooker, Mack," she growled, pointing at her like that was something that had happened at least once. "Take Rose with you, so you have some sort of fashion leash, okay?" she snorted.

"Kay, Bellsy," Makenna giggled. "Am I to assume you need everything?"

"Yes," Bella sighed, rolling her eyes. "We'll need purses big enough for weapons, cells, and...hell, fucking pepper spray," she grunted in disgust, rolling her eyes again at the laughter around her. "There's no telling what disgusting creatures we'll come across tonight."

"I wanna go, I wanna go, I wanna go!" Alice pouted from her perch on a kitchen stool.

"Good, 'cause I don't," Bella sang back. "Go, then, and take someone with you."

"Em, Jazz," I called into the living room, because I knew that those assholes were listening, and they both groaned. "You can piss and moan all you want, but you're still fucking going," I said, grinning at the girls' soft giggles and giving them a wink.

They both trudged into the room, looking like pouting children.

"Yeah, we heard," Emmett huffed, rolling his eyes and pointing to Rose, "but don't think I'm holding your fucking pocketbook."

Bella snorted, turning her face into my arm to hide her laugh.

"*Pocketbook?*" Makenna giggled, looking up at him. "What are you? Eighty?"

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"You'll *hold* whatever I put in your hand, Emmett," Rose stated with a raised eyebrow, poking Emmett in the chest. "Got me?"

Emmett nodded vehemently, his eyes wide.

"Good, then let's go," she said, grabbing his hand.

Without another word or letting go of my hand, Bella guided me down the hall to her bedroom. She pushed me into her big chair in the corner, crawling up in my lap. I chuckled at her, but she just smiled, settling between my legs with her back to my chest and opening that photo album to the first page.

"I want to look through these with you," she said softly, bending her knees a little so we could both see.

I moved her hair from off of her shoulder, placing a kiss to her cheek. "Sure, baby, whatever you want."

The very first two pages were a shock to both of us. It was the day that Bella was born. Her newborn picture was on the first page, but the second page held a picture of all four of our parents, and the two of us asleep in the same bassinet. I was obviously a few months older, with a shock of hair on the top of my head, but newborn Bella clung to me with little fistfuls of my shirt.

"Holy shit," she giggled, looking up at me. "I thought Aunt Kate said our moms only met the one time."

"Maybe she didn't know about this time," I chuckled, unable to take my eyes off of the infant versions of us, because by God, she slept that same way with me now. "She does live all the way in Alaska," I murmured, tracing the two of our faces.

"I think our moms were totally setting us up way back then," she laughed sweetly, kissing my cheek. "Look at their faces."

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I chuckled and nodded, because she was right; both women looked proudly over the top of the crib, with almost mischievous smiles.

I kissed Bella's ear, whispering, "We're hanging this one, too."

She laughed, laying her head back to my shoulder. "Maybe I loved you then, too."

"Obviously," I teased, tickling her sides. "I was damned handsome. Look at me!" My girl dissolved into hysterics, and I couldn't help but join in, because fuck, I loved that sound from her. "Keep going, *sweetness*," I snickered, poking her to continue.

"Okay, okay, quit being pushy," she snorted, turning the page.

To say Bella was an adorable child would be an understatement. With her big brown eyes, wide smile, and her insatiable thirst to want to know more, her parents had taken some amazing pictures of her. Starting with her first birthdays, first steps, and first lost tooth, they had documented just about everything. Bella's hair had always been long, with curls at the very ends. She had a few freckles across her nose that had faded as she got older, but the most noticeable change was after she turned eight, after her mother died.

I could almost see the seriousness take over the little girl's face, and there was just a little less spark in her eyes. Not that she didn't look happy, because she did. Charlie did a damned good job keeping up with major events - proms, first cars, graduations from high school. There was even a picture of Bella from Quantico.

And then it changed. It stopped being photographs, and started being a scrapbook from newspaper clippings.

"He has every case that ever made the news that Gravity was involved in," she muttered, flipping through the pages. "Why would he do that?"

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"Because he loved you, Bella. It's really fucking simple. He was proud of you, no matter what," I told her incredulously.

She was quiet for a moment, but finally nodded, closing the photo album. She set it down gently on the table next to us and curled into me.

"I need more sleep," she mumbled into my neck. "Before tonight..."

"Then sleep, baby," I told her, picking her up and carrying her to bed, completely unable to resist crawling in next to her. I wasn't even sure she was aware when she gripped my shirt, pulling me to her and snuggling closer to me, but I didn't care, because she felt like home, like where I was always meant to be, and it was that last thought that sent me back to sleep in her arms.

~oOo~

"Edward, help!" she called, her voice echoing in my head.

I spun in a haze of fog or smoke, looking everywhere I could for her, but only her voice was present. Running blindly down corridor after corridor, I finally fell into a room where her voice became louder. I found her on a table, strapped down, beaten - even worse than when I'd first stumbled upon her.

"Edward..."

I struggled with her straps, because she was never supposed to be like this again. I'd fucking sworn she'd never be touched by him again, but I froze when the door blew open in a blinding blur of fire. I swung my gun around, pointing it directly at the bastard's skull.

"Edward! Shit, wake up!" Bella gasped, backing away from me. "Baby, it's just me..."

I came up out of my dream, like I was surfacing from being deep underwater. My brow was sweaty and my hands shook, as I realized I was fucking pointing my glock right at Bella's head. I squeezed my eyes closed tightly, before

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opening them again to make sure it was really her I was looking at, and not the asshole in my dream.

"Christ," I breathed, tossing my gun to the floor, where it thumped heavily and skidded to the baseboard. "Fuck, baby, I'm sorry..."

She crawled slowly up the bed, and I sat up, taking a deep breath when she brushed my hair from my forehead.

"Don't apologize," she sighed, a little smile curling up on her mouth. "Besides, you looked kinda hot pointing that gun while wearing nothing but black socks and underwear..."

I snorted, shaking my head and looking back up at her. She had an amazing ability to take away all the ugly shit, even if it was accomplished by teasing me.

"Bad dream?" she purred, kissing my cheek.

"Yeah."

"Me?"

"Yeah," I whispered, as I ran a hand through my hair, glancing over at the window and noticing that it was early evening. "Yeah," I said again, gazing back at her calm, sweet face.

"I'm okay," she stated firmly, tilting her head at me.

All I could do was nod, close my eyes, and lean into the hand she placed on my cheek.

"You know what I want?" she asked. Again, her sweet smirk wasn't hard to miss.

"What's that, love?"

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"Breakfast for dinner..." She grinned widely, nudging my jaw with her nose and crawling completely up into my lap.

"You do, do you?" I chuckled, feeling my heart finally settle down - something that happened every time she was near after a nightmare. "And I'm supposed to just... *jump* when you say so?"

"Yup," she giggled, wriggling closer like she did when she wanted something.

I smirked at her, locking eyes - green to sweet, chocolate brown. I'd mentioned to Alec the day before that I wanted to cook before we hit this club, so I guess I had my menu, thanks to my girl.

"Breakfast? Really?" I verified with a snicker.

"Uh huh," she giggled softly, playfully nipping at my lips. "Please?"

The fact that it was me she came to for this, that it was some sort of comfort for her before we did what we had to do tonight, meant more to me than I could possibly explain.

"Anything you want, *sweetness*," I said, lifting her off of my lap and setting her on the bed.

It seemed that breakfast for dinner was a huge hit with everyone, because no matter the amount of food I made, it was eaten up completely.

The table was loud, conversations flying all over the place, but Bella stayed quiet, just watching, just listening, and it was then that I saw what Rose was talking about. Bella was looking at each and every one of us, measuring and planning, worrying and preparing. I could almost see the wheels turning in her mind of the steps she had to take. Her gaze lingered the most on me, Carlisle, and her girls. When her deep brown eyes would land on me, her brow would furrow and her teeth would nip at her bottom lip, to the point that it looked painful.

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I reached over, tugging it out from between her teeth and rubbing my thumb across it. "You'll do great tonight, baby," I whispered in her ear as I picked up a few dirty dishes, not sure exactly what I truly wanted to say, because I really didn't fucking know how the night would go. Not that I didn't have faith in her, but with such a big place and so many people working together *and* at the club, anything could fucking go awry.

"I got those," she said softly, taking over the dishes. "Your dad needs you before we get dressed."

I kissed the side of her head, starting to turn away, but she stopped me with a wet hand on my wrist.

"Oh, and thanks," she giggled, looking up at me through her eyelashes, which just made me want to set her on the counter and do wicked things to her. "For dinner... It was exactly what I'd been craving."

"That's what I'm here for, *sweetness*," I chuckled, bending to her ear and licking up the shell of it. "To satisfy... *all your cravings*..."

I grinned at her laughter, passing Esme on my way back to the table, but she stopped me.

"You'll listen to everything tonight?" she asked in a whisper, her face full of worry, because she was the only one that wasn't going tonight. My father just wouldn't bend on the subject, even when Eleazar pleaded her case. "You'll watch out for them?" she verified, meaning Bella, her brother, and my dad.

"Yes, ma'am," I vowed, frowning as I looked around to Bella, who was using the dish washing as a chance to just... *be*. I swallowed thickly, suddenly feeling the weight of this next step like a ton of bricks on my shoulders.

"I'm sorry," Esme huffed, shaking her head. "I know you will, son. I don't know what I was thinking. I know you love them both..."

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I nodded, feeling that same warmth spread over me when she called me "son." It made me slightly uncomfortable, like I was cheating on my mom or some shit, but I couldn't help it. Esme had been nothing but loving and supportive since the fucking beginning, and for a moment, I wondered what life would be like if my dad got his wish of getting out of this mercenary life, when Bella and I were finally on our own. Would it feel like it was supposed to? Like a real family?

Visions of a future with Bella flew through my mind - her in a white dress, next with her stomach beautifully round with my baby, and finally, normal family cookouts flooded my brain, and I shook my head. That shit was dangerous to dwell on, especially on a night like this. But Holy Mother of God! I just fucking *wanted* it.

"Your face reads like a book, Edward," Esme chuckled, brushing my hair off of my forehead. "It's okay to hope, son. You tell Bella to use her anger to focus. Well, you should use your hope. It's something to really fight for."

"If I do that," I rasped, still calming down from my revelation, "then all that matters are *them*, not everyone, and that'll get someone killed."

"Do you see everyone in your dreams of the future, Edward? All your friends?" She jerked her chin towards the table, where the girls were getting up to get ready, leaving the men to still plan and plot.

I said nothing as Alice kissed Jasper on the top of his head, causing his cheeks to tinge pink, as Rose scratched Emmett's head by running her fingers through his short curls, as Mickey closed the laptop that I didn't even have look to know that she'd been emailing Obie, just to check in. And finally, my dad looked up and locked eyes with Esme, and I could see the same silent communication that Bella and I had. There was so much to say, yet we were all too fucking worried to voice it aloud.

But I saw what she meant. Did I see every last one of them at those cookouts that I'd just been daydreaming about? Did I see futures with my friends, both old and new?

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"Yes," I sighed, looking over at her. "Yeah, I see it."

"Then use it, Edward," she urged softly, kissing my cheek. "You have a brilliant mind and a brave soul, but your heart is just as smart and courageous, okay?"

"Kay, Esme," I murmured, a little shocked when she wrapped me in a fierce hug.

"One day...you'll have it all, sweetie," she whispered in my ear.

I snorted, shaking my head at her and smiling, despite the serious conversation, because Bella and I were always teasing each other about "one day." Though our "one day" always tended to be a little... *intimate*.

Giving Esme one last look, I joined the table, hearing my dad say, "I want you all dressed, just in case you have to go inside that damned club..."

~oOo~

BELLA

With the last swipe of lip gloss to my lips and one last look at my outfit, I shook my head and sighed. The clothes that Rose and Mack had picked out weren't *bad*, but they weren't *me*. Short skirts, tight shirts, and heels were just not something I liked to wear. Though I had to admit, my legs did look good.

I took a deep breath, steeling myself for the next few hours. I was about to walk into a lion's den. Men with dark intentions, with monetary agendas, with no respect or shame about what they did to exploit women. This was the final true bad guy left on King's payroll - besides Miller - and it was important that this night go down without a hitch.

We had slowly and meticulously removed all but King himself, Dale Young, the owner of *Club 13*, Riley Miller, who was still MIA, and Wes Michaels. However, the latter was on our side and would be setting up his own sting,

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scheduled to go down at the same time that Charlie's memorial was being held tomorrow, with Eleazar, Eric, and Felix offering their assistance. Ivan Wendell was small time and would be attended to by me and Carlisle personally after Charlie's services.

So taking out this club, its prostitution ring, and its drug dealings, was really important, because every man caught tonight was one less man that King could depend on. My biggest fucking hope was that King's dumb ass would be there to witness it, and maybe join in the festivities.

I knew that it was dangerous that I was going in the first place, but *not* going wasn't an option. I needed to help, because I was tired of Carlisle and Edward and the rest of their crew doing everything, when I was quite capable of holding my own. And I couldn't let my girls do this alone, even though they could. If something happened to any of them and I wasn't there, I'd be haunted the rest of my life with what-ifs.

Besides, my notoriety with Twi Tech just might be too much for this Dale Young to resist - at least, that's what Carlisle and Benny were counting on. If Young were to deliver Charlie Swan's daughter to King - the man that had ordered the hit on me - he'd be sitting pretty with the biggest mob boss since Gotti.

Little did they know, we were coming in the front door, the back door, *and* the roof. We would have snipers on two sides of the building, with Federal scanners and computers four blocks away. We had the backing of the FBI, the CIA, and the strongest fucking group of brave mercenaries - of honorable men - that I'd ever had the pleasure of knowing. And they all were my friends, my family.

I stepped out of the hallway and into the kitchen, catching sight of everyone getting ready to go. Edward's back was to me, and my heart skipped two beats at the sight of him, because for one tiny moment, I wished that we were just... *going out*. No mission, no plan, but a real date, because he looked amazing. I would have been proud to walk in anywhere on his arm, and the envy of every woman that laid eyes on him. Fashionably and fantastically faded jeans hugged

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his ass, like they were made specifically for him. He was wearing a navy blue v-neck sweater, with a gray t-shirt underneath.

He ran a hand through his hair, but it was Alec's amused smile and folded arm stance that made him turn around. I had to fight my smile as his jaw hit the floor, because I wasn't the only one emerging from the hallway. In fact, all my girls were ready, and I had to say that we looked damn good; I wasn't alone in that thinking, because the conversations between all the men around the room came to a complete and utter standstill.

Only Carlisle spoke, though he was highly amused at his men. "Ladies," he said smoothly, giving every man a second glance before walking to us. "The limo is downstairs waiting to take you. Don't step foot inside that club without these," he said, holding out a handful of very small ear pieces. "They work differently than the ones you're used to. In order to minimize the feedback from the music, we needed these to be able to mute. So...Benny said to just touch them, and he'll be able to hear you, or patch you in to one of us, okay?"

"Yes, Carlisle," we all said at the same time, taking them from him and placing them in our ears.

"Oh, hell," Alec chuckled, shaking his head. "Saying shit in stereo never sounded - or *looked* - so good. Ladies, you'd better be on your top notch best tonight. Don't make me have to kill a motherfucker..."

A warm arm slipped around my shoulders, and Carlisle's chuckle met my ear. "You've rendered my son useless, Bells. That's not good..."

"He'll live," I giggled, thinking he was pretty much doing the same thing to me. "But I do need to talk to him before we all split up."

"Sure, sweetheart," he snickered, kissing my head. "Keep your eyes open tonight, and communicate as much as you can. The whole building will be surrounded, but until Benny gets, sees, or achieves what he needs to make the arrests, he won't give the word to raid the place. However, you'll have Eric and Emmett at the bar watching, or if you need, someone else will come in. Okay?"

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"Yeah, got it," I said with a nod and a lean into him, before walking to Edward, who I had to say was wearing the most adorable of pouts I think I'd ever seen. "What's the face?" I asked, tugging him away from everyone.

"You are too beautiful to be sending out to the wolves," he growled, giving me the once over. "I should take Eric's place..." he grunted, looking over my head, but I stopped him.

"Don't change the plan now," I sighed, cupping his face. "If I need you, I know you're not far, Edward."

He stared at me through narrowed eyes, but didn't argue my point.

I took a deep breath and stepped closer to him. "Edward, no matter what you hear tonight, you know it won't be real, right? It's just a part I play..."

"I know," he huffed, but his eyes were wary. "Just because you're playing a part... Well, just don't put up with too much fucking nonsense, Bella," he growled, grasping my arms firmly.

"Some amount of shit will have to be put up with, but I know what you're saying, baby. I do," I sighed, wanting to kiss him stupid if he kept up with the sweet pouty face.

"Come on, Bellsy," Rose called. "You're my lesbian lover tonight," she chuckled heartily.

I laughed, not even bothering to turn around. "Yes, *dear*," I snorted, rolling my eyes, because every man in the room froze.

"Wait, what?" Edward, Jasper, and Emmett all grunted, with wide eyes and gaping mouths. Carlisle's and Alec's amusement could barely be contained as they waited by the door.

"Gawd, you are such a... *man*," I sighed, shaking my head at Edward. "It's a plan every group of girls uses when we need to get away from a guy...the best

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friend-slash-lesbian lover thing. It works well when drinking is involved, right, Ro?"

"Shut *up*, Bella," she snapped, but smirked when I laughed at her. "That was one time, damn it!"

"One time for what?" Edward murmured, unable to stop looking between me and Rose, and I couldn't imagine what he was thinking.

I smirked, folding my arms across my chest. "Rose was dating this guy...no more than like two dates..."

"Bella, I swear to God..." she warned from behind me, but I just smiled up at Edward and went on.

"Anyway, he lied to her about being single," I continued, giving a glance back to my best friend, whose face was in her hands. "Well, we ran into him at a club one night...and we'd had a little too much to drink." I snorted at her groan from behind me. "Rose's inebriated self thought it would be a brilliant idea to... *make out* in front of..."

"Say his name, and you're in huge trouble, Isabella Marie!" Rose growled.

"Wait, wait, wait," Emmett gushed, waving his hands in the air. "You two...made out...in public?" he asked, and after every pause, Rose and I nodded.

"Anyway," Alice piped up in a singsong voice, "they got a little carried away. They were asked to leave the club, but only after the... *guy* asked them for a threesome - which earned him two slaps - right in front of his fiancée," she said with a grin.

"Way too much alcohol," Rose groaned. "I needed AA meetings after that."

I grinned, shaking my head at her, because she wasn't lying; she'd gone to like three meetings until she felt she'd redeemed herself.

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"Ladies, get going...before the limo leaves you," Carlisle chuckled.

I started to walk away, but turned in front of Edward. "You be careful," I ordered, kissing his lips roughly.

"And you..." he growled sexily in my ear. "No making out with... *anyone*. I don't care how drunk she gets. Your lips belong to me, along with the rest of you." His voice was a deadly mix of warning and amusement, completely melting me right there as he lifted my face with his fingers under my chin, raising an eyebrow at me until I nodded. I was trying my damndest not to smile like a fool. "And one day, baby... It'll be *me* taking you out, because... Goddamn, I want to fucking show you off! You're so damn beautiful, Bella, I swear."

I closed my eyes and pressed my lips to his, because his words were so close to what I was thinking just mere minutes before, it made my breath catch, and I so couldn't wait until we were just...normal. "One day, Edward..."

~oOo~

I leaned against the bar, sipping a drink that wasn't alcohol. Ginger ale made a fantastic substitute, because it looked like something it wasn't. I used it all the time; only the bartender truly knew, and they loved their tips, so they'd never say a word.

The club was really busy and beautiful. It took up the first two floors of the building, with the second floor being a balcony that overlooked the dance floor. Two huge bars flanked either side of that dance floor, keeping the place swirling in booze, dancers, and loud, thumping music...and drugs. They were everywhere. It was as if they hardly tried to hide it. Cocain, weed, and ecstasy were just the tip of the iceberg. The dealers? The bouncers. I'd been watching them all night.

It hadn't taken long to grab Dale Young's attention. Arriving in a limousine was the best idea that Alice had come up with, because it totally caught the eye of the bouncer at the door and everyone waiting in line to get in, which we

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bypassed with a large bill slipped smoothly from Rose's hand to the man at the door.

I sipped my drink again, allowing my eyes to sweep the whole place, starting at the balcony, down the stairs, across the dance floor, ending at the other bar across from me.

Emmett and Eric, each with a beer in their hand, were leaning against a table. They were both chatting with a few women, but as I really watched Emmett, I could see his eyes doing the same as mine - checking every few minutes as to where we all were - and then he'd go back to his conversation.

Dale Young was standing with a girl that looked no older than Makenna - if that - his arm draped around her as they stood watching the dance floor. While her eyes took in everything, his were narrowed in on Rose, Alice, and Mickey, who were all dancing together. Young had dark hair and pale skin, a constant smirk on his face as he pulled away from the girl, whispering something in her ear and walking away.

"Oh hell, dickwad's on the move," Mack muttered from the stool beside mine.

"Yup, sure is," I sighed, setting my drink down. "Let's dance, Mack. And you don't leave my side, got me?" I told her, snatching up her hand and tugging her from the bar.

"I hear you, Bellsy," she huffed in my ear. "No girl goes anywhere without someone with them...not the bathroom, or outside, or the dance floor, and especially not with Young or someone we don't know."

I nodded, because I'd told them that in the limo on the way over. I wasn't sure what type of girls Young wanted, and we were all pretty different in every way imaginable, so despite the fact that two men were within yelling distance, and several more surrounded the building, I didn't want anyone alone at any time.

Makenna and I pushed our way through to join the rest of the girls. We danced through one song, finding ourselves surrounded by a few different men, but

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they were harmless flirting boys, come to find out. They were students from UW, just out to have a good time. After a few more songs and a couple of phone numbers shoved our way, I looked up to see Young had perched himself at the end of the bar closest to us. And his eyes were locked onto Makenna.

"Oh shit," I sighed, my nostrils flaring as I grabbed her hand into mine and squeezed closer to Rose. "He's staring at Mack," I hissed up at her, but grinding with her like we'd always danced in clubs.

Rose turned around, wrapping her arms around my waist as we danced to see over my head, before bending to my ear. "Then let's get a drink at the bar, because if we're gonna bait this fucker, I want to get the shit over with."

I laughed, nodding my head as we weaved our way to the bar, specifically picking a place close to Young. This time, I didn't have a choice but to order a real drink, but I kept it simple.

"Beer," I told the bartender, and he took the rest of the girls' orders, as well.

Mickey plopped down next to me, her eyes flickering to Young, and then to Emmett and Eric. "I got a wicked feeling about this asshole, Bella," she muttered, taking her beer and sipping it lightly.

"Me, too," I sighed, but a flash of red caught my eye coming in the front doors. "Oh shit, Victoria's here," I hissed, nonchalantly touching my finger to the earpiece.

Benny was instantly in my ear. "Talk to me, Bella," he muttered.

"Victoria just walked in," I told him, wondering if the din of music and noise would allow my voice to be heard, but he apparently had no problems.

"We know," he sighed. "Which means we think King isn't far behind. They tend to meet there."

"Great," I growled, looking up when Young leaned over the bar.

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"Scott, put these lovely ladies on my tab, yeah?" he ordered, and the bartender nodded.

"Bella, leave communication open while Young speaks to you, okay?" Benny asked.

"Mmhm," I sighed, turning towards the man approaching my youngest friend and employee.

"Good girl," he crooned in my ear. "If he's showing interest in you, then go with it, because the more info I can get on him, the bigger the bust."

I stopped listening to Benny, though I knew he could hear us, and instead, I focused on Young introducing himself to Rose, Alice, and Makenna. When he got to me, a slow, slimy smile crept up his features, and he reached for my hand. I knew he meant it to be charming, but it came across as menacing.

"Ah, Miss Isabella Swan," he purred, bending to kiss the top of my hand. "You need no introduction. It's an honor to have you here. I'm sorry to hear about your father's death, but I'm glad you could take some time away from Twilight Tech. It must be difficult, filling his shoes."

Internally, I grimaced, because if he knew who I was, he would have zero shame in handing me over to King, but I took his greeting with a smile and a flirtatious tilt of my head. He shook Mickey's hand, too, but his gaze fell heavily to Makenna again. It made me uncomfortable, but she ignored him quite well.

"Thank you, Dale," I said back with a sweet smile, but in my ear, I could hear all sorts of activity.

Jasper called that he was in place, as did Eleazar. Carlisle directed Edward, Alec, and Felix into whatever positions they were needed, and I realized that they must be about to climb up to the roof. There were other voices, as well, voices I didn't know, but I was sure they were a part of the team that Benny had added into place. The last voice I heard was Emmett's, which made my head

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snap up to look for him at the table not far from us.

"I've got trouble, Benny," he sighed, shaking his head as Victoria stormed up to their table. "Eric's sister just caught a glimpse of him...and she ain't happy."

Victoria already looked three sheets to the wind, and high on top of it. Her eyes were glazed, unfocused, as she glared at Eric. I couldn't hear what was being said, but it didn't take a deaf person to read someone's lips when they said, "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"I'm gonna lose him, Ben," Emmett muttered, glancing back at me. "I got a bouncer heading my way, and she's about to scratch her brother's eyes out, man."

Sure enough, Victoria had started a scene big enough to warrant the bouncers coming to her aid. Two large men - though not as big as Emmett, I noted - stepped up behind her as Eric tried to calm her down, or tug her towards the door. I couldn't tell which.

"Fuck," I heard over the earpiece from Benny. "I need another guy inside. Eric's about to be bounced out."

"Will you ladies excuse me for just a moment?" Dale asked, gesturing towards the table that was now drawing way too much attention. "Let me take care of this, and then we'll chat some more."

"Sure, Dale," I crooned at the same time Mickey did, but she barely kept in her amusement.

Over the radio, Carlisle's voice snapped, "Edward, get in there! We've got the roof, but we can't leave Emmett alone."

"Sir," my favorite voice conceded, and it sounded like he jumped down from wherever he was to the ground.

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Victoria was animatedly angry, gesturing to her brother and waving her arms in the air, like she couldn't believe he would show.

"Damn, she's tanked," Mickey muttered, leaning closer to me.

I tapped my earpiece off for just a moment so I could gather my girls closer. "Listen, Eric is about to be bounced out. Edward's on his way in, but Benny needs more from us concerning Dale." I sighed, looking to Makenna. "Can you handle this? Because it seems he's mostly eying you..."

"Just don't leave me..." she countered, with a shrug and a sip on her beer.

"Not a fucking chance, Mack," Rose snapped back, rolling her eyes to me.

"Benny just told me that Victoria meets King here, so its possible he's coming," I said, smirking at them.

The sound of broken glass and a toppled chair caused us all to glance over at Emmett's table. The bouncers had wrestled Eric off of his stool, and I knew for a fact that he was letting them manhandle him, because in all reality, he could kill both bouncers where they stood.

I tapped my earpiece again, just in time to hear Dale's voice through Emmett's headset. "Vicki, maybe you should take a cab home, too, yeah? Royce isn't in the best of moods, anyway, and you're kinda wasted."

"Hot damn," Benny muttered, most likely to himself. "On my command, send that cab to the front," he ordered, getting an affirmative answer immediately. "We'll get Victoria out of there *now*. We'll hide her, but her brother will have to do it..."

"Em, aren't you coming?" Eric growled, feigning being drunk.

"Nah, man, the night's still young," Emmett chuckled, gesturing around the room. "I still got mojo to burn...look at all this hot ass up in here. They're just begging for some big man action. Besides, my roommate is on his way, dude."

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Dale laughed, as did I, because Emmett never fucking missed a beat, and never, ever broke into a sweat. My laugh must've caught his attention, because Emmett shot me a quick wink and a smile, before hiding it behind his bottle of beer.

About the time the bouncers, Eric, and Victoria made it out the door, in strolled the hottest thing I'd seen all night. There wasn't a man that could touch him when it came to how handsome Edward was, and he was spotted by women left and right as he made his way to the bar.

"Hot damn, pretty boy is here," Mickey said with a grin. "Well, this ought to make shit interesting."

I snorted, elbowing her, but I froze, my thoughts racing, because she was right. I turned to Rose, raising an eyebrow at her, and again temporarily turning off my radio.

"What?"

"How jealous do you think this Young asshole is?" I asked her.

She looked around the club and back to me. "He's pretty used to getting what he wants. I mean, look around you. Women think being with him will get them somewhere. He's connected in all ways that matter."

"Right," I chuckled. "And he wants the baby," I added, pointing to Mack. "What happens when another rooster enters the hen house?"

"Oh!" Alice gasped, looking over at Edward and Emmett, who were giving each other that manly handshake, one-armed hug shit, with big smiles on their faces, which caused every woman in sight to just about fall out of their chairs. "That's freakin' perfect!" she gushed.

Dale joined us again, clapping his hands together one time. "My apologies, pretty ladies, but running a club isn't always fun..."

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I turned my earpiece back on, taking a deep breath for the bullshit I was about to spew. "That's quite all right, Dale. Are you okay? That looked like quite the...confrontation."

"I'm fine," he scoffed, giving me a wink. "I'm used to it. That's what my men are for. Sometimes, people don't know their limit." He snapped his fingers at Scott the bartender over our heads, and looked down the line of us. "Speaking of limits... You couldn't possibly have reached yours yet. Another round, ladies?" he offered.

Fuck, this asshole wanted us drunk before he made his move, so we let him buy us another round, but I'd taught my girls ages ago not to really drink on the job, to just sip it, nurse it. You only wanted them to *think* they were getting you drunk.

It was about the third round Dale ordered for us that he started really working on Makenna. He told her she was so pretty, unique. He complimented her, teased her, but she took it all really well. She gave as good as she got, rolling her eyes when he wasn't looking.

Alice tried her damndest to be still, but she finally squeaked that she needed the restroom. Rose and Mickey opted to go with her, which left just me, Mack, and Dale. I let my eyes drift around the club, only to finally land on Edward and Emmett, who had beers and women in front of them, but when my eyes locked with his, I raised an eyebrow at him.

He asked Emmett a question that I couldn't hear over the earpiece, and took both of their empty bottles. He stood gracefully from the table, excusing himself with his usual sweet, sexy smile, and walked to the bar to stand between me and the stool Mickey had been sitting on.

I set my bottle next to his as he waited patiently for the busy bartender to see him, and when he did, Edward said, "Two more...and one for the lady here." He gestured to me.

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I smiled up at him, wanting to snuggle into the sweet smell that just drew me to him - all fresh cut wood and just a touch of sexy ass cologne. "No thanks, I'm fine."

Scott set two beers in front of Edward, as money was slid across the bar, but piercing green eyes met mine. "A woman as beautiful as you...should never be just...*fine*."

I wanted to laugh at him, because I wondered if that shit worked on girls, but I was pretty sure he could call them dirty pigs and they'd still fall at his feet. But I also wanted to kiss the shit out of him, because he gave me *my* smile - the sweet, crooked smile - that would get him out of any trouble.

"And what should they be?" I asked, barely keeping my smile at bay as he bent to my ear.

"They should be...thoroughly sated, completely ravished, and unable to walk the next day..." he purred ever so softly in the ear that wasn't filled with a tiny radio. He pulled back, giving me a wink. "But if you change your mind, I'm right over there. I'm not sure anyone here could compare to you, so I'm willing to wait. I can be really patient for something I really want."

Every girlie part I had, and some I didn't even know spoke English, tingled to the point of madness. I shook my head slowly, licking my lips. And I'm pretty sure a moan escaped my lungs as he finally turned away from me, because that wasn't the first time he'd told me he was patient for something he wanted.

I turned to Makenna, grabbing her hand when a new song came on. "Let's dance!" I said excitedly. "Come with me."

"Kay," she giggled, and we both slipped off of our stools, but my young friend didn't miss a beat. She fucking knew what we were after. "Dale, we'll be right back," she flirted, giving him her big, dimply smile. "And when we do, you can tell me all about that friend that takes modeling pictures..."

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"You got it, beautiful," he chuckled, eating up every bit of what she was dishing out.

We situated ourselves in the middle of the dance floor, but I watched with fascination as Edward once again excused himself from the table, the girls around him not bothering to hide their disappointment.

I switched off my earpiece, pulling Mack's ear to my lips. "We have to make Dale jealous, so we're going to dance with Edward. Got me?" I asked her, and she nodded fervently. "Good, but don't you dare touch my man inappropriately!" I snorted, rolling my eyes at her laugh.

"Shut up, Bella! For real?" she gasped, starting to move to the music. "God, woman, I'm so happy you have him, I can't stand it. I would never touch him. He's hot...yeah! But I love you two... *together*."

"Good," I snorted, but it morphed into a moan, because my whole body reacted when warm, strong arms wrapped around my waist, and I could feel every muscle in Edward's chest press into my back.

"I thought I'd give you a...taste of what you're missing," he purred sexily in my ear. "You know...in case you change your mind."

"Fuck," I sighed, thinking Edward was the distraction to end all distractions, but I forced myself to stay focused. Leaning my head back just a little, I spoke into his ear. "We have to make our pal, Dale, jealous, baby," I told him. "It's Mack he wants."

And so began the hottest dance I'd ever had. Apparently, Edward *excelled* in making men jealous, because he reached out a hand to Makenna, whispering something in her ear to make her laugh, and then suddenly, he was sandwiched between us. While his hand stayed on Mack's waist, he was not so chaste with me. We all writhed and moved to the music, but Edward's leg was between my thighs, his hand firmly planted on my ass, as I snaked one hand up his chest to grip his neck.

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From afar, it probably looked like the three of us were practically making out and laughing together, but in reality, Edward was telling us just how fucking angry Dale was becoming, especially when Edward drew us closer, pretending to kiss Mack's neck, but really opening his mouth to mine and leaving a long, soft, suckling kiss just below my ear. His hand cupped my bottom, grinding me up his thigh, as he whispered, "Just you, baby," in my ear.

When the song was almost over, his hand left my ass, traveling slowly up my spine and into my hair, only to bend my head back again so that he could brush his lips across my throat. "Get this shit over with, love. I don't like other women, and I fucking hate that another man is touching you. And when it's over, I'll show you those ways I said my beautiful woman should be treated. Got me?"

I nodded, swallowing thickly, as he placed a kiss to Mack's cheek. "Follow Bella's lead; don't let this asshole get to you."

"Kay." She smiled up at him. "And next time, you two can dance alone."

He chuckled, shooting her a wink and patting my ass, before walking away as the song came to an end.

By the time we made it back to the bar, Dale was chatting away with Rose, Alice, and Mickey, but his eyes were on fire as he looked towards Edward's table and back to us.

"Did you know that guy?" he asked Makenna.

"Nope, but he's a damn good dancer," she stated with a falsely tipsy giggle. "And really nice..."

"Let me show you nice," Dale suddenly beamed. "My friend just texted me. He's got an opening for a photo shoot coming up. He's always looking for young talent."

I sneered behind my beer bottle, but Mickey placed a hand on my leg.

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"I believe the next group of models is heading to Italy. Do you want to meet him?" he asked Makenna.

"I don't know," she mused, looking to me.

"He's right upstairs," he said, standing and offering her a hand.

"Come on, Mack," I chuckled, setting down my beer. "It won't hurt to talk to him. I'll even come with you."

Dale's nostrils flared for a fraction of a second, but all he said was, "I don't think he has time for two girls..."

"That's okay. I have a job, but I can't let my baby cousin go alone," I lied with a snicker, like it was the silliest of things. "Besides, my aunt would kill me if she knew we were here tonight..."

I watched as Dale realized what he had on his hands. Not only was he getting a new girl, but he was getting the one person his boss wanted more than anything. I could practically see dollar signs flash up in his eyes like a fucking cartoon.

With that said, Dale nodded once, saying, "Well, let's go, then."

I gave my girls one last look, and then turned my gaze to Edward, whose face had gone dark with concern, because he'd most likely heard the whole exchange over the radio.

We took a set of stairs to the left of the bar, and the noise of the club started to fade the higher we went. It was on the fifth floor that Dale finally pulled a set of keys out of his pocket, opening what looked to be offices. What bothered me was, if that was his office, what the hell did we pass between the second level of the club and the fifth floor?

"West end of the building, fifth floor," I muttered softly.

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"We've got you, Bella," Benny comforted over the radio. "We've got Jasper on that side. And we see the room you're in."

But we didn't stay in the front room. Dale led us down the hall to another office, but instead of opening it, he knocked softly.

"Come in," a male voice said on the other side, before Dale slowly opened the door.

My heart clenched at who was sitting behind a big desk, and I sighed, "Fuck."

"Isabella Swan..."

I nodded, taking a deep breath, because Mack had just slipped her hand into mine. I nodded in greeting, but really, I wanted to pull my gun out of my purse and just start firing.

"Royce King," I stated, hearing the radio snap into audio activity, because I was pretty sure they didn't know he was there.

He smiled and sat back in his chair, his fingers at a point in front of his face. "Have a seat. We should talk."

I turned when the door behind us slammed closed; standing in front it was a very large man with his hand on the gun in his waistband. I turned back to King, who was wearing a wicked smirk on his face.

Makenna and I were trapped.

A/N...Yeah, I know. Another cliffie, but we're getting to the end of things, so expect them. A few of you asked me on Twitter the other day how long this story will be. I said around 30 chapters, but it wasn't set in stone. And I'm not sure that includes the Epi or not. An epi that is completely planned out, so just have faith in this story and my vow of HEA, okay?

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Okay, so the final stages are set. Dale Young's club is on of the last of the pieces to pull away from King. The shooting range is the other, which will be taken care of the day of Charlie's memorial. But for now, we have King...and Bella and Makenna trapped in the upstairs office of that club.

And we finally know what that damned key opened. Charlie stole all the evidence ages ago, hiding it until technology, or Bella's memory caught up to catch the man he'd been trying to get out of their lives for years...

As you can well imagine, or if you just know me by now... the next chapter is...well, violent. And you'll get some of Edward's POV...

I want to thank JenRar for "cracking the whip"... heh! And as always helping me bring the best of this story to you. To Goober_Lou for pre-reading this, and just tapping her foot for the demise of Miller... LOL And as always, the beautiful MedusaInNY for maintaining my blog better than I ever could...and that's no lie! :) MUWAH to all of you.

Again, I want to welcome new readers...thank all the retweets on Twitter...and encourage you to review. Let me know what you're thinking... Will they get King? Or will he ask for the hit he called out on Bella ages ago? Will Edward get to her? Or will Carlisle? And what's on those 2 floors in between the club and the offices? Hmm...tons of things to think about... So reviews are better than Edward in his undies... ummm, nah... but I like them! LOL :D So let me hear you... The next update is looking like Wed...so until then, Later! :)

Chapter 27

A/N...I know you probably don't care about anything I have to say at this point, because you want to know about King and Bella and Mack... but humor me.

I need to answer one question...someone asked why Charlie took the DNA if he was the company that invented the machines that could read it. You need to understand a bit of history. DNA was discovered in the early to mid eighties, but it wasn't widely used in law enforcement until the early nineties and it was very expensive then. SO...that being said, if Charlie was working on the machines, then he knew that no matter what evidence King left behind it wouldn't be usable in court until years later. Charlie was really smart when it came to technology, so he was aware that one day what he had on his hands would eventually put King away. NOW DNA is widely used to catch criminals, but just 20 years ago it was a new science.

There's a reason I stopped where I did on the last chapter, because this one is FULL...and I really mean full of action, so it had to end on a cliffie. And there is a LOT of info in this one. But I will let you get on with it, because I know you're chomping at the bit to go... so, I'll see you at the bottom...

CHAPTER 27

EDWARD

I shut my radio earpiece off the very second Bella asked Makenna to dance. I took a long draw on my beer, before standing up from the table and excusing myself from the company that had gravitated to us.

What used to be something Emmett and I lived for - women all over us in clubs and bars - now was a curse, because now we wanted nothing to do with them. Emmett hadn't said so, but I knew he was lost to Rose, and there was no going back. I knew this, because he wasn't working that brilliant sense of humor with

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the young girls in front of us. His conversation was stilted, nervous, and slightly off-putting - not that it made the girls stop trying.

