



Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight

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## **I Remember December**

*A Christmas story...*

**EPOV**

**1.**

*I remember when we first met...*

***December 12th 1992***

I stomp my feet hard, so hard, and slam the door shut.

Hate everything. Hate Mom and Dad. Always drinking and shouting.

So, I go to the roof. S'cool up there.

It's almost Christmas, so it's really, really cold, but I don't care.

Up the stairs, all the way, 'til I reach the roof.

I kick the door open, 'cause I'm fucking strong.

The cold hits my face right away. The snow, too. Still don't care. At least I'm alone up here.

Until I see that I'm not.

There's someone sitting by the brick wall behind the door. Looks like a punk. A girl punk. I scowl at her. 'Cause this is my place.

"Who are you?" I ask, and she looks up. All I see are tears. Even in the dark, 'cause it's night. "Crying's for girls." I huff.

Who is this kid? She's gotta be new in the building, I just know it.

She narrows her eyes at me. "I *am* a girl, you idiot."

"I'm not an idiot!" I growl. Dad calls me that, and I hate it!

The girl just looks away.

I kick some snow around.

"You didn't answer my question," I tell her, and I'm kinda angry. "I asked who you are."

Without looking my way, she answers. "I'm Bella. Just moved in."

Yeah, that's what I fucking thought.

"On the third floor?" I remember Mom saying that the Chinese man was moving out. "S'that where you live?"

She nods, *still* not looking at me!

What a punk.

"Fuck," I breathe out, 'cause the wind is so cold. I'm just in my pajamas and my jacket. And shoes, duh.

The girl is just in her nightgown. Um, and also a jacket. And boots. And she's sitting in the snow on the ground. Stupid girl. She's gonna get sick, I just know it.

I'm still scowling, 'cause her hair is all over the place. The wind makes it fly around and shit, and it gets stuck in her tears.

My breaths come out with puffs of air.

Sorta like when Mom and Dad smoke cigarettes.

Looking up, I don't see stars. Just the snow right before it falls on my face.

"I live on the fourteen floor," I mumble. "That's one and four together."

The Bella girl is only quiet.

And sniffing. Maybe she's getting sick, like I thought.

"How old are you?" I ask. Then I shake my head, 'cause the snow is falling too fast. "Fuck!" I got snow down my neck. So cold!

"You cuss a lot," she says quietly. I can hardly hear her for the wind, but I still heard her a little bit. "And I'm eight years old."

Hey, so am I!

"I'm also eight," I mutter. I thought she was like a little kid. Maybe six. She's sorta little, this Bella girl... like my cousin Maggie. Maggie and my aunt moved from Chicago last week. To Florida, I think. Aunt Lizzie met a new uncle. She always does that.

"So... what's your name?" she asks.

I'm still standing up, so I look down on her, 'cause she's sitting.

"I'm Edward Cullen. I live here with Mom and Dad, but they're always screaming, so I come up here on the roof."

Don't understand why she's still crying.

"When's your birthday?" I tilt my head. I wanna know if she's older than me. I think I'm so older. "Mine is in June. It's in the summer."

Bella girl sorta smiles, but not really. And she wipes her cheeks. Also, she wipes away some stuck hair. It's really long, her hair. Dark brown, I think. "My birthday is in September."

I count on my fingers. *June. September. June... July... August... Sept-September!*

"Yesss," I hiss quietly. I knew I was older!

The door opens then, really fucking hard, and I sorta jump. Not 'cause I'm scared. I don't get scared. And a man looks around. He's got a bottle of something Mom and Dad also have. It makes them all screamy and shouty and mad.

"Bells!" he barks out like a fucking dog. Maybe that's her dad. I think it is. And Bella looks sadder. "Get back downstairs." His words are all jumbled together, so I think he's just like my mom and dad. That means I hate this man, too. I scowl at him, but he doesn't see me.

"I'm coming," Bella says in a weird voice. Like she's gonna cry again.

"Do you know how long it took me to track you down?" Bella's dad asks. He's angry. Angry and drunk. Fucker. "Ah, for fuck's sake, Bells. Look at your pajamas. They're all wet. Now we gotta find you new ones. Like I don't already do enough."

Bella says nothing, but she does look back at me and give me a little wave, 'cause she's going back inside.

I wave back and then they're gone.

~oOo~

*I really was a foulmouthed little shit even back then, wasn't I?*

*I miss you, baby.*

**24 days 'til Christmas...**

**2.**

*I remember the Hershey Kisses...*

**December 16th 1992**

I look at the snowman I've just built.

And it looks like shit.

It's a good thing that it's dark, 'cause it would look even shittier in daylight, I just know it. But it *is* dark, 'cause it's night.

Good thing Bella girl isn't here, 'cause I don't want her to see the snowman.

She hasn't been on the roof since that first night.

I'm here every night.

"Fuck you," I tell the snowman before I punch it in the face.

It didn't feel good.

Dad's wrong.

When he hit Mom, I asked him why he did it. He told me it felt good.

It doesn't. He's wrong.

So, I kick the snowman instead. With my knee. That doesn't feel good, either. Mom told me it felt good to kick Dad once. She's wrong. She's gotta be. But I don't fucking get it. They're always that way when they drink that smelly stuff. First, they're happy. I kinda like that. But then they start fighting and screaming and throwing things. I don't like that. That's why I come up here.

"You killed the snowman," someone says behind me, and I swear I jump a million feet into the air.

"Shit!" I scream.

With wide eyes I turn around, and it's Bella girl.

"You scared?" she teases.

I glare at her. "I'm not fucking scared!" I yell.

She thinks I'm a liar, I just know it. 'Cause she just shuts the door behind her and moves back to the place where she sat a few days ago. And she's still wearing the same clothes. Nightgown, jacket, and boots. Silly girl's gonna get sick. I just know it.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, still glaring. "This is my place." But... it feels... I dunno... good to see her. No, it doesn't! I'm just kidding. "No girls allowed up here," I huff.

She just shrugs and pulls her knees up to rest her chin on them. Her butt's gotta be freezing on the ground.

"Mom and Dad are fighting," she says.

And I get it.

My hands are like ice after building the snowman, so I stick them in the pockets of my pajama pants, and then I sorta just look down at the ground. I just don't know how to be when I'm around this girl. I don't like girls. In school, Alec and I always make fun of them. So, this is weird. It's also weird that Bella isn't like other girls. I mean... she is, but... I don't wanna poke fun at her. I guess. I dunno. It's all very weird.

My head snaps up then, 'cause even with the wind and all, I fucking heard the rumble coming from Bella's tummy.

"Was that you?" I ask, even though I know it was. Holy crap. She's gotta be really hungry or something.

"No!" she says, scowling.

She's lying, I just know it.

And I remember the Hershey Kisses I have in my jacket.

Mrs. Cope, our neighbor, she gave them to me after school today.

"Um, I gots chocolate," I mumble, walking toward her. "You can have some if you want." I shrug.

But she doesn't move. She just sits there with her forehead resting on her knees.

I roll my eyes. Girls – always so weird.

"I'm gonna freeze my butt off," I whisper real quiet, and then I suck it up and sit down next to her. "Here, Bella. Have some chocolate. They're real good." One of my favorites, really, so I take a few for myself, too. "Mrs.

Cope, she's my neighbor. After school, she sometimes gives me candy or sandwiches, 'cause Mom and Dad work late."

Bella's still all quiet, but I think she wants some. Maybe she's shy.

"Do your mom and dad also work late?" I ask, chewing on my chocolate.

"S'that why you haven't had dinner yet?"

Now she turns her head a little, still resting her face on her knees, but... she's facing me. "My mom doesn't work," she says quietly. Her eyes are totally on the candy. "Um, she's always home, but... she doesn't really cook."

Oh.

Um... "What does she do then?" I scrunch my face together, 'cause I don't understand. Mom and Dad are only home at night. They work all day, but it's okay. I'm a big boy. I can be alone a lot. And when I get hungry, I can make toast with peanut butter.

"She watches TV and yells a lot," she mumbles. "And she drinks..."

The smelly stuff, I just know it.

That sucks.

"Here," I say again, holding out the bag with Hershey Kisses. "I know you want some, Bella."

I just know she does.

She thinks about it, I think, and she's chewing on her lip for a while, but then... Yeah, I knew it. She wants some, 'cause she takes a few. Only three. That's not gonna make her tummy full, but I can always tell her to take more later.

"Thanks, Edward," she mumbles quietly, and her cheeks turn pink. I think she's cold.

"Hey, you remember my name." I grin.

She smiles!

"So... what're you gonna do for Christmas?" I ask, popping another candy in my mouth. "Mrs. Cope always gives me extra candy on Christmas."

"Um... I don't know." She shakes her head a little, and it makes her hair go wild again. I chuckle when some snowflakes get in my face. And fuck, my butt is really freezing, but it's okay, I guess. This beats being downstairs. "Before, we were at my grandma's house," she says, giving a small smile to the ground. "But she died, and then we moved here. We were in Forks before."

I tilt my head. "Forks?"

She nods, and I offer her more chocolate. "Thanks." Another smile, I saw it. "Uh, Forks is when I'm from. It's not like Chicago. It's a really small town."

Huh. Weird name for a town. "Okay, so now you're here." I swallow my chocolate. "Just you and your mom and dad?"

It's sorta the same with me. My aunt and cousin lived here before, and Nana, too. But she's also dead, and Lizzie and Maggie are in Florida.

"Yeah," she says with a nod. "Don't really think we will have much of a Christmas this year. Mom is just... I dunno... and Dad is always mad and drinking..."

Yeah...

I scratch my forehead, wiping off some melted snow. "Um..." I wonder... "I dunno, but... we can have Christmas here." I shrug and look down. "Mom and Dad won't be home, anyway. They're working, 'cause you get more money if you work on Christmas." At least, that's what Mom says. "Hey, I can make peanut butter toast," I tell her. "I make the best, I swear."

Bella giggles... and I grin *really* big. "What, you say we should meet up here? On Christmas?"

I nod, kinda liking my plan. Beats being home alone, I just know it.

"Maybe Mrs. Cope will give you something, too." She's a nice lady. But she's got like ten cats. "You can knock on my door, and then we can come up here. Uh, I'm on the fourteen floor. Number one-four-seven. There are some stickers on the door if you can't remember the numbers."

"Okay." She smiles again. "I can bring juice boxes, I think."

Sounds good to me, 'cause we only have water and something called tonic at home.

"Um... I think it's time for me to go home," she mumbles. No more smiles. That sucks. "But I'll see you soon?"

I nod and we both stand up. "Yeah."

She gives me a tiny smile and walks for the door.

Um... "Bella?"

"Yes?"

*Just say it, Edward. Say it. Tell her.*

Fine...

"Girls are allowed up here," I say quietly as I look down.

Okay, not all girls. But she is.

I guess.

Yeah.

"Edward?"

I look up, hoping she can't see my ears. They're red, I just know it.

She smiles. "It's gonna be a fun Christmas this year."

I smile, too.

~oOo~

*Looking back now, I know that you owned me even then.*

*Jesus, I miss you.*

**23 days 'til Christmas...**

**3.**

*I remember our pinky promise...*

**December 25th 1992**

"Thank you, Mrs. Cope." I grin really big and take the basket with the stuff she's giving me. I've told her about my Christmas with Bella, and like always, Mrs. Cope looks a little sad when she smiles. But then she smiles like she's happy, and now it's really big. "I hope she'll like it." But if Bella doesn't like the food, I know I will. It's really a lot, too. There's turkey and sandwiches and Coca Cola and candy canes and chocolate and baked potatoes. There's also a really big blanket.

"Are you sure you don't wanna stay in here, dear?" she asks. "You and your friend are going to be so cold up on the roof."

