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EPOV

1.

"Are you heading over to the Swans' right now?" Kate asks, standing in front of the mirror in our hotel room. I grunt out a "yes" as I pull on my boots. With only a week in Washington, I don't wanna waste time, especially since we learned that Bella's having a little girl. I may or may not have secretly hoped for that. "Okay, I'll just join you guys for dinner then?"

I bend at the waist and start lacing my Docs. "Sounds good. Charlie said that dinner's at seven."

Walking over to my nightstand, I grab my wallet and the keys to our rental. Fucking hate rental cars. Or maybe I just miss my own car. Yeah. Being a mechanic makes you a bit picky about cars.

"Have fun with your parents," I say with a wry grin.

Kate rolls her eyes, and I know that she's cursing the only bad thing here in Seattle, which would be her family. Uppity bunch, is all I'm saying. Having their daughter engaged to a mechanic wasn't a part of their plan for Kate. They wanted her to come home after college and marry some fat cat, but she stayed with me in Chicago.

Had it not been for Bella, we wouldn't be here now, 'cause Kate loathes her own parents, but it is what it is. Bella picked us, and we will owe her everything for that. If that means we gotta spend some time with Kate's folks, so be it.

"You're lucky I'm not dragging you with me," she huffs playfully.

"Hey, I was there yesterday," I retort.

Their latest issue with us is that we're living in sin. They don't approve of me at all, but apparently it's even worse that we're only living together. Don't ask me why, 'cause I don't get it. And, in my defense, we were about to get married a few months ago – Ms. Weber at the adoption agency said it might increase our chances – but Bella chose us, regardless of marital status, before we were supposed to tie the knot, so we have postponed the wedding for now.

She smiles ruefully. "Ah, well. I'll see you tonight. Love you, kid."

I scowl and pat my pockets for my smokes. "Are you ever gonna drop that fuckin' name?"

It was fun when I was eighteen and she was twenty-four. Not so much now. I had the hugest crush on her and had to work hard to get her to go out with me. She called me "cutie" and "kid", which just made me work harder and, in the end, I fucking had her. Now it's six years later, so I'm no longer a goddamn kid.

"I'm just teasing you," she coos. "You know that."

I do know, yeah. She's just annoyed that I get to see Bella while she has to see her prissy parents.

"Just get outta here, will ya?" I chuckle. "See you tonight at the Swans'."

After parting ways, I drive over to Charlie's house.

My fingers tap impatiently on the steering wheel.

I haven't seen Bella in two months because I couldn't take time off work last time when it was time to find out the sex of the baby. Kate was here, of course, but I wish I could've been here, too.

2.

"Hey, Edward," Charlie says with a smile. "Good to see ya again."

"You, too." I shake his hand in greeting and enter the house. I smile as the scent of their home surrounds me. "Feels good to be back."

If only it wouldn't rain fucking constantly. Okay, Chicago isn't much better if we're talking weather. Not since I'm originally from Florida. Still, it doesn't rain this much in Illinois.

"Coffee?" he asks, gesturing to the kitchen as I shrug out of my leather jacket. "Bella will be down in a minute."

I grin, feeling that fluttery shit going on in the pit of my stomach again. "Coffee sounds great. Can't wait to see Bella, either." I follow him into their kitchen and take a seat at the table. "How's she doing?"

He gives me a look that says it all. There's chagrin and sadness because his fifteen-year-old daughter ended up pregnant. There's a small smile because he loves and supports Bella, no matter what. There's confliction because of the situation; feelings get involved, regardless of how hard you fight it. There's regret because this is his little girl, who had sex –

unprotected, no less – at too young an age and, as a father, he wishes he could go back in time and fix things. There's anger because Bella's boyfriend is also a minor, and it would've been easier to place blame, but he can't. It was an act of young love and stupidity.

A mistake that will give me a daughter in less than six weeks.

3.

"I thought I heard voices," I hear a certain girl say behind me. I smile and look over my shoulder, confirming that it really is Bella, and then I stand up to greet her. "Hi, Edward."

"Hey, Bella," I say, giving her a friendly hug. My heart clenches when I feel her stomach between us. "Wow, you've gotten big," I murmur, holding her at arm's length. I gotta grin when I see her t-shirt, which is black and has Aerosmith's signature "A" on it. When I first met her and we tried to pull off some casual get-to-know-each-other talk, we quickly learned that Bella and I share a love for 80's hard rock and metal. I was fucking shocked back then, to hear a fifteen-year-old girl talk about Aerosmith, Dokken, and Mötley Crüe, and not just because of her age, but because Bella Swan has the tendency to come off as shy and soft-spoken. Actually, she is soft-spoken, though not very shy.

I digress.

It's what's under her t-shirt that matters, and shit, that did not sound right. Good thing I didn't say it out loud.

"I'm a whale," she mumbles, looking down at her belly, and she's wrong. She's no whale. She's...very pretty. Cute. "Only six weeks to go, though, so..."

She faces me with a small smile, and I decide a change of topic is in order.

“Hey, did you get the CD I sent you?”

She grins, and we both sit down at the table where Charlie’s reading the paper.

“I did,” she chuckles, “and I can’t believe you added Johnny Cash to the mix.”

“Whoa, what’s wrong with Johnny Cash?” Sure, there’s nothing hard about his music – not in that sense – but that man is still golden. “I’m not sure I can accept you if you don’t like Mr. Cash, missy.”

She smirks. “Oh, there’s nothing wrong with Mr. Cash, but the songs you picked...” She shakes her head. “Those were some lame-ass tunes, man. Too catchy.”

I feel giddy, honestly. I just love talking music with this tiny chick, who is anything but a girly girl, thank God. There’s something about her, and I can’t really pinpoint it. Sometimes I think I know, but then she goes and says something that makes me study and ponder all over. She’s an enigma. She’s a walking contradiction. She likes metal and hard rock, but she’s gentle and sweet. She wears t-shirts with band logos, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen her wear makeup or anything remotely close to black eyeliner, which all the rockers did when I was a kid. The first time she saw the ink I have on my arm – almost a full sleeve – she had this cheesy smile on her face. Which is so different from the reactions I usually get, especially around Kate’s friends.

Bella’s foulmouthed, but her voice is soft. She can throw you wicked smirks, but there’s still something cute and innocent about her, which brings me to the final one. She comes off as innocent, but she’s fifteen years old and eight months pregnant. How innocent could she be?

I shake my head, amused and intrigued. "You're calling 'Ring Of Fire' and 'Cry, Cry, Cry' too catchy?"

"Meh." She shrugs. "If you want a good Cash song, you gotta go with 'Cocaine Blues'."

"Good song," Charlie mutters, eyes still focused on his paper. "I taught my girl well."

Bella and Charlie and exchange quick smiles, and I chuckle.

"So, did you get the CD I sent?" she asks me next.

4.

I nod, grinning, and absentmindedly tap my fingers on my leg. "You nailed it with 'Once Bitten, Twice Shy' by Great White."

She beams. "I know, right? Awesome song. I'll send you a new CD for your birthday in a couple of weeks."

I smile. "You don't have to do that."

"Hey, you only turn twenty-five once. And what's a birthday without good music?"

Touché.

That's pretty much the topic of the morning. We talk music and some pregnancy-related stuff. Since Kate's coming later, we wait on discussing the birth. All we've decided is that Bella and Charlie will drive out to Chicago two weeks before, and then they will stay at a hotel until the baby's here.

It's bittersweet, 'cause we all have a silent understanding about afterward. When they go back home, it's the end of this odd little

friendship we've started. I think it's a pity, but I still understand both Bella and Kate. They're on very good terms as it is now, but Bella doesn't want to grow more attached to the baby since it will only hurt her, and Kate has expressed to me that she wants to be the only mother in our girl's life. Like I said, understandable, because the few times I've met the biological father – Eric Yorkie – I've felt very...uncomfortable, I guess you could say. Thankfully, for selfish reasons, Eric isn't around much.

5.

Hours later, after watching Bella devour three burgers for lunch, she and I are sitting in their living room while Charlie is out to pick up a certain flavor of ice cream that Bella craves.

"She's kicking," I murmur, awed, with one hand splayed over Bella's protruding stomach. I want more, I want closer, but I'm too chicken-shit to ask. I honestly don't think Bella would be okay if I pressed my ear over the baby-bump. Kate's done it – she's even kissed Bella's stomach, and Bella didn't mind – but it's different for me, I think. Don't know why.

"She's a wild one," she agrees softly, chuckling once. "Maybe you should name her after a soccer player."

I grin, eyes still on her exposed skin. Or rather, my hand that is on her skin. "Or maybe after some kick-ass drummer."

"Hmm, I don't know any female drummers. Then again, I always liked boys' names for girls." I smile at that, 'cause there are a few names that I've suggested to Kate – that work for both boys and girls – but Kate didn't really approve. I'm sure we'll find something, though. "Shit, I'm sorry. It's not my place to say what I like."

I furrow my brow and sit back in my seat a little. "Bella, you're entitled to an opinion. Just like my mom calls with countless suggestions, you can do the same."

It's clear that she disagrees. We've entered uncomfortable territory again. Since it's an out-of-state adoption, we don't see each other often, so there can't be too much discomfort, but according to Angela Weber at the agency, these kinds of situations are to be expected. No matter how hard you try, there will be a sense of awkwardness at times.

"Still..." She offers a small shrug and sighs. "It's best that I stay out of it."

6.

After some awkward silence, I manage to get us back on track, and once I suggest a game of names and association, it doesn't take long before we're laughing.

I also think it helps that we're only choosing boys' names.

"Abraham," she giggles.

"After Abraham Lincoln," I state confidently.

She shakes her head. "Abraham Simpson, of course."

This girl, I swear. I snicker. "All right. Um... Oh, I know. Peter."

She hums, tapping her chin. Then her eyes light up. "After Peter the Great?"

"Who? Is that some historical fucker?" I frown. History was never my subject. Abraham Lincoln, sure. I mean, I'm not completely dimwitted, but...eh. Cars, sports, movies, TV shows, ink, and music...that's me.

"Never mind. It's wrong, anyway." I waggle my eyebrows. "I'm obviously talking about Peter Griffin."

"Oh, my God!" she laughs. "You do not wanna name a kid after a character in Family Guy, dude."

I scoff playfully. "But it's okay to name a kid after Gramps in The Simpsons?"

"Of course," she replies nonchalantly. "Okay, my turn. Johnny."

Hmm. "Is that a name, though? I mean, isn't it supposed to be John?"

"No. Johnny."

Right. Of course.

"Johnny Cash," I say. We talked about him earlier, so maybe that's how she thought of the name now.

"Nope!" She grins. "Johnny Knoxville."

Oh, she didn't. "You watch Jackass?" I ask in disbelief. I fucking love that show.

"Duh! I swear, I'm gonna marry Bam one day."

There's just something about this girl.

She's funny as hell.

7.

With quick thinking, we all do our best to recover from a few uncomfortable situations but, apart from a handful of times, the week passes in a flash. Kate and I take Bella and Charlie out for a few dinners, and we meet with Angela at the adoption agency to finalize the plans for the birth in Chicago. There's also plenty of time where Kate is forced to socialize with her family, which leaves me alone with Bella and Charlie, but you won't find me complaining. It's clear that the three of us come

from similar backgrounds, especially Charlie and me, and it's easy to find stuff to talk about. Whether it's sports, cars, music, or fishing...we never stay quiet for long. Even Bella can hold her own, and I swear I thought I was gonna shit my pants when she started talking about a truck she and Charlie are going to restore together before she gets her license. They showed me the truck – a Chevy – out in their garage, and that topic held us out there for hours. I guess I've never thought a chick could be interested in cars and shit, but it's clear that Bella is. She's a classic tomboy, wrapped up in the body of an innocent-looking, sweet girl.

When she's all grown up, she will have men falling at her feet.

I digress.

The week passes quickly, and before I know it, Kate and I are back in Chicago.

Another four weeks later, my knee is bouncing impatiently as I wait for Bella and Charlie to arrive at our apartment. According to Kate – who spoke to them two hours ago – they've settled into the hotel and will be here for dinner soon.

"Edward!" I hear Kate call from the kitchen. "Your mother's on the phone!"

All right.

8.

"Thanks," I mutter, accepting the phone from Kate. She smiles and returns her attention to the stove, and I bring the phone to my ear.

"What's up, Ma?"

"Hey, baby! How are you?"

I smile hugely, 'cause I'm such a mama's boy. Fucking sue me. "It's all good," I respond, walking out of the kitchen. "Bella and Charlie should be here any minute." When I reach the living room, I head straight for the balcony and take out my pack of smokes from my back pocket. "How are you and Dad?"

I can practically hear the wistfulness in her sigh.

She and Dad wanted to be here, but neither could get time off work. They were here last weekend for my birthday, though, so it's all good. But hopefully, they can fly in from Florida in a couple of weeks and be here for the birth. Dad's busy opening another garage – yeah, like father, like son – and Ma's busy, too, working as a NICU nurse in Tampa.

"We're good," she answers quietly. "Just wish we could be there for you." I take a drag from my smoke, knowing what's next. "Um, have you talked to Kate yet about moving to Florida?"

There it is.

9.

I chuckle wryly and exhale smoke through my nose. "You know she wants to stay here, Ma. Her work..."

"But, honey, we have paralegals here in Tampa, too. I'm sure she could find something, and remember what you said? You said that you were only gonna be in Chicago for college."

Good God, the guilt trip. Really, Mom?

"So not cool, woman," I mutter, resting my arm on the railing. My eyes follow, and I watch the new ink I got done a few days ago. I just need a few more and then I'll have my full sleeve. "Things change. You know

that. Now, be nice to your only kid, all right?" I smile. "Besides, Dad would be pissed if he knew what you were doing."

She huffs. "That's what you think. Truth is, your dad's sittin' right next to me."

"Shit, really?" I laugh, taking another pull from my cigarette.

"Uh-huh. He wants you to go into business with him, you know." Ah, yes. That was always the plan – a plan I always loved, to boot. But again, things change. Kate wants to stay in Chicago, and it's not like I hate this city. I have a good job and...stuff... "Didn't you always say you wanted to open your own garage, hmm?"

Yes, but it doesn't matter now. It will happen, just a little later than I planned. Plus, moving is out of the question with a newborn. "Nice try, Ma, but it's not gonna work. We're staying here." For now, at least. "Now, was there anything else?"

"I suppose not." She sighs heavily. "Oh, wait. There's one thing. Have you decided on a name for the baby yet?"

I smirk. "We've narrowed it down to five. Why? Do you have more lists of suggestions coming my way?"

A pause. "Well...you may or may not wanna check your email."

I can't help but laugh. "You're making this harder, Ma!"

"Sorry," she chuckles. "I guess I just don't like the names Chantal and Tiffany."

Fuck, I don't like those names, either. "Don't worry," I say just when I hear the doorbell ring. "I've put my foot down. But, Mom? I gotta go. Bella and Charlie are here."

"Okay, I'll let you go. Love you, honey."

"Love you, too. Bye."

10.

"Oh, I'm so happy that you're here," I hear Kate say when I reach the hallway. She hugs both Charlie and Bella, a big smile on her face. "Was it hard to find?"

"Not really," Charlie responds as they spot me. "Hey there, Edward."

"Hey, man." I grin and shake his hand before turning to Bella. She smiles as I dip down and hug her. "Good to see you again." She murmurs her agreement, and I straighten up, eyes moving to her stomach. Jesus, she's big. I chuckle and splay my hand over her bump. "It's like a belly walking around with Bella," I tease.

She throws me a playful glare and slaps me on the arm. "Gee, thanks. You're so nice, Edward. By the way, is your hairline receding?"

"Shit, girl," I mutter, running a hand through my hair. "That's harsh."

Kate laughs. "You had that coming, Edward." Facing Bella, she adds, "Men, huh? It's okay for them to tease us, but not the other way around."

"Totally," Bella replies, smirking at my scowl.

I shake my head, trying to withhold the smile. It's hard, though. "All right, come on. Let's have dinner."

11.

"Best live album?" I ask, passing Bella the salad bowl. Charlie and Kate snicker, but don't ask me why. "Of all time," I clarify to Bella before shoving a forkful of fries into my mouth.

She hums, thinking for a moment. "Tough choice." I agree. It really is a tough choice, but I always wanna know what's going on inside her head. "A safe pick is always Made in Japan, of course." I grin and nod. Can't go wrong with Deep Purple. Or with Maiden, for that matter. "A Real Live One is also brilliant."

"I was just thinking about Maiden!" I exclaim with my mouth full of food. Shit. How very mature of me. "Sorry." I smile sheepishly at Kate. "It's true, though. Iron Maiden, come on."

She shakes her head in amusement. "You two act like siblings, babe."

What. The. Fuck?

I look down at my plate, frowning.

Like siblings?

Her comment doesn't sit well with me...for some reason.

"Maiden has the best fans," Bella comments, making me look up again. She gives me a small smile – one that I return involuntarily. "Have you seen them live? Dad took me to one of their concerts last year, and it was fucking crazy, I swear."

Charlie grins proudly, and I get it. Teenage pregnancy aside – I'm not one to place blame, anyway – Charlie is an awesome dad to Bella. He's much like my own dad—rough around the edges and a bit foulmouthed, but big-hearted and genuine.

"Oh, I don't doubt that." My smirk is back. "I saw them once when I was a kid. My uncle took me. Which brings us to concerts." I give her a pointed look.

"Hmm, well, I haven't been to that many," she muses, scrunching her nose a little. Cute. "Tell me your favorite first."

No hesitation there. "I have two," I tell her. "Def Leppard back in '95 – they're flawless live, I shit you not." I grin at Bella's envious expression, and I know my next words won't make shit better. "And...Pink Floyd, '94, Miami Gardens – The Division Bell Tour."

"Get the fuck out," she says flatly, and I crack up. "You've seen Pink Floyd?" I nod before chugging down some Coke. "Lucky bastard."

I'm damn smug. "Dad let me tag along. I'll never forget it. I was just two shits high compared to the others, but..." I sigh, remembering. "Awesome show."

"Deep breaths, honey," Charlie laughs quietly, patting Bella on the head. "I wouldn't want you to go into early labor because of Pink Floyd."

I wink at Bella's scowl.

12.

After another dinner with Charlie and Bella, I step out on the balcony and spark up a smoke. They've been here for three days now, only spending time at their hotel to sleep. The rest of the time is spent sightseeing and just taking it easy. Of course, we talk a shitload of music, too, though that will probably stop tomorrow when Kate goes on her leave, and she gets bored with all the music talk.

Shit, it feels weird. In the matter of a week and a half, Kate and I will be parents.

And Bella's going home.

"Yeah," I sigh to myself, exhaling smoke into the night air. That's gonna be hard – to say goodbye to her. She's become a great friend, and I really fucking like that little chick. She's cool for her age. We have a lot in common.

Behind me, I hear the door open, and I look over my shoulder to see Bella stepping out. I smile, both concerned and happy. Happy for what she will give me, and how can I ever thank her properly? The answer is simple: you can't. And...concerned because she's in pain. Her back is killing her, and the little girl in her belly is a kicker.

"Mind if I join you?" she asks, flinching at...something...but when she starts rubbing her spine, I understand that it's her back again. "I could use some fresh air."

"Of course," I say, walking over to where we have two chairs leaning against the wall. "Come here." I fold out one of the chairs for her. "Is this okay?"

She smiles gratefully and nods. "Definitely. Thanks."

"No problem," I mumble, taking a drag from my smoke. I make sure to put some distance between us again, not wanting her to be around the smoke. "Anything I can do for you?" I ask and sit down with my back against the wall. I pull up my knees, resting my arms on them.

"No, it's okay," she sighs.

Silence.

"Hey, can I ask you something?" I ask, and it's a question that's been on my mind for months.

"You just did." She smirks, the cheeky little thing. "But sure."

I take a final drag from the cigarette before flicking it over the railing.

"Why did you pick Kate and me?"

13.

She blinks. "Um..."

"You don't have to answer," I rush to say. "I'm just curious."

"No, no, it's okay. You just took me by surprise." She lets out a breath.

"Uh, Dad helped me. It was pretty overwhelming to look at all those papers, and...I had no idea what made good parents, you know?" I nod, smiling carefully. "I just knew that I liked how my dad raised me." I can see that. Charlie has done an amazing job with Bella, and he's a single father, to boot. He's a man I've come to look up to. "So, I basically told Dad this," she chuckles, "and he's a practical man. He just told me that I shouldn't look for wealth or fancy jobs. That's not what makes a good parent, and that's why I didn't go with doctors or professors." She shrugs. "I wanted two people who weren't working all the time. Two people who wanted to become parents above anything else..." She trails off, staring into space.

I swallow hard, so damn conflicted. Torn in between happiness for myself and sadness for Bella. Because she's not unaffected. There's pain in her eyes, and it makes me feel like a selfish prick. Not that I'm afraid Bella's going to change her mind, 'cause I can see that she won't. She's still only fifteen years old. Having a baby now won't be a decision for herself – it would be for the child, and maybe it wouldn't be the best choice. Instead, she's doing the most selfless thing she could ever do: she's giving her child what she can't give it herself.

14.

I can only hope I live up to Bella's hopes and expectations.

I know Kate will make a great mom, and if Bella likes Charlie's ways, then I hope she will approve of mine, too, since I see many similarities between the two of us.

"We're moving, by the way," she says quietly, and I look at her, confused. She smiles ruefully. "I need a fresh start. Away from Washington. And Dad landed a job in a small town- Well, it's small compared to Seattle. It's in Flo- Oh, shit!" She clutches her stomach, and I'm on my feet in a flash, hurrying over to her.

"Bella, are you okay?" I ask worriedly as I cover her hand with mine. I squat down in front of her. She flinches and grimaces at the pain, and when she grips my hand, it's a hard fucking grip. Holy shit, the girl has some strength. "Honey, talk to me. Is it the baby? Your back?"

"I'm fine," she grits out. "She just happens to love her foot on my ribs. Damn." I feel terrible, 'cause I can't help but smile at her stomach. I keep it small and hidden from Bella, but the smile is still very there. "Oh, wipe that fucking smile off your face, Cullen. I swear to God..." Okay, so maybe it wasn't all that hidden.

"I'm so sorry," I murmur, looking up her with an apologetic smile.

My smile, though apologetic and full of remorse, is also gone then, this time when something wet hits my foot.

Looking down, I frown.

The hell?

"Oh, God," I hear her groan. "I think my water just broke, man."

15.

The next eighteen hours are a blur.

Once we get Bella to the hospital, we wait, talk to Angela, wait some more, check in on Bella's progress, call our families, and...we wait. Kate is still a bit annoyed that Bella only wanted Charlie with her in the delivery room, but I can't blame Bella for that. She's already giving us her child, for chrissakes. So, I use some time to make Kate understand, not that I'm sure it helps.

Since it's almost two weeks early, I'm not surprised when Mom and Dad regretfully tell me that they can't come yet. They're already taking time off to visit in two weeks, and they can't change their schedules. It's okay, though. I'll see them soon.

I also call my boss about the news, and he tells me to relax and just return to work in a few weeks. Jason, my boss at Dawn Auto Service, has four kids himself, so he knows how it is.

So, that's where we are now. Calls have been made, and we're just waiting. All we know is that Bella is nine centimeters dilated – Charlie reports to us frequently – which means it's almost time. I smile a little when he tells us that, according to his daughter, the epidural is "the shit". Kate frowns and wonders why the epidural isn't working, and I explain to her that "the shit" means that it's definitely working. It pretty much means that Bella's high as a kite right now.

I wish I could see it.

A few moments later, Charlie comes out again and says, "It's time," before disappearing again.

Shit.

It's time.

I'll have a daughter soon.

If someone told me three years ago that I'd be a dad...

I would've laughed.

16.

I was only twenty-one when Kate told me that she wanted to have a baby, but since she was twenty-seven, I understood her, of course. Anyway, it didn't take that long for me to just say, "Sure, let's go for it". I mean, I've always liked kids, so it didn't really matter to me that I was only twenty-one. However, nothing happened, and after a year of trying, Kate approached me about adoption.

She didn't want to go through tests, for fear that it was something wrong with her, and she just really wanted a child. At that time, she was twenty-eight and scared shitless of the big thirty. Ridiculous, I know. But whatever, I just went along for the ride, 'cause my cousin is adopted, and I think it's a wonderful option. There are so many children out there in need of parents, so...yeah.

My only stipulation was that we'd go with an open adoption, meaning that we get to know the birth parents. Bella and Eric in this case, though Eric's pretty much out of the picture. And Kate agreed with one condition: that we went with an out-of-state adoption. It was sort of a compromise, since she didn't really want to get to know the birth parents in the first place. But I wanted it because my dad's sister went that route, and she could answer my cousin when he one day asked why his "real" mother didn't want him. Jasper – my cousin – found out that it was what was best for him, because his biological parents were drug addicts and couldn't provide for their son, hence giving him up to my aunt and uncle.

One day, Kate and I will be able to tell our daughter that her birth mother gave her up, not because she didn't want her, but because she was too young to consider herself a good parent.

To me, that beats the hell out of having to say, "I don't know why," when our child asks.

Just my opinion, though.

17.

"We should settle on a name," Kate sighs.

She's right.

Shifting in her chair, she faces me fully and smiles softly. "I have a few new suggestions."

I grin wryly. "No Chantal or Tiffany this time, I hope."

Maybe there's something wrong with me, but I'm not looking for a princess. I'm not into pink or Barbie. I'll cherish that little girl as if she were a princess, but I don't like girls who are constantly afraid that their nail polish is gonna peel off if they give someone a goddamn handshake.

"Hey, I happen to like those names," she says, giving my arm a playful swat. I shrug. "All right. The only thing we have so far is a last name."

Yeah. Cullen, which Kate actually wasn't totally on board with at first. When we get married, eventually, she plans on hyphenating, and I don't mind, but I want my daughter to have my name. It doesn't make sense for her to be an Adams.

"I like Josephine," she says quietly, hopefully. "Plus, it's your grandmother's name, so...there's that, too."

Josephine.

"It was actually on one of Esme's lists," she adds.

I rub my jaw, thinking, thinking, thinking. It's better than the other names she's suggested, and...

Josie. Jo.

I don't like too girly names, but this one could work.

"I'm not naming her Riley or Jaymes, Edward," huffs. "Or the other boys' names you came up with."

I shrug again.

Josie Cullen. Jo Cullen. Josephine.

"Can I decide a middle name, then?" I'm ready to bargain, even though I actually like the name Josephine. "It's only fair," I point out.

She shakes her head in amusement. "Fine. Does that mean we agree on Josephine?"

"Yes."

18.

Hours later, an exhausted Charlie joins us in the waiting room.

Even though we already knew, he says, "It's a girl."

Kinda feels like my heart stops, resets, and starts again.

Like it's beating for a new reason.

"Ten fingers, ten toes..." He smiles tiredly.

Kate grabs my hand.

Thump, thump, thump, thump.

I'm a dad.

"How's Bella?" I ask just as Kate asks, "Where's the baby?"

Charlie gives me a small smile. "She's resting." And I know that he's leaving many things unsaid. "As for the baby..." He clears his throat. I see his eyes glistening. "The nurses took her to that room, um...where all other babies are? Yeah, there."

I breathe.