I stood up from my stool, giving the dance floor a glance, before turning back to Emmett. "I'll be back."

Though two girls offered to dance with me, I just shook my head silently and left them with Emmett. I saw Bella's face when she caught sight of the three girls, whose names were insignificant to me. Her raised eyebrow almost made me laugh, because her darkening eyes shined with jealousy - or a warning; I wasn't sure which.

As I made my way through the crowd on the dance floor, I suddenly couldn't wait to put my hands on her, even if it was only for a moment. She was sexy beyond reason tonight, and I detested that we weren't there together. I hated it so much that it almost made me want to claim her in front of every last one of the assholes in the building, but it was her voice in my ear as I wrapped my arms around her waist that brought me back to reality.

"We have to make our pal, Dale, jealous, baby. It's Mack he wants," she whispered against my skin.

I wanted to groan, but I knew what had to be done, so I offered a hand to Makenna, bringing her ear to mine. "You mind those hands of yours, Mack," I teased her, smiling when she laughed.

"Shut up, *pretty boy*," she snarked back with a smirk. "Just hold your girl and pretend I'm not here. This guy's gross, but we got to get it done."

I hated the fact that it was Makenna that Young had set his sights on. Maybe it was because she was so much younger than the rest of us, or the fact that Bella loved her like a little sister, or maybe even because the girl was such a fucking cheerleader when it came to mine and Bella's relationship. But whatever it was, I wanted to break the guy's neck.

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Rose, Bella, and hell, even Mickey could've handled this shit better than Makenna, because they weren't so... *innocent*. They could pull off a drunk flirty girl and still smack the piss out of some guy that touched them wrong, but I wasn't quite sure Mack could. She was sweet and happy, and kind of oblivious to how men perceived her - which was probably why Young wanted her in the first place.

I'd never used so much self control as I did during that dance. I needed to make it look good, but I also needed to be aware that I had Mack on one arm, and my sexy, slightly naughty Bella on the other. But I could damn well make another man jealous. Hell, I'd done it before, only unwittingly when I was out drinking. Back then, I didn't care if another man's girl was hitting on me while he was only feet away. I'd take what I could get, and I usually got what I fucking wanted, despite the presence of the girl's significant other.

For every kiss, grind, and grip I did to Bella, I had to try to equal it out for Mack, faking kisses to her neck and squeezes to her waist, turning us just enough to leave the asshole unable to see everything. I figured if he saw what I was doing to Bella, he'd think I was doing the same to Makenna, and it was totally fucking working, because Young was red in the face as he watched us, which I was only too happy to pass on to the girls. They laughed, and as the song ended, I gave Bella a long, slow kiss to her neck, telling her to get this shit over with. I kissed Makenna's cheek, whispering for her to stick with my girl and to be careful.

It took all I had in me not to pull them both from the floor and send them away, send them to safety, but they were working too damn hard and were fucking close to what we needed to do that, so I stepped away with one last squeeze to Bella's ass, just because I could - not to mention the giggle it caused was fucking worth it.

I walked back to the table, ignoring the looks of jealousy from the same girls I'd left Emmett with earlier and smirking at his wide grin.

"Kinda reminds me of Detroit," he chuckled. "Remember those twins you left with?"

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"Shut the fuck up, asshole," I growled, rolling my eyes at his boisterous laugh and hating that he was right. That had been a night of drunken debauchery I had no desire to revisit, especially now, because that part of my life was blessedly fucking over. "You guys fucking wonder why I don't tell you shit. Now you know," I snapped, pointing across the table at him and picking up my beer.

I turned my earpiece back on so I could hear everything that Bella said, as well as my dad and Benny. My head snapped up when the asshole asked them if they knew me, but I had to give credit to Makenna for not missing a beat, telling him that I was a good dancer, as well as a nice guy, which was the fucking most perfect answer if she was trying to make him jealous, because no guy wanted to be second best.

I shook my head and Emmett growled as the guy finally laid his shit out on the table. He used that bullshit ruse of modeling pictures to get Makenna upstairs, but Bella rose from her stool with grace and ease, a devilish smile on her face, offering to come with. It was at that moment that I knew there was something going on, because Young froze for just a split second, before agreeing to take them both upstairs to meet his friend.

My nostrils flared, and my hand gripped the bottle in my hands as I locked eyes with Emmett.

"Aw, here we go now," he muttered to me, his face the ultimate in focus. He could joke with the best of them, but damn it, if he couldn't toss that shit away when he was needed.

My eyes met Bella's for just a split second, and I didn't need to talk to her to know what she was trying to tell me. She needed everyone sharp, everyone on point, because she was just about to dive into shark infested waters, where no one could see them.

My chest fucking ached the very second my girl left my sight and started up the stairs. I didn't hear her say anything, but the rest of the crew and Benny's men were a shit-storm of activity. My father alerted us that he was in position

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on the roof, Jasper and Eleazar were in their sniper positions. A few other men claimed to now have possession of Victoria and Eric and were removing them from the area. Finally, my girl's nervous, but soft voice stated exactly where she was in the building.

But we all shut the fuck up when we heard her again, telling us exactly just who the fuck Young was taking her to see.

Fucking Royce King. The man himself.

"Goddamn it!" Benny growled through the earpiece, and Emmett and I flinched. "No one moves until I say so."

"Bella knows what we need, Ben," my father snapped over the radio. "Give her a fucking chance to get it done."

"Fuck! With Makenna with her, she may take the safe road," Rose added, and Emmett and I spun to look at her across the club. She was still sitting at the bar, but I could tell all the girls were now listening in.

I grimaced, but Rose was probably right. Bella had a tendency to protect those she was with, almost to the point of forgoing her own safety.

"Radio silence!" Ben snapped, and I could hear him typing away on the computer in the background. "I don't want to take King here. I've got... *better* shit for him..." With that, the radios went silent, except for the discussion that Bella was now having with King.

With a shake to my head and a long draw on my beer, simply to steady my nerves, we all listened in.

~oOo~

BELLA

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As I heard Benny snap the order for radio silence, I took a seat in front of King's desk, glancing around at what I had to work with. It wasn't a large office, no bigger than a bedroom, but it was dimly lit, with thick curtains hanging in the window. There were a couple of chairs, a dingy couch, and two other men to contend with - Young, and the bodyguard at the door.

"Miss Swan," King crooned, smiling like it was fucking Christmas that I was sitting in front of him. "I'm so... *sorry* to hear about Charlie," he said. The word "sorry" came out of his mouth so sarcastically, I could have just spit in his face. "But I hear that you've taken over at Twi Tech. We should discuss a business proposition I have for you."

Royce King was about my father's age, maybe slightly younger, but he was a decent looking man. Despite the hollowness of his cheeks, from what I assumed to be time spent in jail, he carried his power and wealth with an air of aristocracy.

"Word travels fast," I stated with a nod. "I have." I didn't want to give this jackass any more than he needed when it came to TT. I knew he wanted it, knew that he was trying to position Carlisle in there to take it all down, but I also knew he still wanted weapons and ammo. "But I'm not talking work with you in the dirty office of a skeezy club, Mr. King. If you want to talk shop, you'll have to come to my office."

"Skeezy," Dale scoffed, rolling his eyes, but no one paid him any attention.

King's mouth twisted into a wry smile. "Fair enough, princess. Perhaps I should...maybe after your father's memorial tomorrow. I know that it's closed to the public, but I used to work with Charlie years ago, and I know you'll allow me to pay my... *respects*."

He spat the word "respects" out of his mouth like it tasted foul.

What I really wanted to do was walk over and snatch open the curtains, letting Jasper have a clear shot at him, but I didn't.

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"By all means, Mr. King," I said smoothly, giving him a small smile. "Consider yourself invited. Maybe when it's over, we can... *chat*. My schedule is clear the rest of the day, anyway."

"It's a date!" he chuckled, clapping his hands together one time and giving the guy behind me a pointed look. "We'll meet tomorrow." King turned his attention to Dale. "Where's Vicki?"

"I sent her home," Young answered, grimacing a bit. "She was causing a scene...some guy pissed her off, but she was wasted."

"Fine," King sighed, rolling his eyes and waving the whole thing off. "That's probably best," he muttered, his gaze falling to Makenna, who had been completely still and quiet in the chair beside mine. He looked back up at Dale. "You must be meeting with Lance..."

Dale laughed lightly. "I am. I'll let you know how it goes," he snickered, walking to the door when there was a light knock. He stepped aside, allowing a rather small man walk into the room. "Ah, Lance... I've found a beautiful face for you."

Lance nodded, and as I studied him, I could see that he hated every second of what he did for these fools. It was written all over his face as he gave me the once over, and then Makenna. He was rather short, with dark blond hair and hazel eyes - eyes that carried a callousness for what he had to do, but I could see sympathy there, as well.

"You brought me two beautiful faces," he noted, smiling slightly.

"No, just the one," Dale countered with a chuckle. "Isabella is beautiful, yes, but it's her niece that I think would take amazing photographs, don't you?"

"Maybe," Lance mused, rubbing his chin as he studied Makenna. "I'd have to get her into my studio downstairs, into the right lighting, to see if you're right."

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"Why don't you do that," King suggested, and Mack's hand gripped mine, because they were separating us for a reason. "Take..."

"Makenna," Dale answered with a cheesy ass grin, looking like he was about to blow out the candles of a birthday cake.

"Makenna." King smiled at her, and I rubbed my thumb across her knuckles to let her know it was all right. "Take Miss Makenna to your studio. Take a couple of test shots. Perhaps she can join that lovely line of ladies you have modeling for you. They all do rather well. And Isabella and I can chat while we wait to see how things turn out."

When his eyes glanced past all of us to the large man at the back of the room, I knew the hit out on me was still in effect. King wanted me alone.

If there weren't so many men, so many people that cared listening in, I would have ended the conversation right then and walked the fuck out of that office. I knew Carlisle was right above me on the roof, that Jasper was just on the other side of the curtain in the window, and that Edward and Emmett were on ready downstairs in the club to jump when needed. And I knew that Benny was listening to all of this, ready to pounce when the time was just fucking perfect. Yeah, I knew we were as safe as we could be, so I turned to the youngest member of my crew.

I cupped her face, tucking a stray hair behind her ear and tugging one of the cute little pigtails she'd worn. "You'll do great," I said, raising an eyebrow at her at the same time that I pressed the radio in her ear nonchalantly as I tucked another lock of hair back. "Listen to what they tell you, and if you don't like the pictures, we'll just let it go. Okay, Mack?"

"You sure?" she verified.

"Of course," I sang with a false smile. "It's just pictures, right? Dale and Lance just want to see how gorgeous you are on film. If you don't want to model for them, you don't have to. They can't *make* you do something you don't want to do."

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That was as close to a warning as I could get to Dale Young, and my eyes drifted to his as I said it. He swallowed thickly, but still offered Makenna a hand, his next words a blatant lie.

"Come, Makenna. I've got an ad for a magazine coming out, and I think you're perfect for it!" he gushed, but his eyes were cold, dead.

Mack gave me one last look, and I hated that I was sending her away, but I had no choice. She followed both Lance and Dale out the door, and it closed softly behind them, leaving me with King and his guard.

An enormous amount of activity whispered through my earpiece as they all prepared themselves now that Mack and I were on different floors. Benny readied Carlisle on the roof, but it was Jasper's voice I listened to.

"Oh, Bells, please open that curtain," he growled low. "I don't like you in there alone. I'm right across from that office, darlin'."

King sat back in his chair, a faraway look in his eye as he gazed at me. "I have to tell you...you're as beautiful - if not more - than your mother."

"Is that what you got me alone for, Mr. King?" I snapped, wanting to reach across his desk and smack the piss out of him. "You want to talk about my *parents*?"

"Easy, *sweetness*," Edward said softly in my earpiece. "Don't let him get to you, baby. That's what he wants..."

"I'm merely stating facts, Isabella. And please, call me Royce," King went on, unruffled by my reaction. "I've known your parents for years, and I was simply saying that your mother was a beautiful woman, but you've surpassed her by a mile."

"Oh, Bella," Carlisle grunted in my ear. "He's about to bait you. He's going to test what you remember about your mother's death. That's why you're in there, sweetheart. Don't give him anything."

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"Save it for tomorrow, Bella," Benny urged in my ear.

"Thank you," I whispered, my eyes on King, but the words were meant for everyone listening in.

"You're quite welcome," he said with a smile. "Renee was a beautiful woman. Do you remember her?" he asked, and I could see the obsession he had for my mother surface just a little; fuck, my father was right.

"I was *eight* when she died, so yes, I remember... *lots of things* about her," I stated, shifting a bit in the chair.

King's eyes narrowed on me for just a moment, as my own stare didn't waver. "Hmm," he mused, rubbing his chin. "Your father told me your barely remembered her..."

"My father and I were...estranged at the end," I told him carefully. "Not that it's any of your business, but..."

"That's enough, Bells," Carlisle warned in my ear. "If you want to tackle that tomorrow, I *swear* to you that you will get your chance. King is all yours, but please, listen to Benny. I'll even be there with you, sweetheart."

"I need Young, Bella," Benny added in my ear. "If we get *him*, then King walks into TT tomorrow completely defenseless. He'll walk in without any more soldiers in his mafia. Give me enough time with Makenna."

"I understand," King sighed. "You're still in the grieving process," he stated condescendingly.

"Maybe," I sighed, allowing just the mere hint of tears to surface in order to maintain this conversation. I wiped at them with my fingers, gesturing to the window. "It's stuffy in here. Mind?" I sniffled, standing up to walk to the window.

"Not at all," King said with an almost genuine smile.

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"God, Bella," Jasper chuckled. "You're fucking brilliant. Ed's a lucky man..."

I had to fight my smile towards the curtains, when a smooth, sexy chuckle rang heavily in my ears, along with a few others.

"Lucky, indeed," I sighed ever so softly, which made the laughter start all over. I jerked open the curtains and opened the window, allowing the cool Seattle night air to drift into the small, musty office. "There," I breathed, inhaling deeply. "That's better."

"I keep telling Dale to air these damn offices out, but he doesn't listen. He's like a mole in here. They're too dark for my taste," King chuckled, his eyes on me as I took my seat back in front of him.

"I need him to move. There's a bookcase in my line of sight," Jasper said. "No shot, no shot..."

"Here, Isabella," King crooned, offering me a handkerchief, and I froze as I looked at it.

It was the exact same fucking handkerchief that my father had left in my tree house. Identical - down to the very same stitching along the edges. But I wiped my eyes with it anyway, because I couldn't give that shit away. Benny and Carlisle wanted King tomorrow, so I could wait one more fucking day.

"I didn't mean to upset you," he said, leaning on the desk with his elbows. "I merely wanted to let you know that I'm looking forward to our meeting tomorrow, and that I'm surprised that you're going to be running Twi Tech. From talks with Charlie, I always assumed he'd turn it over to Carlisle Cullen."

"Carlisle's still there," I stated with a nod. "But I just couldn't let the business that my father started go to someone that wasn't... *family*," I lied smoothly, hoping my godfather understood that wasn't the truth. At all. Carlisle was more family to me than he'd ever understand.

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King laughed softly and nodded. "Now *that* I can truly understand. Tell me, Isabella, will he be there tomorrow?"

"Oh, most definitely. He still carries the same power, and is trusted even in my absence. If something were to happen to me, though, he will take it over."

I watched as a flicker of hope or excitement lit up his eyes, and I knew that he'd rather have the meeting tomorrow with Carlisle, instead of me, because he gave a look over my head. I wasn't to leave that room alive, because this went beyond King. This was an order from Alistair Corbin.

"Excellent," he said with a beaming smile. "You know, I've always wanted to meet him. Charlie spoke most highly of him, but we've never met face to face."

A cell phone rang shrilly in the dark office, and King reached into his pocket to pull it out, answering it sharply. "Yes, Mary?" he snapped, closing his eyes as he listened to whatever it was that his wife was telling him. "I'm kind of busy, sweetie. Can't you take care of my sister until I get home? Just give her the medication the doctor..." He paused, rubbing his face in frustration, because apparently, he was interrupted. "I know she's upset, Mary!" he growled, sitting back in the chair. "Fine! But you'll have to give me a few minutes. I'll call you from the car." He hung the phone up, dropping it roughly on top of the desk.

"I'm sorry, Isabella," he sighed, his eyes still closed. "My sister, she's having a rough time since she lost her son."

I let my face morph into an unreadable expression, because King's nephew was the man that had led the raid at the mountain cabin. James' body had been dropped to the bottom of a ravine with the rest of the men that mine and Edward's crews had taken down without prejudice. I wanted to smirk at King, tell him that James was a sick fucker and bled out, thanks to my bullet in his leg, but I didn't.

"Oh, sorry," I sighed dramatically. "It seems no one is... *immune* from family problems."

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King grinned, and then chuckled softly. "That is very true. And my nephew was troubled to begin with. All my money and power couldn't change that." He gave the man behind me another pointed look, and I knew this was it. "Please feel free to wait here while your niece finishes up with Lance."

He stood up from the chair, but instead of going around towards the window, King went the opposite way, coming to stand in front of me and holding out his hand.

"It was a pleasure to meet you in person, Isabella," he stated, and I shook his hand. "You're everything Charlie and Renee were, only more. They truly would be proud."

That felt like a send off, but I wasn't sure until the radio activity picked up again in my ear.

"He's leaving!" Benny growled.

"And he's not taking the guard with him," Jasper countered. "He's still carrying out his hit."

"Fuck," Edward seethed. "Bella, hang in there. We'll get you..."

"No!" Benny snapped. "Stand down! Wait for my signal. When King is clear from the building, we'll go in."

"Miss Swan," King said, stopping in the now open door way, "I'm looking forward to our meeting tomorrow."

I smiled a genuine smile at him, because I was looking forward to it more than I could tell him, because he looked pretty fucking confident that I wouldn't be there. "Me, too, Mr. King."

Benny's voice softly guided me over the radio. "Bella, let him go. Let him leave. Everything I sent to the lab this morning just came back to me. Not only can we get him for your mother's murder, but we can catch him for exactly

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what he tried to negotiate with Charlie six months ago. But we've got you. Don't sweat the goon he leaves with you."

I snorted, fighting the urge to roll my eyes, because he didn't see how big the fucker was that King was ordering to stay with me.

"Benny, I swear to fucking God," Edward growled over the radio.

"Edward, stop!" Carlisle ordered, but I could hear his nerves, as well. "I've got her. She's right below me."

There was a dead silence on the radio and in the room King had now vacated, as I locked eyes with the guard. He tilted his head at me, wearing a smirk as he turned the deadbolt to the door.

~oOo~

EDWARD

It seemed to take a fucking eternity for King to exit the damn building. It took a hand on my shoulder from Emmett to stop me from pacing inside that fucking club, from fucking running up the stairs to find my girl, no matter what Benny needed.

"On my mark," Benny stated, his voice steadier than I expected.

"My crew...on me," I growled. "Bella's, too."

"Sir," I heard over the radio, and I turned to look at the girls that hadn't moved from the bar.

"We're taking those stairs, got me?" I verified, raising an eyebrow at them all and getting "Sir" and "Yeah" in my ears, along with fervent nods.

"Carlisle, you get to Bella ASAP," Benny ordered.

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"We've got a problem," Jasper sang in a growl. "That asshole she's with just locked the fucking door."

"Damn it, Benny," I breathed, fisting my hair and standing up from my stool.

"King is out! Go, go, go!" Benny commanded, and suddenly, the front doors, the back doors, and the doors to the storage room on the first level of the building flew open, Feds flooding the place.

"Now!" I snapped. Emmett and I launched ourselves towards the staircase that Bella, Young, and Makenna had taken what seemed like years ago, dodging club goers and panicking employees, but we were met with two giant bouncer assholes as we hit the second level almost at a run.

Emmett and the girls stopped dead behind me, and I didn't hesitate to pull my Glock out, pointing it at the closest motherfucker's head.

"Don't move!" I snapped at him, the other guy flinching just a bit. "Keep your goddamn hands where I can see them, or you'll be wearing your man's brains all over your fucking shirt, asshole," I told the second one, as Mickey and Emmett pulled out their own weapons.

"On your knees," Mickey told them, and they obeyed her instantly. "I got this 'til the Feds get here, Ed. Go!"

I didn't have to be told twice, and I heard the Feds hitting the bottom of the stairs at the same time something exploded at the top of the stairs. It sounded like furniture being toppled over or a door splintering apart; I couldn't quite tell.

A voice I didn't recognize said, "You're gonna make me a very rich man, Miss Swan..."

"No, I'm not," Bella chuckled darkly. "You won't walk out of this room alive, pal."

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I had to smile as I made it to the third floor stairs, because my girl was holding her own just fine.

"Can't you hear that shit?" she laughed. "The building's being raided, jackass."

But at that moment, a sound I'd recognize anywhere echoed over the radio - the soft click of the hammer of a gun being pulled back.

"They won't make it past the fourth floor," the man growled. "And you won't live to see them."

"Shit, Bella, hang on," I panted, taking steps two at a time, with Emmett right on my heels.

"Don't you fucking dare!" my girl grunted softly. "You find Makenna!"

"I've got visual," Jasper yelled. "Bells, you have to move."

"We've got Makenna," Rose growled, pushing past me so that she could try the door for the third floor. "Em!" she yelled, when she discovered it was locked.

"Move, babes," he ordered, and then looked to me. "On three, open this door, and you keep going. I'll stay with them and get Mack."

"And Young!" Benny snapped.

"One, two... *three!*" he said, and we both kicked open the door, causing it to completely come off its hinges and fall shattered against the hallway wall, but it was the sight down that hall that made my stomach turn.

Several doors stood open, and I saw numerous men exiting different doorways, half clothed, as young, tired looking girls peered out of their rooms. It was a fucking brothel up there.

"Jesus," I breathed, looking to Emmett, who looked livid at the sight before him.

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"Go, Ed...I got this. Benny, get some people up here!" he snapped, stopping the first motherfucker he saw and just laying the asshole out with one punch.

"They're on their way, Em. And you've got one more floor to get through," Benny countered.

As I left Emmett to do what he lived to do - kick ass - I looked down to see Mickey had rejoined me, along with Alice, both of whom had their weapons out.

"We'll take the next level," Mickey stated, gesturing to the door once we got there.

But all three of us froze when shots rang out from the floor now above us, and I heard my girl grunt and cry out.

"Dad?" I growled, my heart sinking in my chest.

"We're in!" he answered gruffly. "We had to blow two doors."

"Bells?" Alice breathed.

"She's in a struggle, and I haven't got a shot!" Jasper told us. "She's in my line of sight! Fuck! Someone get in there."

I looked to Mickey, and we both nodded, kicking open the fourth floor door. The very second it flew open, I was tackled down the stairs by a large fucker, and we both fell hard on the landing below, causing the air to escape my lungs in a rush and my gun to drop and skid away.

"Shit," I hissed when the guy's knee met my groin. I balled up my fist, punching his ribs as hard as I could and trying my damndest to roll over and get back control.

The fucker got two shots into my face, before I finally brought my knee up hard at the same time I grabbed his wrist. I flipped him off of me, scrambling

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for my gun that was mere inches away. I was almost to it, when he grabbed my shirt, trying to pull me back, but I shot out an elbow to his face, catching him hard in the nose. There was a satisfying sound of it shattering and spurt of blood as he screamed in pain, holding his face with one hand and going for his waistband with the other.

"You'll pay for that!" he snapped, but before he could pull his weapon, I had mine in my hand, and I was already pulling the trigger.

~oOo~

BELLA

"You're gonna make me a very rich man, Miss Swan," the guard said, a slow smile creeping up his face.

He hadn't gone for his gun yet, but he looked over confident that his mere presence was supposed to be scaring me.

"No, I'm not. You won't make it out of this room alive," I laughed, rolling my eyes. "Can't you hear that? The building's being raided, jackass."

That statement scared him more than the fact that I was walking away from him towards the window. If I couldn't get to the gun in my purse on the chair in front of the desk, or the one strapped to my leg, I was going to hand this guy over to Jasper, plain and simple, but instead of walking up next to me, he placed himself right behind me, giving no sight to Jasper whatsoever. The click of his hammer echoed in my ears.

I heard Edward tell me to hang on, but I needed him to find Mack. I had Jasper across the street and Carlisle right above me, but I had no fucking idea where they'd taken Makenna. However, the very second that my words to him left my lips, I knew I'd fucked up.

"You're fucking wired!" the guard growled, spinning me around. His gun stayed pointed at my face, but his hand was going for his pocket, most likely

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for his phone.

I couldn't let him call anyone, couldn't let King find out that his time was almost up. I wanted him showing up at TT tomorrow, thinking he owned the fucking world, thinking that everything he wanted was coming into fruition - even though it pissed me the fuck off that I had to let the motherfucker leave tonight.

So I baited the big fucker. Taking one step away from him caused him to forget his phone and reach for me, and *that* gave me my opening. I ducked his reach, jamming the heel of my hand into his groin, which caused him to double over. Grabbing his head, I brought his face down hard onto my knee, and he dropped his gun when he covered his face, which caused it to go off, the sound ringing in the small office.

"Fuck!" he snarled, holding his nose as he sank to the floor to his knees. I dove for his gun, but just as I reached it, I was tackled to the floor.

The guy had to have weighed three times what I did, so when he fell on top of me, I suddenly had a bitch of a time catching my breath. I could barely see, much less concentrate on the sounds coming through not only my earpiece, but from the hallway at the end of the other office we'd walked through.

My fingers grasped at the guy's revolver, just barely able to graze my nails across it, but I couldn't get a grip on it. His heavy, hot breath pushed out against my neck as he held me down and struggled to get to his gun before I did. He gave up trying to stop me, but instead, flipped me over and braced himself over me.

It was his first mistake.

"Hell, I don't need the fucking gun for this shit," he panted heavily, clearly winded. "You hardly weigh an ounce," he snorted humorlessly, rolling his eyes, but they darkened when they looked down at me as I squirmed underneath him.

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"Get off of me, asshole!" I growled, pushing at him, but he wouldn't budge, except to grab one of my hands and brace it over my head; mistake number two was leaving one of my hands free.

With his free hand, he made his third and final mistake. He fucking touched me.

"Well, well, well," he purred, starting to grin when he palmed my breast. "This could be worth more than just the ten grand King's payin' me..."

I actually stopped my struggling momentarily with those last words he uttered. "Ten grand?" I asked, looking up at him. "Idiot, do you have *any fucking idea* how much I'm... *worth*?" I growled at the same time that I jabbed the fingers of my free hand into his eye, which caused him to roll slightly off of me.

"You got screwed, buddy," I grunted, bringing a knee up.

I caught his groin and was then able to reach the gun I had strapped to my thigh. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I heard distant gunshots and the sound of a door being kicked in, but I didn't stop to think about it, because my hand wrapped around the butt of the forty-five that Emmett had given me so long ago.

A rumbling outside the office door made the guard look up at the same time I pulled the trigger from underneath his large form.

"Bella!" I heard from several different voices - some in my earpiece and some just outside the door - but I couldn't answer them, because I was trying to get the asshole off of me. He wasn't dead, but he was fucking heavy.

The office door completely shattered, as I finally was able to literally slither out from underneath the guard. I scooted across the floor, making sure to kick him one good time in the head with my broken shoe. When I looked up, I sighed at the sight of Carlisle and Alec barging into the room.

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Alec went straight for the guard, but Carlisle was kneeling by my side instantly.

"Sweetheart, where are you hurt?" he asked, gazing down at me.

I looked down at my clothes, noticing I was covered in blood. "Not mine," I told him, wrapping my arms around his neck when he scooped me up. "I'm okay. I promise."

He set me on the edge of King's desk and gave me the once over anyway, starting with my face, and I winced when he got to the wrist that the guard had pinned to the floor.

"Can you flex your fingers?" he asked softly, holding my arm gently.

I wiggled my fingers, but I hissed in pain. "Sprained," I sighed, shrugging and looking up into his worried, but comforting gaze. "I've had worse."

He snorted and rolled his eyes, and we both turned when we heard a smack of skin on skin.

"If you move from that fucking spot, I'll blow your fucking head off," Alec ordered in a low, menacing tone, which to me, rang much scarier than had he yelled the words. He stood up from the floor, where he'd been kneeling over the guard. "Okay, *bellissima*?" he asked, a frustrated look on his face.

"Yeah, Alec," I said with a nod, looking down at my would-be hitman.

The bullet had caught him in the midsection, his nose and eye were already darkening from my hits, and I could well imagine that his balls were pretty achy, too, because I'd nailed them not once, but two times, as hard as I could.

But he'd fucking *touched* me!

"I need to find Makenna...and Edward," I sighed, slipping carefully off of the desk, and with the help of Carlisle's hand on my arm, I kicked my now broken

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heels off at the guard. "Jackass fucking touched me," I mumbled, starting for the door, but Alec stopped me.

"It will be the last thing he does," he sneered, pointing his gun at the guard's head, but his gaze looked to Carlisle for permission.

With a curl to his lip and a deep breath, my godfather gave one single nod.

I felt the thump through my feet more than I heard the shot ring out, as I made my way out of the offices and down the stairs, passing Benny's men along the way. The fourth floor was a beehive of activity. Federal officers had people lined up and down the hallway, making them sit on the floor with their hands on their heads, while officers paced up and down the hall with automatic weapons cradled in their arms, but it was the loud voices at the end of the hall that caught my attention.

I ran the rest of the way down the hall, practically stumbling through the door, to see a room that had been completely turned upside down. It had to have been Lance's studio or apartment or some shit, but it was utterly ransacked.

On one side of the room, Mack was surrounded by my girls, and she seemed to be okay - just really pissed off. On the other, Edward had Dale Young pressed against the wall, his feet several inches off of the ground, and my man's face was fucking livid. Dale's face was totally busted up, and his body was limp, like he could barely move.

Emmett, on the other hand, had a gun pointed at poor Lance, who looked like he was about to piss in his pants as he sat nervously on the edge of a couch.

It was Emmett that first saw me.

"Jesus Christ, Bellsy... what the fuck happened?" he gasped, looking up when Edward dropped Young like a sack of potatoes to the floor.

"Get this fucker out of here!" Edward barked at the Fed that came through the door, but he was already walking to me...with a limp. "Fuck, Bella, where are

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you hurt?" he asked, and I smiled at the fact that he'd asked the same damned question his father had.

"I'm not," I sighed, feeling my whole body relax at the sight of everyone okay.

"Bells!" my girls gushed, and they all rushed to me, but didn't touch me yet.

"You're fucking covered in blood, baby," he countered, his eyes raking down from my face to my feet. "And don't move, love. There's glass everywhere."

I looked around, noticing that had I taken a few more steps into the room, I'd have cut the shit out of my bare feet. Large lights had been toppled over, and their bulbs had shattered across the wood floor. Edward scooped me up and deposited me on the very same stool Makenna had just been sitting on, and then he stood between my legs, cupping my face.

"You're *sure* you're okay?" he verified, tucking my hair behind my ears as I nodded. "'Cause this blood is scaring the shit out of me," he murmured.

"Not mine," I snorted, wincing when I went to reach for his face with my injured wrist. "Okay, so my wrist is sprained," I admitted, and with a touch just as gentle as his father's had been, he picked it up and kissed it. "How 'bout you?" I asked, frowning at a cut above his eye, and I still hadn't forgotten that he was hobbling around on his bad knee.

"Pretty boy *may* have a scar...the poor thing," Mickey teased from behind him, but it broke the tension in the room.

Edward grinned, rolled his eyes, and shook his head, stepping away from me when Makenna finally felt that she could rush into my arms.

"I'm sorry they separated us," I whispered at her. "Are you okay?"

She nodded, her little pigtails bouncing with every movement. "Yeah, yeah," she sighed, giving Lance a dirty look. "Girly boy over there was trying his damndest to keep things on the up and up. He even told Dale that he shouldn't

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touch me, because of who you were, but that didn't stop him."

Emmett slapped Lance on the back so hard that he slipped off the edge of the couch and onto the floor, only to struggle to get back up again. "Glad to hear that you didn't fuck up, too, little man. They'd be carrying your ass out on a stretcher...you know...kinda like they did your pal, Dale."

We all snickered at him, but I turned back to Makenna when she continued. "Anyway, after the first couple of pictures, Dale decided he'd make his move. Girl, that man fucking touched my ass, and the next thing I knew, he was dragging himself out from underneath that damn TV over there," she growled, pointing to a ginormous plasma television that was now in a billion pieces. "And *then*..." she gushed, pointing to the doorway, "all this noise started coming down the hall, and Dale fucking panicked like a damn girl. So he grabs me and pins me against the wall... *right there*." She pointed to the space on the wall that looked like the drywall was cracked, and I narrowed my eyes at her. "Next thing I know, Em and Edward are busting through the door, and Dale is ripped away from me."

I glanced up at Emmett, who was nodding proudly, and then to Edward, who almost looked embarrassed.

"You said find her," he stated with a one shoulder shrug. "Jasper said that my dad was one room from you...and..." He ran a hand through his hair, huffing frustratedly. "What happened up there?"

I nodded, knowing that I had missed a few things over the radio. "It was a hit, plain and simple." I took a deep breath, calmer now that it was over. "But I almost fucked up," I admitted with a grimace. "He heard me talk to you." I waved a hand towards Edward. "He figured out I was wired and started to make a call... It all went to hell in a hand-basket after that. Poor Jasper never had a shot, and the guy tackled me to the floor...all three hundred fucking pounds of his giant ass! He figured out he didn't need a gun and wanted... *more* than the ten grand that he was getting paid, so he thought he'd just... *take*."

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"Mother *fucker*," Edward snarled, picking up the closest thing, which just happened to be an expensive looking camera, and launched it full force into the wall. It exploded into oblivion, tiny pieces scattering everywhere. "I'll fucking kill him..."

He started for the door, but I had to stop him.

"Edward, wait!" I said, waving him back to me. "He's...he's already dead."

Edward spun on his heel; I didn't miss the wince when he did it, either.

"Your dad and Alec," was all I whispered.

"If they did it, then what the fuck is all that?" he asked, gesturing to my clothes, and I could see him fighting his temper, his emotions, but Edward was nothing if not passionate about my safety.

The room had become quiet, as it usually did when our friends thought we were fighting. They shifted uncomfortably, but they didn't leave. I was sure it looked like he was pissed at me, but I knew him well enough to know that he was just trying to calm down, to not lose it. He was only worried, and he didn't always show it the right way.

"He was on top of me," I explained, trying not to flinch when Edward's face darkened and his nostrils flared. "But he gave me enough room to reach the gun on my leg...I pulled the trigger from underneath him..."

Edward stopped, his eyes a piercing bright green as he folded his arms across his chest. "My dad made it to you in time? And ordered the fucker's death?" he asked, and I saw the pure, raw power and hatred in his eyes over someone hurting me. It was scary and sexy and gorgeous, all at one time, and I wasn't sure that I'd ever loved him more.

"Yes and yes," I vowed, "and Alec carried it out..." I opened my arms for him, saying, "I'm okay. Other than the wrist, he didn't hurt me. In fact, I'd say he came out worse...even before Alec got to him."

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Edward smirked, snickering slightly and shaking his head. "Good girl," he crooned, kissing my forehead, but turning when several people walked into the room, his hand gripping my shirt in order to keep me close.

Carlisle, Alec, and Felix all stomped into the room, followed by Benny, Jasper, and Eleazar, but my eyes narrowed on Benny.

"You want to tell me why we let King leave, Benny?" I growled, starting to get down, but Edward held me firm. "You could've fucking had him!"

"Glass, *sweetness*," he reminded me, wrapping a firm arm around my stomach and standing behind me.

"Not enough to hold him, Bella," Benny countered, sighing at my snort of frustration and eye roll. "Please, please trust me on this," he begged, but I looked to Carlisle.

"Really?" I asked, almost sounding like I was whining. "He orders a hit on me, and it's *not enough*?"

Carlisle smiled wryly, because if anyone understood my irritation, it was him. "Not that I didn't want you to fill him full of lead, Bella, but Benny explained what he wants to do tomorrow after Charlie's memorial, and it's not bad..." He trailed off, looking to Edward when I folded my arms across my chest.

"Bella, nothing he said tonight would've held up in court," Benny countered, holding up his hands in a surrendering gesture when I huffed.

"I don't give a fuck about court, Benny," I sneered.

"But tomorrow," he continued, like I hadn't said anything, "we'll have him exactly where we want him. He'll think you're dead, that Carlisle's in charge, and that Corbin can step in. But what he doesn't know is that I'm sending you in armed to the teeth with your mother's file, the whole place wired for sound, and once he steps foot in your office, the shooting range and the weapons deal he's supposed to be making will be raided. He'll be finished. Publicly, loudly,

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and without the need to testify, Bella. You didn't want to testify, and now you don't have to, because not only will you get him to sing like a bird, but Dale is outside right now spewing every detail."

I rubbed my wrist when it gave a dull throb, my eyes still narrowed on Benny. "You're getting more out of this than I am," I snapped. "As far as I'm concerned, King can fall twenty five stories with the fucking lawyer. I don't care about justice...or courts...or public humiliation. There will be plenty of him spread all over the *public* when I shove his ass out of Edward's chopper. And that will be fabulously humiliating."

Benny smirked at the laughter that exploded in the room, despite the activity that the Federal officers were doing in and out of the room.

"You name the time and place, baby," Edward chuckled softly in my ear. "I think I can take him higher than twenty five stories for you, too."

Benny stepped forward, but Carlisle stopped him, coming to stand in front of me. He took a deep breath, and his eyes filled with a sadness that I wasn't expecting. "Don't you think Charlie could've taken the easy out, Bells? He could have called me, told me all of this...including the part about your mother." He sighed, shaking his head and cupping my face. "I could've made all of this go away for him, and he knew it. He knew all he had to do was ask, to tell me what the fuck had happened, but he *so* wanted to do the right thing, sweetheart. He wanted King to be exposed to the world for what he really was, not taken out for the next bad guy to come along to take his place. Charlie wanted to make an example out of Royce King. It was why he was determined to testify, why he held onto the evidence of your mother's murder in order to wait until DNA was accepted by the courts - or until you remembered."

I wrinkled my nose, feeling the prick of tears in my eyes. "That's not fair, Carlisle," I whispered, looking away from him.

"I'm not saying you have to testify, but you can get King to confess. I *know* you can," he urged. "If *anyone* can get that man to lay it all on the line, it's you, sweetheart."

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"I thought you said..." I started, but my throat constricted around the words I'd started to say.

"I know what I said," he whispered against my forehead. "And any promises I've ever made you...they aren't forgotten," he vowed, raising an eyebrow at me. "But I think you should do this for Charlie...for your *mom*."

"Dad..." Edward started, but his father held up a hand to stop him. He obeyed instantly, but he wasn't happy about it.

Flashes of each of my father's letters that he'd left to me flew through my mind.

Renee didn't commit suicide, baby; she was murdered, and now that I'm gone, you need to know why, because in order to catch the guy that did it, you're going to need to see this through.

My sweet little girl, everything you need to put Royce King away for life is in this envelope and in that brilliant mind of yours.

It is still registered as a "cold case," and with what is in that envelope, you will be able to put King away for life, because now, DNA is widely used.

It's your choice, Bella. I know that you'll make the best decision, no matter what.

I huffed, biting my bottom lip and finally coming to the realization that Carlisle was right; my dad wanted King put away. He'd hinted at it, urged me, even though he'd left the decision completely up to me. But he'd done everything in his power to make it happen and died trying to do the right thing. Carlisle could've easily taken King out years ago. All my dad had to do was tell him - but he didn't. He fought and scratched, until it ultimately became bigger than he'd ever thought it would. It got out of hand, because he was fighting alone.

I looked around the room, and they were all patiently waiting for me to answer. I snorted, wondering for a split second... What would have happened had Charlie called us? Had he just *told* us? Would we still be standing here, the

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unbreakable team that we were? Because by God, we'd formed the most amazing crew I'd ever had the pleasure of working with, and for that, I was sorry my dad kind of missed out.