I shake my head. "It's okay, I just know it. We were up there yesterday, and we said we were gonna put on lots of clothes tonight." And I have. Tonight I've got two pairs of comfy pants, a t-shirt, a sweater, my jacket, thick socks, and boots. Bella's also bringing two pillows we can sit on, and I have the blanket now from Mrs. Cope. It's gonna be so good.

~oOo~

When I hear the doorbell, I run the fastest I can from my corner in the living room. I wish I had my own room, like my friend Alec does, but our apartment isn't very big. When I grow up, I'm gonna have many rooms, I just know it.

"Hey, Bella!" I say after ripping the door open. She's come to the roof lots of times now, and... Fine, she's a friend now, okay? She's okay. All right, she's *cool*. And we've planned the best Christmas, I just know it.

"Hi, Edward," she says back, and she's grinning. That's a lot better than crying. "Ready to go?"

"Yeah, I'm just gonna grab my jacket." Then I run back to the living room where I have all the food and stuff. It's not hot anymore, the food, but I think it's gonna be okay. "Do you have hat and gloves, too?" I yell from the living room. Mrs. Cope told me it was best to bundle up real good. I think she's right about that.

"Yeah, I have it in my bag!" she calls back.

Huh. Didn't know she had a bag.

After putting on my jacket, I grab the heavy basket and the blanket.

"Wow, that's a lot of stuff," she gasps when I come back to the hallway.

I grin. "Mrs. Cope gave it to us."

Then I see the backpack she has.

"Okay, let's go," I grunt, 'cause the basket is heavy. But I'm not a baby. I can carry it.

But when we get to the roof, I'm fucking tired. Not that I will say that out loud, 'cause Bella offered to help, but... she's a girl. She can't carry heavy stuff like I can.

"Did you get anything this morning?" she asks as she places the pillows on the ground. Then she pulls a blanket out of her backpack, and I smile when she puts it on the snowy ground. It's gonna be like a picnic. And the pillows will make it comfy, I just know it. "Mom and Dad gave me a chocolate Santa and a pony magazine."

I scrunch my nose. "You like ponies?" I remember seeing horses once with Nana, but they smelled like crap. But Bella nods like crazy, so I guess she really likes them. Weird girl. I shake my head at her and put the basket down on the blanket. "Um, Mom gave me some clothes... And Dad gave me a toolbox with a bunch of tools for kids."

I sorta like that last present. S'just that I don't have anything to build with.

After a little while, we have everything set up, and we sit down on the pillows. Since I'm so starving, I dig in right away. I swear, the turkey and the baked potatoes are calling my name. And... it's fucking delicious. Not hot, but not cold, either. Damn, so good. The Coca Cola, too. Can't wait to taste the candy.

"This is so good," Bella says before taking a big bite of the turkey.

And I agree with nod, 'cause yeah.

~oOo~

"Fuck, I'm full," I groan.

Bella nods and places her hands on her belly. "Me, too. The best dinner ever."

Oh, yeah. I think so, too.

I know we don't have so much time left, 'cause it's so cold, but... a little bit more. My nose is probably as red as Bella's, but we stay bundled inside the blanket Mrs. Cope gave us, so at least we're not too cold. And the pillows and extra blanket on the ground have worked so good, I swear.

"Um, I have a Christmas present for you," she mumbles shyly then, and my eyes bug out. "It's just something small, but..." She shrugs. "I wanted to give you something."

Shit! "But..." I tug on my hair through my beanie. "I don't have anything-"

She cuts me off. "It's okay, Edward. And... I mean... you sorta gave me Christmas. That's the best present."

I did not *give* her Christmas. You can't give that away. It's just there. On the calendar.

"Just take the gift," she giggles, reaching into her jacket pocket. Then there's a little wrapped present, and it's got snowmen on it. I'm fucking curious. "But don't laugh at me," she says when I take it from her. And why the fuck would I laugh? "I made it myself. In school."

Sucks that we don't go to the same school.

"Um, thank you," I mutter, wrestling with the giftwrapping. And the tape. Bella really likes tape. But I'm strong, really strong, so I manage to tear it open, and... "Shit, this is cool, Bella." It's a bracelet, and there are black beads all around with awesome skulls on them. Like really little ones. One skull on each tiny bead. They're in white, so you can see them. So cool... and it's a boy bracelet. It's sorta like rubber, um... elastic, so it's gonna fit good, I just know it. Yeah. I put it on, and it fits.

"You like it?" She smiles like she's hoping I'm gonna say yes.

"It's the best, I just know it," I tell her, grinning. "Thank you."

Her cheeks turn really red when I hug her, but... I had to, 'cause you do that when you get a gift. Nana told me.

Then we go back to eating candy canes and chocolates for a while.

So good.

"I think you're better than Alec," I mumble as I munch on a candy cane. It crunches as I chew. And when I drink soda afterward, it really bubbles up in my mouth. I think it's the mint that does it.

"Alec?" she asks, tilting her head to the side an itty bit.

I nod, and my ears burn again, but I don't care. "He's my best friend."

"Oh..." She looks down, so I sorta dip my head to see her face, and she's doing that shy smile again. "And you think I'm better?"

"Yeah," I say, looking away.

It's snowing again.

"You're my best friend, too, Edward," she tells me real quiet.

But I heard it.

Fuck, my cheeks are redder than a Santa suit, I just know it.

And it's not just from the cold.

"Even if you're a boy," she giggles.

It makes me grin really big, and I look back at her.

"Shake on it?" I ask, reaching out my hand.

'Cause yeah... Bella's my best friend. Even if she's a girl.

She shakes her head. "No. Pinky promise." I chew on my lip as she holds up her pinky finger. "Best friends always."

Always sounds really good, but... "Pinky promises are for girls, Bella."

"So?" She grins.

I roll my eyes.

And then I hook my pinky finger with hers.

"Best friends," she whispers.

I nod. "Always."

~oOo~

*Such a goddamn pussy I became for you, baby.*

*Miss you.*

**22 days 'til Christmas...**

**4.**

*I remember the day we changed...*

**December 5th 1998**

"Fuck, I'm starving," I groan.

She looks at me, and I can tell that she's deep in thought.

She better not suggest we go home, 'cause I'd rather starve to death.

Which she knows. Hell, she feels the same.

That's why we're walking around instead of heading home after school. Just... aimlessly. And it's fucking cold.

Bella's also cold, but I'm afraid to go near her. Apart from the occasional hug, I don't touch that girl. If I do, I end up with a raging boner, and I'm scared that she'll run away screaming. Lemme tell ya, being a teenager ain't easy. Especially not when you have Bella as your best friend. 'Cause she's fucking hot.

"There's one way we can get money," she tells me then, looking anywhere but at me.

I frown. "What do you mean, and why do you look so fucking guilty?"

Her cheeks are already flushed from the cold, but I sure as hell see her blush anyway.

"See that guy over there?" she asks quietly. I follow her gaze until I see who she's referring to. A grownup. Fancy suit, black leather briefcase. So, I nod. "Go ask him what time it is."

I stare down at her.

I have a feeling I know where she's going with this.

"Are you serious?" I hiss. I mean, it's one thing when we sometimes "forget" to pay for a fucking candy bar at the corner store near her school, but to actually...

And why the *fuck* is my dick waking up now?

"S'just a suggestion." She shrugs, smiling like the angel we both know she isn't.

Bella Swan is wicked.

I admit I was the one who started it all, but she has *no* problems with it.

"Can you pull it off?" I hear myself asking as I look at Suit again.

"Yeah," she replies. "I just saw him pocketing his wallet in his left coat pocket."

Holy fuck, she's serious. I shouldn't approve of this. I shouldn't *want* this. But I'm goddamn starving, and we have no food at home.

"Okay."

She looks up at me, squinting a little because of the snow that's falling.

"Yeah?"

I nod. "But if you get caught, I swear to God, I will..." Do something?

Clever, dude.

"I won't get caught," she says. "Just ask him what time it is or something, and make sure you stand on his right side."

Okay. Okay. Um... right. Yeah, right side.

Gotcha.

*Don't be a fucking pussy, Cullen.*

After taking a deep breath, I look at the guy once more, and I notice that he starts to walk away. "We better do it now, then," I tell her.

Then I walk.

Toward him.

I know that Bella's behind me.

For some fucked-up reason, I smile internally.

The streets of Chicago are full of people, either hurrying to get home after work or out buying Christmas-related shit.

This is it.

I reach the guy.

"Excuse me," I say, walking up next to him. He looks at me, and I see nothing but disdain. Well, fuck you. "Do you know what time it is?"

In my periphery, I see Bella passing the guy.

Did she... did she bail?

She didn't even pause!

"Five o'clock," Suit replies gruffly then speeds up, most likely to get away from me. "Taxi!" he shouts, flagging a car down.

I slow down, keeping my eyes on Bella's back as she continues straight forward.

When she turns, I follow.

Soon, she turns again, and we end up in a narrow alley.

"What the hell happened?" I ask when I reach her. She spins around to face me, and that's when I see the massive grin on her face. Fuck, she's so pretty. "Did you...?"

I swear, she fucking squeals.

Also, she throws herself at me, and I'm fucking stunned.

Yeah, I tip over. That tiny chick is evidently a strong little shit.

"Oomph," I utter when I hit the snowy ground.

"I'm so sorry!" she gasps, but before she can get off me, I wrap my arms around her waist. "Did I hurt you?"

I shake my head, looking up at her pretty face. Her hair falls around us creating a dark curtain... *Fuck*, how I want to kiss her.

Imagine my surprise when *she* kisses *me*.

Right then, right there, she kisses me.

And before she can pull back, I kiss her back... and even if the ground is icy cold, I feel warmer and warmer by the second. Her lips are softer than I ever fantasized about, her breath is sweeter than I thought, and her tongue... holy shit, her tongue! It swipes across my bottom lip, and I can't help but moan when I part my lips to meet hers with mine. Christ, this is so fucking hot!

"Edward," she breathes out, and then she wriggles over my-

"Fuck," I groan, stilling her with my hands on her hips. "You really don't wanna do that."

She's all smiles.

Then she sits up, straddling me and smiling like she's not sitting on my very hard dick. There's no way she can't feel it. In fact, her smile tells me that she knows exactly what she's doing. And since she knows... Yeah, I smirk and place my hands behind my head. What? I'm a cocky motherfucker. She knows this.

"Wriggle away, pretty girl," I chuckle.

She does. Playfully, she fucking wriggles. But then she stops. "Actually, I was thinking we should check the wallet."

Damn, I'd forgotten about that.

Maybe because I have a hot girl on top of me. Maybe because we just fucking kissed. Maybe because I've dreamt about kissing said girl for a year or two now.

"I was your first kiss, right?" I ask when she reaches into her pocket. With a cute fucking blush, she nods. And I'm relieved. "Good."

"Was I yours?" she asks quietly.

I roll my eyes. "Who the fuck would I be interested in enough to kiss if it wasn't you, Bella?"

Seriously.

She doesn't answer, which is good, 'cause it was a rhetorical fucking question. Instead, she drops a brown leather wallet on my chest.

"Got more tricks up your sleeve?" I ask, giving her a wink as I pick up the wallet. I open it, and... "Holy fucking shit, Bella!"

Bills. Bills. Bills.

In an instant, I sit up so that we can both count the fucking bills, and it's with our foreheads touching that we look down at our goddamn fortune. My ass is getting wet from the snow, but hell, I can buy new jeans now. Jesus fucking Christ, there's almost two hundred bucks here.

"Looks like we're getting dinner tonight," she laughs softly.

"All thanks to you," I tell her. This time I don't resist kissing her, and I hope this isn't a one-time thing. It better not be.

"It's called teamwork," she retorts as I nibble on her bottom lip. "Don't eat *me*, Edward. We can afford food now."

"I fucking like kissing you," I admit.

She grins. "Me, too. I may never stop."

Well, that sounds fucking spectacular to me.