Standing up, Kate tells us that she's gonna visit the baby.

I glance at Charlie, suddenly very aware that my time with Bella is running out.

"You can see her when she's rested a while," he says quietly, as if he's reading my mind. "Go see your...your daughter."

Jesus Christ.

19.

"Holy fuck, she's beautiful," I murmur, eyes glued to the little bundle behind the window. She's on the first row, surrounded by so many plastic cribs, but from the moment I saw "Baby Cullen", I haven't looked away. "She's so tiny." Like really fucking tiny. She's smaller than the rest of 'em.

"She's so cute," Kate whispers.

I smile and drape an arm around her, kissing her temple before I go back to staring at the little girl whom I already love.

My fingers itch to hold her, to be closer, to at least be in the same room with her.

Soon.

“How does it feel to be a daddy?”

I let out a breathy chuckle.

It’s surreal.

It’s amazing.

It’s terrifying.

It’s unbelievable.

In a way, I don’t understand how I can love that girl so much already.

Then, in another way, I understand it perfectly.

About thirty minutes later – after a nurse has shown us into a room – I understand it even better as I hold the little one for the first time.

God, she’s so small.

Gorgeous.

She...she looks like her mothe- like...like Bella.

I sigh.

Her hair is a bit lighter than Bella’s, but other than that...she’s all Bella, for which I’m glad. Eric Yorkie is a linebacker, bulky and tall, so I’m pretty stoked about not seeing him in the baby girl.

“My turn,” Kate says.

20.

When I reach Bella’s hospital room, Charlie is just walking out.

He gives me the same tired smile he gave me earlier.

"Can I see her?" I ask anxiously.

I don't know how long I have.

Is this the last time I'll see her?

I'm supposed to have ten more days.

"Yeah," he says, clearing his throat. "I was just on my way to find you."

I nod, relieved, and he opens the door and mutters, "I'm gonna grab some coffee in the cafeteria."

And I know that he's giving us privacy.

'Cause nobody likes hospital coffee.

Entering the room, I immediately spot Bella in the bed. Her eyes are closed, but I can tell that she's not sleeping.

I can tell by the tears streaming down her face.

Fuck.

"Bella?"

Her eyes flash open, and she hurries to wipe her cheeks. "Hi," she croaks.

My eyes water as I make my way to the chair next to her bed.

It's uncomfortable.

Something is nagging at me, but I don't know what. A voice, whispering, in the back of my mind.

I don't ask her how she is as I take my seat, 'cause I already know.

Instead I just grab her hand and squeeze it gently, hoping she can see what I feel at this moment. The gratitude, the bliss, the discomfort, the wistfulness, the sadness, all the emotions. Christ, this is hard. I thread our fingers together, keeping my eyes on our joined hands. What can I say?

"You'll be the best dad, Edward," she whispers, and I have to blink back tears.

Why does it sound like she's saying goodbye already?

21.

"Bella," I choke out, slowly shaking my head. I refrain from looking her in the eye, 'cause I know I'll cry like a kid if I do. She may be only fifteen – for a couple more months – but I've found an awesome friend in her.

Deep breaths.

"Did you see her?" I ask quietly, still watching our hands.

In my periphery, I see her shaking her head and looking away. "I couldn't," she breathes out. "It would just..." She trails off, but I know the end of that sentence anyway. It would just hurt more.

A part of me is dying to ask her how she can possibly give up the little angel two floors up, but I won't do that for so many reasons. One, I know that Bella would keep her daughter if she thought she could – if she could provide for her and be there for her. Two, it would be damn tactless to ask a question like that. Three, she's...I mean...that little girl...she's mine already. Still, something feels terribly wrong.

"Did you and Kate settle on a name?" she whispers.

I nod once, quickly, my eyes fixed on my thumb which is brushing over the soft skin on her hand. She knows that Kate and I have been bickering back and forth about a name we both love.

"Can I tell you?" I mumble, already expecting her to decline.

"Edward," she whimpers, making me look up. Fuck. I swallow hard, caught in her pain. "I..." She sniffles and squeezes my hand. "Don't. I can't."

Overcome with emotion, I screw my eyes shut and drop my forehead to our hands.

22.

Keeping our hands threaded together, I lift my head to look her in the eye. "Who's gonna fight me about who the best drummer is?" I ask, chuckling and wiping away my tears at the same time. Fucking hell, I never thought it was gonna be this hard.

She cracks a miniscule smile and sniffles before speaking. "We both know it's Mike Portnoy from Dream Theater."

I sigh, feeling my eyes sting all over again.

Clearing my throat, I offer a shake of my head. "Don't even start. It's Neil Peart from Rush."

"Pshh." She waves me off, playing cool. "Overrated, man."

Instead of grinning like a fool, I can only muster a weak smile.

"I'm gonna miss this," I admit quietly. "Bella, I'm gonna miss you."

She gives me a pained look. "Don't do this. Please."

Fine. I avert my eyes.

.

.

When I hear her quiet cries, I'm out of the chair.

I lean over her small form on the bed and hug her to me, unable to bear it – her pain, her cries. I end up sitting on the edge of the bed, holding her tightly. Her face is buried in the crook of my neck, and when I feel the tears on my skin, I have to squeeze my eyes shut to prevent my own tears from falling. This is goodbye. I can feel it, and it's fucking killing me.

"Take care of her, okay?" she whimpers.

Jesus.

I choke up completely, so I can only nod in response.

I promise, Bella.

Cradling her face, I make her look at me. I smile sadly, weakly, pathetically, and tuck a piece of hair behind her ear.

Closer.

Forehead to forehead.

Fuck, my heart hurts.

"You're an amazing girl, Bella," I whisper thickly and brush my thumbs under her eyes.

She smiles softly, eyes brimming with tears, but says nothing.

Despite the evident heartbreak in her features, I have to admit that she's incredibly beautiful.

"Will I see you tomorrow?" I ask hoarsely.

The look in her eyes tells me everything.

"Fuck," I breathe out, backing away slightly. I thread our fingers together again and look down.

"Send in Kate, will you?" she asks softly. "I want to say goodbye to her, too."

This is really it, isn't it?

"Sure," I mumble.



23.

Eight years later...

After living in Tampa for six years, it's time to head north.

I don the Ray-Bans and open the door for Josie. I grin. "Get in, baby."

She giggles and mirrors my move with her own shades.

The dark red metal shines in the sun on my beloved '69 Camaro.

Perfectly restored.

It's a good day.

"Call us when you get there, honey," Mom says, sniffing. Nah, she's not all that excited about our leaving, but when Dad told me he was opening a garage outside of Jacksonville, I knew it was mine before he even asked me. Not that the garage I ran here in Tampa wasn't awesome, but it's time to move on. I'm ready for more. Plus, Jasper's waiting for us in Lakeside – the town we'll call home from now on. It'll be good for my girl, too, since Jazz has a daughter of his own, though Callie's only six.

"I promise," I tell Mom.

Even though I just turned thirty-three, she likes to baby me, much to Jo's amusement.

"Bye, Nana!" Jo calls, waving frantically. "I'll take care of Dad, I swear!"

I laugh through my nose and slide into my seat. Crazy fucking girl, that one. "Pretty sure it's the other way around, kiddo."

She snorts. "Yeah, right. Yanking my chain, Dad? For instance, you can't cook for shit."

Smartass. I can cook just fine. "Watch your mouth," I chuckle, and Mom just shakes her head. "All right," I sigh, leaning out the window. "I'll talk to you tonight, Ma."

"Drive safe," she says with a nod.

"Always do," I respond, and with a two-finger wave, we're off.

24.

"We need music, baby," I say, turning onto the freeway.

She groans. "Ugh, Dad. I've told you not to call me 'baby' anymore." She gives me "the look", which I can plainly see in the rearview mirror. The one that tells me she's boss. I can only grin. "I'm eight now, remember?"

Oh, I'm aware.

"Just pick something, will ya?" I chuckle. "My case is here in glove compartment, and yours should be in the bag behind my seat...on the floor, I think."

It doesn't really matter which one she picks, 'cause we share the same taste in music.

"I want the CDs I got for my birthday," she decides, grunting a little as she reaches across the seats in the back. I give her a glance in the rearview, sighing when I notice that she's not wearing her seatbelt. "Fuck, I can't reach it."

"Language, kid," I remind her. "And if you can't reach it, let me do it. Now, sit back and put your goddamn seatbelt on."

She huffs and plops back in her seat. "Language, Dad," she mimics with a smirk.

Cheeky little shit. God knows I love her to death, but the day I find grey hairs, I will blame her. She's too witty for her age, and it's becoming hard to keep up. She's smart as hell, big-hearted and genuine. Very opinionated. There's not a selfish bone in her, and on her first day in school, she kicked a boy in the nuts because he was bullying another boy. "I hit where it hurts! Remember that, munchkin!" she had shouted at the boy...according to the principal. Now, how the fuck can I be mad at her for that? She's perfection personified in my book. A cool little tomboy. Though, she very much looks like a girl, of course. Long hair, light brown

with streaks of dark brown and red, dark brown eyes with flecks of gold, fair skin...

She dresses in denim shorts and t-shirts with band logos. She loves her little collection of Chucks, and she can't survive without her classic Ray-Bans or aviators. Her hair always goes into a messy ponytail, and when she uses nail polish, it's dark blue or some crazy fucking color like neon yellow.

She hates pink. Never played with Barbie – and not because they weren't available. Mom bought her so much girly shit when we first moved down to Florida, but Jo never cared. She was busy with her LEGOs. And when she got a little older, she fell in love with my old Transformers and my baseball card collection. She collects her own baseball cards today and can get into heated debates about her crush – Derek Fucking Jeter.

Her favorite pastime is to hang out in my garage after school and spend time with her coloring books while I work.

We talk music and movies. Unfortunately, she's a hardcore fan of High School Musical, but it's nothing I can't live with.

She's my sweetheart, my kiddo, my baby, my spitfire.

My Josie Belle Cullen.

25.

"Time to change," Jo announces when we've listened to Aerosmith's Big Ones twice. "I'm thinking...Def Leppard." She taps me on the shoulder with a CD case.

I grin to myself and grab the case from her before dropping a kiss on the top of her hand. "You got it."

She giggles and wipes her hand off on my Dokken t-shirt. "Oh, Dad. Why are you always kissing my hand?"

I chuckle and switch lanes. "Because I love you, of course."

"I love you, too, but you don't have to slobber all over my hand," she says matter-of-factly, which causes me to bark out a laugh. "Now, put on the music. Mirror Ball. The best live album ever. I'm telling you."

My smile falls a little.

"Best live album? Of all time."

"Tough choice... A safe pick is always Made in Japan, of course. A Real Live One is also brilliant."

"I was just thinking about Maiden!"

I shake my head, clearing it.

With my daughter's personality and looks, it's virtually impossible not to think about the girl who gave birth to her eight years ago.

I miss her.

"Dad, you're mopey again. And I'm starving. You should do something about that."

I can't help but laugh. "Yes, ma'am. We'll find a diner."

26.

"You've got some ketchup on your chin, baby," I say, handing her a napkin.

She grimaces and wipes her chin and then returns to devouring her hamburger.

"So, are you excited about living close to Callie?"

They're second cousins, what with Jazz and me being first cousins and all, but they act like sisters when they get together.

That's not always a good thing for Jasper and me.

"Yes, it's gonna be so fun," she gushes. I smile at the way her eyes light up. "It's about time I see her room, you know? 'Cause she's always been the one visiting us."

True. The last time we were in Lakeside was before Jasper and Maria got divorced. They lived in another house back then, and I'm surprised Jo can even remember since that was about four or five years ago. After the divorce, Jasper opted to visit Tampa whenever it was time for a get-together.

"Will I go the same school as Callie, Daddy?"

Daddy. It's not often she calls me that anymore, so when she does, I revel in it. Damn kid is growing up too fast.

"Yeah, you will." I wipe my mouth, done with my meal. "She's starting first grade, and you're starting second." Callie will start a year early, but that's just perfect. It means she'll be close with Jo. "Your uncle has signed both you and Callie up for swimming lessons this summer, by the way, and you'll be in the same group there." Jazz and I have been conspired against many times since Josie and Callie got the hang of using Skype. One puppy-dog look is deadly by itself, but two... A father doesn't stand a chance. Luckily, swimming lessons are a good thing, especially since this is in the ocean, and I want Jo to know how to play it safe, so...

"Sweet!" she cries out, fist pumping the air. "Ohmygosh, I'm gonna kick ass-!" I clear my throat loudly and give her a pointed look. "Um, butt. I'm gonna kick butt. That's what I meant to say, I swear."

"Sure you did, honey." I shake my head in amusement. "Now, eat up so we can get back on the road."

"Yes, Sir!" She's all but vibrating with excitement. "This is so frickin' awesome, Dad. Did Uncle Jazz tell you if Ms. Brandon is our teacher or not?"

I furrow my brow. "How do you know about Ms. Brandon?"

An Alice Brandon is, in fact, the girls' swim instructor, but I don't understand how that's important, or how Jo knew her name already.

"In kindergarten, Ms. Brandon was Callie's sust- supst- supitut"

I smile. "Substitute."

"Yeah, that." She nods. "For a whole week. She said Ms. Brandon's nice. She also told me that Uncle Jazz wants to bone Ms. Brandon. Whatever that means."

My eyes bug out.

Damn you, Jazz!

27.

After another hour and a half on the road – with Josie singing "Let's Get Rocked" at the top of her lungs over and over – we finally pull in to our new house in Lakeside. It's modest but perfect for us. One bedroom for me, one for her, a living room, kitchen, laundry room, two baths, and a generous-sized backyard, perfect for barbecues and a small pool for Jo.

Since Jazz lives on the same street, I didn't have to drive up here to look at our house. His looks the same, so photos and videos were enough for me to close the deal. And Jasper took care of everything with the Realtor and made sure there was nothing wrong with the house.

“Come on, shortie,” I say, leaving the car. “Time to check out our new home.”

With Jasper on the receiving end, I was able to ship all the furniture here last week, so all we have to do now is get settled, which I’ve put aside one week for. Then, next week, Josie starts her swimming lessons, and while she’s there, I will run my errands and do paperwork. We don’t open the new garage officially until early August, but there’s a lot to do before then. And as much as I love having Jo with me at work, she sometimes acts as if she’s on crack, and that’s not optimal when I try to score deals with moving companies and the like. So, I’m pretty stoked about the two hours every weekday she’ll spend learning how to swim. It’s only for six weeks, but hopefully it’ll be enough.

And speaking of moving companies, I need to call a Royce King tomorrow. He owns a company with his sister – Rosalie King – in Jacksonville, and the two are looking for a new auto shop where they can send their trucks for service. Apparently, they’re not satisfied with the deal they have with their current partner, which I happen to know is Black’s Wheels. They have four shops in the state – all of them located around Jacksonville – and one of them is actually here in Lakeside, though this one in Lakeside isn’t the one King Movers use.

Cullen Auto is here now, and we’re gonna drive Black’s Wheels outta town.

28.

Aside from the successful meeting I have with Royce and Rosalie King, I spend the next few days in our new house. Jasper’s taken the week off, so he and Callie are with us, which is nice. While the girls either unpack Jo’s room or play in the backyard, Jazz and I catch up and move around furniture. Currently, though, we’re standing in the backyard getting the grill ready for some burgers. Dinner time, ya know.

"You remember that guy I told you about? Emmett?" Jazz asks as I check the coals, and I nod, vaguely recalling the name. Jasper's eager for me to meet his buddies, but I'm in no rush. Plus, I want the Blacks to be surprised when one day they see the Cullen Auto sign outside our new property. Not that we're fuckin' celebrities, but with seventeen garages in the state of Florida, the Blacks certainly know about the Cullens. And if it gets out that a Cullen has moved to this little town, they're bound to grow suspicious.

"Was that your friend who owned a bar or something?" I ask, referring to that Emmett guy.

"Exactly." He nods. "Anyway, I spoke to him yesterday, and he told me to tell you that McCarty Dealership – Emmett's dad's company – could use a hand." I frown, wondering where he's going with this. Thankfully, Jasper clarifies. "Em's old man owns a company that buys old cars, restores them, and then sells them for a pretty penny."

I chuckle. "Um, okay. Well, give Emmett my card. You have it, right?"

"Yep. And you still want your arrival not to get out?"

"Pretty much, so let Emmett know that his dad can call me but not to let anyone know that we're here yet."

He snickers and shakes his head. "What is it with you and the Blacks?" I give him a pointed look. "Okay, okay, it's not so much you. But Carlisle; what's his problem with the Blacks?"

I shrug. "It was back in the day. Dad and the old owner of Black's Wheels were friends while they both worked to start up their businesses. You know how it goes when friendships and business clash."

From what Dad's told me, he was striking a deal with some huge trucking company when Black – Billy, I think his name was – swooped in, spread some lies about Dad's business, and then took the deal from him.

Safe to say, their friendship was over after that. Much to Dad's joy, though, the Blacks' business is not as successful as his. Not by a long shot. Anyway, Dad wanted me to be in charge of this shop, 'cause he knows I can be pretty damn cutthroat. I'm a competitive bastard, so you won't find me complaining about being here.

29.

A little later, the burgers are ready and Jasper heads inside to get the girls.

It doesn't take long before I hear them stomping down the stairs, shouting, "Dinner! Yay!"

"Wash your hands," I remind them just as they come outside, which makes them walk back in. I snicker as they harrumph, but I know that – despite Jo's tomboy personality – she loves to use truckloads of glitter and sparkly rhinestones when she colors, and I don't want that shit on my burger.

My little Glitterface.

Grabbing two beers from the cooler, I take my place at the table where Jazz and I have set up dinner. He joins me seconds later, asking me what my plans are when it comes to hiring people. I've told him I need two more mechanics and one to deal with the paperwork and crunch numbers. Which is why I believe he asked in the first place, 'cause my dear old cousin– Okay, not old; he's only a year older than I...

I digress.

He's an accountant.

"Looking for a new job?" I smirk.

"I am, actually," he says with a wry grin.

Well, then. "Consider yourself hired."

There. Done. Now I just need two mechanics.

"Dad, Daddy, Father, Padre! My hands are clean! Look!" And two hands are thrust in my face.

"Um, I can see that," I chuckle and grab her hands, kissing them both before I let go. No "slobbering" this time. "Take a seat, crazy girl of mine; I'll fix your burger."

"Dad makes the best burgers," Jo tells Callie, always in her matter-of-fact kind of way. Fuckin' cutie.

"Didn't you recently say that I can't cook for shit, kiddo?" I ask, arching a brow at her.

"Pshhh." She waves me off, looking awfully a lot like...never mind. "That was ages ago, Dad."

It was five days ago.

Anyway...Josie's burger. Extra ketchup, extra cheese, no tomatoes, extra pickles...

"Are you two excited for Monday?" Jasper asks them as he prepares Callie's burger. Whereas my daughter is loud and fucking insane, Callie is pretty mellow. Still, for some reason, the two mesh well. Don't let Callie's blond hair, bright blue eyes, and soft voice fool ya, though. She can curse

just like Jo. And I know that her mother – Maria, who has her every other weekend – hates that.

“It’s gonna be so fun, Daddy,” Callie says sweetly.

“Yes, we’re goin’ swimming!” Josie exclaims. “Damn, I can’t wait. I’m telling you.”

“Josie Belle Cullen, for God’s sake,” I say, agitated. “Grownup words, remember?”

She scrunches her nose. “But you said that I’m a big girl now. And, by the way, what does the big guy upstairs have to do with anything?”

Uh. Yeah, well. I mean. Er. You know. “Fuck it,” I mutter. “Here’s your burger.”

30.

As soon as we reach the beach in...well, in Atlantic Beach, Josie is ready to explode with excitement. It’s in the nick of time that I manage to reach back and grab her arm before she darts out of the car. Of course, she’s already seen Jazz’s car, which is parked right next to us.

The hour-long drive – and that’s one way, people – is supposedly worth it according to Jasper, but I’m not convinced yet. He says this beach is the calmest and the best, and that Alice Brandon is the best swim instructor... Yeah, I think it’s his crush speaking there. I still don’t have the full story on that one, but he’ll talk when he’s ready. And, in the meantime, I guess I’m driving two hours every day for “the best swim instructor in the Jacksonville area”.

“Remember what we talked about?”

She groans. “Yes, I remember, Dad! Now, lemme go.”

"Uh-uh." I shake my head. "Tell me."

"Fine!" She starts counting on her fingers. "One, no running away. Two, I gotta listen to Ms. Brandon. Three, I won't go into the ocean – never alone, and only when Ms. Brandon says I can."

I nod and smile. "Good. Now we can go."

She wastes no time, that girl.

By the time I've taken her bag from the trunk, she and Callie are already talking animatedly about their first lesson.

The girls changed into their swimsuits before we left home, and apart from their shorts and t-shirts, they're ready to jump into the water. Jasper is also dressed for the beach: black board shorts and a white beater, but...me, on the other hand...well, I'm unfortunately dressed for work. Jeans, Docs, and a black Cullen Auto t-shirt, which means it's hot as hell. Luckily, I brought extra clothes that I will change into after my meetings in Jacksonville.

"I'll be back in two hours," I tell Jazz, handing over Josie's backpack.

"There's water, two towels, some fruit, and a Coke in there. Keep it in the shade, will ya?" He nods. "Oh, right. I've already applied sunscreen, but I packed the bottle in case more is needed."

Another nod. "Got it."

"Hey, Josie!" I call. Her eyes snap to mine before she runs over. "I'm gonna go. And you'll behave, yeah? This is different from being in a pool."

"I know, Dad," she says as I squat down in front of her. "Love you."

"Love you, too, sweetheart," I murmur, followed by an Eskimo kiss. "I don't have any meetings tomorrow, so I promise I'll be here to watch you then."

She smiles widely. "Cool. See ya in two hours. Don't be late."

"I won't," I chuckle.

31.

Josie's POV

As soon as Dad's gone, I turn to Uncle Jazz and Callie. "C'mon! I don't wanna be late."

The sand is, like, wicked hot, so I'm glad I have my flip-flops.

"Are all those kids swimming, Daddy?" Callie asks Uncle J as we walk. She's pointing at a gazillion kiddos. Or twenty. But shit, man. Twenty kids and only one teacher? Uh-oh. Dad's not gonna fly with that. He's like, super protective of me.

"Yeah, it looks like it, sweetie," Uncle J says back. "I spoke to Alice last night, and there will be twenty-three children and three instructors."

Huh.

I slide down my flyators. Or aviationers...or whatever my shades are called...ugh. I slide them down my nose, ya know? And I check the crowd for other grownups, but I can't see any. Maybe they're little people. Like Oompa-Loompas.

Dad laughed so hard when we saw Charlie and the Chocolate Factory together.

I love my old man. He's seriously the coolest man on the planet. He's funny as hell. And he thinks I'm funny, too. He even got the first knock-knock joke I ever told him tattooed on his arm. It's awesome. His arm, I mean. There's so much ink, ya know. Things that mean lots to him. A lot of music – like, Eddie, for example, who is Iron Maiden's mascot – and instruments, his Camaro, stars, my footprint from when I was a baby, and...um, other stuff. Dates, names, numbers... I'm telling you, his arm is covered. There are plenty of words, too. Oh, and he has my name inked above his heart.

"So, do you still wanna bone Ms. Brandon, Uncle Jazz?" I ask as we get closer to the group.

"Josephine!" he cries out, choking on air or saliva or something. Gross. "Where have you heard that?"

I give him the scowl I've seen on Daddy. It's very scowly. "Don't call me that, I'm telling you, hombre."

I heard that word on CSI: Miami, just...for your information. Hombre, I mean.

Oh, and I don't like my real name. It's so boring and just ugh.

It's Josie or Jo.

"And I heard it from Callie, who heard it from you," I tell him. "So, doooo ya? Wanna bone her, that is."

His eyes get all big. "Josie, sweetie, don't use that word, okay? Especially not in front of your dad."

I put my hands on my hips and look up at him. "What does it mean, anyway?"

He thinks about it for a minute and then smiles. "It means I wanna take her out for ice cream."

Um. That does not make sense. Not at all. But...he's a grownup. What he says goes.

So... "Callie, wanna bone later?"

"Sure!" she giggles.

Uncle J lets out a weird sound. As if someone's strangling him, but no one is, so Callie and I just leave him there

With my uncle trailing behind, we walk up to the grownup Callie points out as Ms. Brandon, and I'm like...well, I figured since there's only one grownup here. So far, anyway.

"Ms. Brandon," I say when we reach her. She turns in our direction and looks down at us with this really big smile. "How ya doin'?" I'm Jo Cullen and this one's Callie Whitlock, but you remember her, I think. We're gonna swim with you."

Ms. Brandon chuckles and looks at something behind me – Uncle Jazz, I'm pretty sure – and then back at us. "Well, it's very nice to meet you, Jo. And you're right, I do remember Callie." She smiles at my cousin. "So good to see you again, sweetie."

"You, too," Callie says, all shy and stuff.

And then Uncle Jazz swoops in and the two grownups start to talk. Ms. Brandon looks like she's got something in her eyes and my uncle looks like he's trying to be cool. It's not working, I'm telling you. Only my dad can be cool.

"We're just waiting for my three assistants," Ms. Brandon is saying. "Two of them – Bree Tanner and Claire Ateara – are my usual helpers." She's still fluttering her eyelashes a lot. Weird grownup. "But since so many signed up, I've asked one of the other instructors to help us. A friend of mine. She usually works on weekends. Anyway, her name is Isabella Call. So, yeah. We'll definitely be able to keep them all safe. Don't worry, Mr. Whitlock."

"Oh, please. It's Jasper, darlin'."

Ms. Brandon giggles and turns all red in the face.

I tune out, 'cause that shit's boring.

32.

Josie's POV

"Okay, I can see Bella and Claire over there," Ms. Brandon says to Uncle J, and then she turns to the group of waiting kiddos. "Listen up, everyone! I'm going to call your name and you say 'here' when you hear it, all right?"

"Sure," I say, shrugging. The others say similar stuff.

She starts calling names and since my last name begins with C, it doesn't take long before she says... "Josephine Cullen."

Rawr! "It's Josie or Jo, and I'm right here," I grumble.

By the time Ms. Brandon gets to Callie's last name, two other grownups have joined us.

One of them has a Def Leppard t-shirt. That's cool. She also has some tattoo on her thigh, but it disappears where her shorts begin, so I can't see much of it.

And then Ms. Brandon introduces Ms. Call and Ms. Ate...Atea...something.

"But you can all call us Alice, Claire, and Bella. And Bree should be here any minute," she adds, and I'm like...that's weird.

She, the one with the Def Leppard shirt, has the same name as my real mom.

At least that's what Dad says. He told me when I was little. Like...five or something. Bella Duck or Swan or some other bird.

I asked why I didn't have a mom, and I don't remember, um, that other one. Kate, I think her name was. But anyway, he told me that I did have a mom, but that she was too young to take care of me. She loved me but wanted better for me...or something. And that's how I ended up with Dad.

Both Dad and Nana have explained shit to me after that, but it doesn't matter. Dad is Dad, ya know?

And now it's time to swim!

I fucking love the water, I'm telling you.