As Edward silently played with a lock of my hair, I sighed in contentment.

No, it wouldn't have been the same. Maybe it was always meant to be this way. Maybe I was supposed to be on my own; the term orphaned sounded silly to use for an adult, but it was what I felt like. Maybe we were supposed to fight and claw and heal - all of us - because I looked around the room again, and I saw...Alice and Jasper...Emmett and Rose...even Mickey, who had found Obie along the way. I found out about Esme and Carlisle, how calm and deep their love was, despite the prior losses in their lives.

And then, there was Edward.

My hero - the man that meant more to me than all this other shit. We'd saved each other. We relied on each other, made the best fucking partners *ever*. I loved him with an all consuming fire, with the love of a best friend, and the admiration of someone I totally respected. He'd pushed me, fought me, and loved me. He'd let me in, when no one else was worthy. And he'd slowly put me back together, piece by fucking piece, only to have me come out better once it was all over.

We'd become what our mothers had dreamed that we'd become, and it was that last thought - the flash of my mom's face as she looked at the two of us in that crib - that made me answer, because she deserved more. She deserved a file that said, "Case Closed."

"Okay," I sighed, nodding a little, "but I'm going to need all of you..."

A/N... Don't even say it... I know you want King caught, but believe me when I tell you that the next chapter is exactly what I saw when I started this whole story. Well, that and a few...other things.. LOL

So now you know why Charlie did everything. He wanted to catch King...legitimately. He needed to make an example out of him, to catch him red-handed. And he tried. Carlisle is right, because one call to him could have ended this years ago, but Charlie wanted to not only stop King, but stop the whole mob process. It unfortunately got completely out of his hand. No matter what money and power Charlie possessed, King countered it with his own. And that became the problem. That and the fact that Bella remembered nothing, and there was a small part of Charlie that was okay with that, because he never wanted her to hurt over Renee's death...

Okay, so if you haven't guessed...the show down with King is the next chapter. Not to mention Wendell. And NO...I haven't forgotten about Miller. At all.

Now...a huge thanks to JenRar for beta'ing this one... and the whips and chains she uses every week to get you guys two chapters. LOL Yeah, I kinda like it, so don't tell her. To MedusaInNY for the big, big help on my blog. And Goober_Lou for pre-reading, though between the two of us, RL has kicked in pretty hard.

Now...I'm pretty sure that the next update will be Sunday. Chapter 28 is almost ready to send to JenRar, but I've got a few kinks that need to be worked out, so until then...REVIEW. Let me know if you're as pissed as Bella was that King had to wait, or is it better to catch him like Charlie wanted. And Edward in full working, gun-toting, foul word spewing, fist fighting form is just...HOT. I don't care what you say! XD But either way, let me know what you think. Until Sunday... Later.

Chapter 28

A/N...We're one more step closer to the end, guys. As bittersweet as that may be, I know that most of you are curious as to how all the bad guys go down. And I'm sure that you're wondering what the future holds for not just our Mercward and Bella, but with all the characters. I need you to trust me when it comes to what represents my... *sense* of revenge. :) And you also need to understand that all your questions will be answered.

It was interesting that you all were a little split when it came to the decision on letting King leave the club. SOME of you guessed at what will happen...and were spot on, and some of you are just letting things take their course, but not without your...very violent opinions! LOL I love that!

What I need you to keep in mind is that I have had the ending to this story planned out since the first chapter was written. With that being said, let's see if tough Mercward will let someone finally take a look at that knee, huh? Hehehe

CHAPTER 28

EDWARD

The whole apartment looked like an infirmary on a military base. Esme was attending to Bella's wrist as I walked through the kitchen. Makenna had a few cuts from glass she'd received from inside Lance's apartment, Emmett's hand was pretty banged up from all the punches he'd put in, and Mickey had a really bad bump on her head from when the two of us had busted in the door of the fourth floor. Apparently, when the guy tackled me, he'd knocked her into the wall.

Alice, Jasper, and Alec were all in the living room, intercepting every call made to King and rerouting all calls he made out from both his landline and his cell. Alice had hacked into the phone systems, because we knew someone would try to contact King over the raid. Benny also had a tail on him, stopping

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anyone from going anywhere near him, because the asshole had to stay in the fucking dark for at least twenty-four hours.

"Freeze, Edward!" both Esme and Bella ordered, giving me stern looks.

"Sit," Bella added, raising an eyebrow at me as Esme finished wrapping her wrist. "You're going to get looked at, whether you like it or not."

I grimaced and groaned, rolling my eyes, but I didn't dare fight them on this. It didn't help that my knee was fucking killing me, and the cut above my eye was stinging like a bastard.

Esme snorted, but patted the top of the table. "Sit, son. Let me see that knee."

I'd already showered, changed into cargo shorts, and helped Alec with dinner, because by the time we'd all gotten back to the apartment, mine and Bella's crews were starving. Since no one was truly in an emergency state, Esme let everyone shower, change clothes, and eat, before sitting them down to a once over.

I sighed, plopping down onto the end of the table and trying to ignore the wry smile that Esme was wearing, because it was the no nonsense expression on my girl's face that I was obeying. I didn't want to piss her off, because she had enough to worry about tomorrow.

"What happened to you?" Esme asked softly, her gentle touch on my knee almost soothing as she carefully lifted it up.

"He got knocked down a flight of fucking stairs," Mickey rattled me out, sticking out her tongue at my glare as she held a bag of ice to her head.

"Keep it up, wild child. You'll need another bag of ice... *maybe* stitches..." I growled, but smirked when everyone chuckled. I turned back to Esme. "Yeah, we kicked open the front door...ow, fuck!" I snarled, squeezing my eyes closed as she bent my leg just the right way, putting pressure on the tendons along the side. "Damn it!" I took a deep breath, gripping the table top, and continued.

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"Anyway, as soon as it was open, this asshole tackled me down the damn stairs...he *may* have gotten in two good punches."

"Mmhm," Bella hummed, giving the cut over my eye a look. "Don't move," she ordered softly, and just her mere presence was calming after a night like tonight. "I don't think he needs stitches, Esme."

"Well, just butterfly it and cover it," Esme replied, not even bothering to look up from my knee, until I hissed in pain. Her eyes locked with mine. "I *should* make you go get x-rays, Edward," she warned, raising an eyebrow at me, "because I think you tore old scar tissue."

"Hell, no," I grumbled, shaking my head, because emergency rooms were pure hell. I'd rather get in another fight, to be honest.

"If you don't be still," Bella growled softly as she tried to bandage my forehead, "I'm going to tie you down and make Emmett sit on you."

I grinned, because Emmett stood up from his seat, cracking all his knuckles and his neck.

"I'm tired, but I can handle it, Bellsy," he chuckled, shooting a wink her way.

"No offense, man, but *your ass* isn't coming anywhere near me," I laughed, turning back to Bella. " *Yours*, on the other hand..." I whispered to her, but Esme must have heard me anyway, because she laughed softly as she began to wrap my knee.

"Shut up, Edward," Bella giggled, rolling her eyes, but when she looked up at me through her eyelashes, I knew what was coming next. " *All* your parts must work, if that's the case..."

"They work," I chuckled, shaking my head at her sweet, but very naughty smile. "Some are just...achy."

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"Hmm, right," she sighed, pointing a finger at me once she was finished.

"Behave, Edward. I mean it. This knee is scaring me. It's not the first time since all this shit started that you've limped around here. I'd like you to be able to walk in our future, please."

I huffed, feeling the mood change from fun to serious, but she was right; I'd limped for two days after my chase with Miller.

"Yes, ma'am," I sighed, giving in completely and taking the ice pack that Esme was handing me.

"Rest it, keep it elevated, but after tomorrow, you're getting it checked out," Esme ordered.

I nodded in acquiescence, not even bothering to argue. I slid carefully to the floor, testing my weight on it now that it was wrapped. Suddenly, I was exhausted, and all I wanted was to fall into bed with my girl. As if she could read my mind, Bella slipped her hand into mine.

"Come on," she said softly. "Let's get you off that leg."

She guided me down the hall, settled me on the bed after stripping me down to my boxer briefs, and set a pillow under my knee. I had to smile, wondering where this beautiful thing had been when I'd come home from the Air Force the first time I'd been injured. It made sitting in bed ever so much better when I had something that sweet to look at as she got herself ready for bed, pulling just my t-shirt on and crawling in next to me.

With the lights off and the room quiet, she curled herself into my side, laying her head on my chest. The question that escaped her next was one I truly wasn't fucking expecting.

"Twins, Edward?" she snorted, placing a kiss to my chest when I groaned. "I heard Emmett over the radio. Detroit? Twins? *Really?*"

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I could hear her amusement, but that didn't make me any less uncomfortable with this subject.

"It was a long time ago, Bella," I huffed, looking out the window at the Seattle skyline. "I was really fucking drunk."

She turned her head to look at me, setting her chin on her hands as she continued to lay on my chest. "I'm not a fan of threesomes...I'm too selfish," she stated nonchalantly.

"Well, *you* made out with Rose," I countered like a belligerent child, still unable to look her in the eye directly.

She giggled, rolling her eyes and placing another kiss to my chest. "I did. And I was really fucking drunk, too. It was also a really long time ago."

I studied her face, and she didn't seem upset, but my mind flickered to our two...indiscretions. No way in hell did I want another woman, first of all. And second, no one came near my girl, but me - male or female.

"I-I... I w-won't sh-share y-you," I sputtered, frowning at her. "P-period. It's o-out of th-the question."

She smiled and pushed herself up in order to press her lips to mine. "Good boy," she crooned, sweeping her lips across mine to the point that I thought I'd go mad with the desire to really just fucking kiss the shit out of her. "I don't play well with other women when it comes to sharing, Edward. Jake is a prime example of that, and I didn't love him a fraction of the way I love you."

So this was a warning - an unnecessary warning - but one, nonetheless.

"Just you, baby," I reminded her, cupping her face. It was the same statement I'd made on the dance floor when we'd danced with Mack. "A-always, love."

With that said, I really did kiss her, because it had been a really long fucking night. I was tired, she was tired, and I needed that reconnection. I needed her

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taste on my tongue, her warmth slipping along my side, before I drifted off into dreams I couldn't control.

~oOo~

I awoke to the most hideous of bright lights in my eyes as the morning streamed in through the windows, but the most glorious of warm, strong hands down my underwear.

I could feel every inch of Bella lined up behind me, wrapped around me, our legs tangled together. I couldn't help myself when my own hand joined hers, stopping her completely when my fingers met the wrap around her wrist.

"No, don't stop me," she complained, turning me over and crawling up on top of me. "Let me..."

"Baby..." I breathed, but she shut me up with her mouth on mine, and I was lost to her.

She swept her tongue into my mouth as my hands found a delicious grip on her ass. She was still wearing my t-shirt, but nothing else, and it was that discovery that made me grind her down on me, because waking up this way was the fucking best - something I'd never experienced until Bella.

"I just fucking *need* you," she growled, sitting up as I skimmed the t-shirt off of her and tossed it away.

"I'm not stopping you, baby," I told her, because I could see her need, her worry, her nerves about today just about overwhelming her, and if it was me that made it better, then I was there. Completely. "I could never fucking stop you..." I whispered, slipping my fingers into her hair and pulling her back to me.

She didn't wait - for anything. She just took, and God, if it wasn't sexy as hell.

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I groaned and writhed under her when her mouth, teeth, and tongue drifted down my jaw, my neck, my chest. Grabbing my underwear, she didn't even pull them all the way off, before she was looming back over me and positioning what was now a very wet, very warm pussy over me.

But it was her almost relieved, "Yes," that hissed from her as she enveloped me completely that caused me to sit up face to face with her. Eyes rolling back, Bella threaded her fingers into my hair, pressing her forehead to mine as she moved over me.

"Better, baby?" I asked her, nipping at her lips as my hands helped her move, helped guide her to her release. "You just needed some cock first thing?"

"Yes," she whimpered as I bent her back a little, taking one of her nipples, which had been teasing against my chest, into my mouth, my eyes locked on her face.

"My cock?" I growled softly, feeling so fucking possessive that it wasn't even funny.

"Yes," she whined, her brow furrowing just a little.

I smiled against her breast as her breath caught the very second my teeth grazed over her peak. Her face was gorgeous, desperate, and fucking lost to it all. Her head fell back, the tips of her long hair tickling my thighs as I kissed up her neck to her ear.

"If you're gonna fuck me, love, then at least look at me," I told her, holding her hair at the base of her neck as she lifted her head back up.

She grabbed both sides of my face, turning it almost roughly as she claimed my mouth again. Her kisses were deep and desperate, yet so full of love that it almost took my breath away. And suddenly, the need to see her come was absolutely all I wanted.

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I fell back, watching her ride me hard, and feeling the need to come start to build in the pit of my stomach. Bending my legs behind her, I met her thrust for thrust and brought my thumb to my mouth, swirling my tongue over it. Bella's eyes darkened as she watched me, licking her lips slowly as her whole body rolled gracefully, beautifully over mine.

"You want to come, don't you?" I asked, her my thumb just barely pressing the spot where we were connected.

She nodded frantically, her fingers digging deliciously into my sides and her thighs shaking with the exertion.

"No, baby," I said, shaking my head and grinning a bit. "If you're going to take me like this, then you're in charge. You tell *me* that you want to come."

"God, Edward... *please*," she panted, begging me with her eyes and biting her bottom lip.

"Then come, Bella," I commanded, pressing her exactly where she needed it and swirling my thumb over the spot that caused her to cry out.

I sat up again, wrapping an arm around her waist as she enveloped my whole head in her warm embrace. She panted hard against my cheek as she completely shattered, shaking and trembling in my arms as my own release joined hers, my head falling to her shoulder.

Her hands gripped my shoulders as her muscles continued to twitch, her breathing still a little heavy. "I love you," she breathed, placing the best of kisses to my jaw. "I'm sorry that I woke you," she snickered.

"I'm not," I chuckled, pulling back to hold her sweet face in my hands. "I love you, too. And you'll be perfect today, Bella. I wish you wouldn't worry. I'll be there the whole time, baby."

She took a deep breath, letting it out slowly as she nodded.

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"If something goes wrong, there's always the chopper idea. We'll drop him right down onto the front steps of Twi Tech," I said with a half smile.

Bella rolled her eyes, but broke into the giggle I lived to hear. "Sure, okay," she sighed, kissing my lips. "Then I guess we better get this shit over with, huh?"

"Like I said, *sweetness*...you're in charge."

~oOo~

BELLA

I watched from the back of the auditorium as employee after employee filed in. I took a deep breath as not only the bottom seats filled, but the balconies, as well. We were keeping my presence a secret, but only for Royce King, whose pompous ass was already in the front fucking row.

Carlisle was going to give the eulogy, ask for a moment of silence in my father's honor, and dismiss everyone for the weekend. Under normal circumstances, the CEO - myself - would have done it, but Carlisle and Benny wanted my arrival in my office to be a surprise.

I had to fight tooth and nail to at least attend the damn thing, so I leaned back against Edward as we hid away in the sound booth with Alice and Jasper.

"You okay?" he whispered, wrapping warm arms around me.

I snorted, turning to all of them. "My father died weeks ago," I sighed, shaking my head, "and in some ways, it still hasn't hit me." I looked down at my hands as Edward tucked a lock of hair behind my ear. "This is his funeral," I started with a grimace, "and all I can think about is his last wish...to get this King business over with." I picked at my nails, shrugging. "I don't know what I'm supposed to feel."

"Pride, Bells," Jasper spoke softly as he lounged casually back in his chair, tilting his head at me, but Alice and Edward turned their attention to him, as

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well. "You didn't ask for a single minute of this shit, you know?" he huffed a humorless laugh. "I can't imagine what it was like for you - thinking one thing about your parents and finding out another. You've handled it better than I think anyone expected."

He paused for a moment, his eyes filling with something Jasper very rarely showed - sadness.

"I was in Afghanistan when my mom died," he said, frowning just a little. "I couldn't leave, couldn't fly home - though Eddie offered to take me AWOL," he snorted, gesturing to a smirking Edward. "When I was finally able to get home - months later, mind you - and it was like losing her all over again." He sniffed, fiddling with Alice's bracelet, not looking away from it. "She knew she was sick, so no matter how many calls I was able to make, she still wrote me a letter. She told me that she was proud of me, to take care of my dad, and that I shouldn't be upset. She said that children were supposed to outlive their parents, that she didn't need me to tell her I loved her, because she knew. She *always* knew." He wrinkled his nose just a bit, but took a deep breath. "She told all her little old lady church friends that I was an American hero, that I was busy doing things that kept the world safe, and that's why I couldn't come home."

Jasper finally met my gaze and sighed. "What I'm trying to tell you is be proud of what you've done, because I get the impression that your parents busted their asses to get you to this point. You weren't inside the beach house when your dad came in, practically grabbing Eddie and his dad and making them *swear* that nothing happened to you."

I looked up at Edward, who was nodding solemnly, but so was Alice.

"You know Charlie wouldn't want you upset," Alice stated softly. "He'd want you to toast him and move on. He'd rather shit get done, you be happy, and he *definitely* wouldn't want you to shed tears."

I snorted, looking at her. "He never did know what to do with a crying girl..." We all snickered a little, but I turned my attention back to Jasper. "You still see

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your dad?"

He smiled widely and nodded. "Yes, ma'am. I did what Momma told me. His house is paid, his bills are paid, and all he does all day is putter around in his garden. And I swear he's got a thing for the little old lady next door," he laughed, shaking his head when we all joined him.

There was a soft knock on the audio room door, and Edward got up to look, but he cracked it open when he saw that it was Alec.

He stepped into the room, his eyes falling to me. " *Bellissima*, Carlisle wanted me to tell you that he'd be starting soon, but wanted Edward and Jasper to know that the raid is about to go down at the shooting range, for Alice to pull it up."

"Thank you, Alec," I sighed, turning to Alice with a nod. "Go ahead, pixie. I'm sure they'll want to hear it."

Alec knelt before me, his face pensive, but he took his hands in mine. "You'll be fine, *bellissima*. Trust those around you. *A volte, la famiglia viene a noi ... e più forte rispetto al suo sangue siamo nati in...*" He paused, smirking up at me. "In English... *Sometimes, family comes to us...and it's stronger than the blood we were born into*. My grandmother said shit like that all the time, so I'm used to saying them in Italian."

I smiled down at him, leaning in to kiss his cheek, because I'd really come to like Alec, to trust him. "Your grandmother sounds like she was a really smart lady."

"Hell, yes, she was," he snorted, standing up in front of me. "She raised me!"

We all stopped when Carlisle's voice came through the sound system, and when we looked up, he was taking his place at the podium.

"I'd better get back up there," Alec sighed, shaking his head. "It's all I can do to stop Emmett from just pulling out his gun and leveling King right there in front

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of everyone."

We chuckled as he left the tiny little control room, but Edward spoke up, returning to his seat behind me.

"Jasper, listen in to that raid for me, okay?"

"Sir," he replied, pulling up next to Alice and her laptop and tugging on a pair of headphones.

Edward kissed the side of my head, linking our fingers together as his father cleared his throat and began.

"I'd like all of you to honor a moment of silence for Charlie Swan..."

~oOo~

We'd waited until the auditorium was empty before leaving. Jasper had listened to the entire raid on the shooting range, and it had gone down without a hitch. In fact, Wes Michaels was already being escorted to Twi Tower as an additional surprise for Royce King - escorted by our own CIA friends.

As I stepped off of the executive elevator, my ever present and always handsome bodyguard in tow, I took a deep breath. On the other side of the doors to my father's office, Carlisle was already talking to King, but I had one small matter to take care of before I joined them.

That matter was sitting in the waiting room, with a narrowed eyed Rose and Angela glaring at him from behind Rose's reception desk. Angela had recently been told everything - by Benny, no less, who it seemed was trying to impress her - so her excitement was just about palpable.

"Mr. Wendell," I stated, trying not to smile when he jumped. I failed, but I didn't care, and even Edward snorted at his reaction.

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The little weasel stood up, already breaking into sweat. Whether it was my presence or the presence of the silent, but very stern-faced Edward, I had no idea, but he was definitely nervous.

"Ah, Miss Swan," he said, oozing butt-kissing skills like no tomorrow. "Always a pleasure to be invited to your office. What can I do for you?"

"It's what *I* can do for *you*, Mr. Wendell," I countered, slapping a very thick file down on the coffee table of the waiting area. "See, I can *not* call the Bar and tell them all about your illegal activities. I can *not* call your wife and tell her you've been hauled off to jail, and that everything she owns, knows, and loves has been paid for by blood money and she won't get to keep any of it. And I can *not* kill you where you stand for ratting out my father after he took you in almost fresh after the Bar exam."

He swallowed thickly, glancing down at the ominous file and back around the room to the four faces that were watching him intently.

"I have enough information in that file - because you're the *dumbest* criminal I've ever met - to put you away for a *very long time*," I stated, pointing to the file again and starting to pace slowly in front of him. "There's bribery, extortion, illegally drawn documents...not to mention the phone records from your own office. You might remember that my father *loved* his toys, Mr. Wendell, so the day he was wired in a meeting with King, there was a phone call from your office that traced to a Victoria Hunter, because he trusted no one." I stopped in front of him, watching his mouth gape like a fish out of water. "You know her, don't you? She kept very interesting company..."

He nodded frantically, but didn't interrupt.

"Good, I'm glad we're on the same page," I said with a small smile. "I have emails and financial records that go back almost eight years, Mr. Wendell. Tell me, did my father not pay you enough? Or are you just a greedy little bastard that can't say no to a dollar shoved his way? Or *maybe* its that nasty little habit of yours..." I mused dramatically, rubbing my chin and hearing Rose snort behind me.

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"Now, tell me, Mr. Wendell," I snickered, tilting my head at him. "How much money did you owe Dale Young?" I asked, having recently found out that Ivan Wendell loved his just-under-eighteen girls - a fact that came out when Young started spewing facts left and right the night before. When he didn't answer, I answered for him. "Somewhere around a quarter of a million, right?" I laughed humorlessly. "They were *minors*," I growled, shaking my head at him. "Do you know what they do to baby rapers in prison, Mr. Wendell?"

"Yes," he whispered, looking down at the floor.

"It wasn't that you just liked 'em young, was it?" I continued, raising an eyebrow at him. "They had to be from other countries, bought on the black market so they couldn't be traced, so they weren't... *missing*. And then you'd just let them go in a foreign country, where they couldn't leave and could barely even survive."

"Yes," he breathed again, and now his skin had taken on the color just this shy of split pea soup. "What do you want, Miss Swan?" he whispered, finally making eye contact with me.

I lifted my chin and studied him for a moment. "You're going to pull one more job for Charlie," I told him. "You're about to have one last client, and you're going to make sure that he gets life in prison." I walked around to stand in front of him. "You'll get a call in a few hours, and your new client will be down in county jail, having been arrested under what I'm hoping will be a plethora of charges. You're not going to ask for bail, though I can't imagine he'll be granted any. You're to make sure he knows that *every charge will stick*, that you're the only lawyer he can afford, because as of an hour ago, he lost... *everything*."

"That's it?"

"No," I snorted, rolling my eyes. "That's not it. When it's over... When he's been charged and sentenced, you're going to disappear - never to be heard from again. I don't care if you take your wife and kids with you - that's not my problem - but you're going to get the fuck out of Seattle, out of Washington...hell, out of the country, for all I care. But know this," I growled,

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pointing a finger at him. "Lay *one fucking finger* on another underage girl, and I'll know about it. And that file..." I jerked my chin towards the coffee table. "That file goes not only to the Bar, but the FBI. Are we clear?"

He nodded, but swallowed again as his hands wrung nervously together. "Who's the client, Miss Swan?"

I smiled, looked around the room, finally landing my gaze back on him. "Royce King."

"Shit," he hissed, closing his eyes and now wiping the sweat that was running down his face. "I'll *have* to go into hiding. I'll have no choice..."

"You'll have no choice, because I'm telling you to go!" I snapped, losing my patience with the little slime ball. "If you think I'm bluffing, Mr. Wendell, then you can try me. I'll drag your whole family through the mud. I'll dig up shit from your family tree and spread it all over Seattle. You'll be arrested as a child molester, for terrorism, and for aiding and abetting criminal activities. *Do not fucking turn this offer down.* It will be the biggest mistake you've made yet."

What I didn't want to tell him was that I really needed him to pull this last thing off without a hitch. I was counting on him to screw up somewhere down the line, whether it be with girls or money, and Alice would see it, but for now, I needed him to play the dutiful lawyer to Royce King. When or if he did fuck up, he'd go to jail like he deserved, but I was only buying him time.

"Are we clear, Mr. Wendell?" I asked again, folding my arms across my chest.

He nodded, picking up his briefcase and coat. "Yes, Miss Swan. So I'll be expecting a call?"

"Yes," I sighed, waving him away, "and you'd better answer, Mr. Wendell, or I will find you."

"Yes, ma'am."

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He turned to leave, but unfortunately ran smack into an unmoving, rigid Edward, who glared down at him as he squeaked and darted out around him. I had to hide my smile, but Rose and Angela didn't. Those two snorted behind their hands, shaking their heads, clearly amused at how frightened Wendell was of Edward.

When the elevator doors shut behind him, Angela piped up. "Think he'll show?"

Rose chuckled and nodded. "Of course he'll show. Have you ever met his wife?" When Angela shook her head no, Rose laughed. "Let's just say that *she* runs that household. In fact, I'd love to be a fly on the wall when he tells her they're leaving the country."

We all chuckled, but stopped when Rose's phone beeped on her desk. She looked up at me. "That's for you, Bells. Carlisle wants you in there."

I took a deep breath, handed her Wendell's file, and pulled another one out of my case. It was my mother's police case file, and it was complete. I just needed to get King to say aloud everything that had happened that night.

With one last look to Rose, and then to Edward, I nodded, swallowing thickly and walking to my father's office door. Edward stopped me before he reached for the door knob.

"You can do this, baby," he whispered against my head. "He's just a man...nothing more, nothing less. He'll be intimidated by you and shocked you're still alive. Use it. Use your anger, because the things he's done...he deserves to pay, love."

I nodded, leaning into him for a brief moment and pulling all my strength from him for this next step.

"You'll give Charlie what he wanted, Bella, and that's what all this is about - fulfilling his final wish," he whispered, placing one more kiss to my head, before grabbing the office door and yanking it open.

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To say that Royce King was surprised to see me would have been an understatement. Carlisle's face was priceless as he stared at King the second Edward and I walked into the room. My godfather was leaning casually against the front of my father's desk, and Emmett and Alec guarded the doors.

King was not alone, either, because standing behind the sofa was another rather large goon that reminded me of the guard last night.

"Isabella!" King gushed, finding his composure and standing up to shake my hand. "I didn't think you'd make it today..."

"We had an appointment, yes?" I asked, sitting down in my father's chair.

"Yes, yes," King said, a wrinkle to his brow. "I suppose we did."

I looked up at Carlisle. "I'm sorry I'm late, but I had another meeting run over," I said with a smirk.

"It went well, I trust," he mused, turning his back on King.

"Yes, he's on board with what we need," I answered cryptically with a chuckle, as Edward came to stand behind me in the window, facing the room.

"I know you're former military, Mr. Cullen," King chuckled, gesturing around the room. "But is all this... *protection* necessary?"

"Yes," Carlisle answered, turning to face him. "We acquired additional security after Charlie's death. It seems his murder was...planned."

"Huh," King answered, giving nothing away, but we weren't there to close Charlie's case; we were there for my mother and for the weapons charge.

"Well, let's get started now that Isabella has joined us."

"Yes, please," I sighed, slapping down my mother's file onto the desk. "You said you had a business proposition for me, so let's see it."

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"You don't beat around the bush, do you, Miss Swan?"

I narrowed my eyes at King and huffed. "No, I don't," I stated, leaning my elbows on the desk. "I have plenty of things to do. One of which is to scatter my father's ashes later today, so if you don't mind..."

My confrontation with Wendell had given me encouragement and a little extra bravery, and I needed to maintain my level of control, because *this guy* was the last and final piece. Miller was still out there, but that was personal. This was business, with a touch of family honor thrown in for good measure.

"Yes, of course," King said, getting up from the sofa with a folder in his hand. "I was hoping I'd be able to repair the relationship with Twi Tech with you, Isabella. I'm afraid that Charlie and I... Well, we had a bit of a falling out, but my offer is still just as good today as it was six months ago when I met with him last."

"Let's see it, then," I sighed, reaching for it as he came to stand in front of my desk.

He handed over the folder, and I flipped through it. He wanted large quantities of weapons, but not just guns - heavy weaponry, as well. He wanted grenades, mines, not to mention military grade computer launching systems. He was willing to pay top money for them, well over cost, and the contract was for a year.

I snorted, looking up at him and raising an eyebrow. "Going to war, Mr. King?"

He laughed heartily, but shook his head. "No, Isabella. I've got interests in other countries that require...a heavy hand for protection. This will keep my employees safe, as well as make you a substantial profit."

"A heavy hand is an automatic rifle," I chuckled, setting the file down. "Not a smart bomb, Mr. King. Who would be using these?" I asked, tilting my head at him. "Because I'm not unfamiliar with your...career, *Royce*."

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He smiled, slow and slimy, but nodded as his eyes swept around the room.

"We're *all* familiar," I stated, gesturing to Carlisle, as well as Alec and Emmett at the doors, and Edward behind me, "so cut the shit, King. I'm all about making a profit, but I'm not supplying to someone that will come after me *or* my country."

This was make or break time with him, because he was eventually going to find out his deal at the shooting range fell through. The whole lot was arrested just an hour prior by Wes Michaels, and King had no idea, but he switched gears on me - beautifully, I might add. I couldn't have begged for a better lead-in than what he served up to me. In fact, with his next words, all the men in the room raised their eyebrows high.

"Damn, you're as feisty as your mother," King chuckled, shaking his head and leaning on the front of my desk. "I meant what I said last night, Isabella. You've surpassed her by a mile. And you're every bit Charlie's daughter..."

I smiled, standing up in front of him, the desk the only thing between us. "I *will* take that as a compliment, Mr. King. You asked me last night what I remember about my mother. Are you sure you're ready for that answer?"

King looked smug, because he truly believed what my father had said to him, that I was eight and remembered nothing. He nodded, smiling slightly.

"I remember my mother coming home from this office with a torn shirt when I was six," I started, raising an eyebrow at him, because he'd attacked her a few years before he actually broke into my house to rape and kill her. "And you know, after that, she was never the same. She started drinking, Mr. King." I walked from around the desk to the bookcase, pulling a picture off the shelf and holding it up for him to see. "For years, I thought it was because my father was cheating on her, but this is the last picture we were all in. Look at them, Mr. King," I told him, handing the picture over to him. "Does that look like a couple that's having problems?" I asked, knowing that my parents were looking at each other like no one else was there as they held me on their laps.

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"No, but..."

"No," I interrupted him with a humorless laugh. "No, it doesn't. It took a long time for me to realize that it wasn't my father's fault...you know, my mother's decline. And it took some reminders, some pictures, and a few old memories resurfacing for me to come to the conclusion on whose fault it actually was." I leaned back against the bookcase - the very bookcase that Benny was behind in my apartment at that very moment. "Tell me, Mr. King... Were you in love with my mother?"

He didn't answer, but stood stock-still, waiting to find out where I was going with this.

I clicked my tongue against my teeth, shaking my head. "Careful how you answer that," I sighed, turning back to the bookcase and pulling something else from the shelf - the Twilight Tech annuals. "I found this the day that I came back to TT," I said, flipping open to the marked page and holding it out for him. "Look at you, all young and shit," I laughed sarcastically, pointing to his face as he stood in a picture with my parents at a function for my father's company. "But look who you're staring at."

Clearly, he was ogling my mother - my pregnant mother - in an old photo in the album.

"Your wife's a beautiful woman," I went on to say. "I feel bad for her, looking at this picture. You're with her, but clearly, you don't want to be. Was it because she couldn't have children, Mr. King? No heir to your...seat of power?" I snorted, rolling my eyes at how none of that existed anymore, and he still didn't know it, but my eyes glanced up when Alec snickered softly. He sobered quickly, shooting me a wink.

"Is that why you left my mother alone when she was pregnant with me?" I laughed, shaking my head at the hilarity of that notion. "You thought maybe after I was born, she'd finally come to you...that you'd be my... *daddy*?" I laughed, and I saw that my questions were making him not only uncomfortable, but very angry.

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"Or..." I chuckled, holding up a finger to stop him from answering, because I knew the truth. "Or...maybe it was *you* that was the problem in the kid department, but the gentleman that you are just blamed it on your wife. How sweet of you."

His face went so red after that statement, it was almost puce. He started to turn to leave, without saying a word, and I stopped him.

"Uh uh," I sang, setting the annual back on the shelf. "If you leave now, you don't get an answer about that weapons deal you want so badly," I warned him, shaking my head when he spun around to face me. "And I do plan on giving you an answer, Royce."

Oh, I could so clearly see the debate in his mind: Stay to make sure Corbin got his weapons, or run from the accusations aimed his way. His life was most likely on the line with the former, but the latter was almost too humiliating to endure.

"And I'm not done talking about my mother," I sighed dramatically, shrugging one shoulder. "Maybe because it's my father's memorial today," I stated softly, like I was talking to myself, but I turned to Carlisle. "Beautiful speech, by the way, Carlisle."

My godfather smirked, bowing his head slightly. "Thank you, Bella."

It had been a moving speech, too. Carlisle spoke of friendship, loyalty, and determination - all things that described my father - and himself, if he were to acknowledge it. He spoke of the past, the present, and the future, and he told fantastically funny stories about what they'd both been like when they were young. He'd ended it by telling us all not to mourn his best friend, but to celebrate him, and all the things he'd accomplished in his life, but by now, I knew my godfather well enough to know that he considered his best friend's greatest accomplishment to be...me.

There was a split second where all I wanted was to hug my godfather, bury myself in the love I knew he had for me, because he was the only dad I had

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left. Instead, I turned back to the task at hand.

"You want an answer, don't you?" I asked King, raising an eyebrow at him, and he nodded slowly. King was, indeed, panicking, because Corbin was holding his leash. "Good, then why don't you tell me about your... *date* with my mother the night she died," I said, sneering the word "date."

King's eyes narrowed on me, but then he glanced around the room, finally landing on his guard.

"Now, now," I chuckled, "that might have worked last night, but we won't have that in here. If I sent your other bodyguard to the morgue in a bag, then with these men, he won't stand a fucking chance." I smirked just a little at King's temper and confusion. "Alec, would you please see Mr. King's...associate out to the waiting room? I'm sure he'd like a cup of coffee..."

Alec said nothing, but he walked over and grabbed the large man by his shirt collar, whispering something in his ear. The man paled, nodded, and walked calmly from the room, into the waiting arms of the Federal officers that Benny had waiting for him, I was sure.

"It's just us, Royce," I said, waving a hand around the room once Alec had returned to the doorway. "You're with...let's see... two men that could kill you where you stand, and two men responsible for the death of Alistair Corbin's wife and child. Oh...and me, of course." I paused for a moment, debating my next words, but considering my company, I decided to lay it on the line. "You know, we talked about your...troubled nephew last night before you left me with your now deceased guard. Your nephew bled like a stuck pig when I shot him." I smiled at him and shrugged. "Maybe he shouldn't have been where he was..." I mused dramatically, thoroughly entertained at the color of King's face now. "So perhaps you can tell me about my mother, because there's not one of us here that doesn't have something to hide..."

King's eyes grew wide as he glanced up at Carlisle. "That was *you*," he breathed, pointing to my godfather. " *You* took down Corbin's family..."

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"Indeed," Carlisle chuckled humorlessly. "But answer the lady's questions, and I'll explain how *you'll* get out of trouble with Corbin," he lied smoothly, because there was no getting out of anything for King.

If anything could have made King spill, it was that last statement. He had no idea how to get out from under Corbin's control, but at this point, he'd be willing to trust anyone to get the weapons that Corbin wanted. King was a desperate man, but he had no idea just how desperate he truly was, because he was alone; his army had been totally disassembled.

King turned back to me, his face pale as he started to nod. "Yes, I was in love with Renee. She was everything I'd ever wanted," he started, shaking his head. "I met her at the first Christmas party your father threw for Twi Tech. I tried everything to charm her, but she wouldn't budge. When she became pregnant with you, I hated your father, because he was getting everything I wanted," he growled, frowning down at the floor. "It wasn't just my wife's problem; it was both of us..." He huffed, looking up at me to see if he had to elaborate on that subject. He didn't.

"So you waited," I prompted.

"Yeah," he sighed, nodding slightly. "My wife figured out my...feelings and forced me to choose, but the last time I saw Renee, I couldn't help myself, so I showed up at your house."

"Yeah, I remember," I muttered, glaring at him when his eyes shot to mine.

"You're going to kill me, aren't you?" he asked suddenly, looking around the room as if he just noticed that he was trapped with men that could and *would* make him disappear.

"No, I'm not," I replied with a shake to my head. "I just want answers to my past before I hand you my future, Mr. King. I'm still going to give you a decision on that contract, but I want answers first." I walked to my desk and picked up the envelope that contained my mother's file... *and* all of the evidence Benny had handed me. "I want to know what gave you the right to

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break down my door, to scare a child, and to force yourself on a woman that clearly never wanted you. I want to know why you left all this shit behind," I snapped, dumping the contents of the envelope onto the desk, including the DNA report that showed positive results that it was his semen in the condom. "And if I don't like your answers, then I'm not going to agree with your...contract, Royce. I want the truth, and I want it *right fucking now!* Or Corbin gets a call that you're the reason he didn't get a fucking thing."

That last threat may have been too much for him, but I wasn't above doing what I said. King moved swiftly and angrily towards me, his temper cracking just a bit.

"I was addicted to coke!" he snapped, rushing towards me, but before he could reach me, both Edward and Carlisle caught him by the arms.

"Touch her, and you don't walk away from this room," Edward growled low in his face. "Got me?" he asked, waiting until King relaxed in his grip. "Good. Now, I believe she asked you something."

Edward forced King down into the chair in front of my desk, standing behind him with his father.

"I was out of my mind, Isabella," he groaned, shaking his head and leaning forward in the chair. "The eighties was riddled with cocaine. I was selling it, using it, and hooked on it. It makes you feel...invincible."

"I was *eight!*" I snapped. "And I was in the fucking house!"

"I know," he sighed, putting his face in his hands. "I'm surprised that shit never came back on me. I left everything behind," he groaned, looking up at me.

"Hmm, you did," I agreed with a nod. "But you left a traumatized child, and that was more important to my father than justice, at the moment. See... I didn't remember this shit. You scared me so badly that I forced the reality out of my head. So...he let me think that something else happened to my mother. Let me see if I can guess what your coked out brain did..." I said, holding up the bag

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that contained the two shot glasses. "You thought you'd come over and get my mother drunk, thinking she'd just...cave. You'd worked yourself up into some sort of frenzy, right?" I asked, but he didn't answer. He didn't have to. "Then, you decided to threaten her - with me, I'm guessing. Give into you, and then you'd let me live. Right?"

When he didn't answer that question, my palm smacked down to the desk. "Answer me!"

King jumped in the chair, but nodded, finally whispering, "Yes."

I held up the bag with the handkerchief that Charlie had left me, and then opened my desk to pull out an identical one - the one King had given me last night. "You made her cry, just like you made me cry last night, but you really need new handkerchiefs, because these are the same, asshole."

He grimaced, but didn't say anything.

"What I don't get is why you had to kill her," I stated in a low voice, but my eyes never left the scumbag in front of me. "You could have just...left, cleaned up after yourself, and she might have never said a word. She didn't say anything about your attack on her in the garage. So why the fuck did you kill her?"

"She kept screaming!" he yelled back, and I flinched, my gaze flickering to Carlisle, who looked like he wanted to skin King alive. "I had to shut her the fuck up," he explained, shaking his head and staring at the floor between his feet. "In my fucked up state, it made sense. The neighbors would hear her or some shit. I put a pillow over her, but I swear to God, I thought she was still alive when I..."