~oOo~

*I wish I could kiss you now.*

*Miss you, wifey.*

**21 days 'til Christmas...**

**5.**

*I remember the first time I punched someone for you...*

**December 14th 1998**

After saying goodbye to Alec, I make my way toward Bella's school.

Fucking snowstorm.

Good thing I have my new gloves, scarf, and beanie.

Today's goal is to get Bella a new jacket. She fucking needs it. That old thing she's got now is too damn thin.

Which means we're gonna try to get our hands on another wallet or two today, 'cause our first fortune is almost gone. After buying scarves, gloves, and beanies, we only had enough left to cover food. But now we're down to five bucks, and that won't give my girl a fucking jacket.

"She's not your girl, Cullen," I mutter to myself.

Yet. She's not my girl *yet*.

I will make sure that she is. I just gotta man up first.

Actually, maybe she *is* my girl, 'cause we sure haven't stopped kissing.

Last night when we were up on the roof, she even let me touch her boobs.

I nearly came in my fucking pants, I swear.

Whatever. She's gotta be my girl *officially*.

~oOo~

The first thing I see when I reach Bella's school is a crowd of people.

And the fact that I hear her voice coming from that crowd makes me hurry over.

Then I see it.

A fucking guy hitting on Bella. His friends are whistling and laughing, while Bella's friends are shouting and making noises of disgust.

"I'm not fucking interested, Mike!" Bella shouts.

Does he listen? No, the fucker does not.

"Oh, come on, Bella," the guy – Mike, I assume – laughs. "I've seen that Cullen dude so many times now, and there's no way you're together."

That's when I reach them, and before I even know it's happening, my fist connects with his jaw.

"If she says she's not interested, she's not fucking interested," I grit out through clenched teeth. I've never been so fucking angry in my entire life. My hands are almost shaking as I fist his jacket to pull him off the ground. "Don't get anywhere near her again, are we clear?" I warn. Behind me, I can feel Bella trying to pull me away, but fuck that. "Are. We. Clear?" I repeat angrily as he gulps.

"Edward, please," Bella says quietly. "Teachers are coming, and I don't want you to get in trouble."

I hold my glare, still waiting for the asshole to fucking answer.

"I won't go near her!" he cries out.

I smirk and drop him to the ground again. "Was that so fucking hard?"

Without waiting for a response, I grab Bella by her hand and leave.

"You shouldn't have done that, Edward," she says when we're about a block away. She tugs on my hand, and we come to a stop. She says nothing when she reaches for my other hand. "Does it hurt?"

I wince when she adds pressure, but I've had worse. This wasn't exactly my first time in a fight. "It's okay, I promise."

To me there's only one thing that's not okay right now, and that is Bella's bluish lips. She really fucking needs a new jacket, and since her useless

parents won't provide her with one, we're just gonna have to take care of ourselves.

"You hungry?" I ask her, draping my arm around her shoulders. She shrugs, which means yes. "We still have five bucks. Let's get you something to eat before we hit the streets."

"Are *you* hungry?" she counters with narrowed eyes.

"Nope," I lie. I smile down at her. "I ate at school."

~oOo~

*All right, I admit it. I have a slight issue with my temper.*

*I miss you, Bella. So fucking much.*

**20 days 'til Christmas...**

**6.**

*I remember when you became my girl...*

**December 14th 1998**

"You're so fucking cute," I chuckle, taking another pizza slice from the box. "Maybe I should leave you and your jacket alone."

"But it's so warm and snuggly and soft and pretty," she sighs dreamily.

I chuckle again, very fucking amused, but then I push another slice to her, 'cause she needs to eat. After four hours on the streets today, we finally had enough to buy Bella a new jacket. Then we bought a pizza on our way home that we're now eating up on the roof. We even have forty bucks left. I'm gonna keep that money and make sure she gets something

to eat after school. I mean, I can always have some fucking toast when I get home, but Bella's worse off. There's nothing but booze in their apartment, 'cause her parents eat out. Renee's working at some diner now where she has food, and Charlie's working nearby, so he eats there, too.

And we don't want teachers wondering if Bella doesn't get anything to eat at home.

They need to believe that everything is just fine, 'cause the thought of authorities getting involved is fucking painful.

"Eat more," I tell her before sipping my Coke.

I'm finally full. It doesn't happen often enough, so I'm definitely savoring the moment.

"Thank you for everything today, Edward," she says softly, and she's nuts. We work as a team, taking turns when it comes to snatching and distracting. Bella's far better at actually taking a wallet, though, but I can hold my own. "I don't know what I would've done without you," she adds quietly, eyes on the slice of pizza in her hand.

Scooting over on the blanket, I drape an arm around her. "I don't know what I would've done without you, either," I admit against her temple. Her dark purple beanie is a little wet from the snow, so I move my lips down and kiss her on the cheek. "I'm not going anywhere. You know that, right?"

Bella is all I have that's good in the world.

Only a fool would walk away from that.

Sure, I have Alec and his older brother. Felix is a cool guy, and since their parents died two years ago, he's taken care of Alec. Felix is a lot older, which is good, 'cause otherwise Alec would've ended up in foster care.

Anyway, when Felix drops off Alec at school every morning, he sometimes gives me money for lunch.

But nothing beats Bella. She's the only one who can make that weird fucking rock in my stomach go away.

"I'm not going anywhere, either," she tells me, looking up at me. "Unless we go away together, of course."

I grin, remembering all the times we've made plans to leave.

We will.

*Now is the time to ask her, Cullen.*

Shit.

I chew on my lip, nervously watching her as she eats her pizza.

She gotta say yes.

"Um, B-Bella?" Great, now I'm a stuttering nerd.

She tilts her head up. "Yeah?"

Okay, I'm gonna fucking die. I... I just know it.

*Just ask her!*

Right.

"Will, uh..." I clear my throat. "Will you be my girlfriend?"

I look down at my hands right away, feeling my cheeks and ears heat up. Seriously, this is fucking painful! I swear, *no* one knows this level of embarrassment but *me*!

"Edward, could you look at me?" she fucking giggles. I sorta do look at her, but only a little. "Of course I will be your girlfriend."

*Holy mother of...!*

Then she looks very shy all of a sudden. "I, um, sorta already told my friends you were my, uh, my boyfriend."

Oh?

Oh.

*Oh.*

Oh!

So, I kiss her. Real hard.

She's my girlfriend, and I'm her boyfriend. That's fucking awesome!

~oOo~

*You'll never know how fucking relieved I was when you said yes.*

*I miss you, baby. Casey and Willow, too.*

**19 days 'til Christmas...**

**7.**

*I remember the last time we fucked in our building...*

## ***December 3rd 2000***

"It's gonna be too fucking cold out there," I chuckle when we reach the door leading to the roof. "My poor dick won't survive."

"Mmm, you're so romantic, baby," she jokes. But then she gives me the fuck-me eyes and leans up against the door. "How about right here, then?"

Sounds good to me. It's not like we haven't fucked against this door before. With her parents hating me, there's no way we can spend time at Bella's place. And I don't have my own room, so...

We lost our virginities to each other up on this roof last summer. Since then, there's probably not a damn spot in this building where we haven't fucked or made love. Well, except for in the apartments.

"You know I won't say no," I tell her, trapping her between my arms. I nuzzle her jaw, dropping kisses as I go. Fuck, how I love this. She may have been my girlfriend for two years now, but she's owned my sorry ass for longer than that. "I love you," I whisper, pressing my body against hers. "You know that?"

"I do," she moans softly as I suck on her neck. "And I love you, too." Her eager fingers work my jeans as I remove my jacket. Then I unzip her pants as she pushes mine down my hips. I'm hard and so fucking ready, like I always am. "Fuck, it's been too long, Edward."

Yeah. Like... twenty-four hours.

Capturing her mouth with mine again, I push off her jacket before unbuttoning her blouse. No bra. Those fucking boobs of hers, I'm an addict. *Fuck*. She strokes me expertly. I lower my mouth to her nipple, suckling on it the way I know she loves.

"Now," she whimpers.

Yes.

I release her while she gets rid of her jeans. Then she hitches one leg over my hip before I pick up the other.

"Damn," I moan. The head of me is instantly coated in her juices, and as soon as I'm positioned, I push in. "This is gonna be fast, baby," I warn her through clenched teeth. After the day we've had, I fucking need this. Hell, so does she.

We nearly got caught today when we were "working".

'Nuff said.

"Oh, fuck," I whimper as I pull out. She's so wet and tight, it's almost impossible to keep going. I fucking hate that I can never last more than a few minutes, but it's just too damn good. "Can you touch yourself for me, baby?" I ask breathlessly, angling myself to reach deeper. My thighs are already trembling slightly from the weight. It would've been easier if I hadn't just spent five hours walking the streets of Chicago.

"Just like that," she moans, and I look down to watch her playing with her clit. It definitely doesn't help me to hold back, but I can't *not* watch her. She's so hot and sexy. "It won't be long for me, either, Edward," she gasps. "Oh, yes..."

My eyes roll back for a moment when I thrust in again. Over and over, and I never take my eyes off of us.

"I love you," I tell her again. My breath comes out in quick pants against her temple. "You feel so good, Bella. I can't hold off." My balls tighten, as does my abdomen. "Are you close?"

I don't think she is, but I refuse to come without her.

So, I pull out completely and settle her back on the floor. Then I sink to my knees before her, going straight for her pussy. Dammit, how I love tasting her. Especially now when she's already so wet from me fucking her. While I stroke myself slowly, I push two fingers inside of her, curling them upward like she's taught me. There's a slightly rougher patch there that has her moaning and shivering in no time.

"Edward!" she cries out. I suck on her clit, swirling my tongue around it. Then I lift her leg over my shoulder, urging her to come even closer. "Ungh... I'm gonna come soon... Oh, God..."

I moan as a few drops of juices come from her entrance, and I use my fingers to spread it around her pussy before I lick it up. I gotta stop stroking my goddamn dick, 'cause I wanna come inside of her, not on the fucking floor.

"Now, now," she begs in a rush. I release her, quickly standing up to get back in position. She wraps her legs around me again, and I wrap my fingers around the base of my cock, guiding it in. Then I thrust hard, almost ramming into her. "Yees!" she moans.

I squeeze my eyes shut, already close again. The life of a damn teenager. But at least she's close now, too. Fuck. My fingers dig into her ass. I push harder and harder, panting against her shoulder. Then I find her mouth again, loving it when she kisses me after I've gone down on her. It's so fucking hot, and now I'm so, so, so close!

"Coming, baby," I grunt against her lips.

I can feel her muscles clenching around me as my orgasm takes over. Thankfully, she comes, too. We're both loud, but it's not like we care. I moan and groan, still kissing her hard, as I come in thick streams, ending

with one... two smaller ones. *Ungh*. The last thrusts are jerky and frantic, almost desperate. But I won't stop until I'm fucking done. *God*, it feels amazing. Our orgasms last long, and by the time I'm done, she's still fluttering around me.

*Holy fuck.*

"Christ, that was so good, Edward," she says breathlessly as I lower us to the floor. I gotta sit down for a minute, dammit. Once I'm seated with my back against the door, I release a long breath. Bella squirms a little, but I hold her still, 'cause I love staying inside of her. Which my look tells her. "Fine," she chuckles. She smiles and kisses me. "I love you." My cheeks. "I love you." Then my nose. "I love you." My forehead. "I love you." And lastly my lips. "I love you."

Right now, there's nothing wrong in the world.

"Love you, too, Bella," I sigh in contentment.

But no matter how much we hate it, reality soon seeps through and ends our moment. It's not fair. We're only sixteen years old, but we carry the weight of the world on our shoulders. All we want is to get away. We want to leave Chicago so fucking badly.

Problem is, we might have to do just that very soon. A little *too* soon.

Our teachers are wondering, worrying, asking questions.