Ms. Brand- er, I mean Alice...yeah, she tells us to team up two and two, so I quickly grab Callie's hand. Then we're split into four teams. Callie and I – and two boys named Jared and Collin, and one girl named Jessica who didn't find a partner – are told to go with Bella.

I hope she's as nice as Alice.

"All right, come with me, kids," Bella says, smiling, and then she leads us down the beach. Looking over my shoulder, I see Uncle Jazz and a few other parents following a little, like they wanna watch their kids. Which my dad is gonna do tomorrow! Shit, I wanna impress him.

"Let's all take a seat here, okay?" Bella grins and plops down on her butt. But there's a big blanket, so it's okay. The sand won't burn my skin off. "I thought we could get to know each other real quick first." Uh. Lady, I'm here to swim, not chit-chat. "How about we go 'round the circle?" she suggest as we all sit down. "Tell me your name, age, where you're from, and favorite animal that lives in the ocean."

Okay, I can do that! I love dolphins and turtles. And one time, when Dad took me to the aquarium in Tampa, I saw seahorses. Wicked cool.

"I'll go first," she says. "My name is Bella Call, I'll be twenty-four in September, I've lived here in Atlantic Beach since I was sixteen, and my favorite animal that lives in the ocean is the clown fish."

"That's like Nemo!" one of the boys says, and Bella chuckles and nods.

"That's right. And now it's your turn."

The boy – Jared – tells us some shit. We're all in the same age, sorta. Six to nine. Dad told me, so I already know. Whatever. After Jared comes Collin, and then Callie.

"My name is Callie Whitlock," my cousin says quietly. "I'm six years old and I live with my daddy in...in..." I lean in and whisper Lakeside in her ear. "We live in Lakeside," she says, nodding. "Mommy also lives there, but not in the same house. And my favorite animal is dolphin. They're so pretty."

Bella smiles and faces me, 'cause it's my turn before Jessica. "Your turn," she tells me.

33.

Josie's POV

I take a breath, and then I go. "My name is Josie Cullen, I just turned eight years old, I'm from Tampa, but Dad and I moved here last week. But Dad told me I was born in Chicago. And Callie is my cousin, 'cause our dads are cousins," I add. Muy importante stuff. "My favorite animal is dolphin. Or turtle. Or seahorse. I'm not sure."

Bella opens her mouth and closes it again, and the smile is gone. She looks sorta like Dad did when I asked him what a penis was. I was, like, four years old or something.

"Shouldn't she say it's that other girl's turn now?" Callie whispers in my ear.

I nod, 'cause yeah.

But Bella says nothing. She's just sorta staring. At me, no less.

I mean, are we ever gonna swim?

Clock's tickin', lady.

"Oh, God," she suddenly chokes out. I scrunch my nose in confusion and Bella looks away.

It looks like she's breathing really hard, like when Dad's been out running and he's all sweaty and gross, but then she turns to us again. Either she's close to crying, or the sun is making her eyes sting. I think it's the sun, 'cause why would she cry, ya know?

Riiight?

Right.

"Okay," she says in a breath. "Your turn." She puts a smile on her face and looks at the girl next to me – Jessica.

And Jessica starts babbling.

Ugh. I just wanna swim!

After what feels like forever, though, Bella tells us to stand up on the blanket. We do, and she talks a little about the ocean and how important it is never to go into the water alone. She goes on and on about water safety, currents, and even sunscreen. It's so damn boring, but I remember Dad telling me to pay attention, so I do.

Then, finally, when it's only an hour 'til today's lesson is over, Bella says that it's time to head into the water. We go two by two, and Bella teams up with Jessica since she didn't have a partner to team up with earlier.

The shallow water is awesome and warm, but I wanna go deeper.

"Can we go farther out, Bella?" I ask, still holding Callie's hand like I was told. The water only reaches my knees, which sucks. I wanna dive, ya know.

Bella looks at me with some odd little smile. It still looks like she's close to tears, but now there's also something else. Kinda like she's thinking real hard. Thinking about something special, maybe, but what the fuck do I know?

"We're just going out a little bit farther today," she answers softly. It's cool that her swimsuit is black, just like mine. I think so, anyway. And now that her shorts are gone, I can see the ink a little better. It's a tree branch, I think, with small flowers. There are also little numbers and swirls surrounding the flowers. Still, most of it seems to be hidden under her swimsuit. "I need to see how well you can swim."

"Okay." I nod, and then we walk little farther. Too slowly, but whatever.

A few moments later, Bella tells us to stop. We've reached a good spot, according to her, and the water reaches my belly button now. This is where we duck underwater before showing Bella that we can swim. It's fun. We swim around in circles, and Callie and I totally kick ass. She's the fastest on the surface and I'm the fastest underwater. I can hold my breath for ages.

Time passes too damn quickly, and when Bella says that we're done for the day, I wanna stomp my foot.

Good thing we're coming back tomorrow!

"How about we race?" Bella asks us, grinning. I'm suddenly super excited, 'cause I love racing. "Last one to reach the beach has to bring snacks tomorrow, okay?"

Hmm, I hope I don't lose. Dad says that I'm too wild when we go to the grocery store, so if I lose and he has to buy us all snacks...

Gulp.

But nah, I'm speedy. Here we go. "I'm ready!"

Bella gives me another of her odd smiles, and then she counts down. "On three. One...two...THREE!"

I run.

Actually, I trudge, jump, and dive. Until the water's too shallow. Then I just run.

I grin when I see Dad on the beach, waiting for me. Uncle Jazz is there, too. And other parents.

Josie Cullen for the win!

Bella opens her mouth and closes it again, and the smile is gone. She looks sorta like Dad did when I asked him what a penis was. I was, like, four years old or something.

34.

EPOV

As I approach Jasper on the beach, I spot a group of...two, three...six people in the water. Actually, there are plenty of people in the water, but Jasper's clearly focused on the one of six, so I conclude that Jo and Callie are in that one.

"How's it going?" I ask, stopping next to him.

After my meetings today in Jacksonville, I was eager to get out of my jeans, so I'm glad I brought extra clothes. I'm a bit more comfortable now in army-green cargo shorts and a white t-shirt. Wearing a black t-shirt in this heat is like begging the sun for a third-degree burn.

"Good," he responds, chuckling as he nods at the water. "Your girl is under the water more than above."

I snicker and reach down to pick up Josie's backpack. Her sunscreen is in there, and I need to get some of that shit on my ink. "Yeah, that sounds like her." I'm a bit pissed that I missed her first day here, but I have tomorrow. Plus, I hired a mechanic today, which means I can relax at least a little. I also talked to Dad about what we need to get done in our new shop. "So, are the instructors as good as you claim?" I wonder, spotting a few other smaller groups out in the water. I figure they've been divided, 'cause I remember Jazz told me that they were over twenty kids and three teachers.

"Oh, yeah." He nods. "They brought in a fourth instructor, though." He points toward our kids' group. Behind my Ray-Bans, I try to zero in on the

teacher, but they're too far out. "That's Bella out there. Bella Call." Great. Just what I need. Reminders. "And there's Alice Brandon," he points in another direction, "and Claire Ateara...and Bree Tanner. The last two are assistants, and Alice and Bella are instructors."

I nod silently, applying sunscreen on my arm.

Over the years I've obviously run into a Bella or five. Isabelle, Isobel, Belle...whatever. Their names always tug at me.

"So, how did today go?" he asks.

I'm thankful for the diversion. "I hired a mechanic."

A comfortable silence follows, and we just focus on our girls splashing around for a while. I can't see them very well, but I sure as hell can hear one in particular. Josie's not exactly known to be quiet.

We laugh when the group of kids starts running toward us, Josie and Callie in the lead. Checking the time, I see that it's been two hours. Shit, I hope Josie's had her fill for the day. She may not be mine through blood, but I swear she has my temper.

"Daddy!" Jo squeals as she runs out of the water. "Did you see me? I won!"

I smile. "Yeah, I saw you, baby."

Jasper hands me Josie's backpack, and I quickly pull out a towel for my girl before I walk over to her. I may or may not notice the body of a sexy swim instructor, as well. She's squatting down at the edge of the water, helping a girl with...something in the sand, I can't really see, but...her body...damn. I sure can see that.

The fact that I haven't had sex in almost seven years doesn't exactly help, either.

Shaking my head to clear it, I close the distance between Josie and me. I wrap a large beach towel around her and pick her up, making her giggle like crazy.

"I don't have to ask if you've had fun, do I?" I chuckle.

Her eyes light up. "It's been so fun, I'm telling you. I can't wait to come back tomorrow."

"I'm glad." I smile and kiss her temple, and then I lower her to the sand again. "Are you ready to go home?"

"I just gotta say goodbye to Bella first," she says matter-of-factly and grabs my hand. "C'mon. You should meet her. She had the coolest Def Leppard shirt on before."

I frown to myself and let her drag me along.

"Bella!" she calls.

Looking up, I narrow my eyes as we get closer and closer to the...

No way. It can't be.

I pull off my shades.

Closer. Closer.

The woman looks up.

"Fuck me," I whisper under my breath.

Eyes wide.

Bella.

35.

"Bella, this is my dad. His name is Edward, but don't hold that against him. Nana named him."

I stare at her, at Bella, and she stares back. Only, she doesn't look shocked.

Jesus Christ, the girl grew up.

She was always pretty. Sweet and cute. Even beautiful. But now...Christ, she's stunning. Sexy. All grown up. Long legs – I spot some ink – slender waist, curvy hips and... I swallow hard as my eyes flick to her chest. Move along, man. Right. Her face, her eyes...

And she's here.

I breathe.

I gather my thoughts.

I come to the conclusion that Bella already know exactly who Josie is.

"Bella." It leaves my mouth in a sigh of indescribable relief.

Problem is, as soon as her name is out, the relief is gone. I'm suddenly anxious, nervous, itching to either hug her or run far away... No, no running. But this is heavy. This is so much. It's unbelievable. My heart is pounding furiously. She's standing right in front of me. Alive and right here. Eight years have passed. Incomprehensible.

"Hi, Edward," she says softly, a bit shakily, and gives me a small smile. I can see that she's nervous, too.

I swallow hard again, letting my eyes move between Jo and Bella.

God, they look so alike.

When my eyes find Bella again, the questions pop up at a raging speed. Where has she been all these years? Is she happy? Does she regret anything? Is Charlie here in Florida, too? Did she go to college? Did she miss me? Is she single? Does she have many friends? Married...?

Wait.

Bella Call, Jasper said. Not Swan.

"Oi, Daddy-o, you two are just staring at each other. You're supposed to speak." That's right. We're not alone here, Bella and I. "Jeesh, you grownups are slow sometimes, I'm telling you."

36.

As soon as Josie's words are out, Bella's mouth curves into a genuine smile. It's gorgeous. And her eyes, though brimming with tears, light up a little.

"She's amazing," Bella mouths and, just like that, my eyes water, too.

Swallowing thickly, I close the distance between us and wrap my arms around her in a tight hug. Sweet Jesus. At first, she goes rigid, but only for a second or two. Then she hugs me back, her arms around my middle, and her face pressed against my chest.

"Fuck, I've missed you, Bella," I breathe out.

She exhales shakily.

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"I've missed you, too," she whimpers.

My shoulders sag with relief.

I continue holding her.

Breathing her in.

Who knows how long I have this time?

After Kate left, a little over six years ago, I did try to find Bella. Just once. But without luck.

“Um...Dad. I don't think hugging a stranger is the proper code of conflux.”

I let out a breathy, strained laugh and slowly release Bella. Not completely, though. I keep one arm around her shoulders as I look down at Josie, who stands there with her hands on her hips.

“It's conduct, baby. Not conflux. And...Bella's not a stranger,” I say softly, quickly brushing away a stray tear on my cheek. With one look at Bella, I convey that I won't divulge anything right now. Maybe I never will but, regardless, it's something we need to talk about. I want her in my life. I want my friend back. And I hope we can work something out. “She's an old friend,” I murmur, smiling down at Bella. Sun-kissed skin, summer freckles on her nose, beautiful eyes...

“Oh,” Josie utters, and then she huffs. “Well, this is fun and all, but Callie and I wanna bone now.”

37.

I choke on nothing.

Bella coughs and looks up at me with wide eyes.

No, I don't wanna know what she's thinking.

Turning to Josie, I have to force myself to stay calm. "First of all, you're definitely using that word wrong. Second of all, there won't ever be a reason for you to use that word. Third of all, where the fuck is that no-good uncle of yours?"

Josie just looks innocent as she points at something behind me.

I glance over my shoulder, only to see Jazz and Callie hightailing it outta here. Which means my dear old cousin was probably close enough before to hear Jo's comment. That makes me wonder if he's put together the pieces yet. About who Bella is to me, that is.

"Uncle Jazz told me that it means you wanna go for ice cream," my girl says frankly.

I shake my head and face Jo again. "Well, Uncle Jazz is full of shit. Don't listen to him, okay?"

She shrugs and salutes me. "Whatever you say, Daddy Bossman, Sir."

At that, Bella lets out a muffled laugh, and her shoulders shake under my arm. Hand covering her mouth. Still, her eyes are full of unshed tears.

"Are you okay?" I whisper in her ear.

"Yeah," she croaks, smiling this wide smile that makes my insides constrict. "It's just overwhelming." I can't even imagine. "She's..." She laughs a little and looks down at Jo...then back at me. "She's funny. Her vocabulary..."

I grin sheepishly. "Blame it on CSI, Law & Order, Cops, and My Name Is Earl." And a few others.

I know Bella won't judge me on how I've raised my daughter. She wouldn't, because if she did, she would need to blame Charlie, too.

I remember listening to his stories about Bella's childhood. How she never watched so-called appropriate shows...or that Charlie never talked baby-talk to her. And I'm pretty much the same.

"Dad. Ice cream. Rememmmber?"

I sigh. "I know, I know." Impatience thy name is Josie. I smile apologetically at Bella, who is still looking extremely overwhelmed. "You'll be here tomorrow, right?"

I hope she can see the hidden meaning behind my words.

Please don't run away.

"I'll be here," she says softly, taking a step back. "I'm Josie's instructor for the next six weeks."

My smile is huge, but I can't help it. "Hey, how about we meet an hour early? Maybe we could talk a little." She hesitates, so I add, quietly, only for her to hear, "I'll let Josie come with Jasper and Callie." No response. "Please, Bella."

She lets out a breath. "Fine."

38.

Brown cargo shorts, a white Aerosmith t-shirt, dark blue Converse, Ray-Bans on... Keys, phone, wallet, CD, Jo's been bribed with candy in order to go with Jasper and Callie, and I'm out the door.

I told Jasper everything last night after another barbecue in my backyard.

He asked me what the plan is regarding Josie.

I have no idea.

But I intend to find out. Hell, I don't even know what I want. Do I want her to know exactly who Bella is? Does Bella want that?

I sigh and step on the gas.

There are so many questions, concerns, and worries.

Fuck, I'm still in shock.

There's still a smile on my face, though.

Can't help it.

And when I finally arrive in Atlantic Beach, my smile widens when I see Bella in the parking lot by the beach...dressed in tiny shorts and a black bathing suit.

Fuck.

She did not have those breasts eight years ago.

Well, don't fucking stare, Cullen. You did enough of that yesterday.

"Hi, Edward."

39.

After locking the car, I smile and walk over to her. "Hi, yourself. Want some help with that?" I ask, eyeing a cooler by her feet.

"Um, it's okay."

I ignore her and pick it up. "Lead the way."

"Why did you even ask?" she chuckles, and I shrug. "All right, let's find a good spot to sit."

Which we do after a minute of walking in a silence that's only a little uncomfortable. Okay, it's pretty uncomfortable. We keep giving each other not-so-subtle glances, like we're trying to look for changes in one another. And I gotta say, she's changed the most. Seriously. I remember thinking that when she was all grown up, she'd have men falling at her feet. Yeah, that statement stands. I wouldn't be surprised if this happens on a regular basis.

"So, what'cha got in this thing, anyway?" I ask, referring to the cooler, as Bella places a beach towel on the sand. "Have you brought a picnic for us?" I joke.

Joking is a good way of covering nerves. I think.

"You wish," she says with a wry grin. "No, it happens that I'm on snack duty today. I lost a race yesterday." She takes the cooler from me, putting it down on the sand, and then we both sit down. She sits on her towel, and I plop down on the sand, wanting to sit next to her as opposed to across from her.

"Am I supposed to know what that means?"

She shakes her head, smiling. "It's nothing. We just raced out of the water yesterday, and I told them that the loser would bring snacks today."

Ah. "Gotcha."

Aaaand awkward silence.

With my arms resting on my knees, I look out over the water, thinking, thinking, thinking. I can't really ask all my questions just like that, but...I have to say something. I need to start somewhere.

I take a breath. Then, "Bella-"

As she says, "Edward-"

Nervous chuckles.

For fuck's sake.

I huff and give her a sideways grin. "We were never awkward before."

In my periphery, I see her quick nod. "You're right..."

Tilting my head in her direction, I go with the obvious. "You live in Florida."

"So do you," she says quietly. "You just moved here?" I nod and give her a curious look. "Josie told me." Oh. "You used to live in Tampa?"

"Yeah. We live in Lakeside now. What about you?"

"Right here in Atlantic Beach."

I nod.

Another dreadful silence follows.

Until Bella speaks again.

"How's Kate?"

40.

I give her a small rueful smile.

"I wouldn't know," I say softly. At Bella's confused expression, I let out a sigh, knowing that there's no getting around this. "Kate left a few months before Jo's second birthday."

I'm not surprised to see her eyes widen in shock. "Second birthday? What...I mean, how..." She shakes her head. "I don't understand, Edward."

I remove my shades and scrub both hands over my face. This conversation is hardly one I want to have right now. But I figure it's best to just get it all out, meaning I've gotta start at the beginning. So, I turn my body her way, facing her fully, and take a deep breath.

"We tried to conceive for about a year before we looked into adoption," I start by saying. One year of trying, followed by extensive research, interviews at agencies, and waiting lists. "And when we made our decision, we also decided to not go through tests and shit. Which means we didn't know if there was something wrong with her, with me, or if we simply didn't match." She nods for me to go on. "Well..." I huff under my breath. This is where I still tend to get furious with Kate, even if I haven't spoken to her since she left. "Turns out, her parents pressured her..." I shake my head, remembering. I was under the impression that Kate hated her parents, but the truth was that she only tried to hate them. She loved me, I know she did, and she didn't want her parents to be right about her. What I didn't know was that they often called her – while we were going through everything with the adoption – and they wanted her to get tested. They wanted her to be sure. They wanted a biological grandchild.

I sigh, eyes downcast. "They managed to convince her to undergo a fertility test...and she found out that there was nothing wrong with her." I meet Bella's gaze. "The doctors told Kate that she was fertile, much to her parents' joy." And her own, for that matter.

"But..." She chews on her lip, frowning. "The testing...that took place after Josie was born?"

I smile bitterly. "Yep. A year after Jo's birth, to be exact." After that, our relationship went south, though I didn't understand why at that time. 'Cause we were struggling as it was. "Kate claimed pretty quickly that she found it hard to bond with Josie," I admit quietly, bitterly, regretfully.

Josie became my everything the second I laid eyes on her. That didn't exactly happen with Kate.

"But we worked hard, and we tried..." We tried for a year, and during that time, I was still hopeful. I figured it was some version of postpartum depression, only...she wasn't the one who had given birth. I don't know. "Anyway..." I sigh and pat my pockets, locating my smokes. "When Jo was one year old, Kate got worse." I pause to light one up. "All of a sudden, she became withdrawn. She was still around, but it always looked like she was debating something, and...whenever I would suggest something or talk to her about it, she'd get defensive."

I tried talking to her for about eight months. Eight months of living with a defensive zombie.

"Because by then, she knew there was nothing wrong with her," Bella concludes quietly, anger flashing across her features. "And...so what? The grass was greener on the other side? Is that what you're saying?"

I'd love to say no, but... "Pretty much." I take a drag and exhale before continuing. "With the knowledge that there was nothing wrong with her, she stopped trying to get closer to Josie."

Bella looks down, but I don't have to read her face to know that she's angry. The way she clenches her fists says it all.

"A few months before Jo turned two, Kate admitted everything to me," I go on. "She also confessed that she had found someone else." Bella's head snaps up, and anger is replaced by fury. "She told me that she never cheated, but I don't know..." It doesn't matter, anyway. The fact is that she left the little girl who was supposed to be her daughter. "I'm just grateful that we never got married," I chuckle dryly and stub out my cigarette. "It made the separation easier. I just kicked her out. Papers were signed, and..."

Then I brought Jo to Tampa.

"I...I can't believe this, Edward..."

41.

The moment I see tears in Bella's eyes, I feel the need to assure her that I've done my best as a single dad. I need her to know that Jo's childhood has been a happy one. That it is a happy one.

"We moved to Tampa right away," I say, beginning one helluva rant. "It's where my parents live. It's where I'm from, and...I've done everything in my power to make sure Jo's happy. My parents have been there, too. And Jo may be foulmouthed and fucking crazy, but she's still damn perfect. She's genuine, sweet, honest, and incredibly loyal. She's happy, Bella, I promise-"

"Edward-"

I'm not done. "I mean, sure, Mom had to take her a lot after daycare and preschool, but I needed to work. I wanted what was best for Josie. I wanted to go places with her on weekends, take her to the zoo and-"

"Edward-"

"Then, when she started school, she began to hang out with me in the garage I ran back in Tampa. She loved it. Loves it. She would color or do homework, and we talked about music and movies. At home, we always eat dinner together, and we talk about her day-"

"Edward-"

"I love her more than anything. She's everything to me, Bella. She's not only my daughter, but she's my friend. We share a lot. She even loves cars. And the music is-"

“Edward!”

I draw a shaky breath. I look into her eyes. She doesn't look mad anymore. Actually, she does, but there's something soft, too. “Yeah?”

Her eyes are once again brimming with tears, and her smile is pained – as are her eyes – but, like I said, there's something soft—tender. “Don't defend yourself,” she says softly but firmly. “You have no reason to.” Relief. I'm sure it's visible on me. “I'm furious with her, Edward,” she continues imploringly. “I'm also pissed at myself. I thought she was so nice...” Again, pain flashes in her eyes. “I thought she'd make a wonderful mother.”

Without hesitating, I reach out and grab her hand. “Hey, I thought the same. Don't beat yourself up, okay? As far as I'm concerned, it's her loss. And I have no regrets.”

We stare at each other for what feels like a very long time, but can only be a few seconds, and I see so many emotions flit across her features. In the end, though, I see that she relaxes slightly.

“I never doubted you,” she admits passionately, just above a whisper. “It was because of you that I could walk away knowing that I had done what was best for Josie.” I swallow hard and look down at our joined hands, much like I did the day she gave birth to Jo. “You have to believe me. I loved her...love her...but I just couldn't-” She chokes up, so I scoot closer and draw her to me. My arm goes around her shoulder, and I'm about to tell her that she doesn't have to explain herself – partly because I already know, partly because I don't want her to cry – but she speaks again before I can. “I wasn't even sixteen yet, and...God, it was just so hard. I was so torn. My own mom left when I was six, stating that she wasn't cut out to be a mother, and...” She exhales shakily. “...since I had all that doubt from the very beginning, I feared that it would grow. I also feared that it would turn into resentment, and I could never repeat my mother's

actions. I needed to do what was best for both the baby and for me..." She trails off there.

I can feel that she's leaving a lot unsaid, but I don't want to pressure her. We've already aired out so much, and this wasn't even the plan. I expected... Actually, I don't know what I expected, but it wasn't this. Not all this heaviness.

The good thing is that we've covered a lot, of course, but as long as she's not leaving, we can take our time with the rest. 'Cause God knows I have so many questions left.

However, the only question I want the answer to right this minute is...

What happens now?

42.

"Hey," I murmur, nudging her gently. "Let's talk about something else, okay?" She nods and snuffles, simultaneously wiping her cheeks. "This is the first time I've seen you in eight years." I smile down at her a little, and she chuckles thickly. "I know your class begins soon, but..." I let out a breath. "I mean, we have time, right?"

My heart sinks when she hesitates. "Edward, I..." She swallows hard. "It's so hard," she says tearfully. "Yesterday, when I was so close to her...do you have any idea how it tore at me? Just to be able to look at her, and..." She exhales heavily, and there's nothing but sadness and pain in her features. "It's too much," she whispers. "I'm sorry, but it would be too painful for me. After these six weeks, I think it's best that we..." Even though she leaves the last words unsaid, I know what they are. She thinks it's best we put distance between us again.

I'm suddenly desperate. I need this. More than I thought possible. "Is it just Josie, or is it me, too?" I ask, squeezing her hand. "I mean, I can

understand why it's painful to be around her..." She gave Josie up. Of course it's hard to be close to my daughter, but does it have to be so drastic? "Maybe you and I can meet up every now and then, just...I don't know..." I run a hand through my hair. "Coffee or whatever?" I'm grasping at straws, I know. "We don't have to see each other often, Bella, and Josie doesn't have to be there."

I will never hide my girl, but I don't see anything wrong with meeting up with Bella every once in a while to just catch up. Maybe we could talk some music, and perhaps we could even go to a concert. I don't have any friends here – not that I had countless of them in Tampa either – and Jasper doesn't count. Having Bella in my life would mean so fucking much to me.

By now, my eyes are pleading with her, but I don't care.

"Give me some time," she says quietly. "I need to think, all right? We have six weeks... I'll try to get used to the idea..." She doesn't look convinced at all, but I'll take it.

With a gentle smile, I reach into my back pocket where I pull out the CD I brought from home.

"This is what I miss," I admit, holding out the CD for her. "I never threw away the ones you made me, you know." We exchange a quick smile. "And before I went to bed last night, this was the only thing I could think of doing." I rub the back of my neck, feeling a little embarrassed to be honest, though I don't know why. "They're songs I listen to when I've had a bad day..." I trail off with a one-shouldered shrug.

Bella smiles, and it's a quite wide one – making me think I did the right thing with the CD – but before she can say anything, I hear the unmistakable voice of my daughter.

Our hour is up.

43.

Over the next few weeks, Bella and I only exchange a few words. We greet each other politely and without unease – even throwing in a few smiles every now and then – and we exchange email addresses, though we haven't used them yet. I don't want to pressure her into being close to me, but I do want her to know my intentions. Which is why I've given her more than one mix CD. It's my way to go back to what we used to have eight years ago, and though she hasn't given me any CDs in return, the excitement in her eyes when she accepts one from me is enough for now.

I know she has a lot to think about and consider, and while she does that, she's also Josie's swim instructor. Since I have a lot to do before the opening of my garage, I'm not there for every lesson, but I try to stick around throughout the two-hour sessions a couple of times a week. And when I can't, I'm just there to drop Jo off, say a quick greeting to Bella, and then return when it's time for Josie to go home.

In the meantime, when I'm not working, I'm thinking about all the questions I have for Bella. For instance, I'd really like to see Charlie again. I want to know what Bella does for a living, assuming she isn't a swim instructor full time. I want to know about the tattoo on her thigh that disappears under her swimsuit. I also want to know about Bella's last name and when she got married. I haven't seen a ring on her, but I figure she doesn't want to wear it on the beach.