I brought my hand down on the desk again, and it made every man in the room jump. I remembered the sounds coming from downstairs as I hid in my room, and I remembered them ending. It was all I could do not to put a bullet in the asshole's head.

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But his last statement was apparently enough, because the bookcase on the wall slid slowly open, exposing Benny and a few of his officers. They walked into the room, almost unnoticed by King, but I shook my head at him, holding up one finger.

"Wait!" I growled at them, picking up the one piece of evidence that had never made any fucking sense to me; my father had left it, though, so I knew there was *something* to it.

Benny nodded, and King looked up at me slowly.

"Why was this there? What on earth did you need a lighter for?" I asked King, holding up the metal square.

King grimaced, glanced around the room, and shook his head.

"Don't make her have to ask you twice," Edward warned, gripping the man's shoulder so hard that King practically folded in on himself.

I wanted to chuckle at the look of pride on Carlisle's face as he watched his son, but the circumstances were too tense.

"I smoked a cigarette...after..." he grunted, his eyes watering with the pressure that Edward was putting to his shoulder. "It must have dropped," he squeaked out, finally breathing again when Edward let go.

I froze, my hand twitching by my desk drawer, but I lost it. It was all just too much. I snatched open the drawer, pulling out my nine mil and aiming at his head. Every man in the room flew into action, but it was Carlisle and Edward that got to me first.

"No, Bells," Carlisle whispered in my ear. "You've got him. He's done. Let him go with Benny now...okay?"

"You sat and *fucking smoked*?" I growled, feeling familiar warm fingers trace down my arm to my weapon. "She was fucking dead, and you took the time to

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fucking smoke a cigarette?" I sneered as I shook with my hatred and disgust, flicking the safety off and pulling back the hammer, despite Edward's grip on my hand.

"Lower your weapon, Bella," Edward ordered softly in my ear. "Now! This isn't how you want this to end, and you know it..."

"But..."

"Believe me, I get it," he grumbled, and somehow, he was able to secure my gun, putting the safety back on. I felt him shift a bit behind me. "Benny, get him now!"

Royce King was yanked up out of the chair, the cuffs put on at the same time there was a knock on the door.

"Talk about timing," Benny chuckled, nodding to Emmett his approval for opening the door.

In walked just about everyone, including Eleazar, Eric, and Felix. But it was the handsome man with them that King's eyes fell to.

"Wes!" he gushed, smiling a bit, because he thought he had someone in his corner. His smile faltered when his eyes fell to the FBI shield that Wes Michaels was wearing around his neck. "You're a fucking Fed?" he yelled, struggling in Benny's and another officer's arms.

Wes ignored him, walking straight to me and holding out his hand. "Wes *Mitchell*," he said with a smirk as he revealed his real name. "And good job."

"You, too," I chuckled, because I liked the guy instantly.

He had a wry smile that seemed to be filled with pride at ending what was probably a long damn job for him. He was extremely handsome, which hadn't gone unnoticed by my girls standing along the wall - especially Makenna, who I was contemplating getting a bib. Wes had longish hair, just a shade lighter

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than my own, with hazel eyes that seemed to swirl more blue than green. He had a bit of scruff, dimples on his cheeks, and was built like a man that worked out. Wes Mitchell was kind of...hot.

"May I?" he asked Benny, gesturing to King, who was dumbstruck.

"Three years undercover, Wes... I think you've earned it," Benny laughed, stepping out of the way.

"Ah, Royce," Wes snickered, shaking his head. "Let me explain what just happened to you. You just lost it all, man. Dale Young's place was raided last night just after you left. He's singing so *sweet*," he said, the "sweet" coming out higher pitched. "Your deal with Mandala was raided about two hours ago, and the shooting range has been shut down. Your hit obviously fell through on Miss Swan, here, but she took everything you threw at her and tossed it right back at you...after lighting it on fire. Buddy, you've got more charges than you can shake a stick at, there's not a soldier left in your army, and you just confessed to murder. Hell, I can't think of a single man I've arrested that has ever been looking at more time. So it's my pleasure to say... Royce King, you have the right to remain silent..."

Benny chuckled as Wes read Royce his rights. In fact, the whole room seemed to watch with fascination as Wes took charge of King, and it seemed that King shrank from the evil, mythical bad guy that he'd been since the beginning, to just another criminal. An old man - aging by the second as Wes manhandled him out of the office door.

"You want to stop staring at the Federal agent, *sweetness*?" Edward sang in a low growl at my ear.

My head spun as if it were on a swivel, and I knew he meant it to be funny, because every woman in the room was ogling young Wes, but I met the gaze of a very sexy, very amused, and slightly jealous man. Wes Mitchell was handsome, yes, but nothing beat what was in front of me. Piercing green eyes, a sharp jaw line covered in the stubble from going a day without shaving, and my own personal crooked smile - the smile that had gotten me through some of

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the worst shit imaginable - standing there in a tight, black, long sleeved t-shirt with the sleeves pushed up and black jeans.

"Who?" I asked, fighting my own smile as Edward grinned, but his breath caught when I suddenly wrapped my arms around his waist, burying my face in his strong chest and feeling his arms snake around me. "We got him," I sighed, shivering as the realization that our biggest enemy was gone.

"*You* got him, baby," he countered softly in my ear, placing a sweet kiss to my neck.

I nodded, a soft sob escaping me as I gripped the back of Edward's shirt, because it seemed so fucking surreal to have it finished.

I knew that Miller was still out there. I knew that we would all have to lay low for a while - a few weeks, Carlisle had said. I knew there were many more steps to getting Gravity back up and running, not to mention the fact that Edward wanted me to eventually come home with him. But despite all that still needed to be done, the hardest part was over. We had taken down a mob boss and his entire army, and we'd all lived through it. All of us.

"Let it go, love," Edward whispered, holding me closer as my emotional dam completely burst.

I felt other hugs and hands on my back, even Carlisle's kiss to the top of my head, but I didn't let go of Edward. Instead, I let his sweet smell, his warm arms, and his soothing voice telling me he loved me absorb all the tears of relief, sadness, and loss. I couldn't stop, nor did I care when he sat down in my father's chair and held me close.

When my breathing finally evened out, Edward pulled me from the crook of his neck, and soft, concerned, emerald eyes studied my face as he wiped the rest of my tears away with his thumbs.

"Sorry," I whispered, kissing his lips softly.

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"Don't be," he said, giving me my crooked smile. "It's a wonder you didn't explode, holding all of that in."

I sniffled and giggled at the same time, because he was right. "Yes, I suppose. I love you."

"Love you, too, and I hate to... *tell you what to do*," he said, a wry smirk on his handsome face.

"But you're going to anyway," I laughed.

"Yes, bad habits and all," he snickered, shrugging on shoulder. "You need to call Wendell...let him know to head over to the jail. And m-my d-dad wants to s-scatter Charlie's a-ashes. I w-wasn't sure th-that you r-really wanted to...or if that was for King's benefit..."

I could see his nerves at posing that question. "No, I do. We did my mother's, so Carlisle is right for asking."

Edward nodded, but made no move to get up or remove me from his lap. "Where?"

"The bay," I told him with a nod. "My parents' first date was on the pier, so we scattered her into the ocean. She always said that was what she wanted. Something about making it to Hawaii, finally..."

Edward chuckled and nodded. "Well, I have a suggestion then..."

~oOo~

"In you go, ladies," Edward chuckled, helping Rose, Alice, Makenna, and me into the chopper.

"Edward, I don't think this is a good idea," Carlisle stated, shaking his head as he took the co-pilot seat. "The ashes will blow all to fucking hell and back..."

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"No, we'll just open and drop the whole container, Carlisle," I said, helping Mack and Alice into their seats.

It was their first ride, and I realized Edward was fulfilling their wish to ride in the chopper from back at the mountain cabin. Alice looked excited, but Makenna looked petrified as she looked around the chopper's cabin when Edward shut the door and hopped up into the pilot's seat.

"Relax, Mack," Rose laughed. "You'll like it."

"Why aren't Jasper and Emmett going, then?" she whined, looking up when Edward started the blades, ignoring his chuckle.

"Because they've ridden with him a thousand times," Carlisle laughed, putting on his headset, and we all followed suit, although Edward pulled on his baseball cap backwards first. "And they didn't know Charlie," he pointed out.

Edward called in his flight, slowly lifted off of the roof of Twi Towers, and glided gracefully out over the city. He took his time, flying almost without a purpose over different parts of the city as the sun set, but just as the mixture of oranges, reds, and blues lit up the sky at the edge of the world, the land disappeared from beneath us and the ocean stretched out wide and vast in front of us.

"Tell me where, Bella," Edward asked over the headset.

"Anywhere," I answered, taking the urn out of the bag we'd brought with us.

I loosened the lid, but didn't remove it, knowing that it would come off when it hit the water with force. I unbuckled my seat belt about the time that Edward began to hover over the water, and I slid open the side door. With one last look around the cabin, I turned back, tossing the whole thing out the door.

I watched as it sort of arced away from the chopper, and then splashed down into the choppy water below, the lid coming off just like I'd suspected it would.

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"Bye, Charlie," I heard Carlisle mutter quietly, but it came over the headset anyway.

I nodded, swallowing thickly and standing up to close the door. "Bye, Dad," I sighed, slamming the door shut.

A/N...Not only is King caught, arrested and pretty screwed, but Bella made sure that the only lawyer he can get is going to make sure he stays that way. Like Bella said, Wendell *will* screw up again, and using him for one last job was for her dad.

And we officially said goodbye to Charlie... Which was emotional for not only Bella, but Carlisle as well. I'd like you guys to keep in mind that Bella is *not* weak, but has been through a shit storm...because this story is coming to an end, but *it is not over yet*.

The next chapter will step ahead a bit...and give updates on a few players. Not to mention, there will be some decisions made that are important, emotional, and somewhat scary.

I really have to thank JenRar for beta'ing this...for keeping up with my writing schedule. Love you! Thanks to Goober_Lou, who occasionally has to crack the whip as well (Jen you'd be proud) because we work together and sometimes, I get a little...distracted! LOL And to MedusaInNY for always helping with a blog that wouldn't exist without her. I'm not kidding on that point.

And a very special HAPPY B-DAY to my sweet friend les16... MUWAH! Much love. And if you haven't read *The Greatest Gift*, then you are missing out.

The last rec I'm doing today is again...no shame... *Firefly In Summer* by Primarycolors. HOLY CRAP! O.O I'm so in flove with this story that it's close to obsession. Go...READ! It's worth a few tears to get to where she is RIGHT NOW in the story. Please trust me on this.

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Okay...I know my posting schedule as been screwy this week...so as a bonus, I will still post on Wed as usual. I'm sorry about last week. I was so sick that I didn't even know what day to post! LOL So please, let's hear what you have to say about Bella's confrontations with Wendell (which was my fave) and King (which was hard to write, because rape is no freakin' joke)... and if any of you have read *The Count of Monte Cristo*, which is my fave book EVER, then you know that revenge is best served...cold...or much later, depending on the circumstances... so with that in mind, please, please Review! And I will see you guys again on Wed. Much love, and until then...Later.

Chapter 29

A/N... Umm, I think this first part will surprise some of you, and will prove a theory for others. But just keep in mind this skips ahead a bit, but you'll pick up on it.

I don't have much to say at the beginning of this, but I will have words for the end... So on with it... see you at the bottom...

CHAPTER 29

BELLA

Former Mafia Leader, Royce King, Dies After Prison Brawl

Royce King, who had been sentenced to six consecutive life sentences for charges ranging from two counts of murder, to weapons trafficking, was found dead in his cell yesterday morning. It is unknown as to how someone entered his quarters after lock-down for the night, but prison investigators say they are looking into it.

King, who was soon to be transported back to county jail to await trial for alleged prostitution and slave trading, was recently in a fight in the cafeteria during an evening meal. One of the guards witnessed King being approached by a large inmate, who is said to have several scars on his face, but they had to step in when tempers flew.

The former alleged mob boss was found hanging in his cell yesterday morning, beaten almost beyond recognition and eviscerated. Reports say that King had been tortured to death, and the official cause of death was extreme blood loss. No one will confirm, but our sources tell us that even his fingernails and toenails had been removed with force.

The name of the suspect has not been released, but the warden of Washington State Prison told us that the whole matter is being thoroughly investigated.

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Royce King confessed to the murders of Charlie Swan, former CEO of Twilight Technology, and his wife, Renee Swan. When we tried to contact their daughter, Isabella Swan, also former CEO of Twilight Technology, we were unable to get a comment. However, Carlisle Cullen, current CEO and Chairman of the Board of Twi Tech, did leave a statement for us, concerning not only the death of King, but as to the whereabouts of Miss Swan.

"Isabella is taking a much needed leave of absence after the death of her father," he said. "As far Royce King goes...well, he's made several enemies throughout the years, and his recent testimony against all his former employees had to have made him quite the target. He lived a dangerous life, in an even more dangerous world. The way he died does not shock me, and as far as I'm concerned, he's just one less criminal..."

I sighed, setting the paper down, and gazed off the porch of the beach house as I pushed the swing with my toe. We'd been laying low for well over a month and a half, all of us scattering to the four winds - except for Carlisle and Esme, who had taken the apartment in Twi Tower for more convenience than safety. I signed it over to them the same day I signed over Twilight Tech.

I kicked with my toe, causing the swing to pick up speed, and then I brought my knees to my chest, wrapping my arms around them. I missed my friends. I missed my surrogate mother, Esme, and my godfather, Carlisle. I missed Seattle, but I couldn't be happier for myself or my friends, either, because we'd all found something special when we'd been thrown together by what I considered to be fate.

Jasper and Alice had taken off to Texas to spend the time with his dad. Rose had resigned from TT and would eventually go back to work for me at Gravity. She and Emmett had decided to split their time, starting at her parents' home in Oregon, and then his mother's in California, finally ending in Vegas. Edward and I had a bet as to whether they got married by an Elvis impersonator. Edward said yes, but I said no, because Rose had sworn to me years ago that she would never, *ever* get married.

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Makenna had opted to stay with Carlisle and Esme in Seattle, because she and Wes Mitchell had started dating. He was officially out of undercover duty, having received a promotion for bringing in King. He occasionally had to leave for certain cases, but for the most part, he worked locally. And she couldn't be safer in the company of Carlisle and Wes if she tried, so I didn't even argue with her when she decided to stay.

Eleazar and Felix went back to work for the CIA and were currently down in Colombia, where I was sure they were gathering intelligence on Corbin, but no one would say for sure - not that we were able to communicate with everyone the way we would like. I wasn't stupid, because Alec was off to whereabouts unknown, as well, and we were just waiting for that call.

Eric Hunter, on the other hand, decided to take time off to make sure that his sister, Victoria, got the help she needed. She'd been a victim of King's for so long that she fought him just about every step of the way, but he had eventually put her into a facility so that she could get real help. She'd been used, abused, and addicted to a number of drugs, not to mention alcohol, but when her brother threatened her with his permanent adoption of her daughter, Chelsea, she finally got a clue that she needed to clean up and seek therapy. She was currently in a mental health facility in Northern California, and she saw her daughter every two weeks if she was doing well. They all decided to keep Chelsea's father's identity - which turned out to be James - a secret. Apparently, King wasn't lying when he said he couldn't have kids.

Benny had also been promoted; not that he still didn't answer to Carlisle and Edward when they called him, but he'd taken over the Seattle office of the FBI. He'd also charmed the socks - or the glasses, as the case may be - off Angela Weber, who was now Carlisle's permanent Personal Assistant. Angela and Benny were dating seriously, and I'd be willing to bet Esme was pushing them along to get married, just as she was pushing all of us to do the same. I was convinced that it was because Carlisle seemed to be dragging his feet with his own proposal.

Ivan Wendell had showed up at the county jail, explained - in complete detail - to King that he was basically screwed, and convinced him to plead guilty on

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most of the charges, because had he stepped foot out of the jail, Corbin would have called in all debts. The contract that King had presented to me for the weapons he'd requested was used against him, as well.

Edward and I had disappeared. We'd had no choice, because the capture, confession, and sentencing of Royce King over the murder of both my parents had become a huge media buzz. A few days after his arrest in my father's office, we'd flown out of Seattle. It wasn't because the media bothered us, but the last time that they'd put me on TV, Miller had shown up, and Edward wasn't ready for me to face him. He said it was because I'd already been through "too fucking much, damn it!" But I also think it was because he wasn't at a hundred percent healthy. Edward was still nursing his leg, and I truly think that was why we, along with Mickey, flew out in the middle of the night to stay with Aunt Kate for a week.

Edward had done what Esme had asked; he'd seen a doctor concerning his knee the very next day after the night club. Luckily, nothing was actually torn, but he did have to wear a brace until the tendons strengthened, which the doctor said could take weeks.

Aunt Kate had welcomed us back with open arms and an open kitchen, and I'd never seen Mickey so happy as when she fell into Obie's arms. We knew for a fact that Mickey had finally found a home, for the first time since the death of her family in New York.

When we told Kate all about what had truly happened to my parents, she'd shed a few tears, kissing my cheek. But she'd absolutely beamed at the sight of the photograph that Charlie had left me, telling us that she hadn't know that my parents and Edward's parents had been able to meet up again. We found out from Carlisle that he'd only just gotten leave from the Air Force the day I was born.

However, Edward and I hadn't stayed in Alaska very long. I think there was a part of us that needed to test ourselves alone. And it wasn't easy at first. We were two very strong-willed, hard-headed people. I was still a little shaken over everything I'd been through, and Edward was determined to keep me in a

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walled fortress of protection. It had resulted in a few shouting matches in hotel rooms, but at our basic core, we loved each other fiercely. We were truly just crazy over one another.

We'd started in California, and Edward had showed me his old home and Air Force base. We'd stayed in beach cottages, traveling up the coast, and eventually coming to San Francisco. I'd danced like an excited child when he finally took me to see Alcatraz. The happy grin he'd given me had made the argument we'd had just that morning fly away, because he'd looked so fucking proud of himself.

~oOo~

" Here," Edward sighed, taking one of his baseball caps and pulling my ponytail through it as we made our way across the water.

I sighed, rolling my eyes up at him, but I understood it. Miller was the only threat left to me, and even though Edward was damned diligent about making sure we were never followed, he still didn't want to take any chances.

" Christ, Bella," he huffed, shaking his head and straightening my cap. "I just don't want anything to happen, baby. I'm not asking a fucking lot, right?"

" No," I grumped, but was unable to stop myself from standing up on my toes to kiss his frowning mouth. "I'm sorry." I sighed, looking up at him. "I'm not complaining, I swear," I muttered, and he knew altogether differently. My only complaint seemed to be that the threat to my safety never ended.

" Look, sweetness ," he said, a smirk on his scruffy face, but his eyes were dark green and oh so serious. "If Miller shows up...I can't exactly give chase this time, you know?" He gestured to his leg.

I nodded, looking down at the black brace that surrounded his leg from his mid-thigh to mid-calf. He was wearing khaki cargo shorts and a white t-shirt, not to mention his ever present backwards baseball cap. He looked like a quarterback or a baseball player on injury reserve. He looked sexy, whether he

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believed it or not, as he stood there against the railing of the boat, the sunshine glinting off of his now tanned skin, darker than I'd seem him before, since we'd been playing at beaches all up and down the California coastline.

"I know," I sighed, tugging his hand when we finally docked on the little prison island.

When I met Edward when we were thirteen and twelve, he'd told me that Alcatraz was kind of creepy. It was old, and a little eerie, but apparently, we reverted back to twelve and thirteen years old, because we kept sneaking away from the tour group.

Our bickering and just plain frustration with one another melted completely away, when I found myself pressed into the bars of a cell with a very sweet, very naughty Edward making me hold onto the bars as he did things to me that almost got us kicked out of the tour and off the island.

"Stop fighting me," he growled sexily against my neck, as his lips and tongue made my breath catch when he left open mouth kisses at the same time he cupped my breast. "I can't lose you, baby, so I have to keep you safe."

"Kay," I said, practically incoherent, as I found myself wrapping my leg around his hip.

I felt him smile against my ear, but we both just about jumped clean out of our skin when the clearing of a throat reminded us we weren't alone, nor was what we were doing exactly appropriate for the young kids in our tour group.

I laughed, turning away, but Edward never batted an eye.

"We were just proving how...tight the quarters were in here," he said smoothly, using a voice that usually got women to melt - never mind the fact that she couldn't see his hand, and the word "tight" was emphasized with a firm grip to my ass.

But this woman didn't succumb to his charms.

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" Yes, well, try to keep up with the rest of us, okay?" the rather manly woman huffed, rolling her eyes.

I lost it at that point, having to bury my face in his arm in order to not completely bust out in front of the poor woman.

" You're cute...but I don't think you're her type," I snorted, rolling my eyes at his shameless grin.

" No, but you probably are," he laughed, picking me up and carrying me out into the main hallway over his shoulder. "Next time, you say something sweet, and she'll be putty in your hands."

" There won't be a next time," I sang back, smacking at his hands when he finally set me down. "And I don't want my hands anywhere near her, thank you. Behave, Edward."

It was when he tilted his head in an unbelievably adorable pout that I realized just who we were. We were two people that would do just about anything to make the other happy, to keep them safe, and sometimes, those two things didn't always mesh. Yeah, it was frustrating when he was constantly looking over our shoulders. Yeah, it was a little smothering when he made me wear a hat in public, or didn't let us call our friends as often as we wanted. And yeah, I'd been a little drunk on our freedom together, because having him all to myself was fantastic, and scary, and so very comfortable - all rolled into one gigantic ball of arms and legs that tangled together in bed every night - that I was taking what we'd just been through for granted.

" Don't pout," I sighed, grabbing his face and kissing him quickly. "And I'm sorry I've been...bitchy."

" I would never call you that," he huffed, frowning. "I know it's a fucking pain in the ass, love. Patience, baby, and we can go home soon. I promise."

~oOo~

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After Alcatraz, Edward had suggested that we go back to the beginning, so for the last three weeks, we had stayed at the first safe house he and Carlisle had brought me to - the beach house - and we'd been here ever since, waiting for the all-clear to be able to go home, because King could still give orders from jail to a few straggling goons that were free.

The differences this time around were vast. The house was utterly quiet, without our crews running around at all times of the day, and this time, I slept in Edward's room downstairs. We cooked and cleaned together, and it was so domestic that it was almost scary.

However, Edward had insisted the first night we stayed that I make him an apple pie. He'd eaten practically the whole thing in one sitting. I'd thought he was going to make himself sick. But damn, if that one dessert didn't make him happy.

I looked up when the front door swung open and a shirtless and sweaty Edward came in, slamming the door behind him. He was wearing basketball shorts, his leg brace, and running shoes. He'd gone for a run, trying his damndest to strengthen his leg back up. He was nothing, if not determined to get back to his strong form.

He walked to the fridge, grabbed a bottle of water, and leaned in the doorway, chugging almost the whole bottle in one gulp. I licked my lips as I watched beads of sweat roll from his temple, down his jaw, eventually dripping to his chest as swallow after swallow caused his throat to contract erotically. The simplest of things about him was what I considered sexy and irri-fucking-sistible.

"Morning, *sweetness*," he said, still breathing heavily as he plopped down on the swing next to me, giving me sweaty kisses, just to hear me squeal.

I pulled the newspaper to my lap, looking up at him. "How'd the knee hold up?"

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"Better. I was able to go five miles," he stated, but his eyes narrowed on me.
"What's wrong, baby?"

"I think we can go home now," I murmured, tossing the paper at him.

His brow furrowed in confusion as he read the article on Royce King's death, but they eventually rose high in shock.

"No shit?" he whispered, flipping back the page for the rest of the story.

"Was Sam in jail this whole time?" I asked, turning towards him as he scanned the article again.

"Yeah," Edward sighed, grimacing at the thought.

"For me," I said, more of a statement than a question.

"Yeah, baby," Edward sighed, setting the paper on the little table next to swing and cupping my face. He didn't pull me to him, but it was probably because he was still sweaty and hot - in more ways than one - from his run. "It was my dad's call, and Sam would do anything for my dad..."

"Well, I want him out!" I snapped, starting to panic that poor Sam had been in *jail* since I'd seen him last at the farm - and just to wait until the perfect moment to pounce on Royce King. "I mean, can he even get out, at this point?"

Edward smiled warmly. "I'm sure we can do something, Bella. Please calm down. It was the plan all along," he muttered, pulling out his phone and scrolling through the contacts, until he found the one he wanted. He let it ring, but his touch on my face never stopped and was ever so gentle. "Dad..." he started, but chuckled, shaking his head. "Yes, *sir*," he snorted, handing the phone over to me.

"Carlisle," I started, but my godfather was already talking.

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"Bella, please don't be mad," he began, sounding just like his son when he was trying to stay out of trouble. "I promised you ages ago that we would end... *this* the right way," he said, choosing his words carefully, since we were on the phone.

"I don't care about that. In fact, I'm really happy about that, but..." I huffed, frowning as I poked Edward for chuckling. "I want Sam out. He shouldn't have been in there this long, Carlisle."

"Time, sweetheart; give me time. Give *Benny* time, okay?" he begged. "I know you liked Sam. Hell, he *adored* you, because he volunteered for this mission..."

"Yeah, but... Wait! He did?" I gasped, looking over at Edward as he started to push the swing slowly.

"Yes, ma'am," Carlisle sighed. "I promise you, this is what Sam does...and it was... *orchestrated* to work just like this. In fact, it's textbook perfect. Got me?"

I grimaced, but I could almost see my godfather's perfect eyebrow raised up at me.

"Yeah," I sighed. "It's unfair, though..."

"Well, if it's any consolation, you two can come home now," Carlisle chuckled. "I'm willing to bet my son is just about to go crazy wanting to go to that house of his in Forks..."

"Does that mean everyone can come back?" I squealed, smiling when Edward's head spun from looking out to the ocean, to meet my excited gaze.

"Absolutely, sweetheart," Carlisle laughed. "In fact, *you* call them home."

Edward asked for the phone, and I told Carlisle I loved him, before handing it over. He put the phone up to his ear.

"What about Miller?" Edward asked, running a hand through his sweaty hair.

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I giggled when it stuck up in every direction. It was absolutely impossible not to touch it at that point.

Edward listened and nodded, but didn't say much as he stayed on the phone with his dad; he didn't have to. The dark, serious look that crossed his face said it all, and it was such a dark contrast to the happiness that he'd exuded when he found out we could go home.

"Yeah, I know my house would be safe for her..." he muttered, pulling my hand from his hair and kissing the inside of my wrist with a long, wet kiss, swirling his tongue over my skin just enough to tease me. "He would be stupid as fuck if he showed up there."

I nodded silently in agreement, because not only did I just want to finally start living our lives, but the way that Edward's house was situated in those woods, his security system, and just...Edward himself, there would truly be obstacles that Miller would never be able to overcome.

Not to mention, going home would mean seeing my friends again, people I considered family. Going home would mean I could finally and seriously consider re-opening Gravity - maybe in Forks, this time around. And going home would mean... *permanent*. No more hiding or moving. No more living at Rose's, like when Jake had screwed me over. No more living out of suitcases filled with the same shit.

Edward was about to say something else to his dad, when I interrupted him.

"Edward, I want to go home..." I said softly, and I noticed that it sounded whiny and childish, not to mention a touch pathetic, but I didn't care.

"He's..." Edward stopped, looking over at me, his eyes raking over my face. He took a deep breath and nodded. "We'll call you when we're home..." he muttered, ending the call with his dad.

He set his phone down and turned to face me, pushing the swing with one foot on the porch.

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"Come here," he sighed, finally pulling me to him, and he smelled divine, like sweat, salty ocean air, and my Edward. He cupped my face once I'd scrambled into his lap. "Y-you're r-ready for th-this?" he asked, and I saw that he meant more than just facing the unknown, as far as Miller and my safety was concerned.

It didn't help that he stuttered, because I'd do anything he asked if he sputtered it out, but he meant himself - living with him. He meant the *future*, because Edward didn't take this step lightly. I was the first woman he'd ever brought to his house. We'd made love for the first time there. I was the first long-term relationship he'd ever even had the inclination to have, and he told me that I was his last - and he told me often.

"Are you?" I countered, because this was a huge step for him - Mr. One-Night-Stand. I loved him with all that I had, but it would destroy me if he ever changed his mind.

Despite all that we'd been through, we'd only known each other for months, and had been *together* for less. Our passion was still new, but not empty; it was never empty. God, if anything, it was so very full and real that it was breathtaking, and I never wanted that to end.

"Tell me what you want, Edward," I demanded softly, holding both sides of his worried face. "Because I'm thinking you were now stalling about going back to your place..."

"No! No, I swear, I wasn't, but..." he gasped, his mouth hanging open in shock. "I really was waiting for Sam..." He stopped, leaning in to kiss my lips softly. "God, b-baby...I-I s-so w-want th-this..."

"Me, too," I admitted, nodding slowly and kissing him back.

"I...this is new...for me," he stated, but he didn't stutter, and that meant more than I could possibly explain, because he was firmly stating how he knew himself. "But fuck...I want you home with me. I will never want another woman, or to be without you. I...I know this was a test, this laying low shit, but

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I have no complaints, Bella. I just want to be with you...whatever that entails, whatever you allow me to have..."

"You can have everything," I whimpered, falling even more in love with him and diving for his mouth, because ever since he'd pulled me from Miller's basement, I'd never felt as connected to one person as I did Edward.

He was the essence of comfort and love. He was my fortress from the world, and he was all I could ever hope for in a boyfriend, a best friend, a roommate...hell, even a partner, if he ever decided to work with me - a decision I didn't push him on, but wanted more than I'd care to admit.

Yes, we fought over stupid shit. Yes, we butted heads over the strangest things, but despite *how* we'd met, despite *how* we'd fallen in love, I knew for a fact that I'd never want another man - not the way that I wanted him.

Strong fingers wove into my hair, gripping fiercely as he turned my head just a little. His lips and tongue swept over my own - top lips, bottom lips, barely a breath in between. His grasp didn't loosen when he pulled my forehead to his, his eyes closing so his long, beautiful eyelashes rested against his skin.

When he finally opened them, his gaze was heated, the green barely there. "Let's go home."

~oOo~

EDWARD

"What do you *mean* you got married?" Bella practically snarled at Rose, who looked almost afraid for her life.

I grinned, slapping Emmett on the back. "Nice, man," I chuckled, pulling him into a one-armed hug. "Congrats, Em."

"Oh, Bella..." Rose whined, looking to Emmett and me for help, but I wasn't sure what to do for her.

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I knew weddings and shit meant a lot for girls, but I had no idea why Bella was upset with her best friend, until she made the next statement.

"You did it without me, Ro," Bella huffed, and I winced at the sadness that crossed through her sweet, brown eyes.

"Oh," Emmett and I muttered, turning to leave the two friends to sort it out. I had no doubt that they would.

"What time is everyone coming?" Emmett asked, his eyes wide as we not only tried to change the subject, but start the grill out on my back deck.

Bella and I had been home a few days, and I couldn't even explain how much it meant that she was truly just... *there*. When she'd called everyone to let them know that King was dead, that the coast was clear, they'd all wanted to see us, so we'd planned a cookout.

It was not lost on me that this sort of party was a part of the fantasy I'd had about Bella and our future together, just before we took on the dance club. I wanted it fucking all, and a tiny part of me was jealous that Emmett and Rose had gotten fucking married, because all I ever wanted, all I ever needed in my life, was currently getting apology after apology from her oldest friend.

However, I forced myself back to Emmett, because everyone was showing for the afternoon, so there was going to be a ton of people. There was the silliest part of me that hoped Miller would just show at my house, because he'd walk into the deadliest group of people ever assembled, which caused me to snort to myself.

I looked up at Emmett and shrugged. "Different times, but we should have everyone by about two. Why?"

"I need to talk to your dad," he sighed, wincing when my head spun to look at him.

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"You're quitting, too, aren't you?" I asked, almost laughing, because Jasper had called me not a week after he and Alice had left for Texas to discuss the same thing.

"Yeah, man...I *can't* do this shit and have a wife at home..."

I nodded, knowing that feeling completely, but I'd already discussed my leaving the team with my dad. He was all for it, because he wanted Bella in our lives. He still wanted *grandkids*, as he so bluntly told me when I told him that after the mission with Corbin, I was done. For good.

"He'll have no one left," I snorted, shaking my head. "Not that he cares, at this point...but Jazz is quitting, and I've already told him that Corbin is the last job for me..."

"Oh! I'll go with that, because...well, shit," he chuckled, sitting down on my front steps, "I'd love to see the end of that fucked up individual."

"And Miller..." I growled, shaking my head as I sat down next to him, my nostrils flaring.

"I want in on that motherfucker, too," he snarled low, his face turning from the amused childlike face that he wore most of the time, to the deadly killer I knew him to be as he turned to look at Bella. "No...that fucker will *pay*."

"I'm just biding my time, Em," I huffed, opening my arms when Bella and Rose joined us on the steps. "The *second* I know where he is, it's fucking *over*." My girl settled between my legs, giving one last grumpy look to Rose, before taking a deep breath. I chuckled as I watched her just... *let it go*. "Did you two make up?" I asked, dodging two swinging slaps to my arms. "Ow, what the hell?"

"No, but there's nothing I can change now, is there?" Bella grunted, rolling her eyes at Emmett's chuckle.

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"Aw, Bellsy, don't be sore. I tell you what...when you two tie the knot, we'll throw a big to-do, okay?" Emmett snickered, dodging another set of slaps.

"Glad it's not just me," I muttered, gripping Bella by the wrists. "Stop hitting our guests, love," I snorted, kissing her cheek loudly. I was rewarded with a giggle, because anything that referred to *our* house, *our* guests, or *our* anything made my girl melt. And I fucking loved that shit.

"Well, you stopped me from attending, but you can't stop me from giving you guys something," she sighed, her smile holding a secret that even I didn't know what to make of.

"Don't you dare go crazy, Bells," Rose warned, raising an eyebrow at her.

"Just try and stop me," my girl huffed, looking up when a car pulled into the driveway. "Carlisle and Esme," she said, beaming like a little kid, and was up and out of my arms in a flash.

"I've missed you!" she squealed, launching herself at my dad, and I couldn't help but laugh when he caught her and spun her, whispering in her ear, which only caused her to laugh. "Hell, no, but he will."

"Good girl," my dad chuckled, shaking his head and kissing her forehead, before letting her go to Esme.

If Bella had found a surrogate father in my dad, then I'd found a surrogate mother in Esme. Seeing her again made me realize just how much she'd helped Bella and me along the way - everything from counseling us over Bella's captivity, to just the simple things she could read on our faces. Slow, sweet encouragement that meant the fucking world, not to mention the unwavering faith she had in us.

After hugs and kisses all around, more cars started to pull in, and soon, everyone had arrived, including Eleazar and Alec, and much to my surprise, Benny and Angela. The last two cars to pull in were my Aunt Kate, with Mickey and Obie, and Makenna and Wes Mitchell.

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I had spent the first day at my house building three very long tables to accommodate this many people, and benches to go along with them. They were simple and rough, but they'd hardly given me enough time to make them anything else. The best part was Bella keeping me company as I did it. She'd offered to help, but had ended up just hanging out with me, and I swear to God, it was one of the best days we'd ever spent together.

She'd watched me work, occasionally bringing me a beer, and we'd talked about absolutely everything. In fact, the table I was currently sitting at was the one I'd eventually just taken her on, which only made me grin over at her.

"If you mention *one fucking word* about what this table saw," she warned in my ear, "I'm so not giving you any for the longest damn time..."

I laughed, burying my face in her neck as she giggled. "Not a chance, baby..." I snorted, placing a kiss behind her ear. "All for me..."

She smirked, raising an eyebrow at me, but I loved that she could read me like a book. No one prior to her had ever been able to do that, and I often wondered if it was because we'd met when we were kids, if she still saw the stuttering, awkward thirteen year old kid she'd met the one time.

"Stare at the Federal Agent, *sweetness*, and I'll toss you up here and do it all over again, just to make sure he knows you're mine," I growled in her ear, because it wasn't a secret that every woman at the table thought the guy to be... *handsome*.

"As entertaining as that would be for everyone," she snorted into a laugh, "I'm pretty sure he's all about Makenna. Look, you jealous ass." She nudged my cheek with her nose so that I would turn and look. "However, I'm sure you could teach him a thing or two, if you wanted to do it on this table... *again*," she purred, nipping at my earlobe. "He's hot, Edward... but he's not you, baby."

I huffed, nodding once. "Good," I grunted, smiling when she giggled again.

The conversations ranged all over the place, everyone catching up.

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Jasper and Alice had spent the entire time in Texas, helping his dad with a new deck and computer system, which Alice insisted he have in order to "keep in touch."

We did a huge toast to Emmett and Rose on their marriage, though I lost the bet against Bella in a loophole, because they hadn't been married by an Elvis impersonator. She didn't win, either, because she'd said they wouldn't get married at all.

But with the company that we were in, it didn't take long for it to change from entertaining stories about each other and the things we'd done, to work.

Eleazar, Benny, and my father started talking about Corbin - how his place was still the same, how the plantation was just as big, if not bigger, and finally, what his normal daily routine was like. They were getting ready to take him down. I should have been listening, because Emmett, Jasper, Bella, and I were to all join them, but it was Alec coming to sit by my girl that caught my attention.

"*Bellissima*," he crooned, giving her a kiss on the cheek and a wink, and then chuckling when I rolled my eyes at him. He was a smooth bastard, but he was like a big brother to me. "I've been doing some... *research* of my own, you know," he stated, but his face went dark and his eyes locked with mine.

"You weren't with Eleazar?" I asked, my eyes narrowing on him.

"No, kid," he said with a shake of his head, turning his attention back to Bella, who was looking between us. "Remember when I told you - I *promised* you - that I'd track Miller down for you?" he asked her.

Her flinch at the name made me reach out to touch her neck, rubbing my thumb along her hairline.

"Yeah," she breathed, looking around and noticing everyone was quietly watching them. "You found him?" she asked him, and I'd be willing to bet that the only ones that heard her was me and Alec, because the sound was barely

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audible.

"Have I seen him?" he asked, and she nodded. "No, but I did go to where his mother lives, Bella. I staked out her house for a very long time. I wasn't the only one, either," he said, looking across the table towards Wes and Makenna.

Makenna flinched, holding up her hands. "Bellsy, I sorta told Wes...about Miller. I mean, he'd been undercover, and he knew the name...but I just...I mean... I thought he could help, you know?" she babbled, pleading with her eyes for Bella to understand that it wasn't a betrayal of confidence.

"Mack, it's okay," Bella sighed, a small smirk on her face at her friend's exuberant mannerisms. "Just...someone tell me... *something*." She huffed, looking from Mack, to Wes, and finally, back to Alec.

"Wes was kind enough to meet me at Miller's mother's home," Alec started, picking up my girl's hand, and suddenly, I wasn't sure I wanted to hear what was coming. "We decided to actually ask her a few questions. You know...see if she'd seen her son lately..."

"*That* is one *scary* lady," Wes muttered, his eyes wide as he shook his head slowly. "I thought the nuns in Catholic school were bad, but she's...just...wow," he huffed, looking up when everyone chuckled. "No wonder the guy's a psycho. She really must have messed with his head," he sighed, finally glancing at me. "Look, she says she doesn't know what her son gets up to, but she has this...mental disorder, where she mutters shit under her breath."

"Tourette's Syndrome," Alice answered softly. "It's a neurological disorder, characterized by repetitive stereotyped involuntary movements and vocalizations called tics. The disorder is named for Dr. Georges Gilles de la Tourette..."

"Alice, please," Bella sighed, rubbing her temple. "Please let them finish. I know you can quote medical journals, but not right now..."

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"I don't know about Tourette's..." Wes stated with a one shouldered shrug. "It seemed more like Dementia or Alzheimer's. But still...she'd let shit slip out about her son...and the *whore* that occasionally came around. A woman with... *red hair*."

"Yeah, a woman that drove a blue Toyota..." Alec added, raising an eyebrow.