We know that we can get food and shit, but we gotta ask first. And if we ask, we have to explain that our parents don't provide for us. That's what scares us, 'cause we're too young to make it on our own. We would end up in foster care, or... actually, probably in a goddamn group home. And there's no guarantee that we would get to stay together.

"I don't like it when you frown," Bella whispers against my cheek.

I sigh, dropping my forehead to her shoulder.

I'm so damn exhausted.

With deep breaths, I focus on my girlfriend. Her scent. It's sorta flowery... fresh, maybe a little fruity. I love it. I love *her*. She's all I have. We have to make it together. Separating us is out of question. I don't give two shits about how we make money. We've been stealing and shoplifting for two years now, and I can't say I feel guilty about it. We do it to survive, for fuck's sake. And it's not like we steal candy from a damn kid.

"Anything I can do to make you feel better?" she asks softly, threading her fingers through my hair. I don't have an answer for her, so I just shrug and hug her to me a little harder.

"What you're doing now feels so good," I mumble, but she already knows.

If only we were eighteen.

Then we could just leave. I could marry her, and we could start over somewhere else. Just the two of us. Together.

"What are you thinking about?" she murmurs.

I hum. "About marrying you."

We've talked about it so many times now.

It's like we're a lot older than we really are.

I sure as hell don't feel sixteen.

"Eighteen can't come soon enough," she sighs wistfully.

Two years.

Feels like forever.

"Let's get some fresh air," I suggest quietly, feeling like a fucking pussy when my eyes sting. I don't fucking cry. "How about it, pretty girl?"

~oOo~

*At the time, we didn't know just how soon we'd leave.*

*God, I miss my family, Bella. Are you and the kids okay?*

**18 days 'til Christmas...**

**8.**

*I remember our last moment on our roof...*

**December 3rd 2000**

*"Let's get some fresh air," I suggest quietly, feeling like a fucking pussy when my eyes sting. I don't fucking cry. "How about it, pretty girl?"*

~oOo~

Soon, we're both dressed again.

The cold hits us right away as we step out on the roof terrace.

Funny, we feel warmer up here with the wind and the snow than we do downstairs.

"Wanna play the atlas game?" she asks, leaning back against the brick wall, elbows resting on the top. I smile at her, placing one hand on either side of her before kissing her on the forehead. When I look over her shoulder, I can see the tiny cars down there. It feels secluded. Over the wind, we can barely hear the life going on. It's like it's just us two.

"You play. I'd rather listen to you right now," I tell her softly. Again, I drop my forehead to her shoulder. "Just... talk. I wanna hear your voice."

She does. While I hold her and kiss her, she plays our game. It's nothing special. She just mentions places that sound funny, or have different or special names. Places we could visit.

"In Canada there's a place called Bella Bella," she chuckles.

Well, I gotta smile at that. "Sounds like a place I wanna visit."

"Mm, and right next to it, there's Bella Coola."

I laugh quietly and kiss her rosy cheek. "Sounds... *cool*."

With our foreheads together, I keep my eyes on her. She's so damn beautiful. I know this is her way of lightening the mood and, like always she's succeeding. The bad doesn't go away, but she makes everything worth it.

"Oh, I remember another one." Her eyes light up. "This is also in Canada. Way up in the north, there's a town called Repulse Bay. Repulsing, *eh*?"

I grin. "You're too cute for words, I swear."

Safe to say, the atlas I gave her last year for Christmas has come to good use. I don't know how many dots we've made, saying that it's a place we're gonna visit.

"There's also a place called Lake River. It's near Hudson Bay. I mean, who does that? That's like naming a town Ocean Forest and placing it in the middle of a desert."

The girl makes me smile.

"Thank you for making me feel better," I murmur, nuzzling our noses together. My hands go to her waist and ribcage, squeezing a little through her jacket. That's when she winces. "What's wrong?" I ask, eyes darting between hers and her hips. "Did I hurt you earlier?" Shit, I hope not. But... um, I distinctly remember having my hands on her ass. Then again, there was yesterday...

I clear my throat. I definitely don't need *those* images now.

"It's nothing," she says dismissively.

"Don't lie to me," I tell her seriously. Then I unzip her jacket and blouse, not caring when the cold hits her skin. And that's when I see it. A bruise on the left side of her ribcage. How the fuck did I miss this before? Never mind, her boobs distracted me. "Mind telling what happened?" My fingers trace the purplish mark. It's big. Not very dark, but still very *there*. It has to be new, though. 'Cause it wasn't there yesterday.

Immediately, my mind goes to her parents. They've never laid a hand on her before. I would've known, trust me. They neglect her, but they don't hit her. Hell, they don't even care about her. They most likely know how she spends her days. I mean, we haven't hid the clothes, and... Come on, she's alive, for crying out loud. That's not thanks to them. So, they gotta know she gets food somehow.

"Fucking tell me!" I snap harshly.

It wasn't my intention to sound angry, but I fucking am. I'm furious and... scared. The thought of someone hurting Bella is enough to drive me insane. So, to actually see a goddamn bruise on her...

"Please don't make a big deal out of this, baby," she begs me. Tears are welling up in her eyes, and it's doing *nothing* to calm me down. "It was an accident, he was drunk!"

Every muscle in my body tenses.

Charlie.

"What. Did. He. Do?" I grit out through painfully clenched teeth.

She whimpers. "He... he found the money in my bag... The ninety bucks we have left from two days ago."

The money we *have* left. She said "have."

"He didn't take it then?" I ask, pressing my cold hand onto her bruise. I couldn't care less about the money, but I want the entire story before I hunt him down.

"He tried to," she cries, averting her eyes. That shit won't fly, so I smooth down her clothes and close her jacket before forcing her to look at me. I raise my brow, silently telling her to continue. I'm so fucking enraged that I don't think I could speak again even if I tried to. "He pushed me," she whispers brokenly. "Into a table." Nausea. I suddenly have to swallow down bile. "It was this morning before school." She sniffles. "He found the money, but I managed to take it back before I left."

But he still pushed her. He still fucking *bruised* her.

And she didn't tell me.

I mean, was she planning on going home tonight like always? Does she think Charlie's magically forgotten what happened this morning? I doubt he was that drunk. And it doesn't fucking matter, 'cause now he's crossed a line that I can't live with. Not feeding her or providing her with clothes is one thing, 'cause we can do that on our own, but... but...

To physically harm her?

My mind starts to race. We can't go on like this.

~oOo~

*The pain was indescribable, Bella.*

*I miss you, wifey. I miss our son. I miss our daughter.*

**17 days 'til Christmas...**

**9.**

*I remember when we left...*

**December 3rd 2000**

*To physically harm her?*

*My mind starts to race. We can't go on like this.*

~oOo~

Before I'm even aware of it, I'm moving backward toward the door.

"Don't, Edward," she cries out. With each step I take, she follows. "Please, please, please don't do anything!" My heart fucking breaks when she starts sobbing, but *fuck*, I can't sit around and do nothing! "I c-can live through *anything*, just as long as w-we're together, Edward. *P-Please*."

"You can't live with them, Bella!" I growl angrily.

"They'll take me away from you!" she screams.

Fuck, she misunderstands. "Baby," I choke out. I blink back tears and close the distance between us. "I'm not turning them in." I hug her to me. In my arms, she's shaking violently as sobs continue to rock through her tiny frame. "I won't ever leave you," I whimper into her hair. Fuck, just

the thought of being without her is unbearable. I squeeze my eyes shut, feeling so goddamn weak as I feel two tears roll down my cheeks. I have to remain strong. "But this can't go on."

I only see one way out.

We have to leave.

"We can't stay here, Bella," I breathe out thickly. "We have to leave."

In my mind, I make a list of things we'll need. Things we have. It won't be enough, but...

We have ninety dollars from the day before yesterday. And we have a hundred and eighty bucks from today.

That's... two hundred and seventy.

"You... You'll go with me?" she croaks.

"Of *course* I will," I say quietly but firmly. I stroke her hair and kiss her on the forehead. "There's no option, baby. I can't be without you."

A new set of tears fills her bloodshot eyes, but this time I can see it's relief.

I don't know how we're going to make it.

But at least we'll be together.

I know she wasn't lying when she told me she could live through anything... just as long as we stay together, but *I* wouldn't be able to live with it. One bruise today could quickly turn into a cracked rib next week.

So, this is it.

It's a good thing that I hate my own parents, because I know I won't ever see them again.

They can rot in hell for all I care. They deserve it.

~oOo~

"Wait here," I tell her, squeezing her hand before I let it go. "I'll be back in ten."

She nods, chewing on her lip. She's afraid, but I will protect her with my life.

She *is* my life. Just as I know that I'm *her* life.

After taking a deep breath, I open the door, hoping Mom and Dad aren't home yet. I don't think they are, but you never know.

"Mom? Dad?" I call out, closing the door behind me.

I breathe out in relief when I don't get a response.

After that, I move quickly.

Two pairs of jeans. One pair of sweats. Two t-shirts. Three hoodies. Four pairs of boxers. Six pairs of socks.

My birth certificate.

My ID.

The bracelet Bella made me eight years ago.

The photos I have of us that we've taken in a photo booth. We've done that a few times over the years. I don't have many possessions, but those photos and that bracelet...

I throw it all into a black duffle bag.

*Think, think, think.*

After a few minutes, I've found eleven bucks in change.

Where will we go?

Well, I know where we're going tonight, but then what? I know we can't stay with Alec. He's living with Felix and his wife. They have a baby on the way, and they're all living in a small apartment.

Besides, I don't wanna risk anything. Not that I believe Bella's parents would look for her. Hell, I don't even think my own will look.

But I won't take any chances.

In the bathroom I search the cabinets, not really knowing what I'm looking for. However, when I see the bottle of aspirin, I take it. That can always come in handy. Same goes for the first aid kit I see.

Shit.

With the thought of first aid, my mind wanders.

We'll be homeless.

We'll be hiding.

Chicago can be a rough fucking city. We shouldn't stay here.

And we will definitely be keeping to ourselves.

Despite the slight panic, my mind is also at ease. For eight years I've lived with a knot in my stomach. Each time I've said goodbye to Bella after a night on the roof..

That won't happen again. We'll spend each night and day together.

*Toothbrush. Toothpaste. A hand towel.*

"What else?" I mumble to myself.

I grab a razor.

Then I return to the living room. I grab a blanket and a pillow. There's only so much I can fit into the duffel, but I won't exactly leave until it's full. So, when I reach the kitchen, I empty the cabinets. There's not much, of course. A loaf of bread, a jar of peanut butter, a bottle of tonic, half a bag with potato chips, and some crackers.

Last but not least, a small kitchen knife.

Then I throw the bag over my shoulder and say goodbye to the place I've always hated.

~oOo~

"I can hear someone in there. It's probably Dad," she whispers with her ear close to the door. "What are we gonna do?"

Sliding my arms through the handles of the duffel bag, I carry it like a backpack instead. "We're both going in there," I say flatly. With all that hate I have stored inside me... Yeah, it's all for Charlie. "Don't worry. Focus on packing. I'll deal with your parents."

Renee is more than likely asleep on the couch. That's all that bitch does after work. Drinking before crashing in front of the TV. Or so Bella tells me.

"Are you sure?" she whimpers. I hate seeing tears in her eyes. I fucking hate it. "We can always skip it. Let's just leave, Edward. Please."

I shake my head. "You need your papers, and I need to give Charlie my goodbyes."

~oOo~

"Run, Bella!" I order, grabbing her arm.

We fly down the stairs.

"I will find you, you little bitch!" We hear Charlie screaming and slurring as we keep running down. "B-Bells, get the fuck back here!"

I grab Bella's bag for her, making sure she's in front of me.

It all started out very simple.

We had barged in there. Bella headed straight for her room, and I went for Charlie. Like we thought, Renee had already passed out on the couch. But Charlie was in the kitchen, drinking vodka straight from the bottle. I'd seen red. My fists did the talking. I couldn't fucking stop.