Last but not least, I'm battling a little with myself. I've never had any issues admitting that Bella was very pretty as a fifteen-year-old girl, but she's not a girl anymore – she's very much a woman – and I'm struggling with that a bit, to be honest. Partly because women haven't been on my radar since Kate – Josie's has been my only priority – and I haven't even felt the need to be with anyone. And partly because Bella today is a sinful

vision. She's my type, I've discovered. Petite, yet curvy. Tomboyish in her personality, but...well, her body couldn't be more womanly. Fuck me. I can't help it, but I'm attracted to her. Not a little, either, and it's definitely not what I need right now. What I need is her as a friend. What I want is to be able to look at her as she's in the ocean...without gaining any approval from my neglected dick.

Desire is such an inconvenient little bitch.

44.

"Hey, man," I say as I reach Jazz. As usual, his eyes are glued to the water where Callie and Jo are...and Bella. "I see that I'm not late."

He had to bring both Jo and Callie here today, 'cause I had to work. Luckily, we're ahead of schedule, which means I can take the next few days off. I've hired all the people I need to hire, the construction company – which does all the work for Cullen Auto – arrived in Lakeside from Tampa yesterday and has already started on the garage, and I've closed four more deals with local trucking business and the like. I've also ordered a land line to be installed, along with internet, and the painters will be there next week. Last but not least, the garage sign, business cards, and everything with a damn Cullen Auto logo on it have arrived.

"Bella's teaching them about what to do if you get swept away by a rip current," Jasper says, and I tilt my head in his direction. He gives me a sideways grin. "You should've seen them before they entered the water," he chuckles. "Bella sorta made it onto a game, and it didn't take long before they could list all the things you should do."

I huff a chuckle. "One, pray. Two, swim as if your life depends on it...which it would in that case." I grin. "Did I get it right?" I joke.

"Boy, am I'm glad our girls don't have you as a swim instructor," he replies dryly.

I shrug and turn back to the water.

Only a few minutes later, Jazz and I watch as the group of five kids and...Bella...run out of the water, and it doesn't matter that Bella's not wearing some skimpy bikini. Her black bathing suit does the job, for sure.

Fuck.

I swallow.

Subtly, I adjust myself.

This is so wrong.

45.

"Dad!" Josie shouts, running toward me. Her grin is wide, and I grab a towel for her before walking to meet her. "I'm so awesome, Dad! You gotta hear what I've learned today!"

I chuckle and swoop her up in the towel, positioning her on my hip and she starts telling me about rip currents. I see that all the kids are doing the same with their parents. Telling their folks about today's lesson, that is.

"...and if swimming toward the beach doesn't work, you should try to swim parallel with the shoreline," she says, and I halt her cute little rambling by telling her that it's "parallel" and not "parallelic". "Yeah, that's what I said," she continues matter-of-factly, which just makes me smile. "And you should try to save your strength for shouting, ya know? To get attention and shit. 'Cause Bella said that mostly, the breakers or whatever

it's called...yeah, those will just bring you back to the beach. But to prevent all this from happening-

"Prevent," I chuckle softly as I walk slowly toward Bella.

My girl doesn't often allow me to carry her, but I think she's too caught up in her story to even notice.

Jo gives me "the look". "Whatever. Now, what was I saying before you so rudely interrupted me?"

I withhold my grin and say, "To prevent this from happening..."

And she takes off there. "Right. To prevent this from happening, you should always make sure to keep close to others, never go out alone, and keep track on some landmark... 'cause you don't wanna drift, Dad, I'm telling you."

"Got it, kiddo," I say, nodding solemnly. "You're really enjoying this, aren't you?"

"So much," she gushes. "But you gotta let me down now, 'cause Bella's giving us presents!"

I frown. "Presents?" I ask, letting her hop down to the ground.

She nods furiously. "She said that if we were good today, she'd give us little gifts after, and we've been so good, I swear."

That's pretty much when we reach Bella, whom the other kids are gathering around, and Jo takes off for her, too.

So, Jazz and I just watch.

Bella acknowledges me with a quick smile as she spots me – a smile that I return – and then she turns to the five kiddos. "You've all been so

amazing today, guys!" she compliments excitedly. The kids look so fucking proud, it makes me grin stupidly. "Now, remember a few days ago when I asked you your favorite colors?" Five heads bob frantically in anticipation, and Jazz and I chuckle. "Good! Okay, so whose favorite color is blue?" she asks, reaching down to grab the plastic bag at her feet.

"Me, Bella!" a boy responds, pretty much bouncing where he stands. "I love blue!"

Bella grins and reaches into her bag, presenting a...

I look through squinted eyes, trying to see, and... Ha. It's a whistle. A plastic whistle in blue, attached to an elastic band. I can't help but smile as she reminds the kids how important it is to be safe in the water, and the boy is ecstatic as Bella shows how he can wear it on his wrist. Then she goes through a few colors before announcing pink, at which Jo grimaces in disgust and Callie jumps up and down in joy. Bella attaches the pink whistle by looping the elastic band around one of the shoulder straps on Callie's swimsuit.

"And, last but not least, whose favorite color is green?" Bella asks, winking at Josie.

Jo smiles hugely. "That'd be me!" She accepts the whistle from Bella and hurries to attach it to her swimsuit. "Thank you, Bella!" And all the other kids follow with their own thanks.

"You're welcome, guys," Bella chuckles. "Now, remember: the whistle isn't a toy, okay? It's for emergencies, and you make sure to bring it whenever you're in the water." The two boys and three girls promise, though I'm not sure Jo will keep the promise – about only using it for emergencies, that is – and with that, Bella announces that today's lesson is over.

While the other kids and parents take off, Jazz and I linger for a bit. I want a chance to talk to Bella, and I'm pretty sure Jasper wants a minute or two with Alice.

Why he doesn't just ask Alice out is beyond me. I understand why nothing has happened yet, since Jasper was newly divorced when they met and Alice was engaged, but now...Christ, they're both single. They're also attracted to each other, so why not just fucking go for it?

Speaking of...

Alice runs over as soon as her group has been dismissed, and though I haven't exchanged many words with her, I know that she's like the Energizer bunny.

"Hey," she says, a bit out of breath as she reaches us. "I'm glad I caught you before you left." I hope she's finally asking Jasper out, 'cause my cousin is evidently a pussy and won't do it himself. "It's Friday tomorrow," she continues. "It's also my birthday."

"Alice," Bella says...warningly?

But Alice just waves her off before turning to us again. Not just Jasper, but the both of us. "You guys wanna come to my party? Okay, party is a bit of a stretch," she chuckles. "We're just going to a bar to have some drinks, but it'll be fun. Whaddya say?"

46.

Before I know what's happening, Jasper accepts the invitation. Not only for himself, but for me, too. So, I'm thinking that maybe he's forgotten that we have children. It's not Maria's weekend, so that excuse is out when it comes to Callie. But Jasper just returns my pointed look with a glare that tells me to shut the fuck up.

"Great!" Alice says. "The bar is here in Atlantic Beach; I hope that's okay."

No, I can't say that it is. It's an hour away from Lakeside, and we're already driving back and forth a lot as it is.

"That's more than okay," Jasper says smoothly, that fucking fuck. Pretty sure it's his dick talking now. "Just give me the address and we'll be there."

"I'll text it to you," Alice tells him, batting her lashes. "I think there'll be about seven people, so it's nothing extreme. Oh, and it's a rock joint."

Now, that is okay.

Glancing over at Bella, I raise my eyebrows as if asking, "Is this all right with you?"

I don't know what Jazz's plan is about the kids, but he's a crafty little fucker when he really wants to be, so I guess we're going out tomorrow.

Bella nods stiffly and gives me a tight-lipped smile, pretty much telling me, "No, it's not okay, but I can pretend."

The voice of reason encourages me to back down, but...fuck, I can't. I want to see her. Away from the beach. I want to know more about her life.

And later that night, Jasper informs me that he has called the babysitter he usually turns to when he needs help, and she'll happily take Josie, too. Then, the day after, when Josie's saying goodbye to Bella for the weekend, I tell Bella that we'll see each other in a few hours. And she looks nervous, but nods and tries to smile.

It'll be okay, right?

Jasper obviously decided to bathe in cologne.

Sharing a car with him isn't lovely.

I dressed like I often do: a pair of jeans – that may or may not have a few holes in 'em, but whatever – black Doc Martens, and a black t-shirt, Skid Row this time. My cousin, on the other hand, went all out with a new pair of jeans, a white button-down, and a fucking tie. Man, he's gotta be seriously horny.

After another whiff of his cologne, I decide to roll down my window and light up a smoke.

I don't wear cologne. I used some aftershave earlier when I had shaved, but Jesus fucking Christ...when I say "some", I don't mean that I take a bath in it.

"You reek, buddy," I say, taking a pull from my smoke. "It's gonna have the opposite affect on Alice, you know."

He fidgets with his tie, looking uncomfortable. "Shut the hell up."

"Nervous, are ya?" I chuckle.

"No. It's not like it's a date or something."

I laugh and turn off the freeway. "Then why are you dressed like it is a date?"

"Just...just shut up."

Sure, buddy. Sure.

About fifteen minutes of silence later, we reach the bar. It's eight PM and the place looks packed from the outside.

Here we go.

48.

As soon as Jasper and I enter the bar, we're immediately met by blaring music and a loud crowd of people. To be more precise, it's "Crazy, Crazy Nights" by Kiss, and the patrons are already three sheets to the wind. I can feel the corners of my mouth tug upward.

"A little early to be this plastered, ain't it?" Jasper shouts over the music.

I agree; it is a bit early, but whatever. This looks like my kinda place, so I just shrug and start looking for Bella. And what do I know? Maybe they get drunk early in Jacksonville. One might think Jazz should know, but he's rarely out.

The bar, which really looks like a classic, half-rundown rock dive, isn't all that big, and it doesn't take long for me to locate the corner booth where Bella sits with several others. I alert Jasper to where they are, and then we make our way across the packed floor. Said floor is occupied by chairs and tables, but a big sign above the bar states that the floor is to be emptied at nine PM every Friday and Saturday, and that's when it turns into a dance floor. The walls are lined with booths.

Alice is the first one to spot us. "Jasper, Edward! You made it!" She is very much included in the group of patrons who are drunk already. And...Jesus, I think Jasper's going to regret dressing up. As Alice stands, I see that she's wearing a short denim skirt to go with her vintage-looking Crashdiet t-shirt. And her bottom lip is pierced to boot. She's a rock chick, and Jazz is gonna look like a yuppie next to her.

"Happy birthday," I say, smiling politely. "I'll buy your next drink, all right?"

She grins widely. "The perfect birthday present! How'd you know?"

"Wild guess," I chuckle. With another smile, she steps toward Jasper, and I slide in next to Bella, who is looking...yeah, hot. Fuck me, her nose is pierced. She's dressed much like Alice: denim skirt – I think the length of that thing is called "Granted to Give Daddy a Coronary", and Josie won't ever wear one – and a black wife-beater with the song title "All Night Long" on it. I know for a fact that she likes Buckcherry – though that particular song wasn't out eight years ago – but those who don't know the band probably think Bella has some crazy stamina. And that's not what I should think about. Fuck.

"Quite different from the swimsuit I'm used to seeing you in," I say in her ear.

She smirks lazily, making me believe that she's had more than one or two drinks already.

"Nice to see you, too, Edward," she says amusingly. Gone is the usual stiff demeanor. Gone is the pain in her eyes. "And you look like...you."

I laugh. "Good thing or bad?"

"Hmm." She tilts her head, looking me up and down. Shit, this is definitely different. "Good thing," she decides with a firm nod. "Very good." A big smile follows. "Allow me to introduce you..." She faces the other four people in the booth. "Edward, this is Tanya, Felix, Liam, and Maggie." I greet them all with handshakes. "Guys, this is Edward. Edward Cullen."

"Really?" a behemoth of a man inquires with a grin. Felix, I think his name was. "From Cullen Auto?" he asks me.

I'm more confused than ever. Bella knows about Cullen Auto?

Aside from the work t-shirt I've worn a few times, I haven't ever mentioned my job.

"Yeah, that's right," I answer just as Jasper and Alice return. They have drinks, and before Felix can speak, Alice takes over the conversation. A beer is slid across the table, from Jasper to me, and while everyone starts talking about other people who are supposed to show up, I make a mental note to actually ask Bella all the questions I have for her. Not tonight, of course, but definitely soon. Keeping shit bottled up isn't enough anymore.

49.

Since I didn't buy the last drink for Alice, I make sure to buy the next. I mean, I don't really know her, but it is her birthday, so... Anyway, I head over to the bar and buy a round of shots for all of us, and then I return with a tray of glasses, tequila, salt, and slices of both lime and lemon.

I pass one of the glasses to Bella.

"Oh yeah, liquid courage. Thank you," she says, rubbing her hands together as I set the tray on the table. "Time to toast to the birthday girl?"

"Yeah, I thought so." I nod. "By the way, why would you need liquid courage?"

"You'll see soon enough. It's why I was so apprehensive about you being here tonight."

While I'm thrilled to hear that it's not simply my presence that is upsetting her, I'm still confused about what "soon enough" might entail.

Is she going to tell me something?

"All right, to Alice!" Felix bellows, holding up a shot. I take one, too, forgoing the salt. "She may be only two shits high, but she's still old as fuck." Alice smacks his arm at that, but Felix just laughs. "To the now thirty-year old munchkin!"

Thirty? Really? I figured she was considerably older than Bella since she was once Callie's substitute teacher in preschool, but still. Thirty? Ah, well.

We all slam back the shots, and the girls stuff their faces with lemons afterward.

Bella's grimace is more than a little cute.

"I need another," Alice says, also grimacing and shuddering. "We only have ten minutes, Bella."

"Tell me about it," Bella replies and reaches for another shot.

Before I lose my mind, Jasper thankfully asks the question. "What happens in ten minutes?"

Felix's girlfriend – Tanya? – yeah, she answers. "My sister is on her way, and we kinda feared she'd be here. We used to be close, but..."

"It's more about who she's bringing," Bella points out.

"Whatever," Tanya huffs. "Even if you ended it on good terms, what Jane did was fucked up."

Bella just shrugs.

"Still confused here," Jasper says exasperatedly.

Me, too!

"Tanya's sister is coming with Bella's ex-husband," Felix supplies, and I feel like the wind has been knocked outta me. "And you, Cullen," he smirks, "should probably know that wherever Embry Call goes, Jacob Black goes."

What. The. Fuck?

Jacob Black. The owner of Black's Wheels once his dad handed over the business.

My competition.

50.

"Embry is best friends with Black," Felix chuckles.

I face Bella with wide eyes. I'm not sure what I'm more shocked about. The fact that I now have a name for Bella's husband—correction: ex-husband, something I'm disturbingly happy to hear—or that she was or is close to the Blacks...or that her ex-husband has the most ridiculous name I've ever heard.

"Long story short," Bella sighs, "Jane—Tanya's little sister—wanted Embry for a long time, even when I was married to the guy. So, as soon as we separated, she pretty much jumped him." She turns to Tanya. "And I honestly don't care, T...it's just that I don't want him here."

I'm still unable to speak, so I just listen.

"Doesn't matter," Tanya argues. "We were all friends, and she decides to go after your ex? I mean, I would've understood if she was in love or some shit, but she's just after his money."

Right. So, this Embryo fucker is loaded?

Then I finally find my voice. "And Embryo is coming here now?"

"Embry," Bella corrects.

"Whatever," I retort, feeling a surge of something foul shoot through me. I don't know what or why, but it leaves me balling my hands into fists. "But if you're not married to the fucker, then why is your name Call?" I ask and try to shake off the shit I feel inside.

She gives me some odd look, but before she can speak, Alice pipes in with, "They're here."

51.

Having seen Jacob Black's ugly fucking face in a few magazine ads, I recognize him right away. His too-white teeth are all but blinding me, even as the entire floor separates us—a floor that was until nine PM packed with chairs and tables but has now been cleared to make a dance floor. And he's not alone. Next to his bulky frame stands an equally tall, but lankier man. A tiny woman is there, too, and I assume that's Tanya's sister.

As soon as they spot us, they walk closer.

I gotta smirk when Black narrows his eyes at me.

Guess he recognizes me, too.

"Alice!" the blonde woman shrieks. "Happy birthday, hun!"

Alice fakes a smile. "Thanks."

And Felix leans across the table and tells me, "Jane has the tendency to act as if nothing's wrong."

Uh. All right?

I get the feeling that Felix likes gossip.

"Well, if it ain't Edward Cullen," Jacob Black drawls, which gets my attention. He stands with his arms crossed over his chest, obviously trying to come off as intimidating. Not that it works. I probably have a few inches on him...in every department. "What brings you to this part of Florida, one might wonder."

I smirk again. He knows very well that Cullen Auto is more successful than Black's Wheels, and I'm willing to bet he's close to pissing his pants with worry that we're opening a garage here. Which we are.

"And you are?" I ask in a bored tone.

Next to me, Bella starts shaking with silent laughter.

That makes me smile internally.

He sneers at me. "You know very well who I—"

"Let's not do this here, okay?" the other man—Embry—interrupts. Then he faces Bella. "Can I talk to you?" he asks her. "In private."

I stiffen.

"Actually, no," Bella replies, shocking the hell outta me as she grabs my hand in hers. "Edward here just asked me to dance, so if you'll excuse us."

I did?

I did.

Song: "Porn Star Dancing" by My Darkest Days

52.

If she wants to get away, I'm more than happy to be of assistance.

"Come on," I say, sliding out of the booth. With Black not moving an inch, I steel myself and add some strength when I try to pass him. Our shoulders collide, but he has nothing on me. Fucking idiot. I give Bella's hand a gentle tug, and she follows me.

A Skid Row song ends just as we reach the crowded floor, and when Bella motions to speak in my ear, I dip down. "We don't have to, Edward. I just needed to get away from him-" And I cut her off there, as does the new song that begins.

"We're dancing, Bella," I tell her with a smirk.

Kelly won't kiss my friend, Cassandra

Jessica won't play ball

Mandy won't share her friend, Miranda

Doesn't anybody live at all?

I cock a brow at her, amused by the lyrics and, admittedly, a bit turned on, though I won't say that shit out loud. In response, Bella chuckles with a wry look on her face, but instead of walking off, like a part of me expects her to do, she sighs—surrendering—and slides her hands up my arms.

Gently, loosely, I grip her hips.

Amanda won't leave me empty handed

Got her number from a bathroom stall

Brandy just brought way too much baggage

And that shit just gets old

"Relax, Bella," I murmur in her ear. We're both moving, but she's tense as hell, and I won't fly with that shit. She shivers as I pull her closer to me. As long as I can keep my cock at bay, we should be just fine.

But I got a girl who can put on a show

The dollar decides how far you can go
And when she does relax, I realize that I'm in deep trouble.
The woman can move.

She wraps those hands around that pole

She licks those lips and off we go

She takes it off nice and slow

'Cause that's porn star dancing

She don't play nice

She makes me beg

She drops that dress around her legs

And I'm sitting right by the stage for this porn star dancing

I exhale shakily as she shifts, positioning herself with my thigh between her legs. My fingers tighten on her hips, and a drawn-out shiver runs through me when she locks her hands around my neck.

The song is far from slow, but there's still a seductive feel to it, and I try to remind myself that Bella is pretty drunk when her hips swivel over my thigh. She doesn't know what she's doing. She's just...um, lost in the music or something.

Stacy's gonna save herself for marriage

But that's just not my style

She's got a pair that's nice to stare at

But I want girls gone wild

“Jesus,” I mutter to myself as she turns around. With her back to my chest, she keeps dancing sinfully. Her hips sway dangerously close to my hardening cock, and if I just bend a little at the knees, I will be right there. So, I definitely shouldn’t do that. I shouldn’t. Fuck. Her hands cover mine, slowly sliding her fingers between my own fingers.

But I know a place where there’s always a show

The dollar decides how far you can go

She tilts her head back, resting it on my collarbone, and I can’t help but lean down and breathe in the scent of her hair. I effectively bury my face in the crook of her neck. I want to groan as the scent of her invades my senses. Hell, maybe I do groan. I’m not sure.

She wraps those hands around that pole

She licks those lips and off we go

She takes it off nice and slow

‘Cause that’s porn star dancing

She don’t play nice

She makes me beg

She drops that dress around her legs

And I’m sitting right by the stage with this porn star dancing

Before I even know it’s happening, we’re moving together in what can only be described as foreplay. Somehow, my right hand—still joined with hers—has found its way to her stomach. Under her fucking shirt. The feeling of her soft skin is making me lose my goddamn mind, and don’t fucking ask me how my erection ended up pressed against her ass.

She wraps those hands around that pole

She licks those lips and off we go

She takes it off nice and slow

'Cause that's porn star dancing

She don't play nice

She makes me beg

She drops that dress around her legs

And I'm sitting right by the stage with this porn star dancing

53.

Unfortunately, all good things must come to an end...I guess. Because we get interrupted by a furious-looking Embry Call. Jacob Fucking Black is flanking him.

"Wow," Embry says over the music, smiling sarcastically. "You'll never quit, will you, Bella?" I frown at him, noticing how Bella goes rigid in front of me. "Always with the goddamn games." He shakes his head in disgust before turning to me instead. "Cullen, right? Do yourself a favor, friend, and dump that one," he jerks his chin at Bella, "because she's nothing but a fucking tease."

"Hey, you better fucking watch it," I warn him, pulling Bella behind me. I'm in his face, glaring down at him—on him—and I won't allow that goddamn talk about her. Ever. "Are we clear, friend?"

"Edward," Bella pleads, tugging on my t-shirt. "Please stop. Let's just get out of here."

I stare down Embry, easily ignoring Mr. Colgate next to him.

When he breaks our gaze, I take one step back and grab Bella's hand. Her suggestion of getting out of here is fucking appealing, because I need answers, and I need them tonight. So much for waiting.

"Do you have a bag or something you need in the booth?" I ask Bella as I pull out my phone. She shakes her head, looking down so that I can't see her face. I grit my teeth and fire off a quick text to Jazz.

Taking Bella home. You're on your own. I'll explain tomorrow. – Cullen.

As soon as we're out of the bar, I usher her toward my car.

She's hugging herself, eyes still downcast.

"Where do you live?" I ask.

54.

After telling me that she's currently living with Alice and that she doesn't want to return there, I make the quick decision to head back to Lakeside. We need to talk, and waiting is out of question. I need to know what she's been up to the past eight years, I need to know about this ex-husband of hers, I need to know where Charlie is, I need to know why she's sitting in my car looking as if she's about to break down.

"Where are we going?" she asks quietly as I drive out of Atlantic Beach.

Rolling down my window, I reply. "To my place." I pull out a smoke and light it up, noticing that she's rigid again. "Josie's not there."

She relaxes, which has the opposite effect on me.

"You really can't stand to be around her, can you?" I ask dryly.

Anger surges through me, and I know it's completely different, but it still feels like Kate all over again.

"That's not how it is," she croaks, and I tilt my head in her direction. Shit, she's crying. Fuck my life. Fuck all this confusion.

I sigh and take a drag from my smoke.

The entire ride is silent.

What I wouldn't give to be a mind reader...

55.

It feels fucking weird to have Bella in my house, but I shake it off. "The living room is through there," I say, pointing in the right direction. "I'm just gonna grab us some drinks."

She nods and walks away without a word.

In the kitchen I grab two Cokes and two bottles of water.

When I join her in the living room, she isn't sitting down. She's looking at the pictures I have on the wall above the couch. Pictures of Josie, of my parents, of Callie and Jazz, of me...family gatherings, birthdays, trips... There are a few of Josie and me in my old garage in Tampa. One where Jo is sitting on the hood of a car I'd just worked on...

And Bella's still crying silently.

"Here," I mutter, handing her the Coke. I sit down on the couch, opening my own Coke, and she finally sits down, too. I won't ask how she is. It's quite clear that shit ain't all right.

After some silence, I can't keep quiet anymore. "You need to start talking, Bella."

She bobs her head slowly, watching the can in her hands. "I know. It's just..." She shakes her head and wipes her cheeks. "I don't know where to begin. My life is so fucked up."

She looks so fucking hopeless and broken hearted.

That's not what I wanted for her. Over the years, when I thought about her, I pictured smiles. I imagined a college experience and trips with friends.

"Start at the beginning," I suggest quietly, shifting on the couch to face her fully. She mirrors my position and rests her head on the back of the couch. Without thinking about it, I reach out and thread our fingers together. I've done it before, and I've come to realize that I need it. I've also come to realize that I do it when it feels like she's slipping away from me.

56.

"We moved to Atlantic Beach when I was sixteen," she starts by saying. She's watching our joined hands, too. "I started school, I made friends, I went for normalcy. I craved it after everything in Washington." She pauses, takes a sip of her Coke, and breathes. "Dad saw through my bullshit, of course. He didn't buy my act." There's a small smile playing on her lips, one that I assume is reserved for a memory. "He called me out in his blunt way, stating that I couldn't possibly feel so carefree after what I'd gone through." So, she was pretending to be happy. "It didn't take much for me to break down," she chuckles mirthlessly, quietly, still with a far-away look on her face. "I started going to a therapist..."

I squeeze her hand instinctively.

She takes a breath. "It was so hard, knowing that I'd made the right decision... But I still felt so awful and conflicted. There was a lot of

guilt...still is," she mumbles. "I've always felt like Josie's owned my heart, but-" She chokes up, and I set down my Coke on the table before moving closer to her. With our hands still joined, I drape my free arm around her shoulders.

It takes a few minutes, but eventually she calms down, and in the meantime, it feels like my heart is stuck in my damn throat.

"One part of me tells me that she's everything to me," she admits tearfully. "But another argues and says that if I loved her...I wouldn't have given her away."

"Bella, you can't think like that," I murmur pleadingly.

She shakes her head, sitting up straighter. "I know." She takes a breath. "That's what my therapist said. But it didn't erase the guilt. Nothing helped. There were—are—these two sides of me, constantly arguing about what's right and wrong. While one comforts and says that what I did was selfless, the other pipes in and says that it's the opposite—that I gave her away to save myself."

I say nothing, because I barely know what to think. I can't imagine what she's gone through, but I do know that she isn't a selfish person. That's laughable, for fuck's sake. Though, I doubt it'll matter if I tell her that. She will still feel her own feelings, not mine.

"Anyway..." She sighs. "I went to therapy for a few years, and it did get better, at least a little, and a lot of the guilt dissipated. There's still some left, which will never change, but..." She shrugs. "I learned how to cope."

Silence.

I let what she's said sink in.

"I considered myself pretty happy for a while," she says quietly.

"Especially once I started working. I felt better, more grown up. I moved to my own place, paid my own bills, and took care of myself." And I find myself studying the faint tan line on her ring finger. I haven't seen it before, but I see it now. She can't have been divorced for that long.

"Rose—a friend who was supposed to be there tonight—she made me feel better, 'cause she's this really positive person." She smiles softly. I watch her. She watches our hands. "She may be my boss, but she's most of all one of my best friends. And she was the first one who I told everything to. Alice is the second and last." I nod to myself, having wondered about that before. "Rose's brother knows a little... He knows that I gave up a child for adoption, but no details. He's also my boss," she adds in explanation. "I didn't go to college...not really, anyway. I took a few classes, but it wasn't for me, and that's when Rose offered to help me out. License and all that..." Then she's lost in thought for a while again.