"No fucking way!" Jasper growled, looking up at me across the table. "Oh, hell, Eddie! She was there! Victoria was there when we chased that asshole!"

My hands clenched into fists, but small warm ones rubbed them softly under the table as my Bella turned back to Alec. "Keep going," she told him.

He reached up and placed a hand on her shoulder. "You..." he sighed, looking to Carlisle, before turning back to her. "You weren't his only...living victim, Bells."

"Did he hurt Victoria?" she whispered, narrowing her eyes at him.

"Yes," Wes answered. "And not just her. There's a woman that lives with his mother. I've...never seen anything like it. She was introduced to us as Riley Miller's... *fiancee*...but she was..."

"Scarred," Alec finished for him, when Wes kind of paled at the thought of this poor woman. "Her face, arms, every bit of skin we could see has at least one visible scar."

"We think she was his first," Wes continued, wincing when the whole table had gone silent. "Her name is Delia. She takes care of his mother, but you should see the constant fear she lives in. And the shit the old lady yells at her...it's sick."

"And Miller?" I snapped, unable to take any more about this motherfucking monster. "Where the *fuck* is he?"

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I looked between Alec and Wes, practically shaking, because Miller was a walking dead man. I'd seen more than I could possibly comprehend when I pulled my girl... *my Bella*...out of his fucked up dungeon. I'd seen how hard it was for her to pull herself out of all the bullshit to get better, and she was strong, amazing, surrounded by everyone that loved her. I couldn't even fathom how Delia or Victoria survived it, when they were force fed hatred and violence on a daily basis.

"Easy, kid," Alec soothed, but I saw patience and understanding in his eyes. "We went to see Victoria...with Eric's permission, of course," he said, with a nod to Eleazar and my dad.

Eleazar looked surprised at that admission, but said nothing. My father, on the other hand, looked like he was either going to punch something or throw up; hell, he looked like I felt.

"The things she told us," Wes said, almost in a whisper, his lip curling. "He used all sorts of...tools...lighters, knives, and..."

A hand slapped down onto the table, making everyone jump, but Bella stood suddenly from the table, glaring at the man.

"I *know* what fucking tools he used!" she growled, her whole body shaking as she leaned on the table. "You *don't* have to fucking tell *me*!"

"Edward," Esme said softly, her eyes flickering to Bella and back to me.

I pulled my girl to my lap, forcing her gaze away from an ashamed Wes to me. Her whole being was trembling as she gripped the sleeves of my t-shirt. Her breathing was almost labored as she looked at me - only me.

"He doesn't have to say it," she whispered to me, her brow furrowing.

"I know. He was just explaining, love," I whispered back, tucking her hair behind her ears.

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"I know what he does," she breathed, seeming to have forgotten everyone else around her, but a small sob escaped her, despite how fucking hard she was trying to maintain composure.

"I know you do," I soothed, wiping away a tear that had leaked out. "Not anymore, baby. I've got you now, but he needs to be stopped, Bella. Can they finish telling us what they found out... *without the fucking details?*" I growled softly, my angry gaze falling to Wes, who flinched and nodded.

"God, Bella, I meant no offense," Wes said, his voice filled with regret and sorrow. At his basic core, I could tell he was a good guy, and that this shit was just way too much for him to deal with. "Hell, I worked in the Organized Crime division, for Christ's sake! I studied this shit at Quantico, but I didn't... *work* it."

"It's okay," she sighed, but didn't make a single move to get up off of my lap as my hands rubbed her back slowly. In fact, her little hands continued to grip my shirt. "Just...finish please..."

If sadness and anger were a physical being, then it was sitting at the head of the fucking table. I looked down each side, and all that stared back was black ire. Emmett had his head in his hands as he braced his elbows on the table. Jasper's knee bounced as he stared down at his plate. Rose, Alice, Mack, and Mickey all had angry tears in their eyes, while Esme silently stood up from her place next to my dad, just to come and take Bella's vacated spot, squeezing in next to Aunt Kate. Eleazar, Benny, and Obie all looked on with looks of sympathy at my girl's reaction.

But it was my father that just couldn't take it anymore, because he and I had fucking seen what Bella was like when we'd finally gotten to her. Hell, he'd ordered the hit on Miller that he was just about to call in now.

"I want him *found*. I want him *dead*. And I fucking want it... *now!*" he snarled, looking around the table at everyone that had ever worked for him in the past or currently worked for him now. He very rarely let shit get to him enough to lose control of his emotions, much less order a hit on it. "What did Victoria

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say, Alec?" he seethed. Finally, unable to sit still, he stood up from the table and started pacing.

I would have been right there with him, except for the fact that I was holding the only thing that mattered in my lap. She needed calm from me, not my temper - something that I realized only she could evoke from me. And she'd done it since the day I'd found her.

"Alec," I urged as gently as I could, considering my father's pacing was making everyone at the table nervous - especially Angela, who I'd be willing to bet had never seen my father lose it the way he was right then.

"Okay," Alec sighed, nodding and focusing on me. "Victoria said that Miller went to an underground doctor...one of those chop shops, where it's run by an asshole that's lost their license. After you shot him, he lost a lot of blood. She said that King had basically prostituted her out to Miller over some mistake she'd made...something about a law office."

Bella's eyes shot to mine, her breath catching. "Oh fuck," she breathed, more tears filling her eyes. "She...she got punished for letting us get away..."

I winced, but nodded. It had been Victoria that Makenna had seen make a phone call the day Bella and I walked into the law office of Spencer, Wyatt, and Townsend. Perhaps she hadn't been quick enough, or she hadn't called the right goon, or maybe King was just pissed off that we had squeaked out the garage and needed someone to blame. Whatever it was that had triggered King, he'd exacted his revenge on her by basically giving her to a monster to play with, and there was a part of me that felt really fucking shitty about that.

"You must know something about that," Alec muttered, nodding when we did. "Okay, well...he really fucked her up."

"According to the doctors that run the facility she's in," Wes started, leaning on the table, "she has to have surgery to correct the... *damage*."

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"Jesus," Rose hissed, shaking her head and looking out over my yard, instead of at the table.

"She also said that he made her wait for him at the doctor," Alec continued, swallowing thickly. "Once he was stitched and wrapped up, he then made her take him someplace he could lay low. Someplace that he could hide, but no one would see him. Someplace she assumes he's still staying..." he said, looking to my dad, but again, his gaze fell to my girl. "Charlie's house."

"No!" Bella - and shockingly, Benny - both growled.

"No, no, no!" Benny said again. "I had that house watched the very second Emmett and Mickey picked Charlie up! There's no fucking way someone could get in without them knowing!"

Bella's eyes narrowed on Benny. "That was your guy? The night Edward and I went to my tree house? That was a Fed that chased us, wasn't it?"

"Yeah," he sighed, shaking his head. "They were told to stand down if you showed. He wasn't going to hurt you guys, but he was going to tell you he was working for me. I tore him a new asshole for chasing you, Ed. Sorry."

"He didn't catch us," I snorted, and even Bella cracked a smile. "No one could catch us."

Bella giggled a little, though it was still sniffly.

"Still, there's no way he could be seen, because I'm still having the place watched," Benny stated, looking to Wes, and then Alec.

"I can't tell you if you're right," Wes sighed with a shrug. "We haven't gone there to check it out yet. We were *going to*, but we...well, we wanted to come here first," he said, looking to Makenna, and I had a feeling she was the reason that they didn't go, because Bella would've wanted to hear this shit first.

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"Well, fuck," Bella sighed, shaking her head and looking up at my father. "Carlisle?"

"Yes, sweetheart?" he grunted, trying his damndest to rein in his temper for her.

"Don't you think it's time to clean out my dad's house?" she asked, tilting her head at him.

"Bella..." I groaned, not sure if *I* was ready to face this asshole, because there was no telling what I'd do to him.

"Well, I need to clear it out," she urged, turning to me. "I need to, because I'm giving it to Rose and Emmett for their wedding."

God, I loved her. Neither of us needed to worry about money, but she was not a spoiled girl. She was so very giving and caring that it was almost too much.

"Bells... *no!*" Rose gasped, shaking her head as she and Emmett gaped at my girl.

"Why not?" Bella said, pouting - adorably, I might add. "You've always loved that house. It's on the outskirts of town, so you could commute to Forks, or work from home for me. Why not? Charlie would've wanted *someone* to use it, and I..." She paused and turned to me. "I don't need a house."

I smirked up at her. "You've got this one," I whispered to her, because I wanted her with me. I was ecstatic that she finally started living at my house, and I wanted us to stay there...always. It was where I envisioned our complete future.

"See?" she smirked back at me, and then turned back to my father. "We'll *all* show up. He'll have to hide or leave, but like Alec said, he won't be able to stay away...from me." She whispered the last two words, which only caused a fearful shiver to wrack her frame, and I pulled her even closer.

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"Oh damn, Bella," my dad groaned, his face scrunching like it was in pain.
"That's so fucking dangerous..."

"No more dangerous than any other damn thing we've done," she countered.

"She won't be alone," Mickey piped up, holding a hand up to Obie, who opened his mouth to say something. "Don't," she told him. "You don't know what he put her through..." If Obie was going to argue, he stopped at that command. "She *won't* be alone," she stated again, this time more firmly.

"We can make it look like she's alone," Jasper muttered, looking up at my dad. "We can make a show of the whole damn thing...come in with moving vans and a dumpster. Position me at the neighbor's house..."

"No, the tree house," Bella, Rose, and I all said at the same time.

Jasper chuckled. "Okay, the tree house. That must be some fort," he snorted, glancing between Bella and Rose, but it was Alice that piped up.

"Hell, yeah, it is! It was better than her room!" she gushed, smirking at a chuckling Bella.

"This guy is narcissistic and egotistical," Wes stated. "He's been told women are evil and nasty. He's been abused by his mother his whole life, but he's also OCD, so he'll want to finish what he started, which is obvious, considering he showed up the very second Bella returned to Seattle. In other words, seeing her one more time will be his breaking point."

"He's alone, with no one on King's crew to help him, and he's got to know it by now," Eleazar mused, rubbing his chin, but I could tell there was more going on in his mind. "He'll be desperate...panicky, because he'll think she spilled everything to the Feds."

My dad groaned again, looking to me and Bella. "Son...I'm...I have to leave this decision in your hands," he murmured, his eyes flickering to Bella, and then back to me. "I can't make a logical decision on this..."

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"And I can?" I growled, looking at him like he'd lost his mind, because I was holding the very person who we were making the decision over.

Bella turned to face me. "I won't be alone, but then again, I'm not sure I want to be. We can have someone look inside the house beforehand."

I huffed, but cupped her face, before looking over at Benny. "Call your guy. Have him verify that someone is in the house. I don't care how it's done...if you have to use heat sensors..."

Benny's eyebrows rose up at my last suggestion, but it was Alice that piped up.

"I can!" she squealed. "Bells, where's your laptop?"

"Kitchen counter," Bella muttered, her teeth gnawing away at her bottom lip as Alice bolted from the yard and into the house, coming back with Bella's laptop in tow.

"Stop, *sweetness*," I whispered, tugging her lip from her teeth. "You'll make yourself bleed."

"Watch this, watch this, watch this," Alice chanted in her usual three time manner, typing furiously away at the computer as Benny peeked over her shoulder. "If I log in here," she mumbled, hitting the enter key, "and then hijack this satellite...then I can switch it over to thermal..."

Benny snorted, shaking his head and snickering. " *Why* don't you work for me again?"

"Cause she works for me," Bella chuckled. "The FBI, NASA, and the Seattle Police all rejected her. She's mine now...and you can't have her!"

I chuckled at Alice's pride-filled smile, even though she didn't look up from the computer screen.

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"You *so* have that two million from the stock exchange stashed away, don't you?" Benny smiled, but broke into a full laugh when all Alice did was shrug.

"Yeah, pixie...fess up!" Emmett snickered, shaking his head.

"No idea what you're talking about," she giggled, but shared a look with Bella.

Yeah, she totally had that money stashed somewhere, but she'd never admit it.

"You know, the statute of limitations has run out on that case, Alice," Benny said with a smirk. "I couldn't say a thing, even if I wanted to...even if you gave me the account number."

"No account number," was the only thing that a laughing Alice would say. "But I do have...something," she sighed, the laughter that was breaking up the tension dying at the table. "I have...movement in Charlie's house."

"You know the coordinates to my dad's house?" Bella asked, as Alice spun the computer around so that everyone could see it.

"I don't forget much of anything, Bells," Alice huffed, looking at her like it was a burden, and I'm guessing it probably was, in a way.

"Right," Bella sighed. "Sorry, pixie."

"Sure, sure, sure..." she chanted, almost to herself, pointing to the screen.

It was hard to make out when you didn't really understand what you were looking at, but I could clearly make out the outline of Charlie's yard - the tree house included - but it was the main house that caught my eye. There was a red and orange heat source that seemed to be sitting right about the living room area.

"There are still utilities on at that house," Bella muttered, squinting at the computer.

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"See how the red part is a little faded?" Benny said, pointing to the screen. When we all nodded, he went on. "He's in the basement. What's down there, Bells?"

"The media room...big flat screen, pool table, stereo..." Bella whispered, taking a deep breath and letting it out. "He's just...chillin' in my father's fucking house!"

"He's staying close to you," Wes countered. "It's a part of you - at least, a part he can touch. I would bet he hopes you'll come there eventually, but I'm just wondering how he's getting in and out. He'd need supplies, food."

"It can be done," Bella and I muttered together.

Rose snorted, rolling her eyes. "You can sneak in and out of that house easily."

"Why can't we just send in who's staking out the house?" Makenna asked, to no one in particular.

"Because *I* want him," I growled, staring at the computer screen, and Bella spun to look at me.

"Me, too," my dad added with a nod, but the look he gave to my Bella was sad and loving. "This isn't the high road we're taking. I refuse to *do the right thing* here, because I am incapable of it when it comes to what he did to Bella. This will be revenge at it's purest form. There will be *no* arrest, Benny. This isn't police business...this is *my* business." Benny nodded in acquiescence, knowing the difference between the two, and my father paced a few more steps, before looking back to me. "Son, are we doing this?"

I left his gaze and looked up at my girl, brushing a hair from her face that a slight breeze had loosened from her ponytail.

"You're scared," I stated softly, because I could see it written all over her face, and she'd never really said what she wanted to do on this. In fact, when my normally strong-willed, independent girl heard people talking *about* her,

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instead of *to* her, she usually puffed the fuck up and told us all where to go, but not this time. She was letting us lead, and that needed to be addressed, *before* I made any call.

"Yes," she whispered back.

"One word, and Benny will send in a SWAT team to take him out, baby," I said, hating the thought that the fucker would get off that easily, but I'd do what she wanted on this. "Or we can do what you and Jasper suggested: Go in, make him come to you..."

"What if he gets away?" she asked me, once again forgetting those around her - it was just the two of us, talking. "I don't want to be afraid of him forever, but I don't want to see him again, either," she admitted, which resulted in Esme playing with her ponytail for reasons I imagined to be a way of comforting her.

I took a deep breath, cupping her face in my hands. "Benny's way means you don't have to see him. Our way means you do... Personally - and no offense to Benny's people - but I don't fucking trust anyone who isn't at this fucking table, but if you don't want this..."

"Then we won't stop until we catch him," Alec told her, but she continued to look at me as I nodded with him in agreement.

"I won't be left alone with him?" she verified, again clutching at my shirt, but I knew she would do anything my father asked of her.

"Not a chance in fucking hell," I vowed.

"We'll clean up the house, so I can turn it over to Em and Ro?"

"Baby, we'll paint the damn thing purple if that's what you want," I chuckled, kissing her lips, because during all this shit, she was still worried about our friends and their fucking wedding gift.

"No," she huffed, shaking her head. "I just want them to have it."

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"Okay, so what's the call, love?" I asked her one more time.

It seemed the whole table was on pins and needles, waiting for her answer, but she only looked to me.

Her eyes welled up with tears as she finally spoke. "Don't let him touch me, Edward," she pleaded, her voice barely above a whisper. "Please."

My heart shattered for her, because I knew what it was costing her to put herself in the same fucking vicinity as this asshole. I'd seen what she looked like the day I saved her, but I'd also seen what just his look could do to her when he'd shown up the day of the press conference. My girl was strong - really fucking strong - but I couldn't fault her for her fear. Not a chance.

I glanced at Benny. "Now that we *know*...now that we're aware of him... *Don't* lose him, Ben. There are ways to watch the house without being *seen*," I told him, explaining how the two neighbors' yards were a direct line into the backyard of Charlie's house, and that was probably how he was getting in and out.

"Sure, Ed," he said, pulling out his phone. "I'll have them sit on the next street over...maybe even camp out in that tree house," he snorted, shaking his head.

I turned back to Bella one more time.

She took a deep breath. "I know I need to end this. I need to face him, face my... *fear* of him," she sighed, pausing for a moment, "but...I'm really scared, baby."

"You'll have me there, Bella," I told her.

"Me, too," practically the whole table chanted, and I grinned up at her when she jumped a little at the outburst.

"See? Not alone, love," I soothed her.

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My girl glanced around the table, up to my father, who she studied for a minute, and then she finally turned her sweet brown eyes back to me. "If I don't, he'll hurt someone else. If I don't, he'll never really be out of our lives. He'll be like one of my scars. Maybe not visible, but I'll still know it's there. And if I don't, then someone else doing it won't count, because I will have never found the..." Bella struggled for the right words.

"Closure?" Esme suggested.

"Courage?" Alec offered.

"Balls?" Emmett added.

"Yeah...all of that," she huffed, smiling a bit when Emmett chuckled. She swallowed thickly. "I *have* to do this, Edward."

I could see her looking to me for courage, for support, because only I could feel the trembling that was vibrating her entire being.

"Then we'll do it together, *sweetness*," I stated, prying her fingers from my shirt and kissing them.

She swallowed again, nodding. "Kay."

I looked up at Benny, who was still holding the phone to his ear. "Tomorrow, no later," I snapped.

The whole table jumped into action at her command, but they all came to a standstill when Mickey yelled, "Wait!" She smiled evilly, looking around the table. "Have I got an idea!"

A/N...you have to admit, this isn't as evil as some of my cliffies. In reality, the next chapter is really big...so I had to end it here.

Okay, so Miller...living in Charlie's house, sneaking in and out. It's perfect, because he knew no one was living there, and that Bella was

nowhere near it. And God, I love Alice...with an all consuming nerdy passion, have I told ya'll that? LOL

So King is dead...and at the hands of Sam, who had never left the jail. SOME of you guys guessed that, but I think the big guy was forgotten by a few of you. I told you that just because he got caught, didn't mean I didn't seek revenge anyway. Just because Charlie and Bella took the high road, didn't mean Carlisle would...which is obvious considering what Carlisle's reaction was concerning Miller.

Em and Rose got married...and he's quitting the team, too. And Bella still wants Edward to work with her, though she's not pushing the issue. But at least Edward and Bella were able to finally go home.

Now the next chapter is big...HUGE, really...in terms of just STUFF. And it's so very...hmmm... Let's see...my Goober_Lou called it "a fucking awesome chapter." That's about all I can reveal for chapter 30. But I promise you'll...be proud.

I need to thank JenRar for beta'ing this for me. To Goober_Lou for talking me down off the ledge when it came to Miller and to MedusaInNY for popping all this stuff onto my blog, when I forget about it most of the time. Huge hugs and kisses to all of you.

The question was asked of me on Twitter last night what my next plans are after Mercward. I didn't have any until recently. I know some of my readers really want another story in the Angel Series, but I just don't have anything ready or GOOD enough, in my opinion. BUT...I do have some ideas for a Mercward sequel... So that being said, I may consider writing another...as soon as I know, I promise, you'll know. Put me on Author Alert just in case, okay?

Okay, review for me. I'd love to hear what you think of King's death, Sam's imprisonment this whole time, and the deal with Miller...not to mention Em and Rose's marriage. The next chapter is finished, which means only one more and the epilogue, so I'd really like to hear your

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opinions. Okay, it's looking good that Sunday will be the next post, so until then...Later.

Chapter 30

A/N...Okay, so I'm posting early. It's funny to me that today...some random day...is the end of the world, but I figured you'd want to know what happened to Riley Miller, if that's the case! LMAO Sorry, I'm feeling a little too sarcastic this morning.

I suppose I need to apologize if Wes Mitchell's comment about Catholic nuns, or even Mrs. Miller's addiction to religion - and the abuse to her son thereof - offended anyone. I don't hate the church...it simply was a fictional story line. The opinions and obsessions of my characters do NOT match my own views of life. IT'S. FICTION.

Now, that out of the way, let's get this show on the road... Let's find out what Mickey had planned, and see how Riley Miller deals with being found at Charlie's house.

CHAPTER 30

BELLA

The moving truck beeped repeatedly as we backed up into my father's driveway to the garage doors. I took a deep breath when my phone alerted a text. We were certain Miller was in the house, because Alice had left the satellite image up all night on my laptop, and the damn thing sat open on my kitchen counter until she closed it just before I left. We were also pretty sure that Miller was using police scanners to monitor his surroundings, waiting to hear word about the house he was in, so we were using non-verbal communication, just until we arrived.

Benny's men changed their stakeout positions the very second he'd called them from Edward's house the day before. In fact, I could see one in the shrubbery in the neighbor's yard to my left as I pulled my phone out. The other man was sitting in a car - his own personal VW - on the next street over, so if Miller left, he could tail him. Miller didn't leave until Benny made sure to have the local

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police make a big deal out of driving by Charlie's house prior to my arrival. It had only been a guess that he was listening in, but Benny was thrilled that he was right.

Unfortunately - or fortunately, I guess - he didn't go far.

Eleazar, Wes, and Alec were all correct. The fucker couldn't stay away from me. He'd used the side yards of the neighbor's houses to sneak out to his car...the same fucking blue Toyota that Victoria had apparently picked him up in the day that Jasper, Mickey, and Edward had chased him from Twi Tech.

I looked down at my phone.

Miller is parked at the end of the street.

I sighed, getting out of the truck and hopping down to the driveway. Benny's message, despite our plan, did not make me any less nervous. I looked up and down the street, finally spotting a blue car at the end of the street. It was parked in the driveway of a home that was for sale, and it was far away enough that we could pull off what we were about to do, because it was all about aesthetics at the moment.

Mickey's plan, though a little scary for me, was the perfect plan. Seriously.

We knew that Miller feared no woman, so armed with that knowledge, we ironed out some details. Mickey's idea was to send the three smallest girls into the house "alone," with a rental moving truck. We were to act like we were loading up to take things away - either for storage or donation. Alice and Mickey were chosen to ride with me, and Mickey had opted to drive the truck. We were, indeed, the smallest of the women, but we had a secret.

"Bells, open those back doors and guide me as close as you can to that garage door," Mickey said, shifting the truck into reverse once more.

"Kay," I said, running to the back of the truck and hopping up with Alice to crack the doors open wide. I smiled inside the box. "Hello, boys," I sang softly.

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"Stay at the back for a sec."

Edward snorted, rolling his eyes as he leaned at the back of the trailer with folded arms, but they all chuckled. Emmett, Carlisle, Jasper, and Alec were all back there with him. It was the deadliest moving van ever known to man.

"I see he's here, Bells," Carlisle growled, holding up his phone that lit the trailer just a bit.

"Yes, hush!" I snapped in a whisper, hopping down to the ground and turning to Alice. "Wave Mickey back. She's got a few feet, and then we can pull down the ramp so that it ends inside the garage," I told her, pressing the door opener. The large, three-car garage slowly opened to me.

"Back, Mick!" Alice ordered, waving her on until the truck's trailer was practically flush with the house. "Okay, stop!"

The hideous beeping ceased when Mickey finally put the truck in park and shut the engine off, hopping down to the ground so that she, Alice, and I could pull out the ramp. The three of us, with a little hidden help from the guys, hooked the ramp at the bed of the trunk, and it angled perfectly down to the garage floor, ending right next to something I hadn't seen in years.

"Fuck... The old Camaro!" I gasped, looking up when Carlisle chuckled. "I thought Charlie sold this."

"He did," he laughed, walking down the ramp with the rest of the boys. "To me, Bells. I stored it here when it started giving me problems."

"No, wait!" Edward snickered. "This is the same damn Camaro that was here when we met the first time?" he asked me, his beautiful green eyes wide as I nodded. "Your Camaro was *Charlie's* Camaro?" he asked his dad.

"Yes, son," Carlisle laughed softly. "Now, everyone in. Guys, sweep the house first, because I'm not taking any chances with this asshole."

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Every last one of them pulled their guns out - even though Miller was parked up the street - and darted into the house silently. After every room was completely checked out, we all met in the living room. Carlisle pulled out his phone and sent a text to Benny that we were in.

Mickey, Alice, and I ran from room to room, yanking curtains closed and dropping the blinds. As much as we needed the help to clean out the house, we couldn't have the boys seen moving around inside.

"As much as I want to help, Bellsy," Jasper chuckled, slinging the case that carried his rifle onto his shoulder, "I need to get into position."

"Right," I sighed, nodding a bit and grabbing his hand. I tugged him to the back door and pointed through the window. "You'll be in there. And don't judge my old music collection," I growled at him.

He grinned, slow and crooked, shaking his head. "Whatever you say...but that's too fucking cool," he muttered, giving the backyard a sweeping glance, before darting across the grass and up the ladder.

We were putting him in there to watch the back, while Benny and Wes were watching the front from my little old neighbor's house across the street. Thankfully, she wasn't home, because she was visiting her daughter in Florida.

"Okay, Bellsy," Emmett said, looking nervous, but excited. "What are we doing?"

"Emmett, aside from a few things that I'd like to save... You and Rose can have whatever you want in this house, okay?" I told him, making sure he nodded.

Before I could turn around, he blurted out, "Why?"

"Because Charlie loved Rose," I chuckled. "Like he loved me. And she spent more time here than she did at her own parents' house. Aunt Jane helped dress us for prom and Homecoming. We smoked our first joint in that tree house out there. We suffered our first hangover in my bedroom upstairs. And this is the

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best house I could ever think of to grow up in," I explained, tilting my head at him. "I met Edward and Carlisle for the first time here." I smiled up at them as Carlisle chuckled and Edward shot me a wink. "Despite my mother's...death, this house has seen some really happy things. It's a good house, and my parents would want someone to...create a life here. Just promise me you'll never get rid of my tree house, and you can do what you wish, Em, okay?"

He grinned, big and dimpled. "Yeah, Bellsy. Sure thing," he laughed, reaching to ruffle my hair, but I dodged him by darting around Edward, who was chuckling at the two of us.

After a brief texting frenzy with Rose, we had an idea as to what she wanted to keep. She was currently with Makenna, giving notice to her landlord and taking a run to the old Gravity offices to report the damage back to me. I wasn't stupid, because I knew Emmett and Wes wanted those two as far away from Miller as they could get them. Esme wasn't allowed near Charlie's house, either. Hell, I couldn't blame them, and I'd be willing to bet if I wasn't needed, Edward would have placed me as far away from this place as he could, but it wasn't feasible.

"What we'll do," I said, mainly to Alice, but everyone was listening. "We'll load the furniture that Rose doesn't want, pack the boxes of the shit I want to keep, and then I'll send a cleaning crew in here later to spiffy the place up, because no one has lived here in months. It's dusty as hell."

"What about the basement, baby?" Edward asked, and I spun to look at him.

"I'm...I'm not going down there. *He's* been living down there," I growled, calming a bit when his strong hands landed gently on my shoulders. "I've yet to be able to walk into a basement...yours included, Edward."

It had something to do with steps down into the ground that was too close for comfort for me. It was an irrational fear that had started with being held captive by Miller, but I'd only discovered while we were staying at the mountain cabin. It was the *smell* of a basement, the cold air that rushed out of them when the door was opened, and it was the swinging bare bulb that shined a creepy as

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fuck light down on a room I really couldn't see. I would freeze every fucking time.

"I know, love," Edward sighed, glancing at the basement door. "Want me to take it?"

"Yeah," I whined, silently begging him not to mention the fear and how I should talk to Esme about it; I was all too aware. "Just...take Emmett with you. Hell, he may want to keep it as it is..."

We got to work then, the girls helping me with boxing up some of my parents' things and my own. We were given the all-clear that Miller was still watching the house, but hadn't moved from his car, so some furniture, like my parents' bedroom, was loaded onto the truck by Alec and Carlisle.

But it was the muffled curses from the basement that scared the shit out of me, because despite the fact Edward was down there, I couldn't bring myself to check on him, and that made me hate myself to no end. But Alec went down for me, bringing both boys up to show me they were okay.

"No scaring the already freaked out girl, Edward," I snapped, and he didn't crack a single crooked smile or laugh.

Instead, he looked over at his father. "He's got...a *fucking shrine* down there," he hissed, pulling me to him with hands that were just this side of claws from his temper.

"To Bellsy," Emmett said, almost sounding like he was gagging. "I sent a pic of it to Benny," he muttered, holding up his phone.

I took it from him, and my mouth fell open. Miller's mother's religious influence had reached her son in ways I was sure she didn't know about, because in the storage closet of the media room, where normally some blankets and pillows were stored, along with some towels for the spare bathroom, was the scariest thing I'd ever seen.

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There were pictures of me that had been taken without my knowledge - older ones from before the scar on my eyebrow, and newer ones from when I'd returned to Twi Tech after Charlie's death. I was on the phone, or getting in a car, or laughing with a hotdog vendor.

But the one that scared me the most was the one of both me and Edward on the streets of Seattle, after our confrontation with King. I recognized the doctor's office that we were walking out of, because we'd had his knee checked out. Edward and I had been really happy that day, despite the knee brace he'd balked at, so I knew that under the black burned part of the photo, my Edward would've been smiling.

The shrine also consisted of little melted candle nubs from when Miller had burned and burned them, different sized crucifixes that were altered to no longer have Jesus on them, and what looked like blood splattered over everything.

"Jesus," I breathed, looking up at Edward, who'd started to shake, and I knew it was taking everything in him not to just run down the street and snatch Miller out through his windshield. "What else is down there?" I asked him, forcing him to engage with me, instead of focusing on his temper.

"Just signs that he'd been living here," Edward said through gritted teeth. "But only if you know what to look for...a recently used shower, some fast food garbage in the trash can, and the TV was still warm."

Alec studied the pic over my shoulder, huffing in frustration. "Seems you have an enemy, kid," he told Edward. "He knows you're her protection."

"Good," Edward snapped, his lip curling. "I wish he'd find his fucking balls and come on up here," he snarled. "Otherwise, I'm gonna..."

"No, son," Carlisle soothed, but his temper was no less reined in as he gripped Edward's shoulder.

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"No offense, Bellsy," Emmett huffed, scratching his head and the back of his neck, "but I don't want nothin' from down there...now..." His voice trailed off, but his normally sweet demeanor was gone.

"Toss it, then," I told him with a shrug.

As all the guys made their way down the stairs to empty the room, Mickey stated, "We need food. That'll calm those boys down a bit."

"Sweet, pizza," Alice chuckled, scrambling up onto the kitchen stool and opening my laptop.

I stopped her, texting Benny, who answered immediately.

Bella, CALL for pizza. He may be tapped into the phone. Use the landline. It may give him what he thinks is an in...

When I showed the girls the text, Mickey ran to the basement to let the guys know what we were doing, only to come right back.

Alice picked up the phone I slid onto the counter, and I realized where she was sitting. "I'll just order a bunch of different... What?" she asked, raising an eyebrow at me when I leaned against the counter.

"Edward sat there the time he came here as a kid," I snickered, shaking my head with the memory.

"Is that the pie thing?" Mickey giggled, sitting down next to Alice.

"Yeah." I grinned, biting my bottom lip.

"What was he like?" both girls asked at the same time.

"Oh, God, *freakin' adorable*," I laughed, shaking my head. "All arms and legs, and hair everywhere. And so very sweet and shy."

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Alice and Mickey snickered as Alice dialed the local pizza delivery place and ordered a bunch of food; considering the boys that were with us, it would most likely get devoured.

"What else?" Mickey chuckled when Alice was finally finished.

I laughed, but set about pulling a few things from the kitchen cabinets that I wanted, like my dad's favorite coffee cup and my mother's crystal vase, as I told them about our first meeting - tangled legs, apple pie, and the tree house. The only thing I left out was the fact that Edward used to stutter. I wouldn't have betrayed him then, and I wouldn't now. I knew it bothered him a bit, though he didn't really do it around anyone but me.

Mickey grinned, looking over at the doorway. "I can't see you as shy, pretty boy," she snorted, laughing harder when he flipped her off.

"I was, and Bella was mouthy," he countered with a laugh, kissing my head as I nodded and giggled.

"Oh! Which reminds me..." I gasped, walking as close to the basement as I dared. "Carlisle," I called.

"Yes, sweetheart," he said from down below.

"If there's anything you want out of Dad's office, you'd better take it, okay?" I asked him as he and Alec trudged up the stairs, carrying the sofa. "I mean, there are some of his first inventions...and his journals and shit..."

Carlisle smiled warmly and nodded. "Thank you, Bella."

"Hell, you might find the high school yearbooks," I teased him. "Nice hair, by the way."

Edward barked a laugh from behind me, but Carlisle chuckled so hard that he had to set down his end of the sofa, much to Alec's dismay - and shaking arms. As he dropped his end, he let a string of what I assumed to be Italian curse

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words fly from his mouth in hiss.

"You know, you two," Carlisle started, pointing to me and Edward, "everyone had a bad style they had to live through. You keep that in mind ten years from now when tousled hair may not be so...cool." He laughed, reaching for his son's head, and Edward ducked him nicely, putting his fists up.

"Come on, old man, can't you catch me?" he teased, jabbing lightly at his father.

"I can not only catch you, but kick your ass, son," Carlisle snorted, and moving so quickly that Alice, Mickey, and I gasped, he had his son wrapped in a headlock.

"Oh, fuck," Edward laughed, trying his damndest to get loose, but it wasn't happening.

I loved these moments with them. It wasn't that we'd forgotten why we were there, but the ease in which we all just... *were*...together, made anything we did really fun. Just as Carlisle slung Edward to the sofa that had been dropped in the doorway, every cell phone went off, causing all of us to freeze.

I pulled out my phone, and the message was from Benny.

He's on the move, on foot. Right behind your pizza. I'm alerting Jasper, as well.

"Shit!" Alec breathed, ducking down into the basement and calling for Emmett.

"Girls, you meet the pizza guy out front *in the fucking yard*," Carlisle ordered, pulling out his gun. "I don't need an innocent getting wrapped up in this fucking shit. Got me?"

"Yeah," we all agreed, turning towards the front door, but Edward stopped me.

"Bella," he called, grabbing me and turning me to face the inside of the house. "Look...my dad is down the hall. Alec and Emmett are right inside the

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basement, and I'm upstairs. If this asshole pulls a gun on you, forces you guys anywhere, there's not a place you can go that you'll be alone, baby. Understand?" he asked, kissing the back of my head.

"And Jazz is outside," I sighed, feeling him nod against my head.

"Yes, ma'am," he whispered, kissing my head one more time. "Benny and Wes think he won't be able to control himself the second he sees you, so you be prepared, love. Okay?"

"Bella, in all reality, you can kill him the second he steps unwanted inside the house," Alice stated. "The law states..."

"Alice," all of us sighed.

We were just about to open the door, because the pizza guy was pulling in, but Carlisle stopped us again.

"Wait! Edward," he said, pointing to the door. "Not upstairs. Right behind that fucking door!"

"Sir," Edward grunted, pulling his gun out and flipping the safety off. He flattened himself behind the door so that he couldn't be seen, and we locked eyes one more time. "You can do this, *sweetness*," he whispered, raising an eyebrow at me and using the term of endearment that now represented our first kiss, our first show of real tempers - the latter being what he wanted me to focus on. "He won't have a chance to touch you, baby. I swear to God. Okay?"

"Kay," I whispered back, soaking in as much beautiful green eyes as I could before walking out the door.

~oOo~

EDWARD

"Fuck," I sighed to myself as my girl bravely stepped outside.

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I couldn't let this asshole touch her. I'd fucking promised her that he'd never do it again. But Benny and my father wanted this as low profile in the neighborhood as they could, because this wasn't an arrest. We were letting Miller come to us, and he would be ended. It was plain and fucking simple, but it didn't make me any less fucking nervous.

I pulled out my earpiece, stuffing it roughly in my ear, and punched up Benny. I needed to know what he could see. I had to have eyes in the back of my head.

"Relax, Ed. I've got sights on both of them." Benny didn't even bother to say hello. "The target is hiding along the wood fence, watching the girls. They've just about finished with the delivery guy. I want the pimply faced kid out of here before he can get himself killed."

"That fucking *shrine*, Ben," I growled low, shaking my head and trying to make all the images go away.

It wasn't the surveillance pictures that bothered me; it was the blood splashed across everything, because there was no telling who or what had donated that blood. Hell, I hoped it was his own - the crazy motherfucker.

"It's because he didn't...finish with her, man. And he never will."

That statement made me sick, and I couldn't help the next order that burst out of me. "Tell me where she is," I snapped as softly as I could, locking eyes with my dad, who was peering around the hallway wall.

"Well, she, Alice, and Mickey are charming the socks off the poor delivery guy," Benny snorted. "He may be in love - with *all three of them*."

"Come on, Bella," I groaned, my head hitting the wall behind me with soft thump. I had no doubt some poor teenage kid was lost to her. That didn't surprise me one bit.

"Okay, they're turning back to the house, Ed. And the pizza guy is backing out," Benny noted, but it sounded like he wasn't finished. "A-aaaand... asshole's

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on the move! Girls will be to the door in five seconds...and Miller right behind them." He paused for a second. "Dude has lost it. He should've used the garage as his entry point... Get them in, Ed...he's on the sidewalk."

The next few things happened too quickly to almost comprehend. The girls walked into the house. Alice carried four pizza boxes, while Mickey and Bella walked with her. Miller, on the other hand, bolted into the house like a fucking rabid squirrel - all twitchy and sweaty and shaky.

The fucker didn't even say a word, before pulling the trigger on his gun that was capped off with a silencer. Alice fell hard to the floor next to the couch, the pizza boxes scattering across the wood floor. Bella and Mickey fell to her side, but before I could step from my spot, he had the gun pointed at Mickey's head and slapped Bella. Hard.

"Don't move, girls," he ordered, turning to face me. "You either, bodyguard. I didn't kill the tiny one on purpose, but I won't miss with this one."

I froze, but my sight was at his head. I wasn't lowering my weapon unless I fucking had to.

"I knew *you'd* be here," he laughed humorlessly, pointing to me. "Isabella never goes anywhere without you. Isn't that right, Miss Swan?" he asked, pulling the hammer back on the gun that was still aimed at Mickey's head. "Answer, or your friend's brain decorates the wall."

"Right," Bella sneered.

"Here's what we're going to do," Miller stated, his eyes darting from Bella, to Mickey, to me, and back again. "Isabella, we have unfinished business, so after I take care of this last girl..." He tapped Mickey's head with the muzzle of the gun. She curled her lip in hatred at him, but I shook my head at her, because Miller could just as easily turn that weapon on Bella. "I'll kill the bodyguard here."

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Bella's head snapped up to glare at him in what I could only describe as pure, unadulterated, black fury, and I think Miller had finally pushed the wrong button with her - me. So armed with that knowledge, I proceeded to make him pay attention to me, not them.

"Scumbag," I growled, "you couldn't carry my jock without straining something." I needed to distract him, because I could see Bella and Mickey evaluating their position, not to mention giving Alice a worried look. "Much less kill me."

Mickey gave me an old, silent hand signal for me to move, to keep Miller's attention on me, but to the left, so I took one slow step. And I laughed - just to piss him off.

"How's that cabin of yours?" I asked, tilting my head and taking one more step - any more, and he'd feel it too much. "I bet it *burned* like dry grass after a spark."

From the far corner of the room, I could just barely catch my father's shadow shifting in the hallway. What I needed was Miller's gun off of the girls, even if it was directed at me, but he wasn't budging...yet.

"*You* took her from me," he accused, narrowing his eyes at me as I smiled at him.