All the years of not caring for their daughter...

It was all aching and throbbing in me, and I got it all out until Bella had to drag me out.

I went too far.

But if you only have one person in the world that you can't live without... you'd do anything.

For years they've done jack shit for her.

I needed my fucking say.

"Are you okay, Edward?" she pants breathlessly.

"I'm fine. Keep running," I tell her.

My knuckles are bruised, but it's okay. Some snow will take care of the swelling, and it's not like I broke anything. Well, not on me. I'm pretty sure I broke Charlie's nose. Think I heard his jaw crack, too.

He had it coming, the alcoholic asshole.

"Did you find your birth certificate?" I ask as we finally reach the ground floor. She nods, stopping to catch her breath, but we don't have time for that. I open the door for her, jerking my chin. "We need to go, baby."

As she passes me, I stop her for a quick second to give her the scarf and beanie she forgot in the hallway before we left. She gives me a small smile, and then we're out.

It's close to ten PM.

It's cold as hell.

"Can we really do this, Edward? Have I messed everything up?"

"Don't ever think that," I mutter, shaking my head. After we've put our gloves on, I thread our fingers together. "We needed to get away, regardless. With the teachers snooping around... it was only a matter of time, Bella."

We're quiet as we make our way to Felix's apartment.

The only things I know are that I have my Bella with me, and that I don't regret leaving. No matter how hard things will get now, I have her.

~oOo~

*To this day, we don't regret leaving.*

*I pray that I will see you soon.*

## **16 days 'til Christmas...**

### **10.**

*I remember saying goodbye to Chicago...*

#### **December 4th 2000**

When Bella and I hop on the bus to Santa Fe, we're fucking exhausted. We're weary and uncertain, but we're together, and we're finally leaving.

After we arrived at Alec's last night, we told Felix and him everything. Heidi – Felix's girlfriend – had also been there. Since Felix had known about our situation for a long time, there wasn't really much to be said. But we have their support, at least. That sorta matters. We definitely have Heidi's support, 'cause I remember when she told us last year that she grew up the same way. She and her brother Jasper left home as soon as they fucking could.

It worked out for them. That's what I'm thinking about. It worked out for them.

Heidi... well, she's too pregnant to work now, but... she's a personal shopper or some shit like that. And Jasper – not that I've met him – is a cop, just like Felix will be as soon as he graduates from the academy.

"Sleep, baby," I murmur, holding my arm up for Bella. "Or are you hungry?"

We woke up with the fucking sun this morning. Felix and I bought two bus tickets... Felix insisted on paying. He wished he could give us more, but money's tight. Besides, they've helped us enough. Hell, the tickets were almost four hundred bucks!

There's a part of him that wants us to report our parents to the authorities, but he also understands why we don't. He went through all that with Alec after their parents died. Had Felix been a few years younger, they wouldn't have allowed him to become Alec's guardian. So, he knows very well how important it is for us to stick together.

I digress.

We were up early this morning. And Bella helped Heidi, making a bunch of food for us. We should have enough food to last until we get to Santa Fe.

After that, we're on our own. The only plan is to head south.

"It wasn't too long ago that we ate breakfast," Bella mumbles sleepily, snuggling closer to me. I kiss the top of her head, angling myself a little to give her more room in her seat. "No, get closer, baby."

I chuckle quietly. "Don't you wanna stretch out your legs? Or maybe I could take the window seat. That way you can lean against me and put your feet-"

"Shush."

I'm shushing.

"I love you," I whisper, dropping another kiss in her hair.

She hums softly and presses her lips against my neck. "I love you, too."

The bus rumbles to life then. My insides flutter. It's not entirely bad.

A fresh start.

A rough one, but fresh.

*Goodbye, Chicago.*

~oOo~

Approximately twenty-seven hours later, we're in a warmer climate.

Santa Fe, New Mexico.

I don't know how long we're here for, only that we want to reach the West Coast.

"Should we call Felix and see if he's heard anything from our parents?" Bella asks as we stretch out legs a little. People are everywhere, trying to reach their destinations. But it's still a lot smaller than Union Station in Chicago, that's for sure.

"Felix told me that we should wait a few days," I reply, running a hand through my hair. We showered yesterday morning before Felix took us to the bus station, but the long bus ride just makes you ache for another shower. But... we have no idea when that will happen.

We still have our two hundred and seventy bucks, but they won't last long.

My mind is spinning.

It's all still settling.

Homeless.

We have nowhere to go.

What if Charlie spoke the truth? What if he tries to find Bella?

That thought is painful. It feels like someone is squeezing my heart or stomping on my chest. It's also not allowed to happen. He can't find her. I won't be able to live with that. So... we have to stay low for a while. A long while.

"Should we stay here for a few weeks while we try to get money?" she asks quietly, getting my attention. She wraps her arms around my midsection. I kiss her on the forehead and hold her to me. "Or should we try to hitchhike?"

I don't know. But... "I think we should keep to ourselves as much as possible," I mutter against her forehead. "How about we find some cheap place to stay tonight? That way we can sit down and talk things through properly."

It's going to be hard.

We need to be prepared.

Felix warned me a little when Bella was out of earshot.

But I'm ready for it. I hope.

I have to be.

~oOo~

*It took eleven years until we saw Chicago again.*

*I miss you, sweetheart.*

**15 days 'til Christmas...**

**11.**

*I remember Fe Peak Motel...*

**December 5th 2000**

When Bella walks over to the bed, we already know.

She drops her towel as she joins me.

"Bella," I breathe out as I cover her body with mine. "My Bella." I kiss her hard and passionately. It's our first time in a bed. We're fucking naked. No jeans just pushed down over hips or shirts pulled up to expose chests.

"Fucking beautiful," I mumble against her collarbone. Her skin is still wet from the shower. I kiss, lick, and suck. Needing.

She's already wet for me when my fingers tease her slit.

I'm hard and leaking against her thigh.

"Yes," she whimpers quietly.

I finger her deeply. Two fingers, three fingers.

My mouth covers her nipple. Tongue swirling. I suck it into my mouth, moaning quietly around her.

Fuck, I'm *shaking*.

"I want you," she exhales hotly against my neck. Her fingers are in my hair, twisting, pulling, tugging. "Now, Edward."

I groan and reach up to kiss her, immediately pushing my tongue into her mouth. Slowly, I pull out my fingers from her wet pussy. And I replace them with my dick. In one slow stroke, I fill her. *Oh, my God*. As fucking usual, I have to close my eyes. Concentrating hard not to lose it too fast.

"Feels so good," she moans.

Above her head, I thread our fingers together.

I push hard, but keep it slow.

It's fucking intense.

Unlike anything I've ever felt.

"Wrap your legs around me, sweetheart," I groan. She does right away, and then I slide in even deeper. Fuck. All of me. "That's it... *Bella*..."

She kisses my neck. So fucking hot. Openmouthed. She whimpers and moans.

When I exhale over her shoulder, she shivers.

Buried deep inside of her, I roll my hips slightly. It makes us both moan louder, and I do it again. I also slide my right hand in between us. *Jesus*. She cries out and tightens around me as I start rubbing her clit. Still slow, but a little harder. Deep strokes.

"Oh... *fuck, baby,*" I grunt, needing to speed up. She wants it, too. Even with my eyes closed, I know her signs. The way she squeezes my hand above her head, the way her breathing quickens, the way she meets my thrust. *Deeper*. With a low growl, I slam in.

"Oh my God, Edward!" she cries out.

It doesn't take long until I feel her coming around me. Her walls flutter and squeeze me, making it impossible for me not to come, too. *Fuck*. I can't help but whimper; she's so fucking tight. I come hard, groaning in a strained voice as everything in me tenses up.

"Bella," I pant. I blink, seeing spots in my vision. Damn, girl.

"I love you," she whimpers, and then she starts kissing me almost desperately. It makes my heart clench, 'cause I know she's scared.

Problem is, I can't tell her that everything will be fine. I can't promise her that we'll have a bed to sleep in each night, because we know that's not

true. I can't tell her that we'll have a hot meal waiting for us at the end of each day, because we don't know if we will.

We probably won't.

So, when she starts crying, all I can do is hold her.

It makes me feel pathetic.

Now, I'm not some weak dude doubting my abilities. I'm just stating a fucking fact. I wish I could provide for her, but I can't. I will fight for it, though. Just like I know she will fight. Because my girl's not some weakling, either. She's fierce. After growing up with her parents, what choice does she have?

"Sorry for breaking down like that," she croaks after a while. By now, we're both under the covers. I keep her close, I kiss her, I tell her I love her. Most of all, I promise that I won't leave her side.

*"Stay together at all times."*

Felix's words go on a loop in my head.

*"Never hesitate to call. I will do my best to help."*

*"Sleep during the day. Be up at night."*

He wasn't sugarcoating anything, for which I'm thankful.

*"And whatever you do, stay together."*

That's a given.

"Are you ready to talk, baby?" I ask her softly, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear. "I think we have some sandwiches left, too. We could eat and talk, yeah?"

She smiles timidly, sniffing a little. "Yeah."

A few moments later, we're both sitting on the bed in t-shirts and sweats. Between us, we have everything we own. My clothes in two piles, hers in two. Toiletries in one pile. Our most important possessions are gathered in a small necessity bag; the few photos of us we have, the bracelet she made me when we were eight, the pinky ring I got her when I was eleven – that's unfortunately too small now. It's from a fucking gumball machine, but she refuses to throw it away. I guess I can understand it. Then we have our birth certificates, my ID, and Bella's prescription refill for her birth control in an envelope that I will keep in the inner pocket of my jacket. And in another pile, we have one pillow, one blanket, along with our gloves, scarves and beanies.

Last but not least, the stuff Felix gave us.

Four cans of pepper spray. A pocket knife. He even gave Bella his Taser. Don't ask me how he's going to explain that at the police academy, but I was too focused on Bella's safety to say no.

"So..."

Yeah. "I say our first priority is to get money," I say quietly, watching the items on the bed. "As much as possible, of course, but most importantly so that we can get to LA or another city on the West Coast." It's not like we're picky, but we figure a big city is easier to hide in.

"We can't really get jobs, can we?" she mutters, nibbling a little on her sandwich. "Not that I care right now, but..."

Yeah. That "but" is something we can fight for – which we will – but it's not going to happen over night. The "but" stands for a good fucking future. No goddamn stealing, a place to call our own, decent jobs,

whatever. We don't want much, just enough to get by. A little contentment wouldn't suck.

"We'll get there," I tell her, feeling a surge determination course through me. "We just gotta stay low until..."

Until we're eighteen.

Until our parents have no legal say.

Until we basically own ourselves.

"Two years," she mumbles. When I look up at her, I expect to see sadness or hopelessness, but I don't. Instead, I see a soft smile playing on her lips. "It's gonna be hard, but we'll make it."

That's my girl.

~oOo~

*And we did fucking make it, didn't we? If only I knew how things were going right now.*

*Miss you, Bella. I hope you tell the kids I love them.*

**14 days 'til Christmas...**

**12.**

*I remember how different we were after a year on the streets...*

**December 2nd 2001**

Days are spent in a park... We hunt down spots where the sun comes through to heat us up. Even in LA, December's chilly.

I order her to sleep for a few hours. She needs it.

With her head in my lap, I cover her in blankets. The three we own.

My fingers are in her slightly tangled hair.

The touch is soft, but my fingers are rough, already calloused.

Dirty.

We use public bathrooms to wash up, but...

Nothing is enough.

Stomachs rumble, reminding us that we haven't eaten in a while.

We don't need the motherfucking reminder.

We don't need a reminder of anything we do or don't do.

We don't need a reminder of anything we have or don't have.

We know.

With my hands on the grass, slightly behind me, I tilt my head back. I soak up the sun, needing it.