"It was through work I met Embry," she mutters, frowning a little. Through work? And license for what? That makes me curious about what she does for a living. I refuse to interrupt her, though. It feels like I can finally breathe, dammit. There's no way I'm stopping her. "I was twenty-two, and Dad had just met his girlfriend." I smile at that. "And I wanted that, too. I was so sick of pushing guys away..." She looks up at me, though only briefly. "I had this issue letting people into my life. My therapist told me it was because I didn't want to lose anymore close ones... I don't know..."

She blows out a breath. "When Embry asked me out, I said yes." A humorless chuckle slips out. "Big fucking mistake."

57.

The next words tumble out in a rush, like she just wants to get it over with. "It started out okay. Dating was fine. Casual. Not too much

pressure. But he just wanted to move forward and forward and forward... It felt like I was on the fast track to being barefoot in a kitchen with two point five kids. And I was stupid, because I went along with it. I still wanted that sense of normalcy—I wanted what everyone around me had.” She shakes her head. “And before I knew it, we were engaged to be married.” I grit my teeth, feeling that foul shit running through me again. It’s something I’ve never felt before. “Dad was worried. So was Rose, and by this time, I had met Alice, too. They were all concerned that I was rushing into things.” She takes a sip from her Coke. “But I was stupid and in love with the idea of love. Clichéd mistake.”

I know.

I wouldn’t say Kate and I were the same—far from it, actually—but when I kicked her out, I did wonder how I got over it so easily. I was furious with her, unable to understand how she could be so callous and leave Jo behind, but I can’t remember missing her. No matter what our loved ones do, the heart wants what the heart wants. So, even if she was a heartless bitch, a part of me feels that if I was so in love with her, I would still be in pain when she was out of my life.

“I didn’t put my foot down until Embry wanted me to quit working,” Bella mutters, bringing me out of my thoughts. “Now that we were married, he wanted kids, a white picket fence, and the whole nine yards.” Yeah, I can’t see Bella wanting that. I shake my head internally at the bastard and chug down some Coke. “He wanted me at home, not driving trucks all day.”

I choke on my soda.

Cough.

Cough.

Driving trucks? That's what she does?

"Shit, are you okay?" she asks, and I'm thinking...No, I'm not okay. Fucking fantasy girl.

Cough.

58.

"I'm fine," I croak, wiping my chin. I wave my free hand at her. "Go on. He wanted you by the fucking stove."

She smirks at me, and I'm trying to not picture her behind the wheel of a truck.

Jesus H.

"Right," she sighs. "He wanted me at home, and that's when I put my foot down. We started fighting a lot, and in the heat of a moment I told him that I didn't want children. I couldn't..." She definitely has my attention now. "After giving Josie up, having children felt...feels...wrong. Not just wrong for myself, but for Josie, too."

I guess I can see that, which just strengthens my belief about how selfless Bella is. Her heart is big and in the right place.

Pulling her close to me again, I kiss the top of her head. And this time, she slides her arms round my waist.

"He accused me of stringing him along," she mumbles against my collarbone. "He called me a tease, and...other things. And then he asked for a divorce, which I happily gave him because I was done pretending. It felt like I played along for decades, not two years." I hug her harder, placing another kiss in her hair. "The divorce was finalized two weeks ago." Holy shit. Two weeks. That's nothing. "So, you see," she tilts her

head up and meet my eyes, "that's why I wasn't a Swan when I started Josie's class."

I swallow. "But you're a Swan now?"

She nods slowly. "Yeah."

My eyes flick to her mouth.

So close.

But this is not the right time. Plus, with everything she's gone through, I doubt the attraction is mutual.

"Edward?" she whispers.

I look up again, meeting her gaze. I clear my throat. "Yeah?"

And she averts her eyes before backing away slightly.

"I have a confession to make."

59.

"The first time I heard about Cullen Auto was little over two years ago," she blurts out. I furrow my brow in confusion. "And one visit to your webpage told me that it was your family."

Ah.

I give her a forced smile. "You knew where I was." I can't deny that it hurts a little...or a lot. She knew where I was and didn't contact me. Then again, if I look at it from her perspective, I probably wouldn't be able to make contact, either. The thought of giving Jo up... I'd die. And reminders would hurt like knives.

"I also knew that you had arrived in the Jacksonville area a couple of days before the swimming lessons started," she admits with a pained look. And I'm confused again. There's no way she could have known that. "I just didn't know I'd meet you and Jo on the beach that day." Her eyes well up. "I was ready to quit my job, or make sure our paths didn't cross, but..."

"Bella." I let out a breath, frustrated and confused. "I don't understand."

Her shoulders sag a little. Defeat. "I work for King Movers," she whispers.

My eyes widen in shock.

Rose...her friend...and her brother, they're both her bosses. Holy shit. Rosalie and Royce King. King Movers. The business I closed a deal with just the day after we arrived here.

"Your friend Rose is Rosalie King," I state quietly, mostly to myself.

"Yeah," she croaks. "Rose told me a couple of days after your meeting. I was—am—on vacation. Since they had a contract with Black's Wheels—and Jacob is close to Embry—Royce told me to take an extended vacation 'til they could find another auto shop for the trucks." She sniffles. I'm still processing. "Embry has developed a thing for making me suffer," she says with a rueful smile, pain still evident in her eyes, and I could very well strangle the fucker. "And with the size of Royce and Rose's business, we often have trucks going to service, which means Jacob and his employees are around a lot. Including Embry. And I just needed to get away for a while, so when Royce told me to take a long vacation, I gratefully accepted. I go back in two weeks—the week after the swimming lessons are over."

Jesus Christ, what a mess.

I scrub my hands over my face.

"I just didn't know Royce was in contact with you," she whimpers. "And he had already made a deal with you before Rose came in, right?"

Yes.

I remember the meeting. Rosalie was late. And when she did show up, she was nice, a bit wary and nervous now that I think about it, but nice.

A humorless chuckle escapes me as I lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees.

Now I know what she was so wary about, of course. She knew exactly who I was.

"I'm tired," I sigh heavily, eyes on the floor. "I'm so fucking tired."

"I'm sorry," she chokes out. "I'll call a cab-"

Blindly, I reach out and grab her wrist.

"Not the kind of tired I was talking about, Bella," I say without looking up from the floor.

60.

Still gripping her wrist, still leaning forward on my knees, I peer up at her.

I stare at her.

I open my mouth but close it again.

She cries silently.

I'm sick of the pain in her eyes.

I'm sick of being out of control. I feel hopeless and useless, because whatever I do, no matter how much I want it, Bella still tries to distance herself from me.

"Do you have any idea how much I missed you over the past eight years?" I ask quietly.

She crumbles. "Edward..."

"I need you in my life, Bella," I continue. "If you run now, I will fucking follow."

When I told Kate what I decided for Jo's middle name, she argued with me. Said that it was tasteless and too much of a reminder. She viewed Bella as a fucking incubator, and I viewed her as great friend. I wanted to remember Bella, and Kate wanted to pretend she never existed.

I couldn't do that.

Forgetting Bella was impossible and out of question, and I'll be damned if I'm going to let Bella forget.

"Don't say our friendship didn't matter to you," I tell her.

"Of course it mattered!" she cries, pulling her hand away. Always away. "It still fucking does, Edward! Why do you think it hurts to see you?"

"Then stay!" I shoot back.

"I can't," she hisses, anger flashing in her eyes. "I can't sit by and be your friend on the side while you go home each night to take care of our daught-" She stops there, eyes widening in fear.

My own eyes grow huge, too, and her slip goes on repeat in my head.

Our daughter.

She views Jo as our daughter?

You could hear a pin drop.

61.

“Bella...”

She tries to get off the couch, but I push her back.

“Don’t. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. I need to get out of here.”

“The fuck you do,” I tell her. “We’re gonna talk about this now.”

With her on the couch, I sit down across from her on the coffee table. I hold both her wrists in my hands. Her knees trapped between mine.

My heart is pounding, and I’m not sure which emotion wins. There’s relief and elation...trepidation and caution.

I speak even though she refuses to look me in the eye.

“You want Jo in your life, too,” I state softly, still shocked about the revelation. I thought it was painful for her to be around Jo because it would always remind her of what she gave up, not because she wants Jo in her life now. Maybe it’s both, but the fact that she wants Jo—that she actually sees Jo as a daughter to her—yeah, I can work with that.

“She’s your daughter,” she mumbles in an empty voice. “I shouldn’t have said what I said.”

“I disagree,” I say. “I’m glad you did. You’re right; she is my daughter, Bella, but that doesn’t mean you can’t be in her life. In a way, you already are.” At that, she finally looks up. I give her a small smile. “I’ve already told her about her birth mom.”

“What?” she breathes out.

I cock a brow. "What the fuck do you take me for, woman? You know me. You know how much you mattered to me eight years ago. Now, why the hell wouldn't I tell Jo about the amazing girl who gave birth to her?"

"She just doesn't know it's you—her swim instructor," I add. "But she knows of Bella."

"Oh, God," she chokes out. "You actually told her about me?"

I smile when I see the hope in her eyes. "Of course I did." I reach up and brush away tears from her cheeks. "I'm not saying I'm going to tell her tomorrow that you are who you are, because we have a lot to talk about. But don't run away, Bella. Seriously. We can work this out."

I don't know in what capacity Bella wants to be in Jo's life, and I won't make any decisions based on guesses or hopes. Not that I know what I'm hoping for, but I do know that Bella is a great person. I'd be a fool not to fight for this.

Liar. You know exactly what you want.

I sigh.

I'm not giving Bella everything, but I am letting her in.

"We'll take things slow and see where it goes, okay?" I suggest. She nods, a fresh wave of tears spilling over. But the smile is there now, making everything better. "We have a shitload to think about and talk about, but you're not going anywhere, right?"

"No," she whispers, for some weird fucking reason blushing. Shit, I don't think I've ever seen Bella blush. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Good." I grin. "Now, I'm fucking exhausted, and it's too late for you to go home."

62.

"Edward..."

Fuck. Yes.

Bella.

I smile, watching as she hops out of her truck in front of my garage. She's so goddamn hot in her denim shorts and wife-beater. The summer heat creates a light sheen of perspiration on her skin, and it makes my mouth water. She approaches slowly, eyes of a predator and smirk of a wicked...um, something. Angel, devil, sin. She looks good enough to eat.

"Edward..."

Mmm, yeah. Anything, baby.

She places her hand on my bicep, looking up at me from under her lashes. But I don't know why she's shaking me.

"Bella," I mumble...smiling then frowning...fading, fading, oh fuck.

"Edward."

I wake up.

And Bella's looking down at me.

Shit.

"Uh, something wrong?" I mutter, voice full of sleep.

Even in the darkness of the living room, I can see her sheepish smile.

"I can't sleep."

Oh. One might think I would be the one who couldn't sleep since I got the couch and she got my bed.

I insisted, though, and she surrendered after a while.

"Is it okay if I watch some TV?" she whispers.

I nod sleepily and close my eyes before holding up my covers. "Get in."

Had I not been so out of it, I wouldn't have done this, seeing as I have two plush chairs next to the couch. Alas...

"Um, Edward?"

"Just..." I huff and blindly reach for her hand. "Get in, honey. The remote is on the table."

With a simple tug, she ends up next to me on the couch.

I want Garage Bella to come back.

Sleep takes over again.

63.

That state...when you're not quite awake yet...it's the best one. The remnants of the night's dreams still linger, but I'm conscious enough to know that they were dreams...asleep enough to feel the warm body pressed against mine...and lucid enough to wish that they weren't dreams.

All night, I've dreamt about her.

I breathe in deeply, burying my face in the crook of her neck.

My arm around her waist tightens its hold.

She hums and hitches her leg over my hip, and I groan quietly into her hair as her other leg—thigh, actually—presses against my erection. At the same time, I feel warmth against my own thigh which is nestled between...oh, yeah... She moves a little. I hope I don't wake up yet.

"Fuck," she whimpers. "More..."

I moan and pull her closer, allowing my hand slide down to her ass. I give it a squeeze, at which my already-hard cock hardens further. Seeking friction, I push forward, pressing against her thigh again. She responds with a slow push of her own, and I nuzzle deeper, reaching the skin on her neck. My mouth latches on. Her scent...flavor...fuck.

"Baby," I groan. My hand wanders again, this time upward. Her side, her stomach, her ribcage, under her top, and she arches into me. "Jesus fuck, Bella." I reach the underside of her breast. No bra. My thumb brushes over her tightening nipple. We both shudder. More. I cup her breast in my hand, moaning when I discover that it doesn't fit—my hand isn't big enough to cup all of her. And, for the fucking record, I have big hands. God, yes.

In a swift movement, laced with harsh need, I end up on top of her.

She moans, and my cock is right there.

Only boxers and panties separate us as I push.

"Edward..."

"Oh, fuck," I moan against her skin.

Problem is, the haze is clearing.

And Bella's still here.

We both freeze at the same time.

Not a dream, man.

64.

With my heart pounding furiously, I lift my head from her neck.

I can't breathe, I can't swallow, I can barely think.

Her eyes, as I meet them, are dark and wide. Cheeks flushed.

I remember what she moaned.

My name.

I shudder.

That oughta mean she dreamt about me before she woke up, right?

Just like I dreamt about her.

Through my boxers, I can feel the heat and dampness from her.

So wet.

With a quiet groan, my eyes flutter closed, and I clench my jaw as I try to use my fucking brain.

This isn't right. We have so much to talk about. This will only complicate things if rushed. We're probably on completely different pages. I don't even know what she wants. Later. I don't know what she wants later. Right now, it's pretty obvious what she wants. Or at least what her body wants.

I throw caution to the wind.

“Tell me to stop and I will,” I say quietly, and my voice is thick with both sleep and desire. As soon as the words leave me, I open my eyes again and look down at her intently.

She sucks in a quick breath, pupils dilating further.

No response. Which means...?

Fuck me. She’s not stopping this.

Regarding her carefully, I lower my head slowly. Closer. My eyes flick to her mouth—her full lips, slightly parted. Then her eyes again. Still no response, but her chest is heaving rapidly. Shit, so is mine. Does she feel this, too? Does she feel what I feel? The attraction, the need, the confusion...

My mouth ghosts over hers, slowly, just testing, just brushing.

I close my eyes and add pressure when she starts responding.

Jesus.

“Bella,” I breathe out, and it’s in relief.

I kiss her fully, letting the tip of my tongue dart out to wet my lips. In the movement, I taste her lips, too. She’s driving me insane here. So much has changed, but at the same time, it hasn’t changed enough. Or fast enough. I’m suddenly starving for her—for what she has and for who she is. She’s not the fifteen-year-old girl anymore, but even back then, I felt a strong connection to her. The things we had in common...have in common. Fuck, I want her. But I want it all. All of her.

I groan and let go. We move together. Hands roaming. She fists my hair. I cup her tits. We kiss each other hungrily. My cock throbs as I slide against her, as I rub against her pussy. Christ. Yes. More. I moan.

"Stop."

65.

Her word echoes in my head several times.

Stop.

Stop.

Stop.

I'm stunned, dazed, shocked, nervous, and more than a little disappointed.

Bella pushes me off her easily.

Before I know it, she's pacing in front of the TV.

My thoughts are jumbled and running a mile a minute. I'm also wound up, unable to get the feel of her body against mine out of my head. That she's only wearing her wife-beater and black panties isn't helping.

"I'm sorry," she says, shaking her head. Still pacing. "This," she waves between us, "is...I don't know. I'm confused." Join the club. "This isn't supposed to happen." I frown, not liking where this is going. At all. "This isn't supposed to happen to me." Halting her pacing, she turns and stares at me. She doesn't look mad or...fuck, I don't know. "We kissed," she states dumbly.

We did a bit more than that, honey.

"Yeah," I repeat slowly, and I have no idea what's going on inside that head of hers.

She nods then shakes her head. More pacing. "Yeah, that doesn't happen to me-"

"You keep saying that," I interrupt and let out a frustrated breath. But more than anything, I realize that I'm once again scared shitless that she's going to run away. "Tell me what the problem is instead so that I can...fix it."

She stops again, eyes intent to, I don't know, read me?

"You were my hero," she blurts out, just suddenly, and what? "Eight years ago. You were my hero, Edward. Half of me was sure you weren't real."

I furrow my brow, leaning forward on my knees. Erection's gone down at least, so there's that. Don't need the covers anymore.

She's not done. "I mean, yeah, I noticed even back then that you were hot as hell," she says matter-of-factly, and a weird noise escapes me. That tone is my daughter's trademark. "But I can't say that I thought of you romantically..." She licks her lips, thinking, frowning, looking so pensive. My brows knit together completely; she's got to be an impossible math problem to solve. I dare the fuckers at Harvard to give it a go. "And then, when I saw your picture on Cullen Auto's website two years ago, I started having these..."

"These what?"

Is she running away or not? That's my major concern.

"Dreams."

"Huh?"

She huffs then walks toward me. "Dreams, Edward. I started dreaming of you."

Right.

I don't get it. "What kind of dreams?"

Sexual ones?

"Dreams that you'd find me."

Oh.

And then I stand up, which puts us chest-to-face, and I point out, "I did find you, Bella." Sorta. Okay, not really. We stumbled onto each other. Our paths crossed. "Is this what you're talking about? Things that don't happen to you? 'Cause it did happen."

God, I need coffee. My brain doesn't work yet.

"No. I mean that things I want...they don't come to me—they don't happen. Ever." Her eyes well up. "I don't get what I want. That's not how it works in my life. Even if I sometimes think I deserve better, it doesn't happen."

Well, shit.

66.

To hear her say that, that she never gets what she wants, is pretty devastating.

"What do you want?" I ask quietly, cupping her cheek. My thumb brushes over the soft skin under her eye, wiping away a stray tear. "Tell me what you want."

She snuffles and lowers her head, but freezes. "Oh, God," she breathes out, and color me confused again. What is it now?

Following her gaze, I...oh. That.

Her eyes are now on my chest. Or on the ink over my heart, to be precise.

Josie Belle Cullen.

Next, her eyes move to my left arm. Her fingers follow, ghosting over my skin, causing me to shiver.

She pauses when she comes across a truck on my forearm, and she looks up at me, to which I give her a small nod, because yes, it's her old Chevy. It's one of the tattoos I got in memory of both Charlie and Bella. To make sure I'd never forget the day we spend out in their garage, talking about restoring cars. The text, "To cherish and restore" is written over the car, standing for both my passion for cars and the memory of the Swans.

"Edward," she whispers, two fingers tracing Jo's footprint from when she was two years old. It was the first tattoo I got in Tampa, and it represents the two of us settling down in Florida. "Is this...?" She looks up at me again, and I crack a smile. Her fingers hover over a stack of CDs, tilted to the side so that you can see clearly what they are. There are eleven of them—the same number of CDs Bella gave me while she was pregnant with Josie.

"Yeah," I murmur, clearing my throat. "They're the ones you gave me."

Tears are streaming down her face, but for the first time I can see that they're not tears of sadness. I think she's finally realizing how much she means to me and always did. I love her, there's no denying that, and though I've only loved her platonically so far, I'm sure it's changing. The intense need I've always had for her proves that she's someone special to me. Eight years ago, I craved her because we shared a lot. Those cravings haven't disappeared. They've only grown and evolved into more.

Bella says my name again, this time in a whimper, and she has reached the halftone red heart on my bicep. Treble clefs swirl around the heart like barbed wire, and in the middle of the heart, it says, "The most precious gift". It stands for everything Bella gave me eight years ago. Jo, her friendship, memories...

"Do you see now?" I ask quietly, imploringly. Her breath stutters as she looks me in the eye. "I want you to tell me what you want because I think I can give it to you."

If she wants my friendship, she can have it.

If she wants Jo's friendship, she can have it.

If she wants more...I'm pretty damn sure she can have that, too.

67.

"I think it's my turn," she responds softly, just above a whisper, then tells me to sit down on the couch. And when she tugs on the hem of her beater, I know she's going to show me her own tattoo.

Once seated, I have to swallow my desire as she stops right in front of me, so close, between my legs.

She rolls up her black beater, exposing her side and ribcage to me.

It's a tree branch. Cherry blossoms. Small flowers everywhere and numbers that swirl around the flowers.

One flower stands out in size, being twice as big as the rest, and the numbers that surround it are simple to decipher.

Jo's date of birth.

Reaching out, I brush my thumb over it.

"I've always loved her," she whispers, and I already know.

So, I lean forward and kiss it. With my hands on her thighs, I press gentle kisses over each number around the flower on her ribcage.

She exhales shakily. "This one..." She points to another flower, only one number next to it. Number five. "...is you."

I cock my head, curious.

"'E' is the fifth letter in the alphabet."

Ah.

I smile up at her, wondering, thinking, hoping, fucking wishing that we want the same things.

We could make it.

"I have a few here," she continues quietly, motioning at a group of six flowers. "They're for Dad, Rose, Royce, Alice, Sue—that's Dad's girlfriend—and, um..." She chuckles a little, and when I look up at her again, I see a faint blush covering her cheeks. "My dog."

I chuckle, too. "You have a dog?"

"Yeah. He's a beast, but I love him."

"What kind?" I ask, and my fingers slide up her thigh, ghosting over her tattoo. It's so beautiful and detailed, beginning on her thigh, ending on her ribcage.

"A brown Newfoundland."

Holy shit. Those are fucking huge.

Jo freaking loves dogs, but her dad? Not so much.

"Uh, is it nice?" I ask nervously.

She laughs. "Are you scared, Cullen?" I shoot her a playful glare. "Aww, you have nothing to be scared of. Cash is a huge teddy bear."

Cash.

I can't help but smile. "Cash?" 'Cause I remember.

"Yeah," she says, blushing again. "Anyway, back to the ink." I grin but say nothing. It looks like we're both full of dedications and tributes. "I, uh, have two more flowers planned—for Tanya and Felix." I nod in acknowledgment, recalling how the blonde from the bar yesterday stood up for Bella...to her own sister. "Moving on." She pushes down her panties a little, uncovering eight tiny flowers on her hip, sitting on a small branch. The lust I just felt is quickly pushed to the side when I realize what the flowers stand for. "One for each of Jo's birthdays." And I can see that one of them is newer. It was only a couple of months ago that she got it.

I kiss them, too. Slowly, gently, almost lazily, and my lips linger on her skin for a beat or two...

"Bella," I breathe out against her skin, hands caressing the backside of her thighs. "Tell me what you want."

68.

With a gentle nudge, she pushes me back against the couch. She straddles me, but I notice right away that it's not sexual. I'm not sure yet if that's what I would've preferred.

The day Bella and I said goodbye, I remember how I pressed our foreheads together and told her how amazing she was. This time, it's Bella who presses our foreheads together.

"These past five weeks," she sighs quietly, "seeing Jo in the water, getting to know her a little..."

I smile, knowing very well how you either fall hard for my girl or find her way too much. There's no in between 'cause Jo is... I laugh under my

breath. She's fucking insane, as I've stated before. And a few people—old teachers, mainly—think she's too much to deal with. But I don't care about what they say, 'cause to me she's perfect. Sure, she's wild and loud, but she's also a sweetheart. She's genuine and loving. A jokester, a prankster. Loyal to a fault. Brutally honest.

"She's awesome, you know," she chuckles quietly.

I grin and squeeze her hips.

"You've done an amazing job," she whispers, and it gets serious again. "I told you you'd be the best dad, didn't I?"

Yeah. She did.

Unable to find my words, I close the distance and kiss her cheek instead, again lingering longer than necessary.

"I want more," she admits in a breath. "I want her to know me." Her voice becomes thick with emotion. "And I'm so sorry for being selfish, but I'm really glad Kate's not in the picture."

Fuck, so am I.

No regrets.

I offered Kate everything, and she walked away. It wasn't like I was spending every moment back then talking about Bella or getting tattoos in her honor. I was too busy taking care of the little girl Kate refused to bond with. Clinging to the memory of Bella was something I started doing after I kicked Kate to the curb. Back then, just as well as right now, Bella is the most genuine woman I've ever met. No wonder I missed her.

"I'm selfish, too, then," I say quietly with a small shrug. "Her loss."

She takes a breath, looking extremely nervous and apprehensive all of a sudden.

“My gain?”

And there it is.

I nod, I cup her face, I cover her mouth with mine.

“I’m sorry,” I mumble, still kissing her. “I don’t mean to be presumptuous, but...” I peck her softly. “That’s what I wanted to hear. You’re her mother, Bella.”

She exhales, and I hear the relief—the weight lifting off of her shoulders.

“I want to earn it,” she says tearfully. “I want to deserve it.”

She already deserves it in my opinion, but I know what she means.

“I doubt there will be problems,” I say sincerely. “Josie wants what you already have.”

“And what’s that?” she asks nervously.

I can’t help but smile. She has nothing to be nervous about. “Loyalty, love, good taste in music,” we both chuckle, “and stability. She’s a fucking freak of nature, so she needs people who are always there to keep her grounded.” I smirk. “I do recall your dad saying similar stuff about a certain girl I used to know.” I give her hips a squeeze again. “A certain girl who happens to be sitting on my lap right now.”

She flushes. Again. Man, I love that. “Hey, I was a calm kid. Always quiet, and...”

“Yeah, and you’re full of shit, honey,” I laugh.

A sheepish smile. “Fine. I was a bit on the wild side.”

I remember Charlie saying, "Bella as a kid? Fucking crazy. One time I lost her at the grocery store...three times. Each time, I found her in the candy aisle. Not that she needed sugar to get high, that one."

"A bit on the wild side," I repeat, shaking my head in amusement.

"Whatever you say, Swan."

That earns me a wide smile.

"God, it feels good to hear that again," she sighs. Damn straight. No fucking Call. She's a Swan. "I'm so done being stupid."

"Sounds good to me," I murmur. Not that I think she was stupid. She was just sick of being sad. She wanted normalcy and went for it. I can't blame her for wanting. "So..." I look her in the eye. "We've covered Jo. What about you and me?"

It's obvious now that the attraction is mutual, but I have no idea what Bella is ready for, and I refuse to make assumptions.

69.

"I'm gonna be honest here," she says, sliding forward on my lap. Jesus fuck, chest to chest. I curse under my breath and tighten my hold on her hips. God, those tits of hers... Incoherence. "A part of me is ready to continue what we started when we woke up."

Yes. Me, too. A large part of me. No pun intended.

"But I think we should be smart and slow it down at least a little," she admits, and I'm a bit happy to see reluctance in her features. "I'm crazy attracted to you, Edward." I groan when she kisses my jaw. "And you're the second best man I know...or the best... No, wait. You share first place."

I chuckle huskily and duck my head to kiss her neck. "As long as I share it with Charlie and not some fuckhead, I'm all right."

"Definitely not some fuckhead," she moans softly as I nip at the spot below her ear. "I'm a daddy's girl, remember?"

I do. I also know another daddy's girl—one who will be home soon.

Sighing, I stop kissing her and face her. Truth. "I want you, Bella," I admit. "All of you. But you're probably right; we should take it slow. Just...no more hiding, okay? No running. This is it. We'll tell Jo when we're ready, and we'll tell her about us then, too."

"Sounds like my dreams just came true," she answers softly, smiling. "Aside from the taking-things-slow part." She scrunches her nose, much like Josie does. It makes me grin. "That's just what I think is necessary."