"Oh yeah...and it was *so* easy," I chuckled sarcastically. "You're a fool for working... *alone*."

Alice groaned and started to wake up, but the girls shushed her.

"Leave her!" Miller snapped, pistol whipping Mickey one time to her forehead.

As tough as she was, it caused her head to snap back, but it hardly seemed to bother her. "Fuck, you ass..." she growled, but came to a standstill when he pointed the gun right at the middle of her forehead.

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"You wanted to play, princess," Miller sang. "I'd have taken you up on it that day, except I despise the company you keep." He gestured to me, but maintained his lock on her.

"Don't work well with other *men*, do you?" Bella muttered under her breath, and I was glad she was getting more and more pissed, instead of seeing fear. "Is there something we should know?"

"Keep it up, Isabella," he sneered, but he was smart to keep the gun pointed at Mickey. "I told you how I can shut you up..."

"Hardly a mouthful," she said, tilting her head at him giving him the sexiest smirk I've ever seen her wear. "I'm not tied to a table this time, asshole," she told him. "And I'm not your crazy mother, either, so if you think it's going to be easy this time around, you've got another thing coming. You won't touch me again. *He* won't let you," she stated, pointing towards me.

I grinned and winked at her.

"Oh, Isabella, your bodyguard will be the first to die. And I'm going to make you watch," Miller threatened, chuckling darkly.

"I don't fucking think so," she snapped, her eyes almost black as he started to turn his gun at me. It was his first and last mistake. "*He* won't let you, either," she stated, pointing towards the hallway, where my father finally stepped out in the open. "*They* won't let you," she chuckled, pointing towards the basement, as Alec and Emmett stepped out into the open.

All weapons were pointed at Miller, but he snatched Bella up by the hair and pointed his muzzle right under her chin. We all froze, but she didn't.

"You're missing one, jackass," she grunted, elbowing him hard and falling to the floor, just as a bullet pierced through the sliding glass door, zipping past us all and nailing Miller in the shoulder.

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I'd completely forgotten about Jasper. As I looked up, I could clearly see Bella had positioned Miller in the perfect spot, but he wasn't dead. And I'm pretty sure Jasper did that on purpose, because my friend *didn't miss*. Suddenly, Bella and Mickey reacted.

Mickey nailed the bastard, who hadn't fallen down yet, hard in the balls, but Bella hit him where he'd been shot, and *that* fucking got his attention. He fell to his knees at the same time that my girl brought his arm down on her knee, causing a sickening snap to echo through the house when his arm broke with the force in which she did it. Snatching his gun from his hand and her own from her waistband, she was instantly astride his chest, both guns pointed at his face.

The stubborn - or just plain stupid - ass that he was, started to fight her, and was met with one more gun pointed in his face - Mickey's. Mickey nailed Miller's leg so hard where I'd shot him, causing blood to seep out of his old wound, that the fucker cried out. Bella dropped Miller's gun from her right hand and balled up a fist, punching the shit out of his face. Repeatedly. In fact, I wasn't sure she'd ever stop, until my father said something.

"She'll break her hand, son," he said, almost sounding amused, but I could see the dark look that he was giving the situation.

Alec and Emmett walked into the room, weapons still aimed at Miller. Benny and Wes walked through the front door, closing it behind them. But it was the panicked Jasper that my father had to catch, as his sights were for Alice and Alice only.

"J, just wait," my dad ordered, grabbing his shirt. "Let Edward clear the girls away. I can't take any fucking chances with this guy."

"Mickey, if he even acts like he wants to move, shoot him," I ordered, putting my gun in the front of my waistband as I walked behind Bella. "Baby, that's enough," I told her, but she just kept punching and punching.

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But it was the tears streaming down her face that made Mickey say, "Just...pick her up, Ed."

I wrapped my arms around her midsection and lifted her off of a now bloody Miller. Her fists were raw and covered in blood as she fought even me, but she got in a damn few good kicks to his stomach and balls as I yanked her away from him.

"Edward... *no*," she growled, clawing at me. "He won't do this to me again...I can't let him."

"Bella, stop," I said, tugging her, still kicking, away from the room and onto the kitchen counter, where I grabbed her face. "He won't...stop fighting me, baby."

It was then that she crumbled, her arms shaking with exertion as she tried to hug me.

"I couldn't let him hurt you," she sobbed into my neck. "Any of you..."

"We wasn't, *sweetness*. I promise you."

"But Alice," she cried, her face pulling back to turn around.

Alice was sitting up, holding her arm where the bullet had just barely caught her arm, going straight through. Jasper finally ran to her side, checking her wound. From the bump on her head, it would seem that her fall from the force of the shot was worse than the bullet. She was so tiny that I imagined being shot was like getting hit by a freight train for her.

"She's fine, see?" I soothed her, barely containing my smile when Alec and Emmett snatched Miller up brutally by his throat and injured shoulder, slamming him down in a dining chair, only to have Benny and Wes handcuff his arms behind him and his legs to the chair. Miller cried out when his broken arm protested the restraints at his back.

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"Edward, put me down, please. I want to go see her," Bella sniffled, looking up at me. "Please, baby..."

I nodded, lifting her gently down the kitchen floor, where she took off straight to Alice and Jasper.

"I'll have a scar like yours," Alice said with a weary smirk, holding her bicep. "Just like that case you and Rose had..."

"Sure, pixie," Bella chuckled, sniffing a bit as she checked how deep the graze was. "Of all the things you want like mine, silly..."

I couldn't help but snort at the two of them, but my smile fell when, even through swollen, bleeding eyes, Miller was still watching Bella. Not just fucking *watching*... He was licking his lips, as he still found the ability to smile. He was taking in every inch of her, like he was looking at her naked - like he was reliving every damn moment he'd had with her in his dungeon.

He was fucking *turned on* by her.

"Hey!" I snarled, pulling out my gun, but he didn't stop. "You don't get to look at her anymore, motherfucker!" I said, stepping between the two of them as the whole house came to a halt.

"I'll finish what I started..." he mumbled through what sounded like broken teeth.

"I don't fucking think so," I chuckled darkly, pulling back my fist and letting it fly across his face, but as he recovered, he still tried to see her. "Eyes on me, asshole..."

Miller stared up at me, one eye almost swollen shut. His nose was broken and bleeding, his lip was split, both top and bottom, and he was, indeed, missing a few teeth. His cheekbone was already turning several different colors as it swelled up, and tears ran down his face as he tried to adjust his arm, even though it was cleanly broken and bent at the strangest of angles. For some

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amazing reason, the fact that my Bella had caused most of that damage made me a proud son of a bitch.

"Ten minutes," he mumbled, spitting blood to the floor.

"What's that?" I asked, making sure I'd heard him right.

"That's all I needed before you took her. *Ten fucking minutes*, and she'd have been *mine*," he growled low.

"Oh," I chuckled, shaking my head and looking behind me at my girl, who was watching us both warily. "That's what I thought you said. Well, too bad." I turned back to him, deciding to fuck with him a bit. "'Cause she's mine now," I whispered to him, raising an eyebrow at him and smiling as his smugness finally fell away. "And it's sweet, *sweet* fucking heaven," I whispered again, making sure no one could hear me but him, because I was about to tell him the God's honest truth. "There's nothing like the... *feel* of her. She's beyond what you could possibly imagine. You... *totally* fucking missed out, and you'll die, having never, *ever*...tasted her. All over...ten fucking minutes. I think that's the saddest thing I've ever heard..."

The man snapped, whether in temper or in mental capacity, I didn't know, but the sound that came from him was like a wounded animal. He struggled against his restraints, causing the handcuffs to bite into his skin, despite how badly that arm must have been killing him. I stepped back as he started to spit at me, his eyes wild.

"Christ, Ed," Emmett growled, but he was smiling evilly. He gave a tug on Miller's chair so that he fell back to the floor with a heavy thump. "What the fuck did you say to him?"

I grinned, shaking my head and disengaging my weapon. I looked up at my dad. "He was just telling me that had we,"--I motioned between us--"been ten minutes later to his cabin, then he would have had her..."

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"Is that so?" my dad asked, giving Miller a boot to the head just one time.

"Shut up so I can fucking think, you asshole. And before the neighbors fucking hear you."

Miller blacked out with that last knock to the head, and silence rang through the house, except for the opening of the front door. In walked Rose, Makenna, Eleazar, and Esme, all of whom gave a glance around the house, but Esme rushed to Alice, instantly beginning to clean her up from supplies she was carrying with her.

"Jesus, Edward," Rose gasped, looking at Miller and back to me. "What the hell did you do to him?"

I laughed. "All Bella," I snorted, pointing to my girl, who was worrying the shit out of that bottom lip. That sight made my smile fall. "Hey, come here," I sighed, pulling her away from Miller. I set her on a kitchen stool and stood between her legs. "What's this?"

"Death is too good for him," she whispered, her brow wrinkling a bit. "But I can't...he shouldn't...ever be free. He's a monster, Edward."

I followed her glazed stare as she didn't stop looking at him. Tipping her chin to face me, I said, "Then what do we do, love?"

Eleazar cleared his throat, a small smile curling his mouth that reminded me of his sister. "Might I suggest something?"

~oOo~

BELLA

"We need to go south, Carlisle," Eleazar started, his eyes landing on the now crumpled mass that was Miller.

My body shivered at how I'd finally conquered my fear of him.

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All it took was his threats to Edward, my friends, and I couldn't take it anymore. I couldn't allow Miller's gun to change directions from me to Edward. I couldn't stand by and shiver in fear when the one person who gave me more courage than a lion was about to be taken from me. I wouldn't allow it.

"So soon?" Carlisle asked, walking towards us.

"Miss Bella here just stated that death is too easy for this guy, and I happen to agree with her," Eleazar chuckled, tugging lightly on my ponytail as I pressed my forehead to Edward's jaw. "I think I've just the place for him."

"*La Fosa de Vida*," Carlisle muttered, his eyebrows rising high. "You want to drop him off on the way?"

"What the hell is the living pit?" Alice asked, looking up at Carlisle, who grinned in pride down at her.

"I should've known you were bilingual," he chuckled. "It's a prison...in South America."

"*Multilingual*," she countered with a tired sigh, leaning back against Jasper. "I speak German, Italian, Binary Code, and Smart Ass."

I snorted, smothering my laugh into Edward's shirt. "She'll definitely live," I giggled into his ear.

"No shit," he chuckled, shaking his head.

"Alice," Carlisle sighed, rolling his eyes at her, and turned his attention back to Eleazar. "Felix is already in place down there?" he asked him.

"Yeah, and we could use a few more," he replied, looking around the room.

"This is that Corbin shit, isn't it?" Emmett asked, looking between the both of them, and they nodded. "I'm in, and we get to drop this piece of shit off on the

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way?"

"Yes, Emmett," Mickey sighed, shaking her head at him. "So...what's the plan?" she asked, a wry smirk on her face, because it always seemed like we needed a fucking plan.

"I'm in," Alec stated. "I was there when we fucked up the first time..."

"Me, too," Jasper groaned, locking eyes with Edward. "After this, though...I'm out, Carlisle."

"That goes for me, too, Carlisle," Mickey sighed, glancing up at him like she was prepared for his anger, but she needn't have worried.

"We're all out after this, guys," he sighed, looking older, like he'd looked after being shot. "Edward? I need you to fly..."

Edward sighed, but turned to me, not saying anything, so I said it for him. "We're in."

"You're sure?" Edward whispered.

"Someone has to have your back, right?" I asked, smirking up at him.

"I guess so," he laughed, kissing my forehead and pulling back to cup my face. "You don't leave my side. I don't care what comes up. Got me?"

"*Sir*," I snickered, nodding one time.

"Bells, you're going?" Jasper chuckled, his smile widening when I nodded again. "God, I really need to get a rifle in your hands."

"Right," I laughed. "Oh, but nice shot, by the way," I told him, pointing to Miller.

Jasper bowed low. "Thank you, ma'am. Thanks for listening."

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"You were tied into Jazz?" Edward asked, and both of us nodded as I pulled the small earpiece out of my ear. "Fuck, I was wondering how she knew to duck. Damn!"

The room laughed as Jasper and I shared a fist bump over our secret conversation, but Carlisle sobered up quickly.

"Twenty-four hours, guys," he ordered. "Meet at Edward's. We'll fly out ASAP."

"Sir," his crew grunted.

"Wait!" Edward growled, pointing to Miller. "What do we with this asshole until then?"

"Don't you worry," Esme sang, pulling out a syringe from her bag. "He won't wake up until you're out of the country." With that said, she jabbed that needle hard into his neck, causing all of us to groan and cringe as she pressed the plunger. "And don't worry...I'll make sure he doesn't bleed to death before you get there," she chuckled, getting a wink from Carlisle.

Emmett clapped his hands together loudly. "Well, shit...let's get busy, people!"

~oOo~

I'd been a mess by the time Edward pulled us into his driveway. I couldn't decide whether to laugh or cry or shake to death as the reality that we'd finally caught Miller set in, but it had seemed that Edward knew what I needed, because he led me straight to the bathroom, turning on the shower.

Carefully and silently stripping us of our clothes, he pulled me under the hot spray, whispering, "It's over, baby. Let it wash away..."

We stayed under the spray, not even washing. He held me as my nerves wracked my entire frame, my forehead hitting his shoulder as the water cascaded down our skin and the steam rose to the ceiling.

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He'd finally tucked me into bed, holding me as tightly as he could, and I'd awoken the next morning, feeling like a new woman.

I came up from my memory, trying to remember if I'd packed everything that we needed. I glanced over at the door, making sure I'd brought the bag out of the bedroom after I'd finished zipping it closed, and then turned my gaze out the kitchen window.

Edward was readying his chopper, loading it with weapons from his own cache, making sure it was fueled, and running what I guessed to be some sort of mental check list he had. One day, I'd have to ask him what that list consisted of. And one day, I was going to straddle him in that pilot seat, if it was last thing I ever did, because fuck, if he didn't look delicious - backwards black baseball cap, black cargo pants, no shirt, and barefoot. My pilot was just fucking hot, with muscles that rolled under smooth skin as he opened the cabin of the chopper.

I was just about to give into temptation as I finished packing the cooler with some food for everyone, but Carlisle pulled up in the driveway. Edward looked up and smiled, wiping his greasy hands on a rag that he casually tossed onto his shoulder, before walking to the car.

Alec stepped gracefully from the passenger side of the car, a smile playing on his face. I could barely make out another person sitting in the backseat, so grabbing the cooler, I set it down next to mine and Edward's bag, and stepped out onto the front porch.

" *Bellissima*," Alec sang, turning to Carlisle when he spoke.

"Come here, Bella. I brought someone to see you," Carlisle chuckled, tapping the roof of the car.

Edward smirked, folding his arms across his chest as I stepped off the porch and onto the grass of the front yard. But it was the tall form pulling himself out of the backseat of the car that made me squeal.

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"Sam!" I gushed, running to him.

"Hi, Miss Bella," he said, his deep voice rumbling in my ear as he caught me in a crushing hug.

He set me down on my feet, and I couldn't help but smile up at him. I knew he supposedly looked scary, but I never saw him that way. I saw a giant older man - older than my father - that was scarred horribly. He'd always been so sweet to me, helping me out at Aunt Kate's farm when something was either too big or too heavy for me to deal with, and he told funny stories about Alec and Carlisle when it was just the two of us.

I knew what his job was for Carlisle, but he wasn't a monster. He was no more a monster than my Edward was - or my godfather, for that matter.

"I'm so sorry you were in jail for me, Sam," I told him. "You didn't have to be there for that long."

"It's my job, little one," he chuckled, shaking his head.

"Well, thank you...for what you did," I said sincerely.

He huffed, a frown crossing his features. "I didn't know if it was time, Miss Bella, but I couldn't help it." He sighed, looking over at Carlisle. "He started talking about you and Carlisle at dinner, and I called Benny...the things King was saying...so Benny said go ahead. He set up the open cell door that very night."

I smiled, because I could well imagine what King had said about me and my godfather.

"The *names* he called you, little one." He sighed, shaking his head again. "He was being rude."

I giggled at the thought of manners coming into play in prison of all places, but it seemed to fit Sam somehow.

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The big guy looked around, his gaze landing on Edward, and then he looked back to me. "Is little Eddie over there behaving himself, Miss Bella?"

I had to fight my laugh, because Edward paled under Sam's scrutinizing gaze, his eyes growing wide, much to the amusement of his father and Alec.

"Oh, hell, kid," Alec laughed, practically doubling over. "You better hope she says yes."

Edward nervously took off his hat and ran a hand through his hair, only to tug the hat back on, and I could have sworn he broke out into a sweat.

"Yes, Sam." I laughed as I watched Edward relax a bit. "He's a perfect gentleman."

"You'll call me if he ever isn't... *a perfect gentleman*?" Sam asked, smirking and winking at me when Edward groaned behind him, and it was then that I knew that Sam was just messing with him.

"Sure will," I sang, winking at Edward and turning to Carlisle. "Where's Miller?"

"Oh!" Sam jumped, walking to the trunk of the car when Carlisle popped it open. "I forgot about him already," he sighed, lifting an unconscious Miller from the trunk. At least I *thought* he was unconscious, because there was a black fabric bag over his head. "Carlisle said this guy is in my charge until we drop him off, Miss Bella. Where can I put him?"

"Here...there...garbage can?" I suggested, rolling my eyes at their laughter. "Middle of the woods so that the wolves can have him?" I added, shrugging dramatically.

"The helipad is fine, Sam," Edward laughed. "Is he still knocked out?"

"Yes," Carlisle snorted. "I think Esme gave him another shot this morning, just out of sheer joy. By the time he wakes up, he'll be surrounded by four walls of

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dirt."

Sam set Miller down more gently than I would have. I glared down at the man, finally unable to fight the urge to see him, so I ripped off the bag. There were bruises and swelling all over his face. Dried blood still caked the corners of his mouth where his lips were split, and it was a miracle if the eye that was swollen shut would actually function once the puffiness went down. I could see that Esme had patched up Jasper's bullet hole in his shoulder, but not much else.

All four men watched me in silence, but it was Sam that knelt beside me.

"Is he the one, little one? The one that Eddie and Carlisle saved you from?" he asked softly.

"Yes." My answer was merely a whisper, but he heard me.

"You want him to suffer?" Sam asked, bending low so that I would look at him, and not my former captor.

"I never want anyone to go through what I did..." I answered softly and honestly. "I don't know what would constitute justice for him..."

"Justice will be what he gets," Sam interrupted. "There is no escape from *La Fosa de Vida*. They will know what he did, and will do the same to him."

"How will they know?" I asked him.

"Because we'll tell them, *Bellissima*," Alec stated. "In detail..."

"All of it," Carlisle finished, glancing up when Emmett pulled in, followed by Jasper and Mickey. "He will pay, sweetheart," my godfather said, "and he won't be back. Ever."

I stood up, my eyes gazing down at Miller one more time, but this time, Edward's arms slipped around me. I swallowed thickly as I met Sam's eyes

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again.

"I will take care of it, Miss Bella," he vowed.

"Do you trust us?" Alec chuckled, giving me a wink.

I nodded. "Yeah."

"Come on, love. Let's load up," Edward whispered in my ear, placing the sweetest of kisses to my neck. "And I want you up front with me, okay?"

I turned in front of him and nodded. "Yeah, you gonna teach me to fly?" I asked with a smirk.

"You wanna learn?" he countered with a sexily raised eyebrow and my favorite crooked grin.

"Maybe," I giggled, biting my bottom lip.

"Then get your sweet ass in the co-pilot seat, baby," he growled, smacking my ass lightly.

Edward actually did let me take the stick for like a full minute, before Carlisle accused us of giving him more gray hair. Otherwise, the flight was uneventful and a straight shot, except for one stop in Texas for fuel.

By the time Carlisle started giving Edward coordinates for this prison we were stopping at, the ground below us was nothing but trees, rainforest, and a scattering of small villages. But it was in a wide expanse of rainforest - the middle of no-fucking-where - that his dad finally told Edward to start landing.

We were greeted by three very solemn men with rifles, but they nodded with respect to Alec, Carlisle, Sam, and Eleazar, which meant this wasn't the first prisoner they'd brought to them. And that might have been the scariest thought I'd ever had, as Sam dropped a now barely awake Miller at his feet.

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For what seemed like a very long conversation and heavy gestures with hands - not to mention a point my way - the men nodded, and Sam waved me forward.

Edward, Mickey, and I all climbed down out of the chopper and joined them.

"I thought you'd like to hear them give their... *orientation*," Sam rumbled in my ear.

The shortest of the three men knelt down next to a now fully awake, but a little groggy Miller. "Welcome to hell," the man said in a laugh and very thick accent. "You are no longer...American. You are no longer...human." He laughed evilly again. "You like ropes? You like... *fire*? We can give you fire."

My eyebrows rose, and I couldn't help but lean back into Edward as I watched them tease Miller.

"No more pizza...or...hamburger. You'll eat what we give you," the short man chuckled. "You like it or you starve...we don't care. Or maybe we don't give you anything for a few days, yeah?"

He looked up to Carlisle and asked a question in Spanish.

"Three days," he answered, and they both looked to me.

I swallowed thickly, just very grateful Edward was behind me.

"Holy shit," Mickey chuckled. "They're totally going to torture him step by fucking step, like he did to you. Starve him, no water, beating, burning, whipping, cutting...they're going to do it all. And from what I can tell, he'll have to beg for death before its over...and it won't be over. They'll keep him just alive enough to continue to torture him, but weak enough he can't escape. They'll call Carlisle when he dies."

"Will they kill him?" I asked, but my question was directed to Carlisle.

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"No, sweetheart," he said, a slow smile curling up his mouth. "They like to let... *nature* get to him. Well, once they've repeated his offenses."

"You mean...bugs, animals, viruses, weather...whatever?" Edward asked, giving Miller a glance.

"Yes," the short man stated with a nod and a big smile as he gestured to his two buddies to snatch Miller up. "He won't hurt lady...no more."

"Good," Edward growled, but looked up at Sam. "You'll make sure he's...incarcerated?"

"Yeah, Eddie," he chuckled. "I'll be right back."

"Wait!" I said, breaking away from Edward's arms and walking to Miller, who was blinking up at me. "You..." I growled, poking my finger where I knew the bullet wound was still fresh, making him wince. "You didn't break me, you know. You need to know that. You came fucking close, but see those people?" I asked, pointing to my family, my Edward. "They - and some that aren't here - kept me together, made me stronger. You failed, Riley," I told him, using his first name so that I knew I had his attention. "And I'm going to make sure that Victoria and Delia get put back together, too. Do you understand me? We won't ever let you win..."

I nodded once to the short man with the rifle, and he smiled at me warmly. He turned, waving to his buddies - that were now carrying a freaking out Miller - into the dense forest, disappearing almost instantly into the brush, with Sam's tall form following them.

I turned around to see Carlisle standing behind me.

"Will this work, sweetheart?" he asked softly, almost tentatively.

"Yes." I sighed, hugging him fiercely. "Thank you," I whispered. "Thank you for coming to get me from him."

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"Thank *you*, Bella," he chuckled, kissing my forehead.

"For what?" I asked, completely confused as to what Carlisle could be thanking me for.

"For saving my son," he whispered, kissing my temple.

I grinned up at him. "That was the easy part," I giggled, taking his hand.

"Now...isn't there some mistake we have to correct, Carlisle?"

He snorted, nodded, and looked up when Sam trudged out of the forest, looking rather satisfied. "Indeed, Bells, we do."

Edward pulled me from his father, swinging me up into the co-pilot seat, and once my seat belts were secure, his warm hands cupped both sides of my face.

"You okay?" he whispered, his brow furrowing.

"Yeah." I nodded, leaning in and kissing his mouth softly. "I love you," I breathed against his lips.

"Love you, too, *sweetness*," he snickered. "Let's go bail my dad out of trouble... *again*," he snorted, laughing when his own father flipped him off from the back of the chopper. "Nice, Dad. Some influence you are..."

"Shut it, son. Let's just get this done and go home."

A/N... okay, only one more regular chapter to go and then the Epilogue. I know, I know...but for those of you that play with me on Twitter already know...I will be writing a sequel for this story. When, is the question, so just give me time.

A few of you think that Corbin will be the sequel. He isn't. He's a small part of this story, but one that kind of was the beginning of all the crap, so to speak. They will take an offensive measure in order to avoid a defensive one.

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And yes, some things will be cleared up in the next chapter as far as our friends' futures are concerned. And the epilogue will delve a little further into the future.

Miller...yes, he's totally getting what he deserved...exactly what he did to others. He will rot in a prison in a country where now he doesn't exist. And Bella finally told him that he didn't break her, though she did a damn good job trying to crush his face. Hehehe XD And Sam's out. Woohoo! ;) I do love that small character.

Anyway, I want to thank JenRar for beta'ing this as always...for helping me smooth it out. To Goober_Lou for pre-reading it, and who loved Edward's whispered conversation with Miller without shame. And to MedusaInNY, who maintains my blog better than I do. Lol

I am posting early, but I'm not sure if Wed will be the next posting date, though that is my goal. Either way, please review for me. Let me know what you thought of this chapter...and how Miller was treated. I'll most likely see you Wed, so until then... Later :)

Chapter 31

A/N... Here it is...the last regular chapter of Blood & Glory. It's emotional for me to post this, but knowing that there will be a sequel helps a bit. I'm not sure exactly when I'll start it, but I will announce it on Twitter, my blog, and most likely as an extra chapter attached to this story, so you will know when it starts. I may take a few weeks off of my writing/posting schedule just to rest my brain! LOL

Now, here's the end of Corbin, the beginning of new lives for everyone...and this does have a LEMON WARNING - something we've all been wanting since Bella said it. Hehehe! Enjoy, and see me at the bottom...

CHAPTER 31

BELLA

"I'm not made to be a sniper, Jasper," I laughed, pulling my hair through one of Edward's black baseball caps.

We'd just landed in an open field, but we were quite a ways from where we truly needed to be. Edward had to hide our presence, so a hike in the dead of night was required to get to Corbin's farm, and it wasn't a short walk, either.

"Here." Mickey chuckled, turning me around. "Braids are better. That way your hair doesn't get caught in the trees and shit," she said, quickly braiding my hair down my back and securing it with a rubber band. "And only Jasper can sit still that long without going crazy," she laughed, falling over when he shoved her lightly. "You should've seen what poor Emmett went through one time."

"I'm hyperactive!" Emmett growled, much to everyone's amusement. "And I'd just eaten chocolate cake..."

"A whole cake?" I said with a snort, my eyebrows raising up.

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"Don't judge a man on his desserts, love," Edward snickered, giving me a wink as he helped me into a black Kevlar vest.

We were all in black, because we had to trek through the jungle at night, sneak onto someone's well guarded property, and take down the man that had started all this shit, despite the fact that it was Alec, Sam, and Carlisle who had made the mistake.

"It's amazing that you don't weigh a thousand pounds," I sighed, helping Mickey with her hair. "I've never seen anything like it. Jake didn't eat that much, and he was like six foot seven."

"Oh, speaking of Jake," Carlisle said, securing his weapons and vest. "He's home now. And unfortunately you missed your opportunity to tell him about his upcoming fatherhood."

I grinned. "Well, shit!" I laughed, shaking my head as I tightened my boots. "Please tell me you at least video taped it."

"It's on the internet, if I'm not mistaken," he chuckled, rolling his eyes. "Alice is a sneaky little thing."

We all laughed at that, because we heard her loud and clear through our headsets. She was linked into a satellite system from Edward's house, with the rest of the girls that couldn't come.

"It was fantastic, Bells!" Alice giggled. "Jake got all red in the face...and he sputtered and shook his head in denial, but his first thought was of you." She snorted into laughter.

Edward's head shot up as he loaded his bag with plastic explosives, detonators, and enough ammo for the both of us. I was following him on this mission, considering I'd never been on a military operation in my life - though the mountain cabin situation came damn close when James showed up to kill us.

"Why would he care about Bella?" Edward growled.

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Behind him, Alec and Carlisle grinned in amusement at the pure jealousy that was rolling off of him.

"Because, silly," Alice sang, and I could just see her shaking her head at him and rolling her eyes, "he totally thinks this is Karma she wished on him for cheating!"

"I don't have that good of an imagination," I muttered, smiling when everyone laughed. "I don't! The most I was hoping for was that she stalked him...or herpes or something..."

Edward laughed, his head falling back to the side of the chopper. "That's my girl..." he said proudly, finally getting up and slinging his bag across his shoulder and chest so that it sat low on his hip. He hopped down to the ground and opened his arms for me. "Come on, *sweetness*," he said, still chuckling. "We've got fires to light and a long walk before we get there."

Everyone exited the chopper and helped Edward hide it under his tarps, because we couldn't take any chances that someone would see it before the night was over. Before we could all take off to our perspective jobs, Carlisle gathered us around him.

"Listen," he sighed, placing one hand on my shoulder, and the other on his son's, "I know this is the last job I'll ever ask of you - *any* of you. I know you've got lives you want to live, and families you want to start, and I can appreciate that, because I want those things for you - especially for my son." He paused, sharing a look with Edward, who nodded solemnly. "But I wanted you to know...I've never worked with a finer group of people... *in my life*. And that includes Bella and her girls," he said, giving my shoulder a squeeze. I appreciated him including them, because my girls were listening in from mine and Edward's home. "I've seen war and black ops, but never have I trusted or...cared more for a team than who is in front of me...or listening in...right now."

We were all silent, because it seemed like he wasn't finished.

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"When this is over, when we've taken out the biggest supplier of cocaine to the US - not to mention the reason behind King's obsession with Twi Tech - then I want you to know that I release you from your obligations to me. You're free to do whatever you wish, and if you need anything...anything at all...please come to me. I'll be happy to write a glowing recommendation for all of you, though if Bella had her way, I think she'd just steal you all," he chuckled, wrapping his arm around me when I gasped dramatically, but it was no secret that my girls were urging his boys to come over to Gravity.

He took another deep breath and look around at the faces that were gazing up at him, letting his breath out slowly. "That being said, I want to thank you in advance for your help tonight. This was a mistake we made years ago, but I can't have Corbin coming after me, you, or anyone else, for that matter. We'll end the violence and the drugs at the source - not that he's the only one, but he's the only one that's a threat to us." He nodded, almost to himself, and let go. "You all have your jobs, you all know what to do... So please be safe, and we'll see you back here. Radio silence unless necessary. Jasper, the target is yours, so let's get going."

"Sir!" we all grunted, before separating into the teams we'd been paired into.

Edward and I ran low and silent through the jungle for about two miles, before the farmhouse came into sight. Way far off in the distance, a road wound away towards where Edward had said the house was. It could barely be seen under the bright moonlight. The field of coca plants went off into the distance for what seemed forever in the darkness of the night.

"This is going to get the whole jungle fucking high," I snorted softly as I followed Edward to the barn.

We were going to use whatever fuel or flammable liquid we could get our hands on to start the fire.

Edward chuckled, shaking his head. "Doesn't work that way, baby," he snickered, glancing around us as he quietly opened the barn door. "The leaves are put through a process..."

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"Okay, *Alice*," I teased, rolling my eyes at his silly ass grin, but damn it, if Alice didn't start to give the *exact* fucking description of the cocaine making process.

"Holy God, Alice," Emmett growled. "Enough, you smart ass!"

"All right," I sighed, looking up at a very amused Edward, "that was totally my fault."

He cracked up, tugging me inside the barn. We found kerosene for lamps, gasoline for the farm equipment, and even a little paint thinner, once we got inside. The fields were so large that we were going to start the fire on each end and in the middle, hoping that the winds would take care of the rest.

"We're not doing this until the animals are out of that barn, Edward," I told him, unlocking the stall that held a beautiful horse.

"Fine, baby," he stated, opening the rest. "We'll set them free. They'll stand a better chance in the open than they do trapped in here."

With that said, we both slapped the behinds of two large quarter horses so they'd take off into the night, and with no shame, I scooped up two kittens, their mother nowhere to be found.

"Bella, no," Edward huffed, rolling his eyes, but I stood my ground - pouting to the best of my ability - until he finally gave in, opening the bag at his hip. I set them in, all small and cuddly - one black and one white. He shirked it off his shoulder and put it on mine, raising an eyebrow at me. " *Your* responsibility..."

"Kay," I said with a cheesy ass grin, kissing his cheek. "Thanks, baby," I giggled, wrapping my arms around his neck as he tried in vain to ignore me, but his arm wrapped around my waist.

"You owe me," he growled against my neck. "And I will call that debt in, *sweetness*."

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We left the barn doors on each end wide open and left, carrying the fuels with us. We started by pouring along the outside rows, working our way into the center, and eventually pouring some on the far rows, and Edward then checked in with his dad.

"We're on point, Dad," he stated over the radio.

"Hold your position," Carlisle commanded. "You'll be the first in order to raise the alarm, son. When Jasper and Emmett are in position, you can set it."

"Ten-four," Edward stated, leaning against a tree as Jasper and Emmett worked their way to where they were supposed to be.

"Mickey, Sam, Alec...where are you?" Carlisle barked softly over the radio.

"We're inside the processing plant. This fucker is huge," Alec gushed. "I think we'll need more plastic explosives..."

"Edward...you and Bella get over to them...take them what you have," Carlisle commanded, and Edward grabbed my hand. "You set the remote, and then set the fire. We'll be at the house by then."

Both of us looked up towards the rather large warehouse structure at the back of the property. We could see very small flickers of light in various places throughout the building. Taking off at a jog, we made our way up one of the coca plant rows and quietly opened the door.

Mickey rushed to us, holding out her hand. "I've got two more spots I need to rig," she said, pointing down the aisle we were standing in. "There's that pillar at the end, and that office in the corner upstairs."

"I'll take the office," Edward offered, pulling the bag that was at my hip open, handing me the two kittens with a smirk, rolling his eyes when Mickey cooed at the little black one.

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He grabbed two bricks of plastic explosive, handing one to Mickey with the detonators, both taking off to finish the last two sections. I was just about to place the kittens - who I'd already mentally named Yin and Yang - back in the bag, when a rumble and a clatter behind me made me spin around.

"Don't," Sam ordered quietly, coming out of the shadows from the next aisle over. "Let me look first, little one."

"Kay," I said with a nod, glancing up to see Edward working on the office door, and then back to watch Sam shine a muted flashlight towards where I'd heard the noise.

At the far end of an almost hidden hallway, just beside the door Edward and I had entered, there was a narrow, dingy flight of stairs, ending at a door with more locks than I'd ever seen.

The radio beeped as Sam called Mickey over. "Mick, you're gonna need your tools."

"Gotcha," she breathed over the headset, and I heard the thump of her boots as she made her way back to us, pulling a little pouch out of her back pocket as she ran. "What am I opening?" she asked me, and I pointed down the hall.

I wasn't sure it took her two minutes to open a padlock, two deadbolts, and crack a keypad code, but when she lifted the bar from the outside of the door and she and Sam cracked it open, I damned sure wasn't expecting the sight in front of me.

There had to be thirty girls behind that door, all ranging from preschool age, up to mid-teens. They were dirty, scared, and in the fucking dark. They were different races, and they were damned terrified. I didn't have to even ask to know why they were locked away.

They were for sale on the black fucking market.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," I groaned, shaking my head.

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"Oh for fuck's sake," Alec growled, eyeballing the situation. "So this was where Young was getting some of his girls..." he muttered, looking back when Edward joined us. "Sam, Mick...get them outta here. This place is gonna blow."

Both Sam and Mickey started speaking in Spanish, and I could hear the urgency behind words I didn't understand.

As the girls piled out of the room, Alec and Edward ushered them quietly out the back door, but Mickey poked her head out the door.

"Damn it!" she huffed, stepping all the way out the door. "I can't get these two girls to move. They're scared to fucking death...and I think they're all alone, like their parents are gone."

"Okay, let me try," I sighed, walking down the steps and into the strangely lit room.

~oOo~

EDWARD

Alec and I froze as we watched Bella completely and unthinkingly walk down into that room. And it was a fucking *basement*. Never mind that she was still holding onto those two little kittens. Never mind that she had balked at the basement at her own father's home. My girl didn't think twice when it came to helping two little kids.

"Whoa," Alec breathed, looking up at me, and we both rushed down the steps to watch my girl and Mickey try to coax two very scared girls out of a building we were about to blow the fuck up.

The girls were Hispanic, though what origin, I had no idea. One looked to be about thirteen, the other maybe about six or seven.

"Tell them the truth, Mickey," Bella whispered, kneeling down in front of the youngest girl. "Let them know that they can run away..."

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Mickey nodded, translating to the oldest girl, but she shook her head frantically, arguing back.

"Oh, okay," Alec sighed. "They're from the next village over, but their parents are dead. They have an aunt, but she's in a completely different village..." He paused, narrowing his eyes at them as he listened. "Actually, it's the village that's not far from where we left the chopper."

I sighed, knowing the right thing here was to take them with us, to at least get them as far as the chopper. I ran a hand through my hair, but I froze when the youngest child reached out, with the sweetest of smiles, to touch the kittens in my girl's hand. They might've been scared to death, but Bella's unbelievably sweet, warm smile and those little balls of fur were the best thing they'd seen in a long damn time. I could see it on their faces as they were drawn to Bella, and my girl's eyes were filled with compassion and sympathy.

The radio crackled with my father's voice. "Jasper's in position. Wait for my signal, and you blow the warehouse and light the fields."

"You'd better tell him to stand down," Alec warned, his eyes widening.

"Dad, we have...a situation," I stated over the radio. "There were hostages in the fucking warehouse."

"Free them and get the hell out of there," he ordered.

"We did, but there are two little kids," I countered. "They need to get out of here...but they won't move."

"They're scared, Carlisle," my girl barked, giving me a pointed look. "They're only going to the village by the chopper."

"Take them, then...and get the fuck out of there! I want that alarm to sound in sixty seconds," he commanded.

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I nodded to Mickey and Bella, and Bella smiled in the sweetest of victory. I wasn't sure who would do more for who. There wasn't anything Bella wouldn't for my father, but my dad was becoming a fucking sucker for her - not that I was any damned better. Her voice carried more weight with him than anyone I'd ever seen. In the past, he'd have *never* taken the girls, but this time, he did. That was all Bella's doing.

Bella looked over at Mickey when they both knelt in front of the girls. "Mick, translate exactly what I say," she said, and Mickey nodded. "We're going to take you to your aunt, but we need to get you both out of here."

Mickey translated, and it was adorable watching the two little ones jump up and down in happiness.

"But I need your help," Bella continued, tilting her head at the littlest girl. "I really, *really* need someone to protect these guys. Do you think you can do that?" She held a kitten to each girl.

I snorted, shaking my head as the tiny one was nodding frantically with huge, wide eyes before Mickey had even finished translating. Both children carefully took a cat and tucked it close to their chest.

"Un-fucking-believable," Alec chortled, rolling his eyes. "Oh, kid...I hope you have little ones with her one day. *Bellissima* will make a fantastic mom..." His eyes glazed over for a brief moment, and he sighed, " *Uncle* Alec..."

I grinned, shook my head, and slapped him on the back. "Moron...come on," I chuckled, but in all reality, I totally agreed with him, and that just scared the shit out of me.

The two young girls each held a kitten in one hand, grabbed a hand of Bella's and Mickey's with their other, and they finally left that basement. If Bella realized where she was, what type of room she'd gone into, she never made mention of it, and I damn well wasn't going to point it out to her.

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"Okay," Sam barked, his eyes on the four girls as they left the processing plant. "Carlisle, we're about to blow this place," he stated over the radio.

"Good. Go, go, go," my dad huffed in reply.

"Out of the field," I ordered as we ran past the barn and into the safety of the edge of the jungle.

Sam pulled the remote from the detonator out of his pocket and handed it to me.

"This should actually trigger the fire in the fields, too," I muttered, seeing Bella nod out of the corner of my eye. I turned to her. "This may scare them, love... cover their ears."