But as my eyes close, all I see is how we live.

Stealing, shoplifting before we head to the park to get some rest.

Muscles are sore, throbbing, aching.

When I count back, I realize that it's been four months since we slept in a bed. We try – we always try – to afford a night in a motel every now and then, but food comes first.

I'm startled back to the present when I feel Bella's finger on my eyebrow. "I can't sleep," she whispers. I crack a small smile. With a tilt of my head, I kiss her palm. She caresses my cheek; I need to shave. But it's hardly a priority. She also touches my scars. There aren't many. Just three. One on my left eyebrow, one on my jaw, and a recent one on my chin. As much as we try to avoid others, it's impossible to escape it all.

I've hardened.

We both have.

A part of me wants to send Bella to a women's shelter every night, but she refuses, and I'm too weak to argue with her. I need her with me. I only trust myself to take care of her. Not that she's not capable on her own, because she is. She's extremely strong, but... she's still so small. She's more fragile than I am. But I'm glad she's fast. Like, wicked fast. She's outrun each fucker who has messed with us.

I can't run, though. I *can*, but I don't. Bella calls me stupid, and I know that I am, but when someone tries to take what we've worked for, I see red. So, I fight.

"Are you tired?" she asks softly.

I am, but hunger wins. We've managed to get our hands on two wallets today, which makes it a good – very good – day. And we have eighty bucks. Earlier, I briefly considered that we'd stay the night in a motel, but we'd need to travel for a long fucking while if we wanna reach a cheap motel. Where we are right now there are only fancy hotels.

When Bella coughs, I'm reminded of another thing. "Rest for a while, Bella." I'm telling her. "Then we'll get something to eat. We'll also buy you some more cough syrup."

She scowls. "I don't fucking need it, Edward. I'll be just fine."

I tune her out.

She needs medication, and that's fucking final.

In this hell, she's my light. She's the one my heart beats for. It may sound gay or cheesy, but it's amazing how true it is in our life. She's the only one who can make me smile, for fuck's sake. It feels like there's nothing sweet or innocent left in me, but when she opens her mouth or just gives me a knowing look, I know that I have my reason to keep going.

The nights are the worst. That's when we're on constant alert. Every muscle is tensed, every nerve ending, every fiber... We're so damn focused, because we have to be. Those are the times where I have to remind myself that Chicago's worse.

Charlie and Renee have reported Bella as missing.

Even my own parents reported me as missing, but after a call from Felix in March, I know that they've backed off completely.

I make a mental note to call Felix again soon. I try to contact him once a month, if only to let him know that we're alive.

Thinking of Felix makes me ponder his suggestion. It was a suggestion he offered very reluctantly, and I'm sure the police officer in him cringed at the mere thought, but... he's still a loyal friend who knows the real world. His only demand – though he's not really in a position to make demands – was that he fly here to help us. That's not what I want because he could lose his job if someone found out that he knew where we were. Then again, I'm sure he's more... *capable*.

I sigh to myself.

Too much to worry about. Too many consequences. Too many risks. Too high stakes.

"Edward?"

I look down at her. "Hmm?"

When her eyes well up, I know that I've worried her. I always do. She can read me like an open book. She knows when I'm troubled, which is always. "I love you."

I hate that we say it to reassure. We say it when we're scared. We say it if we're arguing. Like a lifeline. We say it to make sure that it's still us. It fucking kills me. It's not that we doubt each other. It has nothing to do with that. We're solid, I know this. She's still the girl I gave Hershey Kisses to. I'm still the punk she made that bracelet for. Though, we only show those parts of us when we're alone. Those kids don't belong on the streets.

We need safety, and it's horrible how we only find that in those three words.

"Love you, too, baby," I whisper.

And I realize that I have to call Felix.

~oOo~

*That first year was rough.*

*Fucking hell, I need you, wifey.*

**13 days 'til Christmas...**

**13.**

*I remember the last night before Felix showed up...*

**December 12th 2001**

My left hand is shaking.

My right hand is surprisingly steady. Gloved fingers wrapped around the pocket knife Felix gave me more than a year ago.

I keep Bella behind me.

*Think, think, think.*

I know they have the advantage. Fucking crackheads. Two of them.

When Bella places her hand on my back, my eyes flick between the big guy with an iron pipe in his hand and the lankier guy with a knife in his. Bella and I don't stand a fucking chance if we don't run.

Problem is, we're all but trapped in the dark alley. There's a fence behind us, but it won't be easy to get over it, especially not with our two duffles.

*Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump.*

I can hear my own heartbeat. Or pulse. How do you tell the fucking difference?

"There's no way to run," Lanky Fucker spits out.

I take a quick inventory of what we have on us. I have our birth certificates and the only twenty bucks we own. Bella has the necessity bag with our photos...

But that's it.

The rest, our clothes, the blankets... it's all packed.

"Bella," I grit out quietly. "Give me your bag."

"Edward-"

"Do it," I hiss under my breath.

The two assholes take a few steps closer, and this is it. We have to fucking run. We have to get over that fence.

Bella hands me her duffle bag. I exhale, feeling the weight of it. It's not as heavy as mine, but it's still heavy.

"Do you trust me, baby?" I breathe out.

"Are you a martyr?" she whimpers.

Had I not been scared shitless, I would've smiled. "No. I promise."

"Then I trust you."

Good. "Run."

She does – thank God. Right away, she takes off.

And I put all my strength into my arm as I heave my duffle bag against the lanky dude. I grunt from the effort, and my muscles protest, but I manage to repeat the motion with Bella's duffle. Two grunts follow, this time from the crackheads. It slows them down for a second or two, and I run for my fucking life. I breathe out a sigh in relief when I see that Bella's already over the fence. When it's my turn, I turn around and throw the knife in my hand at one of them. The closest one, I don't have time to see who it is, but he screams out, and that's good enough for me.

"My *fucking* leg! GET HIM!"

Fat chance, asshole.

I jump. My entire body screams as I push myself up. Unfortunately, when I'm about to throw my leg over the top, the last one grabs my fucking foot. There's no thinking. I react on instinct when my free leg comes down again, and by some luck, I manage to get a forceful kick in without looking back. Pretty sure I just kicked him in the head, but I don't exactly stick around to watch. Instead, I just use the last strength in my throbbing arms to get over the fence.

"Fuck," I growl when I hit the ground. I get up and take Bella's hand. She's momentarily frozen in her spot, but we don't have time for that shit now. "Run, Bella," I bark out.

Thank fuck, she snaps out of it. We run as fast as we can, and whenever she tries to check for injuries, I tell her to keep her eyes forward. She's a worrier, much like me, but we can deal with that later. I'm not fucking injured. Just some goddamn ache that I've lived with for a year now.

We slow down when we reach a street with a lot of people, and this we know. We know how to get lost in a crowd. Which we do. We maneuver ourselves easily through the crowd of people who are out celebrating their precious TGIF.

An hour later, we've bought two burgers and a large bottle of water. With that taken care of, we head to the apartment building we've slept in ever since we contacted Felix. We hide under the stairs, only this time we don't have blankets or anything to make shit better. The stony surface makes my ass ache. It's goddamn impossible to get comfortable, but we're used to it by now.

We haven't spoken a word since I told her to run.

While we eat, we keep quiet.

My burger is gone before I know it.

Until Bella whispers, "Here. I'm full." She holds out half her burger.

"Liar," I mutter before taking a sip of the water.

"How many times have you told me you weren't hungry when you were starving?" she asks softly.

I stare at her.

She sighs. "I'll be honest with you, okay? I'm not full." Like I didn't know that, sweetheart. "But I promise you that I'm not hungry anymore. Please take it, Edward."

I can't. It goes against everything I am. It's just not possible for me to take her food. She needs it. She's too thin. Much too thin.

"Felix is coming tomorrow," she reminds me softly. "I'm sure he will at least give us a meal. I mean, this is Felix we're talking about." I know. He's done a lot for us, and tomorrow he will probably save our lives. If it all works out, that is. "Besides, Heidi would kick his ass if he didn't give us dinner." She's trying to make light of the situation, but it's all fucking horrible. "So... please. Eat." Then, with a sexy eyebrow cocked, she adds. "I refuse to eat it. If you don't, we might as well throw it away."

I swallow hard.

And I eat the last half of Bella's burger, feeling guilty about it.

~oOo~

*Two guys gave us hope the very next day.*

*I miss you, sweetheart. Time's running out.*

**12 days 'til Christmas...**

**14.**

*I remember our first home...*

***December 15th 2001***

Bella knows not to follow me when I get behind the wheel in the van. I close the door behind me, and it's so quiet. So, so fucking quiet. My forehead drops to the steering wheel. I sit absolutely still, but the van moves, telling me that Bella's in the back. I know that she's organizing.

"Fuck," I breathe out. My eyes sting painfully, and it doesn't take long before I have tears streaming down my face.

I've been too wound up, too focused... For so long. And I haven't shed a single fucking tear, but this...

There's no holding back the quiet sobs that escape me.

Maybe they're not quiet, but if Bella hears them, she doesn't let on.

We won't spend this Christmas on the streets.

Most people would look away, many would pity us, some would be disgusted, but not me. Not Bella. It's not much, but to us it's a goddamn mansion.

It's a van.

*"Good to see you again, kid," Felix says, wrapping me in a hug before he does the same with Bella. I stand stoic, eyes on the man Felix failed to mention he was bringing. After a year on the streets, all I see are threats.*

When Felix arrived in LA two days ago, he brought Jasper Whitlock with him. A man Felix's age, maybe a year or two older. I remember hearing about him, of course, because it's Heidi's brother. Jasper and Heidi grew

up much like Bella and I did, but I didn't know he was coming. And before two days ago, I'd never met him in person.

*"You remember what I told you about Jasper, right?" Felix asks once he's through with the introductions. Bella and I nod, and I make sure she's close to me. "And you remember what I offered before I flew out, yeah?" We nod again, just a small nod. Of course I remember. He's offered to buy us a used van to live in. The only reason we've hesitated is because Felix can get into so much trouble if people knew what he was gonna do. First of all, I don't have a driver's license. Neither does Bella, of course. And we barely know how to drive. The only experience I have is from the four or five times Felix let me drive his Toyota. It was the summer when Alec received his driver's permit. Felix taught me the basics, but that's it.*

After that, Felix told us why Jasper had come with him to LA.

Apparently, even though Jasper's now a cop, he offered to help us. Growing up, he didn't exactly live like Bella and I do. We stay away from all things dangerous. This includes smoking, drinking, getting high...

Jasper didn't avoid those things. Not that he had a drug problem, but he was, however, involved in some heavy shit. He was in some gang or whatever. Doesn't matter. What matters are the contacts he never let go of. Even after he and Heidi got off the streets, he stayed in touch with a few of his old friends. Now he's even trying to help them get a better life.

*"Jazz here can get you new identities," Felix tells us. "IDs, driver's licenses, birth certificates, social security numbers, even passports."*

*"You wouldn't have to wait a year for eighteen," Jasper adds quietly. "If you want my help, eighteen can come in a few weeks. Though, I'd suggest twenty-one as your age instead."*

He basically offered us a new life.

Bella asked him what the catch was. Jasper said there was none. He wanted to help, that's it. He also told us that he had looked into our files, or rather, Bella's file. He believes Charlie and Renee only reported her missing to make it look good. Like Bella and I hadn't already thought of that.

*We're quiet as we get into a cab. Tonight we're spending the night in a hotel. Not a cheap motel, but a hotel. It's not that Felix and Jasper are made of money, but they told us we needed it. I'm not going to argue.*

I wipe at my cheeks, remembering how Bella and I slept that first night. I'm pretty sure we spent four or five hours together in the bathroom. We took baths together, we took baths separately. I showered, she showered. I shaved my face, I trimmed my hair. Bella was giddy when she shaved her legs and armpits.