I agree.

"By the way, do you know what time it is?"

I check the clock above the flat screen. "Almost eleven. Jo will be home in half an hour."

"Oh, shit. I have to get home," she says, quickly getting off my lap. "I have to work in two hours."

I watch, in a daze, as she flits around, locating her skirt, bra, and shoes.

"Work on a Saturday at one thirty?" I ask with a cocked eyebrow.

And I thought she was on an extended vacation.

She chuckles. "Yeah, last night before we went out..." She grunts as she puts on her shoe. "Rose called me and asked if I could cover the Daytona drive today." She straightens and blows hair away from her face, which is

so fucking cute. "Mike, who was supposed to do it, called in sick yesterday morning. So, Rose took his first shift last night—that's why she couldn't come to Alice's birthday party—and..." She furrows her brows. "What was I saying? Oh, right. I'm taking his shift today. We have four people who are driving down there." She shrugs. "A big company moving to new locales."

Sweet mother of...

Sorry, but hearing Bella talk about driving trucks...it just does something to me.

"So, you're driving to Daytona," I say slowly, willing my cock to not wake up. "In a truck."

She smirks, probably seeing through me. "Yeah."

I groan and close my eyes, falling back against the couch again.

So. Fucking. Hot.

"I'm gonna go call a cab," she chuckles.

"No, wait," I say, not making a move to get up. "I can call Jo's babysitter and ask if she can take her a little longer. I can drive you."

Please let me drive you. We can talk about trucks.

"Uh-uh. I'll take a cab. It's a two-hour drive back and forth. There's no way you're driving me."

With that said, I hear her leaving the living room.

I follow, still wearing nothing but boxers.

Unfortunately, I fail to convince her to let me drive her back to Atlantic Beach, but she does allow me to pay for the cab. And before she leaves, she kisses me and tells me that she'll call me.

Which she does, ten minutes after she left. "Is it weird that I miss you already?" she asks, and the smile on my face lasts throughout the weekend.

70.

I let out a frustrated breath as Jo hops out of the car and sprints toward the beach.

"No running, dammit!" I shout. "Josie!"

She comes to screeching halt in the sand before she starts jumping up and down. "Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow! The sand is burning me alive, Daddy! Hurry! I'm too young to die!"

I roll my eyes, but I still obey and hurry over to hand over her flip-flops. I'm so whipped for this girl.

"You've got yourself to blame," I remind her. She huffs and pouts. "No running; do you hear me?"

"Loud and clear, el Capitan," she mumbles. "Sorry. I just wanna swim, ya know?"

I sigh, unable to withhold the smile. "Still, no running, okay?" She nods in understanding. "Good. Now we can go."

This is the last week of her swimming lessons. Come Friday, I'm afraid we'll be able to hear Jo's screams of protest across the state.

As we get closer and closer to Bella and the rest who have already arrived, I already know what song I'm gonna go with. It's something we've done since she took off for Daytona on Saturday. Whenever our mood has changed, we've texted each other a song where either the lyrics

or the title match what we're feeling. That's not even two whole days, but we've still managed to cram in fifty texts or so.

"Hi, Bella!" Jo calls before looking up at me pleadingly. "Can I run now?"

I huff out a chuckle. "Fine. Go fetch, pup."

"Funny, old mutt," she retorts, and then she's gone.

For the record, I'm not old. I'm not a mutt, either.

Kids these days.

By the time I reach Bella, Jo is talking a mile a minute about what she's done over the weekend. And for some reason, Bella's not having a hard time understanding Josie's jumbled rambling. But then I remember that Bella was the same when she was little. I swear, it's like a different language. The words come out so fast. It took me a long while to understand that shit.

Now I'm fluent in Jo Speak.

"...and then on Sunday, Dad and I went to his garage and we worked and we ate ice cream and I helped him with the wrenches 'cause I know them very well and then Uncle Jazz and Callie stopped by with pizza and the painting is done in the garage and it's so cool 'cause Dad is opening the garage early and not in August as Gramps and Dad first decided and-"

"And take a damn breath, baby," I tell her.

"Oh," she breathes out. "Right. Breathing. Gotcha."

"Hey, Edward," Bella chuckles.

"Hey," I return, and I want to kiss her. But I don't. Instead I say, "'18 and Life'—Skid Row."

She laughs. "Ooh, that bad?"

"You bet. The kid brings it outta me. What about you?"

Her smile is wide. "'Welcome to the Jungle'. Gotta love it, though."

Yeah, but that's 'cause Bella isn't a stranger to crazy. I'm not either, obviously, but shit, I'm not twenty anymore.

"Guns N' Roses are cool," Jo comments. "But ya know what's even cooler? Swimming. When are we gonna swim?"

"She was a fish in another life, I fucking swear," I say, shaking my head. Bella just laughs, of course. I sigh and squat down to Jo's level. "You're gonna swim in a minute, don't worry. And I'm gonna go."

"See ya in two hours," she says sweetly, rubbing our noses together.

I smile. "Three hours, actually, and I'm not picking you up." I keep my voice casual. "I have work, so Bella offered to drive you. I'll be in the garage, waiting with take-out."

She chews on her lip for a moment, processing...and then she shrugs.

"Okay. Can we have Thai food?"

I peer up at Bella with a pointed look, silently telling her...I told you there wouldn't be any issues.

We agreed on this just this morning, 'cause Callie's sick, which is why Jazz isn't here. And I really do have work. But after talking to Bella about it, she nervously offered to bring Jo back to Lakeside, and in return, I offered dinner.

It's a good start.

"Thai food it is," I agree with a nod. "Love you, kiddo."

"Love you, too, Dad."

71.

"Everything's done, Dad," I reassure, cradling the phone between my shoulder and cheek. My old man's a bit nervous—he always is before we open another shop. "I've already told you." I reach for the rag on the hood of the car, wiping my hands before standing up. Another job well done. Geoffrey McCarty—Jasper's friend's dad—has already started sending his cars my way, but they rarely need major work. "All we need now is PR, and you've taken care of that already."

"Okay, okay, you're right," he sighs. "Saturday, then? Your mother and I will come up, too."

"Yep."

"And you're sure ads in the locals are enough."

"Positive. I've already closed nineteen deals, so it's not like we don't have anything to do."

I have even begun to scout for more property. One auto shop isn't enough if we're gonna drive Black's Wheels out of Jacksonville.

"All right, I'll call Jazz later to go over the numbers," Dad tells me just as Emmett McCarty enters the garage. Well, I presume it's him, 'cause he looks exactly like his dad, who called earlier and told me that his son would be there to pick up the Impala. I give him a quick wave before ending the conversation with Dad.

Once I've hung up the phone, I say, "Emmett, right?"

He grins. "That's right. And you're Jasper's cousin?"

I nod and shake his hand. "Edward Cullen. Nice to meet you."

"You too, and welcome to the area-"

He's cut off there. By a shout.

"CASH! NO!"

Now, why do I have the feeling I'm not about to meet Johnny?

Aside from the fact that he's dead, that is.



72.

Tom Hanks was a pussy for complaining about Hooch, 'cause the monster running into the garage bay at that point is twice the size of a fucking horse. Okay, maybe not, but shit!

"Your dog?" Emmett asks nervously.

I shake my head furiously, watching as the beast runs toward me.

Someone in the distance is still shouting for Cash, but the damn dog doesn't stop, he doesn't stop, he doesn't stop!

"Fuck!" That's me...as I fall on my ass.

I can't remember the dog barreling into me, but I sure as hell remember the pain as I hit my head on the concrete floor.

Thud.

zLzz zzLzz Lzzz

zzLzz zLzzz zzzLz

"He's going to hate me."

Laughs. "Bella, he's not gonna hate you."

"She's right. Dad's not gonna hate you, I'm telling you."

I groan.

"He's waking up, ladies."

"Ohmygosh, Daddy, you're freaking me out. Wake up. That's an order."

I feel her little hands on my face.

Does that mean I'm not dead?

I grimace. My head is fucking pounding.

"Edward?" That would be Bella's soft voice. "I'm so, so sorry. Can you open your eyes?"

Depends. "Is Cujo still here?" I grumble.

"It's Cash, Dad, and he's right here. My little teddy bear." Ugh. I hear the slobbering, dammit. And when Jo starts talking baby-talk with the monster, I'm thinking that maybe I don't love my daughter that much anymore. Traitor. "Oh yes, you're my little teddy bear, Cash. Woofsie, woofsie, so adorable..."

That's it. "Jo, you're grounded," I grunt, cracking one eye open, and then the other.

"On what charges?" she asks, looking down at me.

"On hating your father," I tell her.

"Ridiculous," she huffs, turning back to her teddy bear from hell. "It's not Cash's fault anyway. Big Guy told us everything."

My eyes find Bella, whose eyes are tearing up, and that's just not right. I manage to give her a small smile and grab her hand. "Don't be sad, beautiful," I mutter and pull her hand to my lips. I kiss her knuckles. "It's not your fault your dog is the devil."

"For the love of one-armed drummers, it's not Cash's fault!" Jo exclaims. "A gust of wind tipped you over. Not this little cutie."

A gust of...!

By the way, the "little cutie" is three times Jo's size. Sorta.

A chuckle or two in the background has my attention, and I seek out the source without any plans on getting up. I quickly locate Emmett, who I assume Jo has named Big Guy, but there's someone else, too. And it makes sense, 'cause it wasn't Bella's voice I heard earlier, you know, before Cujo barged in. So, I figure that Blondie next to Emmett is responsible.

Wait. Blondie. I recognize her.

Yep. Rosalie King.

"One-armed drummers?" Emmett grins.

I shrug sorta sluggishly. "She has a thing for the drummer in Def Leppard."

"A thing?" Josie snorts. "The man is a god, I'm telling you."

I chuckle, though it's cut off by a groan when the midgets in my head start up with vengeance. "All right, help me off this floor."

"Yeah, 'cause we're going to the hospital," Bella says.

"No way," I huff. "I'm fine. Just give me a couple of painkillers."

"Painkillers 'cause the wind tipped you over," Josie mumbles under her breath. "Talk about embarrassing."

"Okay, what the fuck is my daughter talking about?" I demand, looking at Emmett as I sit up. "Tell me."

Josie starts humming "Dude Looks Like a Lady", and I frown at her in question, which she responds to with an innocent smile. "What? I just started thinking about that song...for some reason. Though it's more acts like a lady..." Giggle, giggle.

I give Emmett a pointed look. Start talking, dude.

"Well..." He hesitates and rubs the back of his neck. "Uh, Cash stopped right in front of you. He didn't knock you over, man. You stumbled backward and..." He shrugs. "You got lucky, 'cause your head fell on that rag over there..."

"Like I said, Dad. A gust of wind."

73.

A little while later, we're all sitting in the back devouring dinner. Rosalie and Emmett are also here. I guess my manly fall brought us all together or some lame shit like that.

Rosalie was here in the first place to drop off Cash—she's been watching the dog over the weekend—but she's on her way to Tallahassee after this, hence driving over here, 'cause it's on her way. She doesn't live in Atlantic

Beach, but in Jacksonville, a part which is closer to Lakeside. And Bella had told her that she was coming here after the swimming lesson.

I also found out that I was only unconscious for about two minutes and, in that time, Bella and Jo had arrived.

But it's all good now. My headache is almost gone, and I'm not dizzy or tired.

My ego is a bit wounded, much to my daughter's amusement, but whatever.

"So, are you excited about Saturday?" Bella asks, reaching for another summer roll.

"Definitely." I nod. "The signs are going up on Wednesday when a few ads will run in the locals. After that, it's all out."

"Well, I know some people who are going to freak out," she comments with a smirk.

Oh, yeah. Jacob Black. Probably Embryo Call, too.

"Will you be here on Saturday, Bella?" Jo asks her, all while patting the dog who's sitting next to her. "Nana and Grampa will also be here. Grampa's wicked cool."

Bella looks at me, and I nod, silently saying yes to whatever she's asking. Yeah, they will be here, and yeah, I want you to be here, too.

She smiles, eyes still focused on me. "Yes, I'll be here."

"Hey, maybe you could ask Charlie to stop by, too," I suggest.

And her smile widens.

Had I not been busy acting like a lovesick fool, I would've noticed the looks Jo's giving me.

74.

"Is Bella gonna sleep here tonight?" Josie asks as I tuck her into bed.

I shake my head. "We're just gonna watch a movie or something, and then she'll go home."

Unfortunately, that's the truth.

"Hmm. Okay. Love you, Dad."

I smile and dip down to kiss her on the forehead. "Love you, too, baby. Only sweet dreams, promise?"

"Yes, sir."

After flicking off the light and closing her door, I return to the living room.

I'm not too surprised to find her studying the photos above the couch again.

Cash is asleep in front of the TV, and I reluctantly admit that after our first encounter, he's been harmless and calm. Still, I bet he's the devil incarnate, just waiting for the right opportunity to strike. I'm telling you.

"Hey," I say quietly, coming up behind her. I wrap my arms around her waist and kiss her neck. "You okay?"

"Yeah," she sighs softly and turns around in my arms. "Did you see that Emmett got Rose's number earlier?"

I chuckle. "Yeah, I caught that."

"Wanna watch a movie?" I murmur, nuzzling her cheek.

"Mmhmm," she hums as I keep trailing kisses on her face and neck.

Fuck the movie.

75.

I kiss her softly, hovering over her on the couch. She wraps her legs around me, encouraging me. I groan quietly, our tongues meeting at the same time as I the tip of my cock touches her pussy. Sweet, hellish torture. I'm not sure if I should curse the fact that we're in our underwear, or if it's a good thing we still have them on. Seven fucking years since I got laid. Obviously, I'm eager. But I don't want to rush anything.

"Edward, more," she breathes out, deepening the kiss. "Please..."

I moan and slide my hand up her stomach, under her shirt, not stopping until I reach her breast. In response, she arches into me and whimpers. Her nipple constricts under my touch, and I can't help myself. I can't fucking stop. I move a little harder, my erection throbbing at the friction we cause.

"Jesus," she mutters. "Stop."

The fuck?

I lift my head to look at her. "Again?" I ask, confused and fucking horny. "What's wrong?" This time.

"You," she says bluntly, causing my eyes to widen. "You're treating me like a virgin, and," she huffs, "I think we both know I'm not one. I'm not gonna break."

I choke on a breath.

"Just..." She nips at my jaw. "Don't hold back, Cullen," she whispers.

"Touch me like you mean it."

I frown down at her.

What does she mean? I don't hold back. Much. I mean, yeah, I hold back, but you can't exactly just let go. Women don't like that. Trust me, I know. I've heard it plenty of times in the past. It has to be sweet and gentle. So, what the fuck is Bella on about?

"I do mean it," I say, still frowning.

I'm a bit annoyed, 'cause she's killing my hard-on.

She purses her lips, saying nothing.

For a while.

Then she does. "I want you on your back."

76.

"Um...okay?" I mumble, climbing off her. I end up on my back, still confused, but when she straddles me, I get the idea that we're not stopping at least. That's something.

"Christ, you're hot," she whispers, watching my torso hungrily. "So muscular." I chuckle incredulously under her gaze. This is definitely new territory for me. "What?" She dips down and kisses me. Pecking, nibbling, she sucks my bottom lip into her mouth...then releases it. "What's so funny?"

Nothing.

It's more that I'm rendered stupid and speechless.

She's so...vocal. Honest. Not shy. The light is still on. And...holy fuck... I watch as she pulls her tank-top off...not shying away, not hiding, not wanting blankets or anything.

"God, you're fucking beautiful," I groan and sit up. I lick my lips, hands on her hips, and I look her in the eye, silently asking if this is okay. She just nods and smiles seductively. "Fuck," I whisper. I lower my mouth to her chest and trail kisses until I reach her nipple. With a moan, I wrap my lips around it, and she fists my hair, whimpering in pleasure.

With both hands, I cup her luscious tits and knead them slowly, my mouth never leaving her nipples. If it's not on one, it's on the other. And she moans and whimpers and grinds her hot pussy against me. This is what she likes? This is what she wants? Judging by her moans as I get rougher and rougher, I'd say...yes.

"Oh, fuck," she cries out as my teeth graze her flesh. I moan as she persistently grinds her pussy over my cock. "So good, so good..."

Jesus, she's driving me insane.

"Edward," she gasps, pushing me away slightly. Then more. Leaning forward as I fall back, kissing hungrily and passionately, tongues mingling, breaths exchanged, and hands roaming firmly. She doesn't want gentle and careful. Just the thought makes my fucking balls tighten.

"Goddammit," I hiss, thrusting into her. My hands are back on her hips, this time with fingers digging in. I push her down on me. I feel how wet she is. God. "Bella, I need to come," I admit between kisses. "I swear you'll be the death of me, woman."

Her entire body shudders all of a sudden, and it takes me a beat or two to understand that she's actually on the verge of climaxing. I act on instinct, needing to see this, to feel it, to be responsible for it. So, without thinking, I slide a hand between us, push her panties aside, and slam two fingers deep inside of her.

Holy shit.

"Oh-" She chokes on a moan, nodding furiously against my shoulder, and I groan embarrassingly loudly in the crook of her neck. She wants it. I finger her deeply and hard, all while rubbing my thumb over her wet clit. A part of me is so out of it. This feeling...it's all surreal.

"Come on, baby," I whisper huskily in her ear. "You like this?" She whimpers and nods, and I feel her tensing up. "You like it when I finger-fuck you?"

She sucks in a breath. She goes completely rigid. She fucking comes.

I can't stop watching her.

77.

"Fuck, that was amazing," she says breathlessly and starts peppering me with kisses. In my lust-filled haze, I croak out a small laugh, but it's not my fault. It's her. All her. Her...enthusiasm. "Mmm, my turn," she whispers against my lips.

Fuck. Yes.

However, before she can do anything, I suggest that we move this to my bedroom.

"Lead the way," is her response.

And lead I do.

Soon, we're behind closed and locked doors, and we tumble down together on my bed.

"God, baby," I moan as she pushes me back onto the mattress. I'm ready to explode. And her mouth... So eager. She kisses her way down my chest, making me hiss in pleasure when she playfully bites my left nipple. Hands. Her hands, they move down.

I swallow thickly. She's down there. Fingers dipping into the waistband of my boxers and I lift and she pulls them down and she stares at my hard cock and, and, and I'm fucking dying. Where did this girl come from?

"You don't have to," I say quickly when I see her lowering her head. Some women don't like giving oral, and I don't want her to think that I demand that. 'Cause I don't.

Plus, I just figured she'd go with her hand.

"I want to," she tells me softly.

She wants to. She fucking wants to.

Propping myself up on my elbows—'cause, let's face it, I'm not missing this—I watch as she lowers her head again, and this time she doesn't stop until the head of my cock is in her mouth. Sweet motherfuckin'...

I curse.

She licks the underside of my erection, starting with my balls, ending with the head, and I moan, I moan so fucking loudly. More curses follow. Holy fuck, she sucks me in. I shudder. She cups my balls. She licks some more. I groan some more. Hell, don't ever stop, honey.

"Bella," I breathe out. Tentatively, I reach out my hand and caress her cheek—the hollowed-out cheek. Then her lips, lips that are wet and tightly wrapped around me. "Fuck, you feel good," I grunt, instinctively thrusting once. Just once, and I'm about to apologize for it, but she nods her head.

Again, she's killing me.

Her breathing is labored when she releases me with a wet pop. "Let go, Edward."

I stare down at her.

Let go.

Let go.

I give her a quick nod, suddenly feeling the need to hold my breath for some reason.

As she sucks me in again, I let go. I fall back completely against the bed and close my eyes. She wants this. She told me. So, I let go. With a deep breath, I thread my fingers through her hair. I feel the warmth and the wetness surrounding me, I feel her tongue as she licks, her lips as she fucking suckles me.

"Won't be long, baby," I moan, slowly thrusting in and out of her hot mouth. She hums around me, the vibrations from it causing my abs to clench. "Oh, fuck." I hit the back of her throat. She speeds up, moaning and humming. My eyes are screwed shut. I push harder. She asked for it. The woman moans again. "Bella...ungh... Jesus, your mouth feels so fucking good!" I groan. Faster, harder. Deeper. "That's it..." Almost, almost, fuck, she tugs on my balls. "Baby, stop. I'm gonna come..."

She ignores my warning.

Every muscle in my body constricts fiercely, and I feel as the orgasm shoots through me, small eruptions coming from every imaginable direction. Engulfed by hot and wet, my cock pulses three times as I release down her throat. I'm not breathing. My hands fisting the sheets. The pleasure is just too fucking great. Unlike anything I can remember.

"Holy fuck." And then I'm panting like I've just run a marathon. I blink. I try to gain my bearings. But as spent and drained as I feel, the need to be closer to Bella takes over easily, so I push myself up...only to catch the sight of her licking her lips. Yeah, I groan and flop back on the mattress again.

Killing. Me.

"Get over here," I say, still out of breath. "Right now."

She giggles, which makes me smile this ridiculous smile, and crawls toward me, over me, on me...whatever. And then she's right there, peering down at me with a soft expression. Beautiful. Cupping the back of her neck, I pull her down on me and cover her mouth with mine.

"Wait," she mumbles. "I just need to brush my teeth."

Fuck that. "Why?"

She touches her lips, frowning a little. "Because I just had your..." Even in the dim light, I can see the blush on her cheeks.

Oh, so now she's being coy?

"So?" I mutter, pulling her down once more. "Kiss me."

Nose to nose. "You...you don't mind?"

I laugh a little, because she's insane. "No."

"Oh," she breathes out.

Silly girl.

We kiss, and it changes. One second, it's wild with teeth clashing and moans escaping. The next second, it's sweet with lips brushing and soft sighs.

"Stay," I mumble, once again hovering over her. By now, we're under the covers and underwear has been shed. "Stay the night."

Her naked body against mine is amazing. There's no way I wanna let her drive home now.

Plus, I'm pretty sure I've fallen completely in love with this woman.

"I'll stay."

79.

Song: Sideways by Citizen Cope.

When I wake up the next morning, I can see that it's still early.

I'm not the only one awake, though.

Bella is currently trailing lazy kisses on my chest.

"Mornin', baby," I mumble sleepily and tighten my arms around her.

"Good morning," she whispers.

I hiss when her thigh brushes against my morning wood.

Warmth rushes through me, just because she stayed the night.

"I love this," I admit, voice thick with sleep and lust, as I roll us over.

"Waking up with you..."

She hums and drags her short fingernails down my back.

I shiver.

"Me, too," she breathes out as I drop an open-mouthed kiss on her shoulder. "So right..."

That's the word. It's right.

My cock slides along her pussy.

"Fuck."

"Edward..."

Morning breath be damned. I kiss her hard, and she moans, "Now."

"I don't have..." Condoms.

I keep kissing her. All over. Our bodies move together.

"I..." She whimpers when I suck a nipple into my mouth. "I got tested twice...after I moved out..." She moans. "I'm...oh, God..." My teeth nip at her. She likes that. "...on the pill."

My mouth latches onto her neck again. There's a spot there that makes her gasp. And my fingers find her wet and hot. So slick. I finger her slowly, starting at her entrance, and...up to her clit. Rubbing, softly but persistently. Circling. So hot.

"I haven't been with anyone in seven years," I admit, sucking on that spot. "I want you. God, I fucking need you."

She cries out, the sound muffled by my shoulder. "Please."

A part of me expected to be nervous.

Are we rushing?

It's just been three days since we agreed to take it slow.

"Are you sure?"

She nods. "So sure. I want you, Edward. I..." I lift my head to look her in the eye. Her brows are knitted together. She licks her lips. "I..." A breath. "Not now. After."

"What?"

She smiles, and it's fucking beautiful. "Nothing," she whispers. "I'll tell you later. After."

She kisses me then, and again the woman renders me stupid.

I groan and grab my cock, positioning myself, coating it in her arousal.

"Oh, God."

I push in.

"Fuck," I breathe out, dropping my forehead to her shoulder.

She flutters around me.

I can't get over how hot she is. How wet.

We push and pull, twist and grind.

"Bella," I moan. Her heels are digging into my ass, spurring me on. As are her fucking whimpers. "Jesus..." I slam in. We start panting at the same time, and I keep sliding my cock in and out of her, unable to stop. More touching... Her hands on my back, flat, with nails scraping against my skin. She's crazy. I fucking love it. It's new. It's...consuming. So, I go rough on her.

With my hand covering her mouth, I muffle the sounds of her moans and cries.

Don't exactly want Jo to wake up.

"This is what you want, sweetheart?" I whisper shallowly in her ear.

"Yesss."

I squeeze my eyes shut and bite down on my lip.

Our skin becomes damp.

Harsh breathing.

“Edward,” she begs...for something. I remove my hand and cover her mouth with mine. I can feel the muscles in my back straining as I push and push. And then the headboard, I grip it with both hands and thrust in...and out...and in.

Looking down at us, I watch my cock glisten with her arousal before slipping in again. And her tits, moving whenever my hips meet hers.

“Touch yourself,” I groan, dipping down, forehead to forehead. “Come on, baby. Let me see you.”

Perfection.

She’s perfect for me.

“Almost,” she whimpers, and I watch hungrily as she rubs her clit. “Aahh, Edward...”

Then we’re coming.

My climax takes me off guard, and a strangled groan slips through my lips, every muscle in my body aching and protesting. At the same time, I feel her clenching down on my pulsating cock. Her mouth is open in a silent scream. I watch through lidded eyes, thrusting lazily, which is more like my hips swiveling than anything—in instinct—as I spill into her.

Grinding to reach deeper, even though I’m buried to the hilt.

“Shit,” I pant, releasing the headboard. With a grimace, I pull out of her before collapsing, my back against the mattress. “Just...”

Holy fuck.

80.

"Do you hear that?" she murmurs in my hair.

I nod slowly and kiss her breast.

I do hear it. Josie's up.

"How do you think she'll react?"

Honestly? I think she already knows Bella's here. "She'll be fine," I say quietly. "But we should probably get up."

I kiss her on the lips once, twice, three times, before dragging my ass outta bed.

When I hear a low whistle behind me, I swear on all things holy that I fucking blush. Good thing Bella can't see that, though. Damn girl is blunt.

"Checking out my ass, honey?" I chuckle, locating a pair of grey sweats in my closet.

"Can't help it. Such a lovely ass it is. And you're going commando? Yum."

Jesus.

"Hey, can I use your shower?"

"Sure," I answer, pulling on a black t-shirt. "I'll shower after breakfast."

"Okay, um..."

I look at her over my shoulder.

She smiles sheepishly. "I have my panties and top here, but my other clothes..."

Ah. Right. "They're in the living room."

"Exactly."

Turning back to my closet, I grab a Cullen Auto t-shirt and toss it to her.

"Want to borrow a pair of shorts, too?" I mutter, trying to find a pair with drawstrings.

"Yes, please."

I smile as she comes up behind me and snakes her arms around my middle.

"I won't turn around."

"Why?" she giggles against my back.

I laugh under my breath. "Because I know you're naked. If I see you now, breakfast will be the last thing on my mind. And unless you want Jo to knock down the door and-"

"Got it," she coughs. "By the way, can I take you two out for breakfast instead?"

Not wanting to have this conversation with my closet, I finally turn around, though I make sure not to look below her face.