Mickey and Bella wrapped protective arms around the two girls, and I pressed the button. Several explosions wracked the dark and silent night, sending a giant fireball into the air. As several pieces of flaming debris fell back down, it ignited the gas that Bella and I had poured onto the coca plant field. It, too, bloomed into fiery life, swallowing the plants in a sweeping, gliding line of fire. It looked like an army marching over its enemy.

Alarms started to sound, and they sounded like the bells from high school that signaled the end of a class or the end of the day. Shouts could be heard from the workers' quarters as they poured out into the night, but the destruction was too much for them to even possibly consider trying to save a fucking thing. From the looks of it, they seemed to be celebrating, anyway.

Over the radio, I heard my father call for Jasper to be at the ready, but I knew Jazz well enough to know that he'd been ready for several minutes. He was lying in wait at the edge of the front yard, just outside the house of Alistair Corbin. We knew that the man lived alone, with only one maid, but as I retrieved the binoculars from the bag at Bella's side, I saw that she was the first out the door and down the winding dirt road. However, Corbin, wrapped in what looked to be a silk robe, was right behind her. He didn't take the last step off of the porch before his head exploded and his body fell limply to the

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ground of the front yard. He didn't move again, though my father wasn't taking any chances, because he walked to the body to check for a pulse.

"Back to the chopper. Let's go!" he barked over the radio, but I knew my dad. I could hear relief and a satisfying sigh of a finished job through his voice.

Everyone began to walk away, but I stood firm, because I knew what he was going to do next, and I wanted to make sure he was clear from the house when he did it.

He held up his hand, clicking a remote, and the house exploded behind him as he double-timed it our way. The debris narrowly missed him, but he was fine as he ran up the driveway.

"Edward?" Bella asked tentatively.

"He's fine," I sighed, stowing the binoculars back in the bag. "Let's get these guys someplace safe, baby," I told her, gesturing to not only the kids, but the damned kittens that my girl had to save, too.

"Once we get back to the chopper," Alec started, placing a hand on Bella's shoulder, "I'll run these kids to the next village, *Bellissima*. Okay?"

She nodded, giving the girls a brief glance, before nodding at him again. "Thanks, Alec."

Bella scooped up the smallest girl, who still had a good grasp of the white kitten, as we jogged through the jungle on our way back to the chopper, and Mickey made sure the older girl kept up. We met Emmett and Jasper along the way, and my father was the last to arrive back.

I snorted at the look on my father's face as he took in the two little ones when Bella set the youngest one down on her feet.

Alec knelt in front of them, speaking softly, and both girls nodded solemnly. The oldest pointed west, and Alec muttered, "Good girl," standing up to face

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my dad. "Carlisle, I'm going to run them over to the next village. Or at least close enough that they're comfortable making it the rest of the way. Give me twenty."

"Go ahead," my dad sighed, falling down on the edge of the chopper's cabin, once I'd pulled the tarps off. "It's over, and this area has been abused by Corbin for so long, I can't imagine anyone gives two shits if his compound burns to the ground or not." He snorted and rolled his eyes as we all chuckled with him.

The youngest girl tugged on Bella's hand, pulling her down to her level, and placed a kiss on her cheek. The oldest girl turned to Mickey, saying, "Thank you," in English, before looking to Alec and nodding.

The three of them stepped away, into the jungle, Alec humming lightly to them along the way.

"It's done?" Alice verified over the radio.

"Yes, ma'am," we all answered her, flinching when the squeals of cheering girls echoed over our headsets.

"So we can go back to cheating assholes and finding lost relatives?" she asked.

Bella's head fell back against the side of the chopper as she laughed and shook her head. "Jesus, Alice...don't you *ever* take a fucking vacation?" she groaned, leaving her eyes closed as we all laughed.

"I did. We went to Texas..."

"Darlin', *that* was not a vacation," Jasper said with a grin up at me as he leaned against a tree, sliding to the grass. "I think what Miss Bella is trying to say is that she needs at least... *a day or two*," he chuckled, shooting my girl a wink when she snorted, her head snapping up to glare at him, "to recover from just the mere fact that she knows us."

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My dad barked a laugh, poking Bella's leg. "That may be closer to the truth than she's willing to admit."

As I sat down next to Jasper, I opened my arms for my girl, who came over and fell into my lap with a small giggle. "Does knowing us drive you crazy, baby?" I teased, kissing her neck.

"No, but Jasper's right," she chuckled, shaking her head. "I really could use a day or... *more* without plans or someone out there trying to kill us all..."

I smirked at the laughter around us, but I pulled Bella's face back, tugging on the bill of her cap. "How 'bout this," I whispered, so that it was only the two of us talking. "We take some time, get you completely moved in, and just hang out at the house for a week or two, before you make any decisions about Gravity, *sweetness*."

She smiled, leaning in to kiss me softly. "Yeah," she whispered, biting her bottom lip. "That sounds really... *good*." She grinned, nodding slowly. "Besides, I think there's a table that needs finishing."

"And I'll need help, baby." I chuckled, tilting my head at her. "Besides," I sighed, kissing her because I couldn't help myself, "I have an idea about where you should put Gravity's office..."

Alec returned, breathing heavily, but looking extremely proud of himself. "They're dancing in that village over the fires they can see in the distance," he snorted.

"Good!" my dad snorted, standing up. "Come on, guys...and ladies. Let's get the fuck out of here! This was easy, just like it should've always been. Now Corbin can't bother anyone anymore."

~oOo~

"Really?" Bella gasped, lying back against me as we sat in a lounge in my front yard after just finishing the kitchen table. "You want to *build* Gravity..."

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here?" she gasped, pointing out towards the direction of the vacant space just behind my chopper.

We'd been home for a few weeks, just the two of us, though we'd had plenty of visitors. Rose and Emmett had helped us move Bella's things from Rose's old apartment and the apartment at TT, and in turn, we'd helped move the two of them into Charlie's old house.

Jasper and Alice found a small house just around the corner from us in Forks, and were just about to close on it. Makenna rented an apartment above a small bookstore downtown that she planned on using when Wes was out of town on assignment and when she had to work for Bella. Mickey and Obie, on the other hand, were planning on making their permanent residence in Alaska with my Aunt Kate, but Mickey decided to keep the small place she rented in Seattle, just in case she needed it.

My dad and Esme settled into a comfortable routine at Twi Tech. It was amazing to watch the stress of his old military life fade away from his worried brow. He was living a life he wanted, and he'd found something in Esme - though I was convinced we'd all found something in her - that made him happy, that seemed to fill him with something he'd been missing since my mom had died.

And they were all waiting on Bella to make a decision concerning Gravity - impatiently, I might add.

My dad was its financial backer - though he could really give two shits about the money - but told her the insurance check had come through from the fire of her first office. Rose was already speaking to former, current, and future clients that needed their services, and Alice was chomping at the bit to get back to stalking people on the internet. Only Makenna told Bella to take her time, but that really was because Wes was taking a few weeks off before he had to fly out to Virginia for a few months - something about a new training class he had to teach concerning organized crime - and she most likely wanted to spend time with him.

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But for some reason, my girl was dragging her feet, which surprised me, because I thought for sure that she'd want to go back to work. She had just an enormous fucking passion for it, and she was damned good at it, too.

"I think it would be perfect here, and there is plenty of property," I explained as she rubbed at a spot of stain on my hand. "It's not like you need a store front, baby. Most of your clients come to you via email, word of mouth, or phone, and then you meet with them out in public. This would be a place to store Alice's equipment and a place for her to work, a place to store your files, and..."

"But why... *here*?" she asked, getting up to sit sideways in my lap in order to look me in the eye.

"It's fucking safe," I sighed, unable to lie about my reasons. "And close. If some pissed off cheating asshole wants to get revenge, he sees *me* first."

"This is a really small town, Edward. Everywhere is close," she chuckled, reaching up to take my baseball cap off. I wanted to fucking purr when she scraped her nails along my scalp.

"I know, but still..." was my only brilliant argument as my eyes closed, just enjoying her nearness, her touch, the smell of her - even though we'd been staining the kitchen table all day.

She traced my eyebrows, ghosting a finger down my nose, and then across my lips, before I slowly opened my eyes to her. There was a little frown of concentration on her face as she bit her bottom lip, and she took a deep breath, letting it out slowly.

"Work with me," she blurted out in a whisper, her eyes locking on mine.

I smiled, already knowing that Jasper and Emmett had offered their services to her if she ever needed them, but it was Alec that had suggested combining the two teams, which had made my girl's eyes light up. No more military black ops, but more along the lines of paid protection. He had been doing it on the

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side for years, and said it was harmless, but paid fairly well. He'd guarded singers, actors, even a witness in a murder case once. He'd told her that he still carried a concealed weapon, still got to rough people up, but he didn't really have to leave the country if he didn't want to - and jokingly, he told her that almost no one ever got killed while at a teeny-bopper concert. In fact, he tried his best to just handle the California, Oregon, and Washington area.

"Please," she begged, shifting her position again so that she was straddling my lap, and I couldn't help but chuckle at her, because she always wriggled closer and closer, the more she wanted something.

Like I could tell her no to *any-fucking-thing*. Especially this.

"I thought I was supposed to make furniture all day," I teased, smirking when she huffed in frustration.

"You can," she pouted so adorably, looking up at me through her long, dark eyelashes. "I'm not saying you have to take every case, Edward. Just be my partner... Take cases that you want, only the ones that interest you. It's harmless work compared..."

Her voice trailed off, and I so wanted to laugh, but I bit it back.

"Compared to what, baby?"

"Compared to what we've done...what *you've* done before, but I could use you. Hell, all of you," she explained, her warm finger tracing over my tattoo. "We could do what Alec said...combine the teams. But we could do what we wanted, when we wanted." She huffed again, looking at me with the sweetest begging eyes, and I almost caved then, but she kept going. "We make such good team, you and I. You seem to catch things I don't see, and vice versa... And..."

"Okay, okay," I chuckled, grabbing her face, because she was too adorable, trying to convince me of something I'd been considering for a long time. "But only if you put the office here," I bargained, jerking my chin to the spot I'd

pointed out before.

"Really?" she practically squealed, kissing me roughly, only to pull away too soon.

"Yes, really," I laughed, rolling my eyes. "What else is out there for what I know, Bella?" I countered, shrugging one shoulder. "It's not like I can take a regular nine-to-five job, you know? And as much as making furniture is my favorite thing to do, I only like doing it when someone needs something, and it's a love...not a career... S-so, y-yes...b-because I c-can't imagine w-what it's l-like *n-not* to work w-with you," I sputtered, because telling her this shit made me nervous.

I'd taken the job from my dad to find Bella as a favor to him and his oldest friend, as a favor to the little brown-haired twelve year old I'd met one time, but I'd found so much more. I'd found someone I could really just...be me with. She accepted me wholeheartedly, and if I'd told her that I still wanted to be a soldier for hire, she'd stand behind me one hundred percent, but she'd worry, and I'd worry, and that shit was for the fucking birds. My mom had gone crazy every time my dad went overseas when he was in the Air Force. I swore I'd never do that to anyone, and now I damn well wasn't doing it to the best thing I'd ever found.

So if finding some lost relative, or catching a cheating asshole, or reuniting a child with a parent, or even guarding some spoiled actor was going to keep me with my girl, well then, where the fuck did I sign? Besides, the change, the ease and professionalism in which the girls approached every client, sounded like a helluva lot of fun, and I had a feeling Emmett and Jasper were just biding their time and waiting for my answer before they gave her more than just an *offer* of their services. It wasn't like any of us *needed* to work, but why just fucking waste away when we could do a damned good job at whatever we set our minds to?

"I love you," she said with the cutest grin, the one she saved when she got her way.

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"Love you, too, *sweetness*," I snickered. "So here?" I pointed across the yard, raising an eyebrow at her.

"Yeah, here," she sighed with a smile, and the stress I hadn't even realized she'd been carrying left her shoulders. She'd totally been waiting for me, for *my* answer.

"Well, let's call Dad. He'll want to know what we're up to," I said, pulling my phone out. "And he'll have to help me with finding a contractor."

I dialed my dad, knowing he was probably at the office, and he picked up immediately.

"Hey, son. How's Bella?"

"Oh sure...ask about her first. I'm fine, Dad, thanks for asking, asshole," I teased him.

"And Bella?" he countered without missing a beat.

"She got her way," I stated, smiling at his laugh.

"So, you and the boys are going to work for her?" he laughed, sounding like he'd been waiting for this little bit of fucking news.

"*With* her, not *for* her," I growled dramatically, chuckling when my girl rolled her eyes.

"What *ever*," they both groaned, and I laughed at them, my head falling back.

"If you two are finished, Bella has agreed to build Gravity here," I told him.

"That's the perfect spot," he agreed. "Safe, close... If you ever get married and start a *family*..." he hinted, clearing his throat, "then you'll be close to the house."

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"Don't go there, old man," I warned him. "If anyone should be tying the knot, it's you, jackass. Esme may not wait around forever for you to pull your head out of your ass."

He was silent on the other end, and I pulled the phone back to see if the call had dropped, but it hadn't.

"That wouldn't bother you, Edward?" he asked finally, and I winced when I realized that he'd been concerned about my feelings.

Bella, who was still perched on my lap and could hear every word, bit her lip when she heard what he was asking, her eyes filling with sympathy as she tilted her head a bit. She knew our mothers were touchy subjects, except when it was just the two of us. And fuck, she was just fucking beautiful as the setting sun glinted through the shade of the trees in my front yard over her hair and skin.

"Do you love her, Dad?" I asked, unable to tear my eyes away from the quiet girl in front of me. I reached up to touch her cheek with the backs of my fingers.

"Yes, Edward." His answer was muttered, but honest.

"Don't you think Mom would want you happy?" I sighed, knowing what my own opinion on it was, but I'd never asked him. "I'm not thirteen, Dad. I'm twenty-seven...and you did a damn fine job on your own, but it's time that you...stopped being alone."

I threaded my fingers into the hair at the base of Bella's neck, bringing her close so that I could press my lips to her forehead. I closed my eyes, inhaling the scent of her hair, the floral-fruity smell that had driven me crazy when I first met her, but that I now needed on my pillows every day.

"Esme's an amazing person, Pop," I went on to say, but that's all I said aloud to him, because my own relationship with the woman was phenomenal. I never thought I'd care about someone in my father's life, like I did my own mother,

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but Esme was perfect for him, for all of us, because my Bella loved her fiercely. "If you're waiting for my consent, you have it," I sighed, pressing another kiss to my girl's forehead. "You've had it since she kicked my ass at the mountain cabin," I said with a grin.

Both Bella and my father chuckled, because they both knew of the showdown I'd had with Esme over Bella's recovery. Esme had threatened to take Bella away if I was only after her for a piece of ass. I'd been bound to my girl then, and Esme had made me really see it.

"Thank you, Edward," my dad sighed.

"No problem, but you'd better get busy, old man, because my girl missed out on planning a wedding with Rose. She'll want to be involved with this one," I chuckled, because Bella was beaming like it was Christmas.

"Tell her, yes, ma'am," he laughed, and she giggled, hearing him just fine. "And when *you're* ready, Edward...you give that girl your mother's ring. Got me?" he ordered.

"Yes, sir," I answered out of habit, but it was something I'd already considered. He'd given it to me ages ago, but my mindset was not on marriage then, so I'd stowed it away in the safe inside my house.

Bella and I had even discussed it after Emmett and Rose's announcement, but even though we both wanted it, we were okay just to *be*. We'd rushed around for months with everything, so just the ability to do what we wanted for a little while was soothing to both of us. But it was something I wanted. Badly.

"Good," he huffed. "Now...Gravity..."

~oOo~

BELLA

Two months later...

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"Hell, no," I growled into the phone to Rose as I washed dishes. "I'm not working with Spencer, Wyatt, and Townsend again. They hire shitty employees, be damned of their history. They can find someone else to work their divorce cases."

"I figured you'd say that, so that's what I basically told them," she laughed. "After Victoria and Wendell, I assumed you'd have nothing to do with them."

"You weren't mean to Tanya, were you?" I asked.

I had zero hard feelings for the poor girl; she'd just gotten wrapped up in mine and Edward's twisted emotional tug of war. The poor thing was a casualty in it all, as far as I was concerned. I did wonder at some point if she expected Edward *Masen* to ever call her, which made me smile, because he hadn't given her his real name, just the pseudonym he used occasionally - Masen, his mother's maiden name.

"Not... *technically*," Rose hedged, and I snorted, rolling my eyes. "How's the building coming?"

I laughed, looking out across the front yard through the kitchen window. The damn thing was well on its way, because when Carlisle Cullen ordered a construction crew, they fucking got busy immediately, and all permits were pushed through with blazing speed. The foundation, the outer walls, and the doors and windows were all in, not to mention the electrical panels that Mickey had installed for the security systems and locks. The office building was smaller than my house that I'd bought with Jake, but it was going to be more secure than the fucking Pentagon.

"I figure Alice can start moving her equipment in pretty damn soon," I told her, turning off the water and hopping up on the counter. I dangled my feet a bit as I continued to stare out the window. "So what job is the most important, Ro? Which one should we take first?"

"This custody case, I think," she sighed. "Mr. Rollins won custody of his son, four year old Tyson, because the mother is an alcoholic and an assumed drug

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addict, but she picked Tyson up from preschool early two weeks ago, and hasn't been seen since."

I winced and sighed. "What's the *in* with her?"

"Bars," Rose growled. "Apparently, she's looking for *a way out*. Mr. Rollins talked to her one time after Tyson was taken, and she told him - in a drunken rage - that she was going to find a man to take them both so far away that he'd never see his son again. He thinks she's picking up men in bars, trying to seduce them into being the next *baby daddy*."

"Oh, okay then," I stated, "so she's digging for gold. Got it. Tell him I'll meet with him, but it won't be until tomorrow."

"Still flying to Alaska today?"

"Yeah," I said, dragging my gaze from my new office to the helipad. I shook my head, because there wasn't a better sight on the fucking planet. "Aunt Kate wants to see..."

"Edward Anthony..." we both laughed at the same time.

I bit back a groan of want as my eyes took in Edward as he readied his chopper. Not only was he going through whatever that checklist of his was, but he was washing her, as well. He was wearing only camo cargo shorts and his black backwards baseball cap. Covered up to his elbows in slippery suds, he stood on a step ladder, his back muscles rolling in the most beautiful way I'd ever seen as he scrubbed the side of the tail.

"Ro, I gotta go..." I muttered, licking my lips as Edward drank from the water hose, before turning it on the side of the chopper to rinse it.

"Sure, Bells, I'll call Mr. Roll..."

I ended the call without letting her finish, but I knew what she was going to say, so I slipped down from the counter, leaving my phone behind. Stepping

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out of the house and off the front porch, my eyes never left Edward. He hung the ladder back on the hooks that were on the back of the shed, and then moved to shut the water off. He walked the length of the chopper, checking the back blades, and then opened the hatch that held what looked like the engine - though I had no fucking clue what the technical names for any of it were.

I couldn't help but smile back at him when he glanced up at me, wearing my favorite crooked, but innocent smile. He had no fucking clue just how hot he was at that moment.

"Hey, baby," he called softly, opening the co-pilot door and pulling himself up into the seat. "How's Rose? Does she have a client for you?"

"Yeah," I breathed, again licking my lips at him, because he was oblivious to my ogling. "A custody case. I'll probably need you on it."

"Sure, love," he grunted, bending down to fiddle with something under his seat, only to sit back up to check gauges and flip a few switches. "We're almost ready to go, so whenever you're ready..."

"Kay," I said, boosting myself up on the step so that I was standing beside him. "What are you checking?" I asked, inhaling deeply the scent of him, because he'd worked on a coffee table for Jasper and Alice first thing that morning, so he smelled like fresh cut wood and sweat and the soap he'd just used.

"You really want to learn, Bella?" he asked, pulling me to his lap so my legs fell on the outside of his.

I wanted to tell him yes, because I really was interested in the whole process of flying. And I wanted to tell him no, because I damn well wasn't going to retain a fucking thing he was about to show me. I wanted him too much. But I was in his lap, so that was a step in the right direction.

Strong, warm arms wrapped around me as he rambled behind me about levels, gauges, horizons, and fuel, and not a bit of it was English to me. I could only focus on the feel of his bare chest at my back, his warm arms around me, and

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those muscular thighs beneath me. His warm breath was at my ear, his fingers linking with my right hand as he made us grip the stick together.

"I've showed you this part already, baby," he said softly in my ear, planting the softest of kisses to my neck, just below my earlobe. "This controls everything...kinda like the mouse of a computer," he instructed, placing another kiss to my skin. "It controls left, right... *up, down*," he purred, and I realized that *someone* had finally caught up to what I was feeling.

I laid my head back to his shoulder, turning my head to kiss his neck and groaning when his free hand pressed flat against my stomach in order to pull me back even closer against him. I could feel then that he was *definitely* catching up to me. Rough, calloused fingers teased the skin of my stomach just under my shirt and along the waistband my shorts, but soon, his touch left me.

"What this, baby?" he asked, tapping the control panel in front of us.

"Edward," I panted, squeezing my eyes closed when he removed our hands from the control stick to cup my breast...together.

"Tell me."

"F-fuel," I answered, hoping to God I was right.

"Good girl," he crooned, brushing our thumbs across my very pert, very sensitive nipple, making my breath catch. "And this?" he asked, tapping another tiny little window on the panel.

"Um," I faltered, knowing this pop quiz he was giving me was his way of teasing, his way of making the moment last. "Hor-i-zon?" I whimpered as his hips shifted behind me, giving me just the mere hint that he was as just as turned on as I was.

"You don't sound sure, love..."

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"Horizon," I stated, trying to sound matter-of-fact, but I had no idea if I was right or not, because our linked fingers were now toying with the button of my shorts.

"That's my girl," he praised in the sexiest damn voice, his fingers delving just inside my underwear. "How about this one?"

My whole body tried to arch, to force his - *our* - fingers where I needed him the most, but he held me firm, suckling the skin just below my ear with hot, open mouthed, almost panting kisses. He teased without shame the outside of my folds, not applying the pressure I so desperately needed, not even bothering to accept the invitation when I spread my legs wider for him.

"This one, Bella," he ordered softly, dragging his teeth across my flesh as he tapped the control panel again.

"En-gine...something-or-other," I growled, trying to force our fingers closer to where I was now just completely soaked for him.

"Output, *sweetness*," he snickered darkly. "Engine output..."

"Don't care," I admitted finally with a groan, practically writhing as he wrapped his arm around my waist to hold me still.

"I thought you wanted to learn this, love." Long fingers lightly and eventually delved through my folds, a low growl vibrating from his chest. "So fucking wet, baby..."

"I *do*," I urged, my voice coming out in more of a whine than the convincing tone it should've been. "But... *Edward*..." I panted, reaching back, tugging his hat off, and dropping it to the helipad outside the open door in order to weave my fingers into his hair.

"You want *this*, instead?" he asked, and I gasped as two of his fingers curled inside of me when I least expected it.

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"Yes, yes," I chanted, nodding frantically as he finally let my body arch up, my hips roll. "Right now...just for right now, baby. Please..."

His free hand slipped under my shirt, only to tug down the cups of my bra, releasing my breasts, my nipples aching for his touch. Edward hummed in approval as his palm rolled over each peak at the same time that I tugged and twisted, until he finally bent enough to kiss me.

It was breathy and wet, gasping and frantic, because it didn't take much from Edward to bring me to the edge. The combination of his finger and thumb pinching and rolling my nipple, along with the sweet and deep rhythm that he using between my legs was just about to cause me to completely unravel in his lap, but when his thumb swirled over my clit, applying the most delicious pressure, my breathing almost stopped.

"Come, baby," he commanded, urging and urging me with both of his hands to let go as his mouth met the side of my neck once again. "Come hard for me, *sweetness*." With a mind-numbing flick to my clit and a pinch to my nipple, my whole body clenched down on him. " *Goddamn*, you're beautiful when you come like that..."

With shaky legs and hands, I stood up and straddled his lap, facing him, grasping both sides of his face to kiss him senseless. Edward gripped the outside of my t-shirt, pulling me with force closer to him, both of us letting out a moan as his arousal pressed up against me with perfect precision.

I slowed the kisses down, languidly dragging my tongue along his, in order to savor this moment, because I'd been fantasizing about my pilot and his chopper ever since he'd blurted out that he owned a fucking helicopter. I slowly opened my eyes, allowing myself to take in his handsome face. His long eyelashes rested in a stark contrast against his skin as I took his top lip, and then his bottom. Running my nose up one side of his and down the other, I was finally met with the darkening green that I lived for - the color that was trapped somewhere between sweet and cuddly, and fierce and wanting. Just like his stutter and his commanding tone, it represented *my* Edward - the amazing combination of tender lover and brutal warrior.

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"I love you, Edward...so *fucking much*," I whispered against his lips.

Strong, gripping fingers slipped into my hair on either side of my face, and Edward licked and nipped at my mouth, his breathing heavy. Our tongues met, heavy, wet, and twisting, and I rested my elbows on his shoulders, gripping his headrest in order to pull myself closer, deeper...just more.

Bending my head back just a little, Edward kissed down my neck and up to my ear. "I love you, too. And I want you...right here, baby," he growled, pushing up my shirt. It fell out of the chopper, just as his hat had.

I raked my fingers down his stomach, gripping at the button of his shorts as he tossed my bra out the door, and my shorts were down and off before I could blink.

When I finally had his erection free and in my hand, he looked up at me. "Watch your head, baby," he ordered softly, lifting me just enough so that he could slide me down over him.

It was slow and deep. It was breathtaking and heartbreaking. It was everything we'd always been, and it was so sweet that my heart almost overflowed with my love for him, because I knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that there wasn't anything we couldn't get through, as long we could always come back to this.

Firm, strong fingers flattened between my shoulder blades as we said nothing. Edward met my rhythm, guiding my hip with his other hand, whispering words of love, and want, and how beautiful I was.

"Stay with me...always," he begged, and I pressed my forehead to his, closing my eyes as he continued. "Tell me you'll never leave this spot. Promise me that no matter what, we're it...that nothing else matters..."

I nodded against his forehead. "I promise, Edward...I swear, baby..."

"M-marry m-me, B-bella..."

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I gasped, my eyes snapping open as my whole body registered what he'd said...and how he'd said it. I was so close to coming before, his pure look of honesty, warmth, want, and need just sent me over the edge again, saying the only answer I knew to give.

"Yes," I panted, nipping at his lips as he thrust hard up into me, coming forcefully inside of me, his mouth hanging open as he tried to catch his breath.

"Y-yes?" he verified, cupping either side of my face.

I grinned, feeling strung out, but very, very sated. "Not right away, but... *yeah*," I giggled.

"I don't care when," he said, beaming, kissing me roughly at first, and then slowing down to the sweetest of kisses. " *You* tell me when..." he breathed against my lips.

"Kay," I snickered, biting my bottom lip and looking around at what we'd really just done, making my snicker turn into full blown giggles. "Now this was something I've wanted for a long time..."

I received my crooked, sexy ass smirk as he said in a dreamy voice, "Yeah, me, too."

I kissed him again, because it just seemed so fucking fitting the way he asked me. We'd already discussed it, but I knew he wanted it - or at least a reason to put his mother's ring on me - and he'd done anything and everything that I'd ever asked of him. He'd been brave and sweet when he'd pulled me out of Miller's basement, which turned into patient and encouraging as we tried to figure out what we were, what we were feeling. And then he became the best friend, the best partner I'd ever had.

As I sat on his lap, kissing him softly, I realized there was no better fit than the two of us. We were both very much alike, and yet, completely different, and it *really fucking worked*. I smiled against his mouth as I remembered two very awkward kids meeting for the first time. I pulled back, running my fingers

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through his hair, still seeing that boy I'd been crushing on by the end of the day. I thought about our mothers, and how they must've wanted this for us so badly, which made tears well up in my eyes, because I really hoped they saw that fate had taken over when they couldn't finish.

"Hey," he murmured, "what's this?"

"Will you do something for me?"

"Baby, anything," he vowed, sitting up straighter and wiping away the tears that fell down my cheeks.

"Build us a birdhouse," I said, pointing to the pine tree by the front porch.
"Right there."

I watched his brow wrinkle for a mere second at my request, but I knew I didn't have to elaborate. I knew that he'd know that maybe, just maybe, a small family of sparrows would move in, bringing the story that his mother told him so long ago about how she would watch over him from the trees with the sparrows a little closer. And now I hoped that my own mother was with her, that her spirit or whatever she was now was a little more free, because we knew the truth about how she'd died.

Edward's gaze slipped to the tree I'd chosen, and then back to me. "They should be close, don't you think?" he asked, and I nodded. "They should see that it worked out in the end, huh?" He smiled the sweetest, crookedest smile, but it was a happy smile, his eyes the color of the tree we were discussing.

"Yeah," I sighed, smiling back at him.

He was nodding before he actually answered, as his eyes fell back to the tree. "Yeah, okay," he whispered, looking back at me and kissing me softly. "When we get back, I promise, but we better get moving, baby. Aunt Kate worries if we're late."

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I giggled, because I looked down at us - all naked and still wrapped around each other - and tilted my head at him. "Clothes first, baby..."

He laughed, lifting me carefully down from the pilot seat, and we both went inside to get ready to leave. We were just about to take off, but before Edward switched on the power to the chopper, he held out a box to me.

"I-it's m-my m-mother's," he stuttered, looking at the little black box and back to my face as I gently took it from him. "I-I...I know th-that she'd b-be happy that i-it w-was you..." He trailed off, but I knew what he was saying.

I nodded, swallowing thickly as I opened the box, and then gasped at the ring. It was perfect and beautiful, just like his mother - a solitary diamond in a simple white gold setting.

He plucked it out, sliding it onto my finger, only to kiss it with a reverence that I'd never seen from him. "Just knowing you said yes...well, that's good enough for me," he stated with a nod as he swallowed thickly. "I can be p-patient f-for something I w-want," he teased, giving me a wink when I giggled at him as he kissed my lips, because that seemed to be our motto.

"Kay," I sighed, putting on my headset when he handed it to me and started the chopper.

Once he'd called in his flight and leveled out, heading north, he picked up my hand, kissing my ring again. "Okay..." he sighed, like a huge weight had been lifted from him. "So tell me about this next case we're taking..."

As we flew towards Alaska, I explained about a little boy that might be in trouble. I told him what Rose had told me, and that we were meeting with the father the next day. And as I discussed this with him, I had to look out the window to hide my smile, because I realized this was the beginning of a whole new life, a new way of working, and it was better than I could possibly explain.

Edward banked the chopper towards the ocean gracefully, nodding and humming as he thought about the case. "I'll come with you...tomorrow," he

stated with another nod.

I smiled over at him. "Yeah...tomorrow..."

A/N... Yeah...you didn't think I'd forgotten about the chopper, did you? LMAO Come on! XD So there it is, the two teams are one. Gravity is being built on Edward's property, everyone is finding their little niches, and Corbin is gone. I hope you noticed that I gave zero consideration to Corbin, because he just wasn't as important as King, and no where close to Miller. But he did start it all, and the best defense, according to Carlisle, is a good offense. Get rid of the threat before they have a chance to get rid of you.

I post this with sort of a heavy heart, because that's just how I am when it comes to my stories. I get attached. There's still the epilogue to go, and it is so very important...and it will most likely post on my usual Sunday.

I have tons to thank but most importantly, JenRar for her amazing help and support through this story. Not one chapter would read as smoothly without her. Goober_Lou, I owe you for every chapter you've pre-read, because you yell at me before the readers do, so at least I know when they'll be pissed at me...yes, I know...every damn cliffie. And to MedusaInNY for the help with my gorgeous blog, and so very many other things. I owe all of you huge hugs and smooches. MUWAH!

I also need to thank all of you that reviewed, retweeted, rec'd, and just plain babbled to whoever would listen about this story. It's been nominated for so many things, that I can barely keep up, and just the nom's alone mean so much that I can hardly explain. So thank you, thank you, thank you...

Okay, so review again for me...and tell me what you think. I hope that I did my characters justice in the end, but the true end is the epilogue. Trust me on this. So until Sunday, let me hear you. Later...

Chapter 32 Epilogue

A/N... Oh...it's the final chapter. But I've been so waiting for you guys to read this, because as you know I've opted to write a sequel, but what happens in *this* chapter makes a helluva lot of difference for the next story, which is going to be named *Sin and Innocence*. I'm not sure when it will post, but the notes are started.

I have more to say at the end, because I'm sure you're itching to read, but I just wanted to thank all of you for taking this journey with me. It started as something I was unsure about, but turned into something very special for me. Anyway...go on...

CHAPTER 32 - EPILOGUE

EDWARD

Two months later...

"Bella, I can't do this," I whined - yes, fucking *whined*.

"You have to, Edward," she groaned over the phone. "I'd do it, but I can't. Please just...try."

"Fuck, baby..." I sighed, running a hand through my hair as I paced outside the dingy little bar in Olympia. "I don't know *how* to fucking pick up women anymore, Bella. Nor do I fucking *want* to."

I smiled when my girl laughed, but my smile fell, because her laugh was strained. She'd been sick for the past week. The plan had been for her to be sitting at the bar separately, watching over the situation we were in - but she'd been battling the stomach flu.

It had taken fucking forever to locate the ex-Mrs. Rollins, because she was "off the grid," according to Alice. Susan Rollins had taken her four year old son

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underground - way, *way* underground. She was dealing only with cash, no identification, no cell phones, and no communication. In fact, Harold Rollins was losing his mind, because she'd even stopped calling to taunt him. He'd rather that she call with threats, because at least he'd know that his son was okay, but without any news whatsoever, he was going to snap soon.

Susan made one mistake by renting one hotel room in Olympia just above the little, ugly bar I was currently standing outside of. She'd used someone else's stolen credit card, but in either a drunken stupor or a stoned euphoria, she'd used her own name. I wanted to tell her she was an idiot, but the very second the info blipped up on Alice's computer screen, we'd all jumped into action, grateful for her stupidity.

So there I was, standing outside this bar and trying to find the balls to go in and play the rich playboy that was looking for an easy lay, while my girl was sick at home. I was fucking hating it.

"Damn it, Bella," I groaned, hearing the raspy sound of her voice. "I should be home, baby. I should be taking care of you."

"Just find that little boy, Edward, and then you can play nurse to me," she whined. "Please?"

"I'd rather play *doctor*," I teased, but I was just being stubborn.

She giggled again, and I smiled at my favorite sound in the whole world.

"Edward, you're so fucking cute, and you're dressed like a Wall Street god...just go be sexy and get this shit over with, and tell Jasper that as soon as he catches a glimpse of that baby, he and Emmett should rush their asses in."

I snickered at her commanding tone, but she was right. We needed to get that kid out of a desperate situation and back to his father. We were afraid that Tyson Rollins wasn't being taken care of, was being shuffled from one terrible place to the next, and that his mother was neglecting him. Tyson's father wasn't worried that she'd hurt him - just leave him alone for long periods alone. He said she barely remembered to feed herself, so his fear that Tyson was

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somewhere hungry was making him crazy. Harold Rollins' panic was the reason I'd agreed to try and find the kid, knowing it would take a guy to move in on his ex-wife, rather than Bella and the girls.

"Have you kept anything down today, baby?" I asked, before I had to get to work, because my girl came first, everything else be damned.

"Some sports drink, but my dinner didn't last long," she sighed, sounding so tired.

I huffed, running another hand through my hair. "Tell me you aren't alone..."

"Esme's on her way now, Edward, I promise. Go be cute and charming, like only you can, baby. Go be my hero," she snickered, and I could almost see her playing with the quilt that I'd tucked her under on the sofa of our living room before I'd left and wearing her sweet smile.

"Okay, I'll call you as soon as it's over, love," I told her, looking up when Emmett walked into the bar without looking at me. It was time to go flirt, hit on, and try to pick up a woman I'd rather just yell at for what she was doing to her son.

"Love you, Edward," Bella sighed, yawning into the phone.

"Love you, too, *sweetness*," I said with a frown. "Get some sleep, and don't wait up for me."

"Yeah, right," she snorted.

I ended the call, and in some ways, it felt like a slice to my chest. I didn't like that she was home without me, much less *sick*. With one more hand through my hair, dropping my phone into my pocket, I yanked open the door to the small pub, loosening my tie, like I was coming in after a hard day at the office.

I sat down at the end of the bar, the complete opposite of where Em was sitting, catching his eye briefly. I ordered a scotch, which was utterly needed with what

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I was about to do, turning towards the direction that Emmett's eyes had flickered to, and lo and behold, there she was.

Susan Rollins was swaying drunkenly by the old ass jukebox on the far side of the room. It wasn't that she was an unattractive woman, but I could see her refusal of reality, her living in the moment. And with one last deep breath and a hand to my hair, I caught her eye, giving the smile that used to never let me down and tucking away my worry for my sick girl at home.

Susan smiled back, her eyes glazed with alcohol and lust as she walked my way.

I turned towards the bartender, sliding my credit card across the bar and saying, "Whatever the lady wants, put it on my tab."

"Good luck, pal," the older guy snorted, rolling his eyes. "She's a clingy one, that one. Looking for someone to save her, I think."

I smirked up at him and nodded. "I'll take my chances," I told him with a shrug, turning to the woman that was now perching herself on the stool next to mine.

Bella had totally had to teach me about this shit. I could raid a camp, a prison. I could fly in and take out the hideout of bad guys, but playing someone I wasn't was hard, and not something that came naturally to me. We'd tried everything to locate this woman, because as soon as we'd close in on her, she'd disappear. Bella told me that I needed to play into her personality and the woman's needs.

Susan Rollins needed someone that wasn't turned off by her drunken state, or that she had a kid, or the fact that her appearance had slipped. She needed the fantasy guy, Bella had told me. I needed to play a man with money, that was just about to take off to another city, and wasn't scared off by someone else's child. I needed to be everything that Susan Rollins was looking for, and Bella said that because I was ten years younger than this woman, it would make me all the more appealing.

Fan-fucking-tastic, I was about to serve myself up to a cougar or some shit.

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But it worked - like a fucking dream. The woman ate up every line I gave her, every story I told her, and her eyes lit up when I spoke of my new position in San Diego. When I mentioned that I coached Little League baseball, I'd fucking sealed the deal. She wanted me, and it was all I could do not to vomit when she kissed my cheek and invited me upstairs to her room.

With a nod to her and the bartender, not to mention a pointed look to Emmett, I held my hand out to her and helped her out the door and up the stairs to her hotel room. It was now a time-sensitive situation, because my nod to Emmett meant he was right now downstairs calling Mr. Rollins, who wasn't far away.

There had been an Amber Alert sent out when Tyson went missing, so all he had to do was bring the Olympia Police with him when the address was confirmed, but I had to set my eyes on Tyson himself before any of us could celebrate.

With that last thought, I touched the tiny earpiece in my ear and linked up to Jasper instantly.

"It don't mean a thing, if you ain't got that swing...do-wah, do-wah, wo-wah," he sang in my ear - poorly, I might add. But I couldn't say a word to shut him the fuck up. "Kiss that chick, and I'm totally squealing on you, Eddie," he chuckled in my ear, and I had to hide my laugh behind a fake cough.

Jasper was planted - no longer holding a rifle, but a telescope, instead - on the roof of the building across the street. He'd been waiting to catch a glimpse of the kid all night, but there wasn't a single open curtain in her hotel room.

As Susan held my hand, she led me into her room, turning in front of me. She was wearing a smile, but I let my eyes scan the room. It was a basic dingy hotel room, with two beds and an old ass TV. One bed was unmade, but the other had a small lump in the middle, a shock of blond hair resting on the pillow.

What pissed me off was the half empty bottle of cough syrup on the nightstand next to a juice box of apple juice. There were few toys and no fridge to store food, so my temper flared to an all time high.

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"Your son?" I asked through gritted teeth, and she nodded. "Good," I sighed, smiling when Jasper called out that Tyson had been spotted.

"He'll sleep through anything," she whispered, looking up at me as she wrapped her arms around my neck, but I pried her off of me.

"Why don't you pack a few things?" I suggested, because she knew I was heading out to "my new job," and I needed to stall her long enough for Mr. Rollins to bring the police to the door.