And the bed...

Jesus, the fucking bed. After devouring a pizza, we crashed. There was no question about sex, we just fell asleep. Arms and legs tangled together... blissful fucking sleep. The morning after was another matter, but... yeah.

Then we met up with Felix and Jasper for breakfast in Felix's hotel room.

It was time to talk.

*My mind is spinning. Jasper's offer makes me wanna throw up and hug him at the same time. I'm scared shitless about things going wrong, but after the past few weeks on the streets, I know we won't last forever. It's too fucking rough.*

Jasper and Felix talked us through everything.

In the end, Bella and I could only agree.

After that, Felix brought out a few ads he had printed out. It was time to buy a home for us. He had already made calls from Chicago, and it was only a few hours later that Felix paid for a van. It's old, but in decent shape.

He handed over the key to me with a smile.

That was the first moment I knew that I was close to breaking down, which I'm fucking doing now. "Goddammit," I whimper, wiping angrily at my cheeks. I hate feeling weak.

*"Don't worry about the paperwork, kid," Felix says, squeezing my shoulder. "Jasper and I will deal with it all." Bella throws herself at him in tears, thanking him profusely. I would do the same if I wasn't about to fall apart. Luckily, Felix seems to understand how much this means to me. The simple nod I manage to give him is so far from what he deserves, but I can't fucking move – much less open my mouth to say thanks.*

We spent hours after that just driving. Well, I drove. To get the hang of it.

Felix also took us to a few stores, and Bella completely fell apart when he bought us a big mattress to put in the back of the van. It's so fucking soft. Pillows, two sleeping bags, and blankets followed. After that, he took us to the Salvation Army where we bought new clothes. "Heidi's demand," Felix told us with a grin.

We feel so damn guilty about all the things they've given us, because Felix and Heidi are still struggling. With Alec and a little baby, they don't have money to throw away. Still, they've done this for us.

There are no words to describe how thankful I am.

*"Now, how about some dinner?" Jasper suggests, smiling for the first time, I think. "I'm in the mood for fuckin' steak, and we need to talk about your digits."*

And talk we did. Jasper told us – over a delicious fucking meal – about this friend he had here in LA. And in a few weeks, when Jasper's done with our new papers, he's gonna mail them to him, and Bella and I are gonna pick it up there. New identities. A fresh start.

*"My advice is that you still stay low," Jasper says. "Get jobs where you get paid under the table, even with new papers." I nod, knowing very well that those jobs aren't all that hard to find. But so far it hasn't been an option for us. No one will hire someone who doesn't know when he can take his next shower. And since we've prioritized staying hidden, we've pushed away all options concerning help we could've received. Now, though... The money we usually try to save for a motel night every now and then can simply go to making sure we're clean. A little creativity is all you need. There are public showers that aren't very expensive to use, there are gyms, some motels even let you use their facilities for a few bucks, and if it comes to it, there are motels that charge by the hour.*

Once Jasper was done giving his advice, he brought out a map that showed places that were relatively safe to park the van at night. Places that aren't too far from civilization, places where we can have the van parked for days in a row before we have to move it, places where I don't have to get on the fucking freeway to reach. 'Cause no one can learn how to drive perfectly in two days.

We're in one of those places right now.

This morning before we checked out of the hotel, Jasper and Felix gave us more stuff. Stuff from work. Tasers, pepper spray. Felix also went out and bought us a bag of groceries. Last but not least, Jasper gave us a hundred bucks to use on food and gas.

We definitely won't drive more than necessary, of course, but it will still be an expense. I don't mind, though. Not when it gives us a roof over our heads. That's what we have now. A home.

A few hours ago, we said goodbye to Felix and Jasper. We talked a bit more; they offered advice and stuff, we made plans, and Jasper told me that he was going to look up Charlie and Renee. He's not going to act on anything, but he's going to see how they live now. 'Cause our goal... or dream... is to be able to use our true identities soon. When we're eighteen, it would be nice to be my own person. But until then, we're gonna use the papers Jasper's working on.

And we have a plan now, something to work for other than surviving. We're going to make shit better. Get decent jobs, stability...

A future.

~oOo~

*The following year was easier. Until December 2002 hit us, that is.*

*Not many days left now, baby. I miss you.*

**11 days 'til Christmas...**

**15.**

*I remember the horror and the fucking bliss...*

**December 19th 2002**

"We're going in there," I tell her, killing the engine. "And don't argue with me."

Dr. Uley helped Bella and me when we got sick a few months ago. She knows – without ever asking – that we don't have a proper home. She helped us, no questions asked, with medication and shit. And now we're back at her practice. Bella's in denial. I'm not.

I know that she's pregnant.

I'm full of dread and worry.

We still live in our fucking van, and even though we both have a few jobs now, nobody will let us rent an apartment without a legal income. Besides, flipping burgers, cleaning, and waitressing doesn't exactly make us loaded. The pay is shitty, the conditions are despicable, and there are no such things as benefits when you work illegally.

"I'm not pregnant, Edward," Bella cries. "It's just a bug, I promise."

I kiss her temple then I leave the car and walk around to get her door. She's fucking pregnant, I just know it. For weeks, she's thrown up every morning. Her breasts are sensitive, and she hasn't had her period in God knows how long.

We've been careful, but clearly not enough. Her birth control is free at one of those free clinics, but condoms mean less hassle. They just hand them out, and sometimes we buy our own. However, she went on the pill again a while ago. My guess is that they weren't effective yet when we skipped out on the rubber.

"Come on, sweetheart," I murmur, holding out my hand for her. "Dr. Uley told us to come to her if we needed help, and Bella... we need help now."

Her bloodshot eyes are full of pain, and I wish I could take it all away from her, but I can't. If she's pregnant, which I'm sure she is, we're doing this. No matter how bad things get, I can't get rid of a fucking child. I'm not my parents.

"What if I *am* pregnant?" she whimpers, finally taking my hand. Once I've closed the door behind her, I hug her to my chest. "What are we gonna do?"

I don't know. "We'll work it out together," I mumble into her hair. "Maybe we should do what Emmett suggests?"

Emmett and his little sister Alice live just like me and Bella. We met them this summer when we lived near the beach for the free showers. Bella and I were both working in a bar at the time, and one night when it was time to move the van, we coincidentally parked next to theirs. Since then, we've stayed together. Emmett's twenty-two, and Alice is twenty, but they don't have a choice when it comes to hiding. Bella and I sometimes use our fake identities, but most often we don't have to. It was in late September – just a few weeks after Bella's eighteenth birthday – that Jasper informed us of Charlie and Renee pulling back. But Emmett and Alice don't have it quite that easy. Bella's case was hardly active, and it wasn't like her parents really searched for Bella, but yeah... the McCartys' story is different. They've been on the run for five years now, ever since Emmett took Alice away from their abusive parents. She was badly beaten by their father, and much like I punched Charlie before we left Chicago, Emmett beat up their dad. Only, their dad was left in a worse state than Charlie. And now... now Emmett's wanted for both assault and kidnapping.

Plus, their parents are still actively searching.

I digress.

Emmett's sick of hiding. He wants to start over. In Mexico.

Maybe Bella and I could do the same.

Perhaps we should go with them.

~oOo~

"You're pregnant, sweetie," the doc says, smiling in concern.

I already knew, but the confirmation hits me with a wave of nausea.

Dr. Uley – Emily – starts talking to a crying Bella, but I can't fucking focus.

She's pregnant.

Age doesn't matter. Really, I don't care that we're only eighteen. It has nothing to do with that, but... shit. We have nothing. Our pockets are never completely empty – we always have a few bucks, we always have something to eat – but if a child comes into the picture... The picture, which is our reality, where we live in a van. A fucking van. And it's not an "if". It's a "when". We're going to be parents. Fuck.

Parents.

A part of me is filled with warmth and utter bliss, but it's horrible. It's horrible... the way we're going to bring a child into this world. I can't give our child anything. Not even a home.

Before I know it, the bile is too much to swallow down, and I rush over toward the trash can and empty my stomach.

With an internal growl, I squish down the part of me that's fucking giddy about becoming a dad... *a dad*... because I have too goddamn much to worry about now.

~oOo~

*You were already two months pregnant with our son that day.*

*Tell Casey I love him, wifey.*

**10 days 'til Christmas...**

**16.**

*I remember when I asked you to be my wife...*

**December 19th 2002**

"You okay, baby?" I whisper in her hair. Her cries have quieted, but I keep her here, cradled in my arms. It's chilly as hell, but the sun is still out, so we have the door slid open to the van. We soak up the rays. My eyes are on the ocean.

"Getting there," she mumbles thickly as I shift her slightly on my lap so that she's sitting sideways. "I still can't believe I'm pregnant."

My mind is finding it hard to understand, too, but my body is aware. Even now when I'm doing something so mindless and insignificant as tapping my foot on the ground, my hand is on her stomach. Like a magnet or some shit.

"You don't want to get rid of it, right?" I ask, chewing on my lip. Ever since we left Emily's practice, Bella's crying has been nonstop. I know that the timing couldn't be worse, but the thought of abortion is a whole other level of horrifying.

"Of course I don't," she croaks against my neck. I breathe out on relief and hug her to me harder. "But I'm so damn scared, Edward. I mean, how can I ever be a good mother?"

And the stupid fuck that I am, I smile.

Because the thought of Bella as a mom... "You'll be perfect, baby. I just know it."

We just gotta figure out how to move forward.

Sure, we can freely use our real identities now, but then we have to start all over. I mean, I don't have a driver's license in my own name, and I

don't have the passport I need if we're actually going to leave the country. I don't have an address, I don't have a bank, I don't have insurance... Nothing. Not that I have an address or a bank account under Anthony Masen, either, but... Yeah. At least I can tell a future employer that I have a driver's license when I'm Anthony. I'm also older under that name.

And the thought of Jasper helping me with fake papers under my own name... Can't really say I feel comfortable with that.

We will just have to talk to Emmett and Alice when they get back from work.

During the summer, our vans blend in perfectly with all the surfers', but now... not so much. It's only our two vans parked here right now.

"What are you thinking about?"

Bella's whisper brings me back to the present, and I tilt my head to kiss her cheek.

"Options," I respond quietly. I kiss her softly, never really backing away when I continue speaking. "The future... where we will go from here."

She hums softly. "Any suggestions?"

Yes, one.

There is one thing I want before we do anything else.

We've talked about it since we were fifteen, but it hasn't been possible until now.

I've been saving for months, in secret, but I still don't have more than two hundred bucks to spend on a simple ring.

This is Bella, though. And me, for that matter.

It's not about possessions.

"I love you," I murmur, nose touching nose. "And even though we have so much to worry about, I wouldn't trade what we have for anything." She smiles softly when I caress her stomach under her hoodie. "As long as we're together, we can fucking make it." I smirk, and she grins. "But I want us to be married. So..." I take a deep breath before releasing it slowly. "Be my wife, Bella?"

I reach up to brush away a few tears under her eyes, and I'm a little surprised that my heart isn't pounding furiously. But maybe that's because I know how solid we are. Or maybe it's because she's smiling.

"You know I will, Edward," she whispers.

~oOo~

*We got married in February of the following year.*

*Will I see you on the fifteenth, Bella?*

**9 days 'til Christmas...**

**17.**

*I remember when the worst of the tension dissipated...*

**December 19th 2002**

By the time Emmett and Alice return from work, Bella is already asleep inside the van. Not me, though. It's time to talk shit out with Emmett, and it can't wait.

"Hey, man," he says, walking toward me with a grocery bag in his hand. I push myself off the van and meet him in the middle, at the single parking

spot in between our vans. "How did it go at the doc's? She pregnant?" he asks, handing me a can of Coke while he takes a beer for himself. It's been a long time since he offered me a beer. He knows Bella and I don't drink. Doesn't matter that people can drink without becoming addicted. After growing up with parents who are alcoholics, beer and stuff like that hold no appeal for me.