God, I really love this woman.

"You wanna take us out on a breakfast date, Ms. Swan?" I tease and kiss her on the nose. She hums and nods. I hum, too. "Hmm. Depends on what that entails. You paying? Then, no."

"It does, actually," she chuckles, and I growl playfully as I nip at her jaw. My mom raised me better than that. Women don't pay. "And you're gonna let me."

"Doubtful." I snicker, and...how did my hands end up squeezing her ass?

Fuck if I know.

"Please," she says, softly but seriously. "I want to."

I sigh.

"Just don't make a habit out of it," I concede. "And you better bring loads of dough, 'cause I want a mountain of pancakes."

"Understood. Wait, Mount Everest or K2? 'Cause I'm not sure I have enough for Everest."

This woman, I swear. "I was actually thinking Kilimanjaro, so you're good."

"Phew."

I laugh through my nose and give her ass a little swat. Couldn't help it. "Go shower. I'll tell Josie that we're going out."

81.

As I enter the kitchen, Jo is sitting at the table already fully dressed in a pair of denim shorts and her Spaghetti Incident t-shirt. She claims that Guns N' Roses do the best covers, which I say is crazy, but to each their own, I guess. When I first played her that album—she was only two shits high or something—and told her that each song was a cover, she gave her first fist pump. I was a proud daddy that day.

"Mornin', kiddo," I say, kissing her on the forehead. "Only sweet dreams?"

"Si. I promise."

"Good." I take my seat across from her, smiling. "What's with the face?"

'Cause she's looking all stern.

With her favorite hellhound in the house, I figured she'd be walking on air.

Though, Cujo is asleep, thank you very much.

She responds by straightening her back and tenting her fingers on the table.

"We need to talk, Father."

Uh-oh. She pulled the "Father" card. That means business.

"I gotta hand it to ya, Dad," she sighs, shaking her head. "You've got cojones, but...this can't go on."

I grit my teeth. "No more CSI: Miami and definitely no more Spanish soap operas. Are we clear?"

"Cojones comes from Uncle Jazz, and I Googled it," she says frankly. "But we're not talking about that now."

I cock a brow.

"We're talking about your int- inti- intuta-" She lets out a frustrated breath, and I bite the inside of my cheek to prevent from laughing. "You intenuations- Grr." Oh, baby. Intentions. "We're talking about Bella."

Oh, shit.

"What do you mean?" I ask uncertainly.

81.

She tilts her head to the side, scrunching her nose a little.

Her voice is quiet, soft, and with a slight tremble. "Is Bella my mom?"

My shoulders sag at the same time as I go rigid. My breaths come rapidly. My heart begins to pound.

"You told me about a Bella and a Charlie," she goes on, still in that quiet voice I'm not used to. "And you said that Bella could bring Charlie on Saturday..."

With my elbows on the table, I cover my face with my hands.

I don't know how to do this.

"Is Call a bird?" she asks next, and I drop my hands to the table. "You said Bella's last name was...um, something with a bird."

Oh.

I smile carefully, reaching for her hands across the table. "Her name isn't Call anymore," I murmur, clearing my throat. My ears start to ring. Heart's still pounding away. I swallow hard. "She was married, but it didn't work..." I let out a slow breath, a heavy one. All of a sudden, I barely recognize the girl in front of me. She's not her usual crazy self, always with a smile or a grin or a smirk. She's a young child, looking awfully vulnerable. "Her last name is Swan now. Again."

She swallows. "Oh," she whispers. "That's a bird."

I nod hesitantly and squeeze her hands gently. "She's your mother, baby."

Her own nod is quick and small, followed by her bottom lip beginning to quiver.

Fuck.

I'm out of my seat in a flash as her eyes well up, rounding the table to kneel down next to her seat. I rarely see Josie cry, so when I do, it breaks my fucking heart.

"Can I tell you something, sweetheart?" I ask softly, a bit surprised that my voice didn't crack.

She gives me another jerky nod; I know she's trying to keep the tears at bay.

I take a breath and sweep her off the chair, positioning her on my lap instead.

I've already told Jo about Bella and the adoption, but now that Bella's back in my—our—life, I think it's time to add to that story.

82.

"Remember what I told you about ages?" I ask, brushing a piece of hair from her face. "When you go from being a child to a grownup?"

"Yeah," she croaks. "You said that you gotta be eighteen to be a grownup, but that I gotta be thirty 'cause I'm special."

I smile crookedly. "That's right. And..." I exhale. "Bella was only fifteen," I say. "She did grownup things even though she wasn't an adult quite yet. And she became pregnant with you." I kiss her cheeks. "She wasn't careful when she did the grownup things." I choose my words carefully. "So, when she found out you were in her belly, she knew she was too young to take care of you." This, I've already told her. "And sometimes, adults who want to have children can't."

"You and that other lady," she finishes quietly. "You couldn't have babies."

"Exactly. And since Bella couldn't take care of you herself, she wanted to find two people who could. Two people to become your parents."

"So, she found you, and you've told me that the lady who wanted to be my mom changed her mind."

"I also told you that grownups are stupid sometimes, remember?" I continue quietly. She nods. "Right. Well, what she did was completely fucked up."

"Language, Dad," she mumbles automatically.

I let out a strangled chuckle. "God, I love you, baby." I kiss her on the forehead. "Anyway..." I sigh and tilt her chin up to face me. "What I mean to say is that there's a difference between being stupid and doing one stupid thing. Bella shouldn't have done what she did, because she was still a child, really. But...and this is important, Jo..." She nods slowly, listening. "She will never and has never regretted you. Because she loved you from the beginning. And if it weren't for her mistake, I guess you could call it, I wouldn't have you now."

"So, it's not really a mistake?" she asks in a small voice.

"No, it's not," I agree. "I mean, what would I have done without you in my life, huh?" I give her a smile. "I would be so devastated."

"I am pretty awesome," she says, nodding.

"Damn right you are. And you know why?"

She scrunches her nose in thought. "'Cause I have a pretty awesome dad?"

"And an awesome mom," I add, pressing our foreheads together. "I have raised you so far, and I have changed your stinky diapers." I tickle her a

little, which gives me a giggle. "I have also fed you, tucked you in at night, and been there when you were sick." She nods and rests her head on my collarbone. One of her hands goes around me, fingers playing with the hair on the back of my neck. "I was there when you took your first step," I go on, my lips brushing against the top of her head. "I was there when you threw your oatmeal in Grampa's face, and when you said your first word."

"But no matter how much I've been there for you, there are things that will always come from Bella," I finish.

At that, she looks up. "What things?" she asks curiously.

I smile and tug her hair gently. "For starters, your hair, eyes, and nose. Your mouth, your dimples, and your chicken legs."

"I don't have chicken legs!" she growls. I laugh. "And Bella doesn't have chicken legs, either. So, there." She huffs.

"Not anymore," I say teasingly. "I've seen photos of Bella from when she was your age, you know. You look just like her."

"Bella's pretty."

Bella's fucking beautiful.

"So are you. You're both perfect," I say. "And since you look like her, you will always be stunning."

That doesn't bode well for me when Jo realizes that boys don't have cooties.

"But there's more than that," I murmur. "Just like you, Bella was a wild little shit when she was a kid."

And Jo grins, of course. Rather proudly. Yeah, she likes driving me nuts.

"She didn't like pink, she was the first one to go out in the mud when it rained, she would play her dad's Led Zeppelin records instead of children's songs, and she was loud and crazy."

She giggles. "Just like me."

"Just like you."

83.

"She loves you, kiddo," I whisper in her hair.

She hums softly.

"And if you'll let her, she wants to be a part of your life."

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"I'd be cool to have a mom, but only if she's cool," she says quietly, lifting her head again. I can't help but smile down at her. To kids, things are simple. Black and white. If you're good, you're in. "Does she want to be my mom?"

"She does." I nod slowly. "She's ready to be whatever you want her to be. She won't pressure you. Right now, she just wants to get to know you better. We will all go with what you're comfortable with. Understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes," she whispers, and I can see that she's thinking.

"We'll spend time together," I continue. "Dinners, movie nights, trips to the beach, maybe... Is that okay?"

"Yeah," she says with a sweet smile. "Can we go to a concert?"

That's my girl. "Oh, I'm sure we can work something out."

"But right now," I kiss her on the nose, "I think we need breakfast. Whaddya say?"

"Toast?" she asks.

"Pancakes." I grin. "Bella's taking us out. If that's okay."

"For pancakes? Oh, yes!" Aaand she fist pumps the air. "Go wake her up, Dad."

Before I can tell her that she's in the shower, the woman in question speaks up from behind me. In a voice thick with emotion.

"I'm right here."

84.

"You okay, honey?" I whisper in her ear. Since we arrived at the pancake house, Bella's been to the bathroom three times just to calm down. After having heard almost my entire conversation with Josie this morning, she's more than a little emotional. Beamingly happy, judging by the smiles, but extremely emotional...judging by the constant sniffing and bathroom breaks.

"Fine," she croaks quietly.

She is, but she isn't. If you know what I mean.

"So, are you also boyfriend and girlfriend now?" Jo asks casually, sitting across from us.

I shake my head in amusement and reach over to wipe some raspberry jam from her cheek.

Under the table, Bella threads our fingers together.

All the doubt is gone.

We're on the same page.

"Yeah, we are," I tell her, forking up some pancakes. "That okay?"

"Duh."

Right.

I snicker and shovel a mouthful of pancakes into my mouth.

"Excuse me," Bella chokes out, getting up once more. Then she's off to the bathroom again.

I sigh. My heart goes out to her, it really does, and it hurts that happiness has hit her so hard that she can barely relax. It only proves how hard it's been for her in the past—how miserable she's been. But I'm gonna do my best to make sure she's always happy from now on. She deserves it like no other.

"Daddy?"

"Yeah?"

She lets out a breath. "Bella...she's really awesome," she says, "but she sure cries a lot."

I smile sadly. "This means so much to her. It's very overwhelming."

"I know. You told me. But I'm here now. She doesn't have to be sad anymore."

I open my mouth, but close it again. Time to choose my words carefully again.

"You're only eight years old, sweetheart. It's difficult for you to understand-"

She cuts me off with a huff. "Are you befitting me just 'cause I'm a kid?"

Say what?

Befitting...oh. I laugh a little. "You mean belittling."

"That's what I said," she responds, waving me off. "So, are you?"

"No. I'm not," I promise, trying to withhold the grin. "Okay, how about this..." I take a breath, gathering my thoughts. What I'm about to say doesn't hold a candle to how it really is, but I hope it will help put things in perspective for my eight year old. "Imagine giving up all your baseball cards, all your CDs, all your band shirts, and all your coloring books... Imagine never being able to go in the ocean again." I definitely have her attention. She looks positively horrified. "And then one day, many, many years later, you're finally allowed to have all those things again."

Her eyes widen, flicking between me and the direction of the bathrooms.

Her mouth pops open.

"Ohmygosh, poor soul," she whispers. "Maybe I should go give her a hug."

With that said, she runs toward the bathroom, fork still in hand.

Fuck, I need an onion or something to blame for my stinging eyes.

85.

When Bella and Josie return from the bathroom, I've managed to get my own emotions under control by giving Jasper a call. Having a grown man crying in the middle of a pancake house is probably frowned upon, though I bet it happens often once these little suckers around us get hopped up

on sugar. But I digress. It's almost time to head to Atlantic Beach, so I called Jazz to see if Callie was still sick, which she is. So...as far as I see it—since we probably don't have time to swing by Bella's place—is that I will have to look after the mutt while Bella and Josie are in the water.

Fun times.

"I'm sorry for the hysterics," Bella says, taking her seat again. "I'm not really a crier, though recent events would say otherwise."

"Oh yeah, please," I reply, teasing. "Apologize for being happy. I beg you."

She huffs a chuckle and smacks me playfully in the arm, at which I reach forward and kiss her on the lips.

"Make love, not war." I laugh through my nose. "Or some shit like that."

"Are you a hippie all of a sudden, Cullen?" she jokes.

I shrug and kiss her again.

"Okay, that is going to take a while to get used to," Jo comments, digging into her pancakes again. Studying her for a bit, I notice that her nose is a little red, so I conclude that she's shed a tear or two, as well. But since they're both smiling, or were a few seconds ago, I'm pretty sure everything's good. I'll just ask Bella what they talked about later, assuming there were words exchanged. Knowing my daughter, though, there are always words exchanged.

"You mean the kissing?" I ask bluntly. Fuck, I hope that doesn't make her uncomfortable. I mean, I come from an affectionate family. Showing what you feel is important. And it's not like I've taught Josie any different.

"Uh, yeah," she answers in her "duh" voice. "My dad and my swim teacher? Freaky, man."

How about your dad and your mom, kiddo?

"But by all means," she waves a hand at us, "keep it up, 'cause I want a brother."

I'm good at choking on nothing, so I just stick to what I'm good at.

"And kissing leads to babies," she finishes, like it's self-explanatory.

"All right, I think that's enough outta you, Jo," I tell her, panicking inside.

I don't really understand why Bella's now smiling to herself.

86.

Once at the beach, Jo says goodbye to Cash while I say goodbye to Bella.

"If the dog kills me, I'm gonna come back and haunt you," I mumble in between kisses. She laughs. "Don't laugh." She giggles. "No giggling, either."

"It's two hours, baby," she whispers, and she's still laughing a little. "Or maybe you wanna trade. You take six kids into the water, and I'll take Cash."

"How about no?" I counter.

"That's what I thought." She smiles, and I gotta kiss that smile.

"Okay, let's swim!" Josie says impatiently. "It's Tuesday today. We only have 'til Friday!"

I snicker at her. "You act like you'll never see the ocean again after this week."

"Madre mia," she mutters, running a hand through her hair. "You grownups just don't get it."

I chuckle.

"We're going, we're going," Bella assures, still laughing. It's awesome to see, to be honest. I love it when she's happy. "See ya in two hours."

I nod. "If I'm alive by then," I say, holding up the leash.

"Crybaby," Jo sighs.

Bella shakes her head in amusement and walks backward in the direction of the beach. My ass is planted on the hood of my car, Cash sitting next to me on the ground. Slobbering.

"By the way, Cullen," Bella says, about ten feet away. "I forgot to tell you something this morning."

"What's that?" I ask and watch her retreating form. Sexy fucking form.

She smiles. "I love you."

87.

Picking up my jaw...

I love you.

Holy shit.

It almost feels like time has stopped, though it certainly hasn't. I'm still watching as she walks backward, an oblivious Jo walking beside her. Maybe Jo heard, but she doesn't react.

Bella's still smiling.

I open my mouth to...what? Shout that I love her, too?

As if she's reading my mind, Bella just shakes her head at me, silently saying no, before she turns around toward the beach.

I sigh contentedly, eyes on the two girls who own me, and my smile is wide when Josie grabs Bella's hand.

And the next two hours drag.

I get a lot done, though, so I can't complain. While walking the beast—who is admittedly calm and docile—I use my phone to email Dad, some clients, and Jasper. I tell Dad about everything that's been going on in my life, leaving him to deal with Mom. I know she'll be ecstatic beyond words, which means she will scream and squeal, and I don't have the eardrums for that. No, it's better that Dad handles it. I'm very aware that Mom will try to call me and ask a million questions, but I'm thinking I will let Josie answer the phone. Or maybe even Cash. And...last but not least, through emails, Jasper and I catch up. Callie's still down with the flu, but I learn that a certain Alice has been there a couple of times with "soup". Okay, perhaps soup has been involved, but I'm sure Jazz and Alice haven't had any difficulties finding stuff to do when Callie's sleeping.

In return, I tell him that Bella and I are together and that Jo knows about her mom.

There's no getting rid of the obnoxiously giddy smile on my face.

Once it's time to pick up Jo, Cash and I walk back to the parking lot, and I swear that the mutt is sending the ocean longing glances. Weird fucking dog. Sure, I can see why all that fur would be miserable in the middle of the summer, but I'm willing to bet that mentioned fur would make sure he drowns as soon as he hits the water.

He probably can't even swim.

"Weirdo," I mutter and light up a smoke.

I guess the dog is a part of my life now, however, since Bella sure as hell is.

"Just get this straight, Cujo," I tell him. "I'm the man of the house."

He ignores me.

Rude.

"Edward, are you having a conversation with my daughter's dog?"

My head snaps up.

Charlie.

88.

He's sitting there, on the hood of what I presume is his black Mustang, with a big grin on his face.

It's obviously a grin I return.

"Charlie fuckin' Swan," I say, walking forward. I chuckle and throw away my cigarette. "Wow. Long time no see, man."

Sliding off the hood, he grabs my extended hand and pulls me in for a hug. I smile.

"Too long." He ends the hug, both hands on my arms. "Good to see ya again, son."

"You, too." I couldn't agree more. "I see you shaved off the 'stache."

The Charlie I remember from Washington—and Chicago for that matter—sporting a mustache that competed with German porn stars, wore flannel

shirts, well-worn jeans, and boots. The Charlie I'm seeing now is wearing black cargo shorts, a faded grey Megadeth t-shirt, and... I laugh.

Flip-flops.

"Well, this is Florida. Bella told me the lumberjack look didn't work out here." He snickers. "I see you haven't changed much. Though..." He frowns at my hair. "Getting grays there, are ya?"

Oh, he's Bella's dad, all right. "Not cool, Pops," I mutter and run a hand through my messy hair. I don't have grays. Yet. It's only a matter of time when Josie's your kid. "And you're one to talk," I huff, eyeing his graying temples.

He shrugs, the corners of his eyes crinkling as he grins. "Hey, I'm nearing fifty."

"Whatever," I laugh through my nose. "Here, take the hellhound, will ya?"

He cracks up. "Hellhound! So, what Bella told me wasn't a lie? You really fell over?"

Ah, fuck my life.

Figures that Bella would call Charlie the first opportunity she got.

"Nah, she's full of it," I lie, handing over the leash. "Don't know where she gets it all from. To be honest, I'm getting worried."

"Yeah, that almost sounded believable."

Dammit.

"Whatever," I repeat like the quick fool I am. But I can't even begin to feign annoyance. The smile is right there; it feels good to see Charlie again. "So, what brings you here today? Bella call you?"

I already know that Bella has filled Charlie in, beginning right away when I first saw her again little over five weeks ago. Since then, Bella has talked to Charlie, Rose, and Alice about what she's been going through with Josie and me so close to her.

"Yeah, she did." He chuckles quietly, a wistful expression on his face. "She called me yesterday after you guys had had dinner at your new shop." I nod. "And then she sent me a text about two minutes before her class started today." At that, I give him a curious look. She must've texted him right after she told me... Right after she told me she loves me. Jesus. That shit won't get old. "Here," he says, sticking out his phone. "She sent me this. She told me about next Saturday, but after reading her message, I couldn't really wait that long."

I read the simple text—just four words—but they couldn't be more meaningful.

I'm her mom, Dad. ~Bella.

"I take it you told Jo this morning?" he guesses.

I smile and rub the pad of my thumb across my lip. "Yeah, she knows." I nod slowly, still thinking about that text. I chuckle. "If someone had told me a couple of months ago that this would happen..."

Perhaps some would say that Bella and I are moving too fast, but I would disagree. I've loved Bella for eight years. It's just that my love has changed and become more, which didn't take much. The need I have for her hasn't changed. Actually, it has. It has grown and become stronger. And the attraction is certainly there. I can't stop thinking about her, for fuck's sake. I've missed her more than words can describe, and now that I have her in my life, everything comes crashing down. Every feeling, every moment that I've thought of her, every time I've missed her...

I don't want to waste any time.

After Bella's declaration two hours ago, I'd say it's safe to say that she doesn't want to waste time either, which just makes me love her more.

"She's happy again," Charlie says quietly, making me look up. He's got that wistful expression again. "I saw her briefly on Sunday when she came back from Daytona..." He shakes his head with a faraway look. "The girl couldn't sit still, lemme tell ya." We both chuckle. "I haven't seen her this way since... I don't even know."

"I love her," I admit. He gives me a sideways grin, nodding with a dip of his chin. "I'll do my best to make sure she remains happy."

He looks out over the ocean, giving me one more nod. "I know you will, Edward."

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"Otherwise I'd nut punch you."

I laugh.

"I'd let you," I finish.

That's pretty much when I see Bella and Josie walking toward us.

"Time for you to see your grandkid again," I say, squeezing his shoulder.

89.

Unable to wait, unable to just stand there as Bella and Jo close the distance, I walk toward them, eyes focused on the woman I love.

Twenty feet.

Fifteen...

Ten...

"Hi," she says, smiling.

Her hair is wet. Those summer freckles are there. Swimsuit still on; she's just pulled on her cotton shorts, too.

When she's right in front of me, I dip down and cup her face. Covering her mouth with mine, I kiss her hard and passionately. I take her by surprise but she catches on quickly.

Her soft lips move with mine, parting when the tip of my tongue swipes over her bottom lip. She fists my hair and pulls us impossibly closer to each other. Chest to chest. Okay, not really, but whatever. She's really fucking short. Which doesn't work right now, so I dip down a little more and place my hands on the backside of her thighs. Without breaking the kiss. If anything, the kiss grows hungrier. And hungrier. Fuck. I pull her up and wrap her legs around my waist. Finally, face to face.

"Edward," she breathes, her lips moving with my name.

"I love you," I say, a little breathless and more than a little turned on. "I love you."

She smiles, eyes glistening with emotion. "I love you, too."

With our foreheads touching, I rub our noses together. "Beautiful. So fucking beautiful."

Of course, this is the moment Jo reminds us of her being here.

"Lemme know when my brother gets here."

90.

Josie's POV

"Lemme know when my brother gets here," I tell them, and then I just leave them there. Cash is waiting for me, and he's much more important than seeing my dad suck face with Bella. Mommmmm. Mmmmmom. Mom.

S'gonna take a while to get that shit right.

But I want to, 'cause Bella's wicked cool.

I'm telling you, she damn perfect for Dad and me. I mean, she understands when I say that I would give my left arm to play drums in Def Leppard. That shit is funny, and she gets me. She's not like Callie's mom, who is, like...all hoity-toity. And earlier, in the ocean, when I told Jared—an annoying boy in my class who is, like, always smacking the water—that he shouldn't go Tommy Lee on the water, he didn't laugh. He didn't get it, but Bella did. Know what I mean?

I sigh, 'cause...

Kids these days.

They don't know about drummers.

"Hey, Cash," I say when I reach my little woofsie. I pat him on the head and look at the man standing next to him; I know who he is, of course. Bella told me when we saw Dad talking to this one that he's her dad. Otherwise I wouldn't be here, 'cause Dad says you shouldn't talk to strangers, but...yeah.

"You're Bella's dad—my mom's dad," I say, sticking out my hand. "I'm Josie Cullen. What's up?"

I'm gonna need a name for this one. Charlie won't work, 'cause that's not my name for him. I mean, I can't really call Nana and Grampa Esme and Carlisle, now can I? That's just wrong. They're Nana and Grampa. End of.

"Hi, Josie," Charlie says back, chuckling real quietly as he squats down to be at my level. It's my age that makes me all little and stuff, but Dad says it's also because Bella's short. And she's my mmmmmmom. "That's a cool shirt you're wearing."

I look down, and yeah. I grin. "Thanks. Ratt is a great band. Too bad many have forgotten about them. At least that's what Daddy tells me, and he knows music." I nod, 'cause he really does know music. "You have a cool shirt, too." He's wearing a Megadeth t-shirt. "I really like that French song."

He grins, and his eyes are shining a little. Maybe the sun is bothering him.

"You mean 'A Tout le Monde'?"

"That's the one!"

So, this guy knows his stuff, too. That's great.

"God, you look just like Bella," he says, shaking his head a little bit.

I smile. "I know. She's my mom, so that's why."

Man, the sun must really hurt him, 'cause his eyes become watery again.

Or...shit. Maybe this is overmuch for him, too, or whatever Daddy called it. Over...helmet...whelming...

Something.

'Cause Bella's dad is my granddad, and that makes me his grandkid.

"You don't have to be sad," I tell him quietly, smiling just a small one.
"I'm here now."

He doesn't say anything, but he gives me a quick nod and scrubs his hands over his face.

Remembering this morning when Dad told me about being taken away from all things you love, I wonder if maybe Charlie was sad when Dad got me. Bella was real sad, but she doesn't regret it 'cause...hmm...something about Dad being best for me. And I'm glad because I would cry like a little girl if I didn't have Dad. This is the best, I think. Now I can have both. I couldn't have that before, because Dad says that Bella was only a child.

I don't really understand all of it, but yeah. Something like that.

"Josie, baby?" I hear Dad say softly just then, so I look over my shoulder, and see him standing there with Bella, an arm wrapped around her.

She has her face pressed against Dad's chest—sorta close to his armpit—and I wrinkle my nose 'cause that can't smell good.

"Ready to go home?" he asks me.

"I'm hungry," I tell him. I always am after swimming.

He smiles. "Barbecue?"

"Hell yes!" I fist pump the air.

Dad makes the best burgers, I'm telling you.

"Charlie, you're coming, too, right?"

And Charlie nods at Dad. "I'd like that."

So, that means... "Sleepover!" I cheer. 'Cause everyone who comes over to our house nowadays end up spending the night. "Aww, can Cash sleep in my room, Daddy?" I ask sweetly.

"What if he eats you?"

I cock a brow at him. "You're weird. You know that? I mean, I love you crazy much, but you're weird. And we're talking epic proposals."

He chokes on nothing, something he often does. I guess breathing doesn't come naturally for everyone.

"Proportions, kiddo," he coughs. "Not proposals."

That's what I said.

91.

Josie's POV

Everything sucks!

Gazillion days pass by—or a few, whatever—and tomorrow is Friday.

The last day of swimming.

It's like my life is over.

I huff.

"Enough with the huffing," Dad sighs, flippin' da burgers on the grill.

Happens every day now. Barbecues, I mean.

Charlie—Pops—and Bella—Mom—are here. That's awesome. They've been here every day, too. Only, Charlie doesn't spend the night. Bella does, though, but it's cool. I want that brother, so they gotta kiss a lot. Callie

also wants a brother, so she's happy to see that Uncle Jazz and Alice kiss lots, as well.

"Something wrong?" Bella asks, coming out with beer for Dad and Charlie. Cool, she brought me a soda, too.

I huff. "Yeah. S'Friday tomorrow. I want 'Josie Belle Cullen—fuckin' awesome' on my headstone."

"Josie!" Dad barks out...like a dog. "You can't say that word until you're a grownup. Are we clear?" Shit, he's mad when he speaks through his teeth like that.

"I'm sorry," I mumble and look down.

I think I hear Charlie snicker, but I'm not sure. I keep looking at my fingernails instead.

Gosh, I hate when it's quiet.

That's like when nothing happens.

I sip my Mountain Dew. Gotta love the Dew.

"Take a ride on the wild side," I sing softly under my breath. I bob my head to the beat just an itty bit. "Pray for us on the wild side..." Mötley Crüe kicks ass, I'm telling you.

All of a sudden, I hear laughter. I look up, only to see Dad and Charlie chuckling and stuff, eyes on me. And Bella's smiling prettily.

"What?" I ask, 'cause they're staring.

Dad shakes his head, amused for some damn reason. "Nothing, baby."