I took a breath of relief when she removed her hands from me and began to toss a few things into a small suitcase. By the time she'd closed the bag, there was a knock on the door.

Susan tried to stop me, but I yanked the door open anyway, letting the police rush in, with Harold hot on their tail. As the cops arrested her, he scooped his son up lovingly, placing frantic kisses to his face.

I smiled when a little voice broke through, above the sobbing cries from the woman being led out of the room.

"Daddy," he muttered with a yawn, only to fall back asleep again.

Harold walked to me, cradling his boy. "Thank you," he sighed, glancing over to the nightstand. "She used to give him that at home when I would go out of town on business. He'll be fine."

"Good," I grunted with a nod.

"Thank Bella for me, will you? And I'll wire the rest of my payment to you first thing."

"Yes, sir," I said with a smile and an awkward handshake, because he could barely let his touch leave his son. "I'm sorry it took so long."

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"Just as long as I have my boy back, Edward," was all he said, waving as he left the hotel room.

I trudged down the stairs, my hands in my pockets as I watched Harold tuck his son carefully into his car. The other scene wasn't so pleasant, because Susan Rollins was a sobbing, drunken mess in the back of the police car.

Officer Jackson stepped up to me, holding his hand out. "Nice job, sir," he said, gripping my hand firmly. "Mr. Rollins explained that he'd hired a private investigator to find his son. Custody cases are the hardest for us. Not enough man power..."

I nodded, but I was ready to go. "What will happen to her?" I asked, pointing to the back of the cruiser.

"She has to be transported back to Seattle," he said, looking at her. "She'll be arrested, booked, and processed. It's a slap on the wrist, but what she really needs is help..."

"You're right," I sighed, suddenly really tired and unable to care about the ex-Mrs. Rollins anymore. I wanted to see my girl.

Once I'd spoken to Harold one more time, I met Emmett and Jasper at the car.

"How's Bella?" Emmett asked, falling into the passenger seat of my Challenger, as Jasper settled himself into the backseat.

"Sick. And I want to get home to her," I growled, cranking my car and peeling the hell out of there. I pulled my phone out, and dialed home.

~oOo~

BELLA

My stomach roiled with nausea with every fast food TV commercial, and I shut the damn thing off. I glared at my phone, willing it to ring with some news

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about Tyson, even though I'd just hung up from speaking with Edward. I was nervous about finding the boy, because it had been a bitch finding his mother - the crazy cow. It was one thing to want to fuck up her own life, but she should leave her kid out of it.

I was also nervous for Edward, because he and the boys weren't used to these subtle kind of missions - missions where you had play a part, be someone else for just a little while. My Edward wasn't exactly subtle when it came to his temper, and his anger had flared when he'd listened to Harold Rollins talk about his ex-wife and son. If I'd left it up to the boys, they'd have just gone in, guns fucking blazing, but there was no telling about Tyson. He didn't need to be scared into fucking therapy; he just needed to be brought back to his father.

A light knock on the back door snapped me out of my worry, and I called, "Come in, Esme."

I looked up when she walked in, her arms full of a few grocery bags. "I'm sick, not broke, Esme," I chided lovingly.

"Hush, pretty girl," she snickered, rolling her eyes and sitting down on the edge of the sofa, feeling my forehead for a fever. She set the bag down on the coffee table, pulling out another sports drink for me to sip. "I just brought you a few things," she said, and I could see a knowing look in her eye as she pulled out a small box from one of the bags, handing it over to me.

I stared at the small box, and suddenly, a whole bunch of forgotten things came flying to me. "Oh shit," I breathed, looking up at her and counting the last few weeks, and then back almost two whole months. My last period had been just before we broke ground on Gravity's office. In fact, if I was counting correctly, then my last period was just before Edward and I had made love in the chopper.

"You know, it's been months since I gave you that shot, Bells," she stated, a little warning in her voice, but I could also hear hope, love, and patience. "Have you been getting it from your regular doctor?"

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My heart completely sputtered out of control, because she was right, and I slowly shook my head no. With everything that Edward and I had been through, with all the moving, the rebuilding of Gravity, and even this case he was currently working for me, I'd forgotten all about my birth control.

"He'll kill me," I gasped, tears welling up in my eyes. "We're not even ready to get married, much less for this, Esme! What do I do?"

She smiled, picking up my hand and letting Elizabeth Cullen's ring glimmer in the low light of my living room. "I *think* you two have always found your own way, sweetie. And I *think*...you're not giving that boy enough credit."

I nodded, swiping at my tears and knowing she was right, and then stood up from the sofa, taking the box with me. It didn't take the full timer for the extra little mark to show up on the plastic stick. I threw up one more time for good measure, before walking back into my living room, holding it out to her.

I couldn't help but give her a halfhearted smile when she squealed with utter joy and happiness. But my tears started all over again, because I was honestly scared. I was scared of what this meant for me, for my work. I was scared of how much my life would change, and I was absolutely fucking petrified of Edward's reaction.

But above all else, I was also...really happy. Visions of a cherub face with a head full of dark hair and green eyes suddenly overwhelmed me, as Esme held me while I cried.

"Things have to change, pretty girl," she whispered, kissing my temple. "You have start eating right - no more coffee, no more beer - and you need to tell Edward when he gets home, Bella."

I nodded, sniffing and hiccuping another sob, but everything I'd recently been feeling made perfect sense. I'd been a mood-swinging bitch, sicker than a dog, and so very aroused by Edward's mere presence lately. My hormones were on the roller coaster from hell.

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Esme stayed, smirking knowingly as I finally heard from Edward telling me the mission had gone perfectly, that the cougar hadn't kissed him, except on the cheek, and that he and the boys were on their way home. He'd been completely successful, but his last words to me were, "Baby, how do you feel?"

"I'll be better when you're home," I answered honestly, because I needed to tell him this. Our whole relationship revolved around leaning on each other, and for this new development, I was truly grateful of that.

"A few hours, *sweetness*," he promised. "Get some sleep, please."

"I'll try," I sighed, thinking there was no way that would happen, but it did. I fell asleep almost the minute Esme left me, after swearing to me she wouldn't tell Carlisle yet. In turn, she made me promise to see my doctor first thing.

I was awakened when I was picked up from the sofa and carried into our room. I looked up with blurry, sleepy eyes at Edward.

"Go back to sleep, baby," he whispered, kissing my forehead as he nestled me under the covers.

I curled up in a ball, watching him undress down to his boxer briefs, and then I squirmed myself as close to him as I could get. It was as he pulled me to him, letting me mold myself to his front, that my tears started again, because I just didn't know how he would take the news.

I sniffled, threading my fingers into his hair and pulling his forehead to mine. He was just so fucking handsome, it was almost painful to look at him. And despite how soon it was that I was pregnant, the fact that there was something that *we* had made growing inside of me, made me love Edward even more.

"Hey, hey," he soothed, tucking my hair behind my ears. "Baby, what's this?"

"I...I have something to tell you," I sobbed, sitting up and swiping at my tears with the back of my hand. "And I don't...I'm not sure... Fuck..." I cried, looking up at him when he sat up next to me. "I messed up, Edward...so badly. But it's a

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good mess up...or maybe it's just a too soon mess up..."

Edward snorted, cupping my face. "And I thought I had the speech problems," he chuckled, but he lifted my chin gently so that I was looking him in the eye. "Just...spit it out, love. I can't imagine any mess up is worth getting this worked up over."

I snort-sniffled at him, because he had no idea, but I decided that I should do it quickly, like ripping off a bandage. "I'm...pregnant, Edward," I whispered, as more tears coursed down my face.

He froze, except for his eyebrows. Those bad boys shot up to his hairline. Edward tilted his head at me, his mouth opening once, only to snap shut again. His green eyes, which were filled with worry, darkened into confusion.

"It's my fault," I exploded into hysterics, wringing my hands together. "I forgot all about my shot. With everything...and work...and we're engaged...I just..." I knew I wasn't making a bit of fucking sense, but my stomach roiled again, and I shot off the bed and into the bathroom.

The only thing I had in my belly were liquids, and those were lost in an instant, but warm, rough hands gently held my hair as I heaved again. I took the cloth that he held out to me, sitting back on my heels.

I couldn't look at him. I didn't want to know if he was angry, because I was a fucking coward. "Don't hate me," I whispered, wiping my face roughly with the cloth.

"I don't hate you, baby," he whispered against my temple. "You're sure? Is that what this is? It's not the flu, is it?" he rambled, but at least he could form normal sentences, and the irony of that was not lost on me.

I nodded, looking at my hands wringing again, and not at the man that was sitting on the bathroom floor next to me. Again, his fingers tilted my head from under my chin so I would look at him.

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"I don't hate you, Bella," he urged, making sure I was truly looking at him. "How can I hate you? Y-you're c-carrying m-my b-baby..." he sputtered, swallowing thickly. "I know you're scared, but... *we* did that," he stated firmly.

There it was. There was my nervous, honest, but in control Edward that I *so* fucking needed at the moment.

I nodded, tears welling up again. "I am scared, but I'm in love with him...her...already." I sniffled, smiling when he gave me his light chuckle. "I know it's stupid, crazy timing. I'm sorry..."

He cut me off with a quick kiss, despite my throwing up. "I'm an adult in this relationship, too, Bella. I am half responsible. I'm finding it hard to be sorry, though."

"We're going to be parents, Edward," I whispered, shaking my head, but again, a little boy with crazy hair and green eyes flooded my mind, and I couldn't help but smile as I stood up to brush my teeth for what felt like the hundredth time today.

"W-what d-do we d-do n-now, love?" he asked, helping me to my feet and leaning on the counter as I brushed.

Once I rinsed, I said, "Doctor. Esme said so..."

Edward nodded, smiling so very sweetly as he fell to his knees in front of me. He lifted the front of his t-shirt that I was wearing and placed a long, slow kiss to my belly. "Tell me when and where, Bella. I'm in...I'm completely in, baby."

~oOo~

"Marry me, Bella," Edward whispered as his lips pressed to my now very large belly.

"Yes, Edward," I giggled, rolling my eyes at his umpteenth proposal, because now, it was just a joke.

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It wasn't that I didn't want to marry him, but time was against us. We could never just get it done. And neither of us wanted a big to-do, especially with the baby on the way, because she was more important than the the both of us combined.

He chuckled when our daughter kicked his face. "She's so going to be like you. All feisty and smart and stubborn," he teased, kissing the spot on my skin. "Aren't you, *Little Sweetness*?" he crooned at my stomach, and she kicked at him again.

I giggled down at him, because number one, he was tickling the shit out of me with his rough, scruffy face. And two, he thought it was the best day ever, because we'd just found out that we were having a little girl. It had been five months since I'd told him, and I don't think there was a man alive that had accepted the news with such happiness like Edward had. I'd been terrified, but he told me that he thought it was the best thing. Ever.

"I will marry you, Edward," I giggled again, squirming under him as he rubbed his chin lightly over my stomach. "You know this," I chided him.

"I know, but I still like hearing it," he snickered, and then turned to my belly. "Tell Mommy that she should marry Daddy...like tomorrow, Bethy."

I don't know what was more adorable. The fact that he was already conspiring against me with our child, or the fact that she seemed to adore the sound of his voice, because she always seemed to squirm more when he talked to her like this.

"Miss Elizabeth, tell *Daddy* that *he* needs to get working on your crib," I snorted, raising an eyebrow at him as I rubbed my tummy where his scruff had left me tingly.

I don't think either of us had, had to think twice about the name - Elizabeth Renee Cullen - and we both had blurted it out in the car on the way home from the doctor's office. Naming her after our mothers was a no-brainer. It was the boys' names that were giving us hell. If it had been left up to our family and

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friends, the poor boy's name would have been Carlisle Alec Jasper Emmett Eleazar Cullen. Not a chance in hell.

"*Daddy* will," Edward sighed, crawling up so that he was braced over me. "I'm waiting for the special stain I ordered to come in. I didn't realize how many safety regulations I had to follow when it came to spacing between the bars, height, and even the paint..." he said with a shrug, "but she'll have a place to sleep by the time she gets here."

"Kay," I sighed in contentment, as I cupped his face and kissed him senseless, because Edward was nothing if not ecstatic about having this baby.

He'd been to every doctor's appointment, and could barely contain himself when it came to telling everyone. That's not to say we weren't nervous, because we really were, but just like the beginning of our relationship, we took things slowly, carefully, learning as much as we could as we went along.

But *no one* was as happy as Carlisle.

It was like Christmas everyday for him, once we told him the news. He couldn't wait to be a grandfather - or *Poppy*, as we'd all nicknamed him - and he loved it. He'd already set up accounts, trust funds, and college funds, and I'm pretty sure he was saving the old Camaro to give to her for her sixteenth birthday. Not to mention the fact that he'd opened a credit card for himself, just for spoiling Bethy at Toys R Us.

A horn honked outside, and Edward sighed, cupping my face. "Gravity meeting," he groaned, rolling his eyes, but then shot up like a little kid. "But Emmett owes me a hundred fucking bucks! I told him she was a girl ages ago..." he rambled, pulling out the sonogram picture like it was prize possession.

"Hey, *Dad!*" I laughed, reaching for him, because I was completely stuck on our sofa. "Before you run off and leave me like a turtle on its back, can you help a girl out?"

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"Shit, sorry, love," he chuckled, helping me to my rather swollen feet and kissing my forehead.

I pulled him to me, wrapping my arms around his waist. I closed my eyes when warm, strong arms wrapped around me and kisses were dropped on the top of my head. I took a deep breath, just leaning on him.

"Let's just...go, Edward," I whispered, setting my chin on his chest and blinking up at him. "Just go somewhere and get married. I don't care about traditions or any of that shit. Do you?"

Edward smiled and shook his head no, kissing my forehead, and then my lips. "Tomorrow?"

"Yeah," I giggled. "Tomorrow."

We were married in San Francisco in a court house two days later. The only witnesses were Carlisle and Esme, and that was kind of how we wanted it, though our friends threw a hell of a party when we got back. And it was perfect.

Elizabeth Renee was born two months later - *Little Sweetness*, according to her Dad, Bethy, to the rest of us - perfectly healthy and by C-section. She was fat and sweet, with a head full of hair the same color as mine, but with gorgeous reddish highlights. And even though her eyes were blue, it didn't take long to see the perfect green start to shine through.

There wasn't a stick of furniture in our child's room that wasn't made by Edward. He'd made it so beautifully that all my girls wanted something like it when they got ready to have kids, which Edward and I assumed wouldn't take long, because Emmett and Rose were already married, Jasper and Alice were engaged, and Wes and Makenna were head over heels for each other. However, Carlisle still hadn't popped the question to Esme.

But it was what Edward was making for her before Bethy was even a year old that made me fall in love with him all over again, which was saying something,

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because I loved him with just as much fire as ever.

I lounged in the shade, Bethy asleep on my chest, as I watched Edward, Jasper, Emmett, and Alec build a tree house that rivaled the one I had growing up. It was in an enormous oak tree in the back yard. The plans were top secret, but it didn't take long for it to start to take shape. With a wrap around porch, a staircase - instead of a ladder - and real, locking windows, the thing was beautiful. And knowing Edward, it would be painted white with blue trim to match the house. I half-expected to see a small American flag once it was all said and done.

Rose paced on the phone, speaking to the possible next client. "Well, hang on, I'll check our schedule and see if I have a guy for that date." She put her hand over the phone, yelling up into the tree. "Boys!"

"Yeah?" they all answered her.

"I need one of you for a protection service day after tomorrow in Seattle. Some fashion designer is opening a new line downtown. They need to get from the airport, to the show, to a meet and greet, and then back to the airport. It's just a day job..."

"I'll take it," Alec grunted as he lifted a board up with Jasper so that Edward and Emmett could nail it in place.

Rose nodded once, pulling out her notebook. "Okay, you're covered. Give me the details."

Bethy jumped, shifted, squirmed, and then broke into a cry when one of the guys dropped a board too loudly.

"Damn it," Edward growled, leaning over the rail of the porch. "Sorry, baby," he said with a grimace, and then tore down the steps. "That was me..."

I stood up, rocking Bethy and cooing to her, but it was amazing to watch what her dad could do.

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"Come here, *Little Sweetness*," he sighed, and I shook my head as she quieted down almost immediately.

His large, rough hands picked her up, holding her above him, so their foreheads were pressed together, and she hiccuped once, grasping at his scruffy face. There was nothing as sexy as Edward holding her when he was shirtless and humming softly. Nothing. They were made for each other.

"I have to return a few calls, Edward," I told him as he sat down with a slowly drifting off infant in his arms. "Can you take her for a few?" I asked, knowing that he would.

"Yeah," he said with a nod. "We were just about to call it a day, anyway. Emmett has that adoption case he's working on and needs to head out."

I nodded and kissed my husband, and then my daughter. "Those are tough, because the records are sealed. Has Alice been able to help?"

"She shouldn't," Edward chuckled, lounging back and letting Bethy sprawl on his chest, her front pressed to his. I couldn't help but smile when his fingers played with her tiny toes. "It's illegal as hell, but I'm pretty sure she's drawn him the family tree."

"Bethy still needs one more feeding and a bath before bed," I told him, "so give me an hour to work, and we'll put her to bed, okay?"

My work went over an hour, because I had three cases to discuss with Rose, Makenna, and Alice. Four very long phone calls, a breakdown, a schedule for all three cases, and assigning those cases put me at almost two and a half hours before going back inside after sending the girls home.

I walked in, finding Edward rocking our daughter as he read to her in her room. "I'm not sure Tom Clancy is exactly infant material, flyboy," I teased him.

He chuckled, looking up at me with a wink. "She's asleep, and nothing else was working."

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"I'm sorry it took so long," I sighed, scooping up my sleeping girl from his arms. "I have a case for the two of us, but I need to see if your dad and Esme will watch Bethy for two days."

"Gladly," Edward chuckled. "He was bitching yesterday that we hog her."

"She's *our* kid," I giggled, rolling my eyes and laying her down in her crib. After covering her up, I couldn't help but lean back against Edward, just looking at her. "She's beautiful, Edward," I sighed, feeling like my heart could hardly contain my love for the other two people in the room.

"She's just like her mother," he crooned, kissing the side of my neck. "Opinionated, strong, and gorgeous."

I smiled, turning in his arms. "And easily pissed off like her dad," I giggled, squeaking when he scooped me up.

Before he left the room, he turned to look at Bethy again. "She's going to give 'em hell, baby," he chuckled, shaking his head, and then kissing my lips. "She'll be a force to be reckoned with."

With that said, he shut the light off and carried me to our room.

~oOo~

Three years later...

EDWARD

"That's not a freakin' *strike*!" Emmett yelled at the TV, shaking his head and taking a long draw on his beer.

"Come on, knock that thing into the damn bleachers," Jasper urged, sitting on the edge of the chair.

"Where's my baby girl?" my dad asked, looking around the living room.

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I snorted, shaking my head. "Last I checked, she was planning world domination in her room, with an army of teddy bears," I told him, grinning when he chuckled.

"She'd succeed," Jasper laughed, standing up. "I'm getting another," he said, holding up his empty beer bottle. "Anyone else?"

"Yeah," we all answered.

It was the first weekend in ages that we'd all been able to get together at my house for a Mariners game. The only one from the old crew that was missing was Mickey, but she'd been stolen by the girls for the day, though she'd rather be with them, anyway. They were off shopping in Seattle for my dad and Esme's wedding. Alec wasn't there, either, because he was on an assignment in Los Angeles.

My dad had finally asked Esme a few months ago, and out of all of us, *they* wanted the big deal wedding, where the rest of us had just gone off and done the courthouse thing. Maybe it was a media thing, because he was still running Twi Tech with an iron fist, or maybe it was an Esme thing, because she'd never had a real church wedding before. But whatever it was, all the girls were eating it up, and they were planning the whole thing.

To be honest, I was really happy for my dad. It was a long time coming for him. It seemed ever since my mother's death, he'd always been alone, and looking back on it now, a touch sad. However, Esme changed all that for him, and they'd only gotten stronger and better in the last few years.

I looked up when I heard a bedroom door shut, taking a beer from Jasper when he came back into the room.

The little thump-thump-thump of Bethy's feet on the hardwood floor echoed down the hallway, until she cruised through the living room as fast as she could, without actually running. Her hands were full of just...stuff. I heard the screen door open, and then slam shut.

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"Okay, top of the sixth...no outs, runner on base," Jasper called out, rubbing his hands together.

The screen door slammed again, and this time, we all watched as my daughter hurried through the room, without so much as a glance our way.

"She's so up to something," my dad snorted.

"Always," I sighed, but smiled, because she was amazing.

Elizabeth Renee Cullen was three, going on twenty-three, and her mother made over. She was so smart, so very sweet, and constantly on the go. She had Bella's long, beautiful, dark hair, with just a touch of red to it, but her eyes were all mine - bright green that reminded me of my own, but more my mother's. They were softer, warmer, but carried my glint of up-to-no-good, according to my wife.

Slam! Thump-thump-thump...

She came back through, again her arms loaded to capacity. I saw stuffed animals, hats, clothes, and some other things I couldn't quite see as she bolted out the screen door.

"Um, Eddie?" Emmett muttered, looking over at me. "What's the baby girl doin'?"

"No idea," I chuckled, and sometimes, it was best just to let her be. Besides, she was nothing if not entertaining.

By the time she'd done it the third time, we'd muted the TV and just started waiting for her, but when she came in from outside that last time, she stopped in front of the TV.

"What are you up to, *Little Sweetness*?" I laughed, because she reached up and turned the TV completely off, much to the shock of the guys.

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"It's t-time, D-daddy," she sputtered.

Oh yeah, she'd earned her stutter directly from me, and I couldn't help but love every single word she said, because despite her little speech impediment, she could command a room without shame. The fact that she was wearing a pink camo shirt and little jean skirt was icing on the cake. With her hair half up in two little high pony tails, she tilted her head at all of us like she'd already lost patience.

"Time for what, Bethy?" my dad asked her, sitting forward on the couch.

"T-tea p-party," she stated, and I flinched. "D-daddy, you puh-puh-pwomised," she chided, pointing a stern finger at me.

"I did, *sweetness*," I told her, "but can you wait until after the game?"

"No." she grumped, walking to me. "M-mommy says t-tea is at t-two...and it's *t-two*!"

"She can tell time?" Jasper murmured, his eyebrows raised high, and I nodded slowly.

"Yes, she can," I sighed, pulling her to me when she tried to pull me up by my hand. "I'm telling you...world domination..."

My dad laughed softly, because there wasn't much Bethy didn't do that he couldn't just eat the fuck up. He spoiled her rotten, but had more patience with her than I ever remembered him having with me.

"Did you promise, son?" my dad asked.

"Yeah, I had to get her in bed somehow," I murmured, rolling my eyes at his laugh.

"Pwease, D-daddy," she said, crawling up into my lap, using my t-shirt to hold onto. Finally, I gave her a hand and sat back, straddling her on my lap. She

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grasped both sides of my face and pressed her forehead to mine. "Y-you said l-last n-night that y-you'd have a t-tea party wif me in the twee house. You did! I heard you."

"I did, Bethy," I chuckled, because she hadn't let go of my face. "And I meant it, but I was thinking more about *after* the game."

"N-no! N-now!" she said with a cherubic smile and wriggling closer to me just like her mother did when she wanted something.

When she tugged my baseball cap off and ruffled my hair, I was done. There wasn't much I could do about it, either. Both of my girls could get me to do just about anything when they did that. It had something to do with the begging eyes, the slight tilt of their head, and the sweet kisses to my cheek. Both my wife and my daughter knew exactly how to play me, but I didn't care, because they were my fucking universe, and I wouldn't change it for the world.

"What about Poppy?" I asked, smirking over at my dad. "Don't you think he should come?"

"Yeah!" she squealed, beaming and slipping off of my lap. She grasped both our hands, and we let her pull us up this time.

My dad scooped her into his arms, planting loud kisses on her face and neck, just to hear crack up into hysterics.

"What about the game?" Emmett asked, pointing to the TV with the remote and turning it back on.

"Don't you think Uncle Em and Uncle Jazz should come, too?" my dad whispered conspiratorially to her.

"Unca Em...Unca Jazz...you hafta come!" she pleaded with them both, and I fought my laugh, because those two guys would do anything for her, except when it came to interrupting a game.

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"Boys! Up, now!" my dad commanded without even bothering to turn around, as he carried her out the screen door.

"Aw, hell," Jasper muttered, but they shut the TV off and followed us outside and up the steps of the tree house.

We all settled down Indian style, cramming into my daughter's tree house. I knew that Bella had adored the one she'd had growing up, so I'd built one here. It was everything Bella's was, but a bit more. It had electricity, working windows, even a small ceiling fan, not to mention heat for the winter. Hell, it was a mini version of a real house.

Bella had decorated the thing with bookshelves, beanbags, and little brightly colored curtains. There was even a miniature sofa up here. I think most of the books on the shelves had belonged to Bella first. One of my favorite things was finding the two of them curled up on a beanbag up here, my wife reading to Bethy - something we'd started when she was a baby.

As Bethy handed out teacups and saucers filled with water, I picked a tiny helicopter up off the shelf, spinning the blades. It was new, and I wondered where she got it.

"*Little Sweetness*, who gave you this?" I asked her, pulling her down into my lap, smiling when she squealed.

"Mommy," she answered, taking it from me. "She s-said one d-day I c-could f-ly my own chopper."

I laughed, kissing her loudly on her neck and tickling her when she practically growled the word "chopper." She wriggled out of my lap, ruffling my hair, and got back to the serious business of her tea party.

"That would *rock*, baby girl," Emmett cheered, donning a big floppy hat and taking a pink feather boa from her.

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"Th-that's what Aunt Awice said," she giggled, handing Jasper something that looked like a bonnet or some shit. "Now," she barked, pointing to all of us. "You have t-to d-drink wif y-your pinkies out!"

~oOo~

BELLA

"Why didn't you bring Bethy today?" Mickey asked from the back seat of my SUV.

I turned onto the 101 to head home. It had been long day of plans, shopping, and fittings. Esme and Carlisle's wedding was the only full-blown wedding amongst us, so all of us were living vicariously through them. I had no complaints on how I'd married Edward, because it was simple and quiet, and I'd been seven months pregnant with Bethy at the time.

"She was determined to stay with her daddy today," I chuckled, shaking my head at my obstinate child. "Something about a promise he'd made her, but she wouldn't spill the beans."

The girls all laughed, because they knew her. She was insanely smart and completely sweet. She had zero tolerance for bullshit, just like her father.

"They are two peas in a pod," Rose chuckled, shaking her head and rubbing her now large belly. "I've never seen anything like it."

I grinned, looking over at her. She was due in a month, and this wedding had been torture trying to get her into a dress that fit, because every time we went for a fitting, she had gotten bigger.

"Just you wait," I told her still chuckling. "Just you wait until Emmett's little clone comes tumbling out like hell on wheels. *Then* we'll talk about peas in pods."

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"Right, because hyperactivity is genetic," Alice chirped from the backseat, which only caused all of us to laugh again.

"Fabulous," Rose sighed, rolling her eyes.

She was having a boy, and they couldn't be happier. The name was still up for debate, but Emmett was pushing for Caleb Edward McCarty. It had something to do with Afghanistan, and a lifesaving situation that Edward had pulled Emmett from, but I didn't quite know the details. The name had only just recently been put out there.

Alice and Jasper were waiting on kids. They weren't sure they were ready, but I told them they were wrong, because they were Bethy's favorite babysitters. Alice was so smart, she was able to teach my daughter just about anything - computers, languages, reading - and according to my child, Unca Jazz told the "best stories *ever*."

I pulled in my driveway, hitting the remote for the gate, and once again when I was through. I parked between my Mustang and Edward's Challenger. When Bethy was on the way, neither of us wanted to get rid of our cars, so we'd opted for a third vehicle. I'd let Edward go get it, and he'd come back with the safest SUV on the planet - a Volvo. I'd said nothing about it, because it was perfect, but Edward had muttered something about, "can't have some asshole run my girls over."

His girls. His *sweetnesses*. I fought my smile at the thought. If I'd thought Edward was protective before, he was practically vigilant now. Our work wasn't all that dangerous, just the simple cheating spouses, lost kids, and finding relatives, but my husband didn't take any chances. The entire property was a safe zone. We were careful about using real names with certain jobs, and we never, ever met a client at the office, which was behind the helipad. Period.

When I worked, Edward stayed with Bethy, and vice versa. And when we were both needed, Esme and Carlisle took her, without even batting an eye. They were the perfect grandparents - Poppy and Gamma to my daughter. She'd stay with them in the Twi Tech Towers, using my old room as her own, though we

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totally had to get rid of the purple and paint it back to the pink my mother had originally picked out.

"Mommy's home!" I heard my favorite squeal. The rumble of little feet down the tree house steps caught my attention, and I scooped up Bethy, spinning her around.

"I missed you, pretty girl," I said, smooching her cheek. "Did you have fun with Daddy?"

"I d-did," she gushed, her cheeks flushed and her eyes a vibrant happy green. "I m-missed you, t-too, Mommy."

The fact that my little girl inherited her stutter from her dad just made me melt. I loved it so much that even when the doctor and Carlisle said that she'd outgrow it, I prayed that she didn't, because it was just the sweetest part of her dad that she received. Edward stuttered when he was nervous, but Bethy stuttered when she was excited, and that was just about all the time.

"So what was this big deal you and Daddy had planned?" I asked her, walking her towards the tree house.

"W-we puh-puh-pwayed t-tea party wif Unca Em and Unca Jazz and Poppy!"

I laughed, just imagining four of the deadliest soldiers I'd ever met having a tea party with a three year old, but if I thought they were just drinking tea, I was so wrong. I looked up to see the funniest thing. Ever.

Carlisle was wearing an old, frilly apron. Edward was tugging off some sort of flowery smock, but it was Jasper and Emmett that had me and the women behind me almost in tears. Both were wearing big, floppy hats with flowers and birds on them, and Emmett was twirling a bright ass, pink feather boa.

"Sure, laugh it up," Jasper grumbled, but Emmett grinned wide and shameless.

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"You know I am *so* rockin' this look," he huffed haughtily, tossing the boa around his neck and going back inside the tree house. "Baby girl! It's your turn."

"Oh!" Bethy gasped, wriggling down out of my arms. "Coming, Unca Em!"

"Killer game of Chutes and Ladders. She destroyed us in Hi Ho Cherry-O," Edward chuckled, wrapping his arms around my waist. "How was girls day?" he asked, leaning down to kiss my neck.

"Productive, but tiring," I sighed, wrapping my arms around his neck. "Now I know why we didn't have a big wedding. It's exhausting."

He grinned, kissing my lips this time. "I was just happy you said yes," he whispered between each nip to my lips. "Dinner is ready. I've been cooking it all day, love. Take the girls in with you."

"Kay," I sighed, not letting him go.

"Unca Em, that's cheating!" our daughter growled, and I swear she sounded just like Edward.

Edward chuckled, kissing me quickly. "He's been doing it on purpose to see if she'd catch it. She may kick his ass before the game is over." He turned a bit, yelling up into the tree. "Bethy, boys...it's time to eat. Get in the house!" he ordered.

"K-kay, Daddy!"

I snorted, rolling my eyes, but begrudgingly pulled myself from my husband's arms. I held a hand out for my daughter, and said, "Come on, let's wash up, and you can help set the table."

Dinner was loud, fun, and full of an entertaining debate between Emmett and Bethy, concerning who was better looking - him or Edward.

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"Daddy," she huffed, rolling her eyes and folding her arms across her chest in a way that was so me, I just about choked on the pot roast Edward had made.

"That's my girl," Edward crooned to her, kissing the top of her head as he walked back into the kitchen, though he flipped Emmett off when Bethy wasn't looking.

When the conversation turned from the upcoming wedding to work, Bethy scrambled down from her chair and crawled up in my lap, trying to hide her yawn, but I wasn't fooled.

"Bath and bed, pretty girl," I whispered to her, setting her down. "Go pick out your pajamas, baby, and I'll be in there to help with your bath."

Bethy met me in the bathroom with her favorite pajamas - a tiny little Air Force t-shirt and soft shorts. I was pretty damned certain the boys were trying to turn my daughter into a tomboy, but I kept faith in the fact that she still liked the color pink, wearing dresses, and playing with my makeup.

Once Bethy was clean, her hair brushed out and dried, and her teeth brushed, I knelt in front of her. "Better go tell everyone goodnight, baby."

She yawned again and nodded, padding out to the living room, where everyone was watching the highlights from the game they'd apparently missed, thanks to a very important tea party. With kisses and big hugs to Poppy and Gamma, hugs to the girls, and a high five and a fist bump to the boys, my daughter went in search of her dad.

She found him in the kitchen, and he quickly had to set down the beers he was pulling out of the fridge in order to catch her, chuckling and wrapping both strong arms around her.

"Night, D-daddy," she said, grasping both sides of his face and planting big kisses to his face as she wrapped her strong little legs around him.

"Night, *Little Sweetness*," he whispered to her.

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"Love you," she sang, grinning at him and tilting her head.

"Love you, too, baby," he said with a smile, kissing her neck loudly so that she squealed. "Lights out, little soldier."

"Y-yes, sir," she giggled.

"Only sweet dreams," he grunted playfully at her, and I loved this little routine they had.

"Y-yes, sir!" she huffed back, faking a serious face.

"You'll fall in at oh-eight-hundred tomorrow," he grunted again.

"Kay, Daddy," she finally laughed, kissing him again, before wriggling down and coming to me.

"C-come, Mommy, r-r-read t-to m-me," she ordered, and I rolled my eyes.

"Yes, *ma'am*," I said, giving her a salute.

We settled her into bed, and I pulled out the book that we'd been reading. As much as she liked the *Wizard of Oz* movie, the book was different and a little scarier, so we were currently working on *Peter Pan*. My daughter loved fairies and the Lost Boys; she was convinced that Emmett was never growing up, either.

I heard everyone leave and Edward lock up the house, setting the alarm at the front door. My daughter started to drift off, just as her dad leaned in her doorway. She was too tired to speak, but she reached for him, and we both knew that she just wanted both of us with her when she finally fell asleep, so he squeezed in on the other side of her in her tiny little bed.

I finished the chapter out, just to be sure that she was completely asleep, before Edward and I carefully got out of her bed. Leaving her nightlight on and the door cracked, we turned the lamp off by her bed, after we both kissed her

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forehead.

"Oh, damn," I sighed, once we were in our bedroom and I was getting undressed. "I totally forgot to ask your dad and Esme if they could watch Bethy tomorrow. We have to head to Portland to meet with that client..."

"They're good," he answered, coming to stand right behind me. "I asked them before they left. They're talking about the zoo or something. They're spending the night here in Forks and will pick her up in the morning, love."

I smiled, closing my eyes at the feel of his arms wrapping around me. I leaned back into him, tilting my head when warm, wet kisses were dropped along my neck and shoulders. I moaned shamelessly when my ponytail was gathered up in a firm grip, and his kisses became hungrier, more desperate.

I turned in front of him, though he didn't let go of my hair, and pressed myself fully against him. He'd already stripped himself of his t-shirt, and at thirty, my husband was in the most amazing shape. He still ran just about every morning, though his hobby of building furniture kept him in really good shape - not to mention our daughter was a whirlwind of energy.

I let my fingers trace every muscle, every dip of his chest and stomach as he wrenched my head to the side in order to kiss my neck roughly up to my ear, where he took my earlobe between his teeth.

"Bella," he grunted, walking us backwards towards the bed, and I stopped when the backs of my legs met the mattress. "Fuck, baby..."

"I guess you missed me today," I teased him as we fell into the middle of the bed in a tangle.

He smiled against my neck, pulling back to gaze down at me as he settled between my legs. He was still in his jeans, and I was still in mine, but his weight felt good, comforting. I traced my fingers down his back with one hand, the other brushing an errant curl from his forehead.

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"I d-did," he stuttered, sounding just like Bethy, and I smiled up at him, because it was, by far, my favorite sound. It was the sound of pure honesty and love coming from him. "I probably love you too much, *sweetness*," he purred, scooting down my body to press his lips against my old scars, as his fingers deftly flicked open my jeans. "I miss you whenever you're away from me..."

I never even gave them much thought anymore, because they'd faded over time and with the help of the cream that Esme had given me so long ago. The only scars that remained prominent was the deeper one on my thigh from the tip of Miller's knife, and the newer one of Bethy's C-section, both of which Edward always tended to give extra kisses and love. The one on my thigh, he'd told me once, meant the most to him, because it was that one he'd kissed when he'd told me he loved me the first time, and the C-section scar was when I gave him the best gift he'd ever received - our daughter.

As he tugged off my jeans and dropped them off the bed, he did, indeed, pay homage to those two scars, just as I'd known he would.

"I love you, too, Edward," I sighed, my eyes rolling back as his mouth worked its way from one thigh, across my belly, to my other thigh, my fingers threading into his hair. "So much..." I tugged him lightly, saying, "Get up here and love me..."

He chuckled lightly, kicking out of his jeans and crawling back up my body. His mouth gaped just a bit when my legs wrapped around his hips, both of us moaning at the feel of nothing between us.

He pressed his forehead to mine, planting his elbows on either side of my head and his fingers lightly brushing my hair from my face as he gazed down at me.

"I-I'm a l-lucky fucking man," he sighed, a slight smile gracing his handsome face as he shook his head slowly. "You've given me everything, Bella. Shit that I never thought I'd have..."

I looked up at the man that had once called himself a monster, the same one that I'd called a hypocritical asshole. I looked up at the guy that had been

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angry, commanding, and standoffish, the same guy that kissed me stupid for the first time during the chase of our lives. He was not a monster... He was my hero. He was strong and loyal, sweet and loving. He was an amazing husband and father, and he was the best partner I could ever ask for. He'd vowed once to me that he would make it so that I was safe, and I don't think he'd meant permanently at the time, but it ended up that way. He'd built a world of safety and comfort for me, and now our daughter, and I loved him more for it with each passing day.

I pulled his mouth to mine, kissing him softly, slowly, because I remembered a time when I could barely let him touch me, much less let him make love to me. And as he slipped inside of me, with a delicious slowness, I knew that he wasn't the only lucky one.

Our mothers had tried to keep us together, though two different paths had ended their plans, but fate had intervened, giving us another chance. I pulled him to me, keeping him close, because closer was always better.

I kissed his shoulder, all the way up to his ear, whispering, "Me, too, Edward. Me, too."

A/N...Excuse me while I shed a tear or two, because I always seem to do that when a story ends, despite the fact that these characters will go on for at least one more story.

Elizabeth Renee Cullen...aka Little Sweetness, or Bethy...was a pretty confirmed character for me, but I owe the Tea Party to my friend and pre-reader Goober_Lou...that developed after a long, slow day at work, and the tea party became a "what if" scenario. I owe her big, huge thanks, because it was by far the funnest thing I've written.

Okay, the sequel...I know you've got questions... let me see if I can answer them... I don't know when it will post. It will continue from the ending point *right here*. And every character - yes, even Alec, who as earned his own fan club - will make it for the next go around, especially my little Bethy. I will post a chapter on this story just in case you miss it, and there

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will be an announcement on my blog and Twitter when it all starts. Look for *Sin and Innocence*.

I need to thank JenRar for everything concerning beta'ing this story, and patience...lots of patience... Without her, this story wouldn't be what it is...

MedusaInNY... I owe her huge thanks, hugs, kisses for all that she does for my blog, including a pdf version of this for download, which will be available on my blog soon. Again, that's thanks to her... I'm absolutely certain that it will be beautiful. Thank you, bb.

And to all of you that read, reviewed, reTweeted, rec'd, pushed, nominated for awards, and told everyone you knew about this... for everyone that was there from the beginning, to the people that joined the party late... THANK YOU. Thank you, and I hope to see all of you on the next adventure.

Since there won't be another posting of B&G, then please review. I hope that you enjoyed the ride, and that you'll tell me all about it. I hope to hear from you one more time before I take a small break. I will miss hearing from you, but I will see you soon, so until then... Later. :)