"I'm eight!" I shout. "Not a baby!"

He holds his hands up...as if I'm holding a gun or something. "Sorry." But he's still smiling.

"Hey, how about we put on some music," Bella suggests softly. I grin and nod, 'cause yeah. "All right," she chuckles, "come on."

We go inside, and after we've chosen a CD from Dad's massive collection, I teach her how to use the stereo. We picked Dokken, by the way, 'cause we agree that we're both in the mood for "Dream Warriors", and once we've pushed play and cranked up the volume, we go to the kitchen to check on the potato wedges in the oven.

"Wanna help me make a salad?" she asks.

Um, not really. Salad's boring. But I like hanging out with Bella, so I say yes.

I like having her here; she's funny. She makes Dad smile lots, and if there's silence, I can count on her to break it. That's awesome, 'cause silence sucks.

"So, Bella...I mean, Mom..." Still learning. "I was thinking..."

"About what?" she asks, and her eyes are shining again. They always do that when I call her Mom. Dad told me it's because she's so happy, though, so I'm definitely not gonna stop.

I distress.

No, wait. That's not the word. Ummm...

Digress...? Or something.

Whatever.

I have serious stuff to say now, so here we go.

92.

Josie's POV

"Okay, I told you that there are things I only do with Dad, right?" I say.

Bella nods slowly as she cuts up a cucumber. "Of course. For instance, when you visit him at work and you get ice cream."

She gets it.

Good. "Exactly. And that's some thing I'm gonna do forever," I say, 'cause duh. Ice cream in the garage with Dad is as important as breathing. That's when I'm his little helper, too. I hand him the right wrenches, and he tells me about cars and stuff. Anyway... "I was thinking that since you're my mom and all, we should have that, too." She puts down the knife and gives me a glance from the side. "Something only we do, and if Dad asks if he can come, we say no, 'cause that's the rule."

Oh, dear. Her eyes are shining again.

"Anything you want," she promises. "As long as your dad approves."

Right. Well, I won't give him a choice.

"Can we go swimming? That could be our thing," I say, nodding. "And also, can I come with you in your truck some time?"

"We'll talk to Edward about the truck, okay?" she replies, squeezing my hand. "As for swimming, I'm pretty sure your dad will say yes."

Fist pump!

"Ohmygosh, we're gonna have so much fun!" I tell her, and it's the truth. It'll be only the two of us. No Jared, Colin, or Jessica. Not even Callie. Just us two. "C'mere, let's hug it out." I hold out my arms.

She laughs and snuffles at the same time, reaches down to my level, and then we hug.

"You're so amazing, Jo," she whispers in my ear. "Thank you."

I smile and release her. "What're you thanking me for?"

For being amazing?

Well...

"For letting me get to know you, sweetie," she says softly, brushing away a tear or two. She smiles at me and taps me on the nose. "You and your dad have made me so happy, you know."

I shrug. "We're awesome, and you're my mom, so..." Right? "Plus, you're cool."

"So are you," she chuckles. "The coolest kid I've ever met."

Aww. Such compliments. I think we should hug again.

93.

EPOV

"Seatbelt," I tell Jo before folding back the passenger seat again.

"Yes, sir," she replies sullenly. Backing away, I give room for Bella to take her seat. Both girls are acting a little off.

With a sigh, I close the door for Bella then walk around the car to hop in behind the wheel. I have no idea how to cheer them up. I've already suggested one particular thing, but Bella claims that it wouldn't feel right. She told me it would feel like she's leeching off of me, which is complete bullshit.

In my opinion, it would solve everything.

The topic is whether or not Bella should move in with us. I mean, it's not like she has a place of her own. She sleeps in Alice's spare room, and since Bella works in Jacksonville, she might as well live in Lakeside as Atlantic Beach. Plus, with Jo entering her life, she has told Rose and Royce that she doesn't want to go on long-haul drives anymore, because it would result in too many days away from Josie. That's where money comes in: she can't afford her own place without a job, which means she'll be moving in with Charlie for a while, who also lives in Atlantic Beach. Four months, to be exact, she will be out of work, because there's a position opening up at King Movers at that point when another woman will go on maternity leave. Said woman doesn't even believe she'll go back to work at all after that, leaving Bella with a job she wants permanently. So, we're talking four months without a job, unless Bella's willing to be away from Jo, and that's out of question for her.

I offered my house, obviously, because it really is obvious to me.

It would put her under the same roof as our girl, for chrissakes. And by solving everything, I'm saying that once Bella starts her new shift in four months, we will have two incomes, and that means we can afford to build a real pool in the backyard, which will turn Josie into a happy little shit again.

'Cause right now she's miserable.

It's Friday, her last lesson just ended, and we're currently driving away from Atlantic Beach.

A pool would make her life. She really loves the water, and I can't say I'm opposed to having a pool in this heat. Florida's fucking hot, man. Hell, yesterday it was so hot that Bella took Cash to a friend of hers who's a dog groomer. Cujo is now naked Cujo.

I digress.

Bella's plan is to crash at Charlie's instead and drive out to Lakeside almost every day in order to see Jo. That's two hours on the road. It's stupid. Not only will she have to spend loads of money on gas, but she will also waste a lot of time on the road.

Stupid independent woman.

"Jo?" I say, looking at her through the rearview mirror. What I'm about to say goes against good parenting—'cause parents are supposed to make decisions together, or so I've heard—but if it helps persuade Bella...

"Yes, Daddy," she answers, pouting.

I smirk internally. "If you get your mom to move in with us, we will be able to afford a real pool in the back."

Her eyes widen.

"Edward!" Bella hisses next to me.

I shrug innocently. "Never said I played fair, honey. If you had a valid reason, I wouldn't say a thing. But money's not fuckin' it."

I won't apologize for wanting my family all together.

That's what we are now—a family. While I've been happy alone with Josie, nothing beats having Bella with us.

"Ohmygosh, really?" Josie exclaims, eyes pleading with me. "A pool?"

Bella grumbles under her breath and turns away from me. "For the love of..."

I know what her next words are.

Edward, we've only been together for a week, officially. You just don't do this. A week! That's seven days! And then there's money. Plus, what if we don't get along...blah, blah, blah.

I heard it all—twice, actually—this morning when I first suggested it.

Fuck. That. Noise.

94.

As soon as we get home, Jo goes to play with Cash, and Bella ushers me into our bedroom. Unfortunately not for the good stuff, but it's okay. For now.

"What are you doing, Edward?" she asks.

I want this out of the way, so I won't even begin to stall and ask what she's on about.

"I want you here with us," I say, folding my arms over my chest.

She mirrors my position, standing a few feet away from me. "It's been a week."

"I'm aware."

"It's too soon."

I tilt my head. "Says who?"

"Everyone!" she cries out. "We barely know each othe-"

"Bullshit," I say flatly, cutting her off. She gives me an incredulous look, at which I clarify. "No one knows you like I do, and vice versa. Don't even try to deny that," I tell her. "Now, obviously there are things we don't know: what we want in the future, for instance. So, why don't we just settle that right the fuck now?"

She stares at me.

No, honey, I haven't grown a second head.

"Fine, I'll start," I offer. "I want you, baby. All of you, and I know this because I've loved you for the past eight fucking years." Her eyes soften a little, but I go on. "I can't say that I've waited for you, because I had already lost hope that I'd ever see you again. So, now that you're here..." I let out a breath. Can't she just see? "This is it for me," I say quietly. "I know."

She shifts her weight from one foot to the other, a pensive expression on her face, and I'm glad that she's not immediately saying no.

"I can't predict the future, Bella, but I can tell you that I love you, that I want us all together as a family, and that we have so much in common that it's ridiculous." I run both hands through my hair, tugging at the ends. "Granted, shit could happen; that's always how it is. But I won't stop wanting you. If something happens, it won't be because of my feelings. Or Josie's for that matter."

She swallows and looks down. "I know," she says softly. Walking forward, I close the distance between us, because I know what's going on. She's done this a few times over the past few days, and it's all in her head. She's constantly afraid that she's going to lose everything, which isn't the way to lead your life.

"Look at me, honey," I whisper, gently cupping her face. Her teary eyes meet mine. "Say no if you feel pressured—I apologize and will back down if that's the case—but don't say no because of money. Please." She blinks, causing a few tears to spill over. I brush them away with soft kisses. "I'll wait forever if that's what you want, but money..." I shake my head, silently pleading with her. "Plus, money would only be an issue for four months—an issue for you, 'cause I don't see the problem..."

She lets out a heavy breath, a crease appearing between her brows. I smooth it out with the pad of my thumb, because she should never frown or look sad.

"You know I won't be able to move out after four months, right?"

I breathe out in relief.

"Well, I should hope not," I murmur. "I don't want a trial run. I'd want that if I wasn't sure."

She smiles tenderly. "But you're sure?"

I couldn't be more sure. "Very," I promise, kissing her nose.

"And..." She chews on her lip. "What we want in the future?"

I want...

What do I want?

"Marriage...children...more dogs..." She trails off with a teasing smile, though I see the seriousness behind the humor. "We've been through a lot," she says carefully. "So, we may know each other, but the time we've spent apart has still changed us, Edward."

I nod slowly, choosing my words. "I see marriage," I admit quietly. "Kids... I don't know if I can give you any."

I wouldn't mind testing, of course, but biological children are nothing I can promise her.

Wanting more children is another matter entirely, and to me it's all about who I have the children with. Before Bella, I didn't see any of it. Not since Kate, anyway. The woman standing in front of me, though...yeah, I can definitely picture it. Everything.

She inhales deeply, sliding her hands up my biceps. Her eyes follow the movements, and again I wish I could read her mind. She's thinking hard, perhaps phrasing her words... Regardless, I want them. Unfiltered, preferably.

"You don't know me very well if you think DNA matters to me," she finally says, the words coming out slowly, but still a bit teasingly. And I feel relief wash through me again. "And..." She smiles. "I see marriage, too. Down the road."

I place a hand over my heart, feigning hurt. "You wound me, sweetheart. You'd turn me down if I popped the question right now?"

She shakes her head in amusement. "Cheeky bastard."

"Says you."

"I do."

I grin widely. "See? Halfway through the ceremony already, and I haven't asked you yet."

In all seriousness, I don't have any plans to propose tomorrow. "Down the road" sounds perfect. We need time—plenty of time—to reconnect and create our life together. But it's nice to know that we want the same things eventually—that we're on the same page.

"So...you'll move in?" I ask softly, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear.

She nods. "I'll move in."

95.

"Josie, can you get the door?" I shout over the music. After grabbing a Coke from the fridge, I walk in to the living room and lower the volume a little. Dad loves the same music, but Mom is more for softer rock.

"Are they here?" Bella asks, appearing in the doorway. I refrain from chuckling, 'cause she'd punch me. I don't know how many times I've told her that my folks are gonna love her, but it doesn't matter. She's still nervous. She's even wearing clothes that aren't really hers. They are, but it's not what she prefers. Instead of a band shirt and a denim skirt or shorts, she's wearing a dress. There's nothing too girly about it, thank God, but still. In truth, she looks stunning in it—a simple cotton dress in black, neither modest nor provocative—but it's not necessary...is all I'm saying.

Then there's the fact that Mom and Dad have just spent the past three days visiting Cullen Auto shops along the coast. I doubt they will look like the royal fucking family from England when they get here...which is now.

"Yeah, they're here, baby," I say, passing her in the doorway. As I do, I also pull her with me. "You look-" Shit, what is the answer she's looking for? 'Cause I'd say hot or stunning, even sexy. But maybe she want "pretty", "beautiful", or...crap, I'm running out of words.

"Amazing," is what I settle for, and that's okay since it's always the truth.

She purses her lips, looking up at me.

At the same time, I can hear Josie greeting my parents in the hallway. Loudly.

"Oh, fuck it," Bella suddenly says. "Gimme five minutes to change." And then she's gone.

I just shake my head and smile as I watch her go.

"Women," I chuckle under my breath, heading to the hallway. Once I reach it, I grin when I see Josie clinging on to Dad while Mom is fussing with Jo's hair.

"Edward, my baby!" Mom exclaims upon seeing me. I exchange a look with my daughter, silently conveying...I'm thirty-three and still a baby. You're only eight but complaining when I call you baby? I think she understands me. Maybe.

"Hey, Ma," I say, hugging her. "You look great." I kiss her on the cheek before taking a step back. "Bella should be down soon."

As if that was some trigger, Mom's eyes well up. "I still can't believe you've found each other again," she says tearfully, squeezing my hand. "It's amazing."

"I think so, too," I murmur, winking at Jo.

"My mom is awesome," she says matter-of-factly. "But, Nana? Don't cry; it might set off Bella, too, and that's just wrong, I'm telling you."

"Understood." Mom snuffles, gathering Jo in another hug. "No more tears."

"Hey, kid," Dad says, and then it's more hugging. "You okay?"

"Very," I respond, smiling. "Good to see you guys again."

"You, too. It's been a while since we were here. Where's Jazz?"

I shrug. "Across the street. They'll be at the garage later." As my words leave my mouth, I feel a hand on my back, at which I smile and look to see Bella behind me. Oh, yeah. She's back in denim shorts and a black wife-beater. That's my woman. "There you are," I murmur and wrap an arm around her shoulder. Smiling at my parents, I say, "Mom, Dad, this is Bella."

"Hi," Bella says softly, a bit shyly. "It's nice to finally meet you."

I can't say that I'm surprised to see Mom and Dad just staring at her. I know what they see—the resemblance between her and Josie. It's like looking into Jo's future.

"Oh, shit," Mom breathes out. "Josie, honey, I don't think I can keep your promise."

With that said, she bursts out in tears and pulls Bella in for a hug.

"Damn," Dad mutters under his breath. "You won the jackpot with that one. She's smoking."

I elbow him. "Shut the fuck up, old man."

"What?" he asks, trying to come off as innocent. "I'm just saying that if she's looking for someone just like you, only a little older..."

Gross.

While I do look sorta like my dad...that's just wrong.

"A little older." I snort. "You wish."

He may be in good shape, inked like me, and wearing pretty much the same clothes that I do, but come on.

"I'm fucking with you, kiddo," he chuckles, slapping me on the back. "She is stunning, though."

I know. "Ass."

"What're you talking 'bout, Dad?" Josie asks, tugging on my t-shirt.

I smile down at her. "Nothing, sweetheart. Nothing at all. Now, why don't you let Cash out of your bedroom. It's almost time to head down to the shop."

We're supposed to be down there an hour before we open at noon, so...yeah, time to get a move on.

"Oh, Cash is the dog you told us about, Josie?" Dad inquires, and Jo is one beaming kiddo.

"Yeah, he's the best."

"I beg to differ," I mumble.

96.

Hours later, we're all busy down at the garage. Mom, Bella, Josie, and Alice flit around with snacks and drinks. Geoffrey and Emmett McCarty have lined up cars—cars that I've worked on from Geoff's dealership—and they're both talking to clients. Emmett may be a bar owner, but it's easy to see that he loves working with cars, too. Peter and Alec—my two fellow mechanics—and I are talking to possible customers, who are all lining up for the free stuff Cullen Auto is giving away today. Dad is also busy doing the same. Jazz is talking numbers to those with questions, and I gotta say he's one helluva salesman. He can, without making it obvious, say that we run the best auto shops in the state, and thanks to the deals we make with local trucking companies and movers, we can always guarantee the best prices and shit like that. And both Rose and Royce King stay close to Jasper, piping in every once in a while since they're using Cullen Auto's services. It's good advertising for everyone. I don't know how many business cards I've seen being handed out.

The ads Dad placed in the local papers have attracted a good crowd, and I'd say it won't be long 'til we're properly established in Lakeside.

"I don't know how many oil changes I've done in the past two hours," Peter tells me, wiping his hands on a rag. I laugh and nod, definitely agreeing. "It's school all over again."

I groan. "Don't remind me. I fucking hated that." I remember when I studied to become a mechanic...all the things our teachers would drill into our heads. And since I've been around cars all my life, oil changes and equally simple shit is just a waste of my time.

"Are you guys having a good time?" Bella asks, appearing in front of us with two cold sodas. After wiping my face with the sleeve of my t-shirt, I lean forward and plant a sloppy, noisy one on her lips.

"Mmm...slobbering."

I laugh and accept the soda. "I think I've heard that before."

Of course, that's the moment Josie chooses to butt in. "You've heard it from me, Dad."

"Go get Cash some water," I tell her, ignoring her remark. "I'm sure it's been ten minutes since last time."

"Ohmygosh, you're right!" she gasps, cupping her own face. "Poor soul is suffering in your office all alone."

Poor soul, my ass. Yeah, Cash is in my office in the back, but said office has air-conditioning, not to mention water and treats that Josie brings him constantly. The mutt is living like a king.

"Don't forget his velvet pillow!" I call after her.

She flips me off over her shoulder, using her ring finger.

Bella and I sigh contentedly.

"Okaaay," Peter chuckles. "Time for another oil change."

"Yeah, and I'm gonna go out greet Dad," Bella says. "He just arrived."

I nod. "I'll join you as soon as I'm done with that one." I point at the Volvo I'm about to work on. Fuckin' Volvo. Fuckin' transmission problem.

The next twenty minutes or so pass quickly, and I'm halfway done with the Volvo when I get the sense of déjà vu.

They are words I've heard before.

Words that are shouted.

"I hit where it hurts! Remember that, munchkin!"

97.

Josie's POV

After giving Cash fresh water and more treats, I run through the garage bay where three cars are lined up—Alec, Peter, and Dad are working on them—and I grab a handful of chips from the snack table before heading outside. The sun is shining, so I definitely don't wanna be indoors.

The first one I see in the crowd—that I recognize, that is—is Charlie. I mean Pops.

"Hey, Pops!" I say, making my way to him. Gosh, so many people are here. That's good for Grampa and Dad's business.

"Hi, kiddo," Pops says back, giving me a quick smile before looking at...something. Huh. I look where he looks, and...

Who's that?

Bella...Mom...is standing on the sidewalk, talking to two guys. Two guys that look like they're trying to be Vin Diesel and The Rock in Fast & Furious 5. Only, they're totally not, 'cause these guys are smaller. Even

Dad is closer to Vin Diesel. And definitely Big Guy—or Emmett as grownups call him.

I love Fast & Furious. Kick ass movies. When Dominic and Brian drive off that cliff and down into the water, ohmygosh, ohmygosh, I get butterflies in my belly just thinking about it. Or when The Rock tells the po-po that he wants a certain translator because of her smile, and then he says, “Stay the fuck out of my way”. Ohmygosh, ohmygosh. Every time Dad and I watch that movie, I gotta promise him not to repeat the words. And I don’t. Most of the time.

But that’s not what I’m supposed to be thinking about now.

“Who’s that, Pops?” I ask, tugging on the hem of his t-shirt. A couple of days ago, Charlie was on the beach when I was there with Mom, and I saw the ink on his back. My birth date and Bella’s birth date. Wicked cool.

But that’s not what I’m supposed to be thinking about now.

“That would be Stupid One and Stupid Two,” Charlie says, folding his arms across his chest to look badass. He watches Stupid One and Stupid Two like he hates them. “Bella told me to give her five minutes before I jumped in.”

Um...I don’t get it.

Popping a few chips into my mouth, I head toward my mom.

Charlie calls my name, and I hear him, but I don’t listen. There’s a difference.

“So, you’re on Cullen’s side now?” one of the guys says angrily.

Bella huffs. “I was never on your side, Jacob.”

I’m a name that one Stupid One.

"Enough of this, Bella," the other one growls like a kitten. I'ma name him Stupid Two. "Are you doing this because you're bitter or something? Is it because I moved on quickly?"

At that, Mom laughs. Then she stops just like that. "Oh. I thought you cracked a joke. My bad."

I walk closer, and Stupid Two speaks again. "You fucking bitch. You're ridiculous. You know that, right?"

Ohmygosh, that's not allowed! I remember when I started school back in Tampa and there was a boy who bullied another boy. The bully is the idiot!

"Mom?" I say, finally reaching her. I tug a little on her hand. "Pops says these guys are stupid. You're not s'posed to talk to stupid people. Dad says so."

"Mom?" Stupid One scoffs.

I wrinkle my nose at him. "Are you a parrot?" He looks confused. "Y'know, 'cause they repeat stuff."

"Jo, sweetie, go back to the shop, okay?" Bella says.

I hear her, but I don't listen. Dad says it's a problem of mine.

"All of a sudden you want kids, Bella?" Stupid Two chuckles.

"Unbelievable. So, what? You adopted Cullen's kid?"

Man, he's really silly. "Hombre," I huff, shaking my head. "It's the other way around. Get your facts straight. This is my mom, comprende? And Dad adopted me. Now we're all together, m'kay?" I look up at Bella, who's both angry and amused. I know you can be both, 'cause I've seen it on Dad. "Are these bullies?"

"Um..." She's thinking. "I guess you can say that, but again, Jo, go back inside, all right? I'll handle this."

No can do, madre mia. If these are bullies, then...well...

I place my hands on my hips, giving Stupid One and Stupid Two the best stink eye.

"You're supposed to be nice to people!" I yell, and then I take a few steps forward and kick Stupid One in the nuts. "I hit where it hurts! Remember that, munchkin!"

He drops to his knees, looking like someone who just got kicked in the nuts.

Last but not least, I curl my hand into a fist and punch Stupid Two in the nuts, too.

I know what's going to happen now. Dad will show up and be real mad at me, 'cause you're not supposed to hit people, but he will still be secretly proud, 'cause I'm like a superhero fighting evil.

98.

Josie's POV

"I knew it," I mutter under my breath as I see three guys coming. Dad, Big Guy, and Uncle Jazz are all looking pretty damn mad as they head our way. Oh no, Dad's badass. He sparks up a cancer-stick, holds it between his lips, and rolls up his already short sleeves over his shoulders. And Big Guy's cracking his knuckles. Jeesh.

"Fuck, Edward's gonna hate me," Bella whimpers.

She's weird.

Why would Dad hate her?

And that's when Dad reaches us.

"You okay, baby?" he asks me, but he's glaring at Stupid One and Stupid Two behind me.

"I'm okay, Dad. I'll take my punishment with a smile. They're bullies."

He fights a smile and turns to Bella. "You, honey? You're okay?"

Yeah, take that, Mom. Told ya he wouldn't hate you.

"Y-yeah," Bella stutters.

Snicker, snicker.

"Good," Dad says. "Now, take Josie inside. I'll deal with this."

99.

EPOV

After pulling Embryo up to a standing position, I push him up against a brick wall.

"Listen closely," I say in his ear. "Come near my family again, and I won't let you leave with just a punch from my little girl. Are we clear?"

He swallows hard, which I feel against my hand since I have him by his collar.

"Fuck you, Cullen. You won't last here," he grunts, failing at sounding confident.

I laugh a little. "And you're a delusional little fuck, Call." I add pressure, causing him to whimper. "Stay away from my girls. Understood?"

More pressure.

"Yes," he chokes out.

Pushing him away from me, I turn to Jacob Black.

"You're done," is all I say.

He knows very well that Black's Wheels has nothing on Cullen Auto.

That's probably why he doesn't say anything in return.

This is a done deal already.

"Now, get the fuck out of here," I tell them.

With weak glares, they scamper off.

Assholes.

If my Josie hurt her hand on either of them, they better know how to hide.

"All right," I sigh, taking a final drag from my smoke. "One more oil change and then I'm so going home."

Emmett and Jasper chuckle.

100.

Later that night, I have Bella on my lap, family surrounding us in our backyard, Josie and Callie playing with Cash, burgers and steaks on the grill, and Poison playing in the background. A cold beer in one hand and my other hand around Bella's waist.

I'm not gonna be all sentimental and think back on the past eight years.

It's about looking forward, ain't it?

"Maybe we should strike right away and open a second garage here soon," Dad says thoughtfully. "Maybe in Jacksonville."

Ma's all smiles. "You could run it, honey."

And Dad nods. "Yeah, Tampa's not that fun anymore."

I chuckle at them, and I feel Bella's lips against my neck, curling into a smile.

"Besides, I wanna be closer for when more grandchildren come my way," Mom finishes.

I grin and shake my head in amusement. "You two are relentless."

They shrug.

"I'm thinkin' you should move to Atlantic Beach," Charlie mentions with a smirk directed my way. "This house is gonna be too small when you have more little ones anyway. And I'm pretty sure Josie wouldn't mind living close to the ocean."

"Oh, boy," Bella mutters.

"Dad!" Josie calls. "Can we buy another dog? I think Cash wants a friend."

I hear what she's saying, but I don't listen.

Easier that way.

"So, who wants a burger?" I ask.

Third Page

Song: Simple Life by Lynyrd Skynyrd.

This is the last of it.

After three years in Lakeside, it's time to move to Atlantic Beach.

From there, I will run our third garage in the Jacksonville area. Peter and Alec will manage the one here in Lakeside, Dad handles the one in the city, and Atlantic Beach is now mine.

It's not like we have any competition, what with them being run outta town and all.

I don the Ray-Bans and open the door for Brady. I grin. "Get in, baby."

He chuckles and mirrors my move with his own shades.

At five years old, he's a freak—just like his sister—but with that brown hair, that dimpled smile, and those blue eyes, he has us all wrapped around his pinky—just like his sister does.

We went through the testing, and though my sperm count was a bit low, the doctors told us it shouldn't be too hard to get pregnant. However, in the back of our minds, Bella and I were on the same page once again. This was—is—our way, and we adopted a three-year-old boy from New York two years ago.

He's our son.

He's Josie's little brother. She's crazy protective of him.

Once he's buckled in, I close the door and walk over to the truck. I'm glad Charlie has Cash for the week, 'cause I don't want him slobbering in my Camaro, and he wouldn't fit in the truck with Josie and Bella.

"See ya in an hour," she says, looking sinful as she leans against the semi. "It's been a while since you ate, so I left sandwiches in the cooler next to Brady."

I grin, cup her face, and kiss her. "I love you, honey." Even though we'll be able to cook in our new kitchen in just an hour, she made food for the road. My kinda woman, is all I'm saying.

She hums, smiling into the kiss. "Love you, too, baby. By the way, Brady took the Slash CD."

"Got it," I mumble, pecking her a little. "And Jo took one of Great White's."

"Mom, hurry up!" Josie huffs impatiently from the passenger seat. "You and I gotta beat the guys."

"That won't happen!" Brady shouts from behind me. Breaking my kiss with Bella, I look over my shoulder to see him hanging out of the window. Man, we just couldn't catch a break second time around. Wild little shit. "We're gonna win, right, Daddy?"

I smirk. "Of course we are, buddy."

Rose and Emmett, who are moving into our old house, laugh from the sidewalk.

Bella smirks, too. "We'll just have to see about that."

"Oh, it's on, Mrs. Cullen," I say challengingly.

With that said, I head back to my car.

I close the door, Brady hands me a CD, and I hear Bella's engine rumble to life.

"Uh-oh, Daddy," he mutters as I roll down my window. "We gotta hurry if we wanna beat Mommy and Josie."

Don't worry, kid. I've got this.

I rev the engine.

"See ya next weekend, guys," I tell Rose and Em.

Weekly barbecues are vital.

And our new backyard is fucking huge.

"Drive safe," Rose says with a nod.

"Always do," I respond, and with a two-finger wave, we're off.

The End