I give Alice a nod in greeting as she gives me a wave before disappearing into their van. Like always, they look exhausted. Much like Bella and I do.

"Yeah, she is," I sigh. "Eight weeks."

He nods in return, facing the ocean for a while in contemplative silence. He knows that we need to talk, too. But our hands are tied. We don't have many options. Even less now that Bella's pregnant, because there's no way I'm leaving the country. Not when Emily's offered to help us throughout the pregnancy – again, no questions asked.

"Oh, I almost forgot," Em mutters, shoving his hand into his pocket. Ah, my cell phone. Felix sent it to me – via Jasper's friend who lives here – for my birthday in June. They sent one for Bella, too, when she turned eighteen.

"Thanks," I respond, switching it on. Since Emmett works in a bar right now, he charges it for me at work. I'd charge it myself but I'm currently working at a moving company, which means I spend my days either lifting heavy crap or sitting next to a dude named Paul who loves country music while he drives the semi-truck. I hate country music, FYI.

"By the way, Alice talked to our boss," he says. "Bella's welcome to try out for the waitress gig if she wants."

I nod pensively, already fighting with myself. I can't forbid Bella to work just because she's carrying our baby. I know I'm being irrational.

Pregnant women work all the time. But... I dunno... It doesn't feel awesome, is all.

"I'll tell her tomorrow," I reply quietly before taking a sip from my soda.

I gotta admit, though, that the thought of having Bella working with both Emmett and Alice is comforting. At least I know she'll be safe. Same can't be said for the diner she worked at until two days ago. Her boss was a complete bitch, and I almost throttled her after work one day. Bella had accidently burnt her hand when she was dealing with the fryer, and instead of giving her a fucking break to get ice on her hand, her boss had ordered her to mop the floor.

Safe to say, that was Bella's last day there.

"So... have you guys thought about Mexico?"

I take a breath, releasing it slowly. My nod is just as slow. "Yeah. But we can't go anywhere now." I run a hand through my hair, turning to watch the ocean again. Not that I can see it in the darkness, but I can hear it. "The doc who helped us today... she knows a little about our situation, and she offered to help us with everything."

"That's real good, man."

I agree.

"What about you and Alice?" I ask.

He shrugs, also facing the water. "We're sick of hiding, but we don't wanna leave without thinking shit through."

I smile ruefully before drinking the last of my Coke. Emmett and Alice once told us about their wish to open a bar or something in Mexico. They

wanna run their own business... live without having to look over their shoulders, have a place to call their own...

Who wouldn't want that?

"I can call the guy who helped me and Bella," I offer. I've already told them about Jasper, and I have to say I prefer asking him for help with papers than for Emmett and Alice to cross the border without knowing the outcome. Sure, there are people crossing the border illegally all the time, but many are also caught.

"I appreciate it, Edward," he says quietly. "No rush, though. We need a little time to save up some money and shit like that." I nod, understanding too well how long it can take to "save up some money". We don't see time the way others do, maybe. "A little time" can easily be several months. Things take time when you live the way we do. Nothing happens overnight. "I hope we can be in Mexico before the summer, but... who knows?"

No one, that's who.

"Bella and I will join you as soon as we can," I surprise myself by saying. But as soon as the words are out, I feel the truth in them. It's suddenly something I want badly.

~oOo~

"*Damn,*" Felix sighs over the phone. Damn is right. I've just told him that Bella's pregnant. "*How far along is she? When did you find out?*"

I rub the back of my neck, trying but failing to get rid of the tension that resides there. "We just found out today," I mutter, kicking some pebbles on the ground with my foot. "And she's eight weeks pregnant."

After finishing talking to Emmett, I was fucking tired – and I have to get up early tomorrow for work – but I couldn't fall asleep without calling Felix. He's the only one who I can turn to, knowing that I'll be given good advice.

Ever since he and Jasper helped us with the van and the papers, Bella and I have managed to get by on our own. But that's not to say Felix hasn't been there for us. Through phone calls, we've kept in touch a few times each month.

*"How do you feel?"* he asks softly.

I lean back against the van, shrugging once, even though he can't see me.

"Excited, scared, worried, happy, fearful..."

He chuckles quietly. *"Yeah, that sounds about right. I felt the same when Heidi was pregnant with Madison."*

Yeah, but they had a place to live.

"I don't know what the fuck I'm gonna do, Felix," I say bluntly. "I mean, we have money. At least to keep us afloat, but... adding a child to that?" I make a bubble face, thinking, thinking, thinking. "I was thinking we could try to find people who're looking for roommates, maybe." But I don't like the idea. "With both of us working, we could afford a room, but I doubt anybody wants to let us live with them when we have a baby on the way."

Felix is quiet for a while, and I know he's thinking, too.

Then I hear the door slide open behind me, and I watch as a sleepy Bella joins me outside. I hold up my arm for her, and she snuggles into my embrace with a soft smile.

"Who are you talking to?" she whispers.

"Felix," I mouth.

She gives me a nod in acknowledgment. Then she tugs on my hand, silently guiding me to the opening of the van where she motions for me to sit down on the edge. Without a word, she settles behind me – legs on either side of me. And then I feel her hands on my shoulder blades.

I bite back a groan. My head drops. Eyes close. I shudder.

"*You still there, kid?*" Felix asks.

I shiver, feeling Bella's hands rubbing, kneading, pressing. "Yeah, I'm here."

My free hand goes to her leg, caressing the spot where her knee bends. She loves that.

Pretty much like I love what she's doing now.

But this is what my girl does. My *fiancée*. She's a caretaker. Even though we don't have much, she makes the most of it. Massages in all forms. Neck rubs, foot rubs, back rubs, you name it. I do it, too, of course, but she often bats me away. She tells me that she's not the one doing heavy lifting every day.

"*Okay, I've been thinking,*" Felix sighs. "*Money isn't as tight now as it was before I started working, and...*" He releases a breath. "*You say you could afford a rent?*"

My brows knit together, wondering what he has in mind. "Yeah. I mean, we both work. Well, I work, and I made Bella quit her old job two days ago, 'cause the boss was... Never mind." That's not important. "She'll have a new job soon," I say, giving Bella's leg a squeeze. It's news to her since

Emmett just told me about the bar where he and Alice work. "We both work. We can afford a low rent, but who would take us in? We get paid under the table, and it's not like we have references."

*"You could live in a trailer,"* Felix replies, sounding quite happy about his suggestion. *"Heidi and I could help you out with the loan. You can make small payments to us, and the rent at trailer parks shouldn't be too high for you."*

I blink. His words register awfully slowly, but it's hard to take it in. If we see our van as a mansion, a trailer would be like Buckingham Fucking Palace.

*"You can't live in the van with a child, Edward. You need this and, frankly, I refuse to have it any other way. This will be your next stop. Sure, I gotta talk to Heidi about it first, but I doubt she'll oppose. She hates that you only have that car."*

Suddenly, it's fucking hard to breathe.

"Are you okay, baby?" Bella whispers.

Yes. No. Well, I don't know. I'm pretty sure I'm more than okay. I'm pretty sure we just got saved again.

*"Listen, kid. I'm gonna talk shit over with the missus, and then I'll call you, okay? But expect us to visit you guys in LA soon. We'll get this sorted."*

~oOo~

*It was shortly after our wedding in February that we moved into our new trailer.*

*Bella, if you show up on the fifteenth... Christ, be careful.*

## **8 days 'til Christmas...**

**18.**

*I remember saying goodbye to Emmett and Alice...*

### **December 1st 2003**

With Case resting his head on my shoulder, I know it won't be long until he falls asleep, and I kiss the top of his head as Emmett and I both watch Alice and Bella hugging each other. Tears are rolling down their cheeks, and it's a bittersweet day. A day we at times worried would never arrive. The goal was this past summer, but money was still too tight then. So, we continued working, harder and harder, everyone pitching in, because the goal is all of ours. Not just Emmett's and Alice's. Mine and Bella's, too.

The first two months of this year were spent planning and talking. It was all about Mexico. With our vans parked close together somewhere, we sat up at night after work and made our plans. Then, in February when Felix and Heidi arrived with the trailer, we moved – all of us – to a trailer park. The trailer isn't big, but it's enough for three, and Emmett and Alice have their van parked right next to it. That way, we could all stay together, work together, and share expenses, as well as benefits. Showers, home-cooked meals, heat... we have that now.

But it ends today. Well, the part where we all stay together ends today.

Felix and Alec visited us last month, this time to hand over papers to Emmett and Alice. Papers that Jasper had fixed. Jazz would've visited if he hadn't been too tied up at work.

"She'll be crying all the way down to Mexico," Emmett chuckles quietly, nodding at Alice. Then he averts his eyes to the ground. "This sucks."

It does. The five of us are like family. I never thought I'd have that, but Alice and Emmett are like our siblings. Emmett's definitely the brother I never had, and Alice and Bella are extremely close, especially after Casey was born.

Casey Felix Cullen.

Emily – true to her word – was there the entire time. From start to finish. She was there to help bring our son into this world on July 20th.

Times were rough – they still are – but I don't think either of us expected that little boy to light up our fucking world. But he did. Even when he spent hours, nights, days... screaming bloody motherfucking murder... he still became a reason, a motivation, to keep going. He became the source of smiles after a gruesome day.

"It's just temporary," I sigh, trying to find comfort in my own words. But I don't. I will, but not yet. "A year. We'll see you guys in a year." I'm just repeating the words... to myself, I think. And I hope the next year will go by fast. But it's the time we need before we can join Emmett and Alice in Mexico.

They're leaving now, to get started down there, and Bella and I will keep working here since the pay is better. Especially with my new job. It's a legal one, a real one. In construction. It's experience I need before heading south. It's experience we need to get what we want. And we want that bar. We're all gonna start our business together.

So, we've said a year. That will give me and Bella time to save up some money. It'll also be easier when Casey's a little older.

"Alice, you ready?" Emmett asks.

"No," she huffs, wiping her cheeks.

I smile ruefully as the girls join us, and I kiss Alice's cheek before she hugs both me and Case.

"I'm gonna miss this little guy so much," she croaks, caressing Casey's cheek. Bella buries her face against my chest, and I drape my free arm around her shoulders. "One year. I'll be counting the days."

Me, too.

A few moments later, we watch as Emmett and Alice drive away in their van.

Bella and I stay put, even when the van is long gone.

I have warmth. It's thanks to Bella, who is currently hugging me close. It's also thanks to my son, who is blissfully asleep in my arms, face buried in the crook of my neck.

I have food on the table every day. It's thanks to hard work and determination.

I have a home. It's thanks to Felix and Heidi.

If this were a cheesy romance novel, I'd say that Bella's my home. But after living on the streets...

A home is a home. A person can guide you, make you feel safe and content, but you need those four walls.

You need shelter.

The saying goes, "Home is where the heart is".

The person who came up with that was not only full of shit, but he or she had probably never been homeless.

My home is *with* Bella. Not *at* her.

"Come on, wifey," I murmur against the top of her head. "Let's go inside."

She hums. "I'll make dinner."

I kiss her temple, and we turn toward our home. "And I'll do the dishes afterward."

~oOo~

*And a year later, we found home in Mexico.*

*Baby, I miss you and the kids so much. I miss home, I miss... I just miss you.*

**7 days 'til Christmas...**

**19.**

*I remember the first Christmas where nothing was wrong...*

**December 25th 2004**

The hacienda we all share in Ensenada ain't big, but I think it's fucking perfect. We even have a small backyard. Bella and I live upstairs where we have two rooms and a bathroom. One room for Mommy and Daddy and one for Casey. Then we have Emmett and Alice down here. They also have a room each, and then there's the shared kitchen and living room. The living room is where we're all gathered right now, and my wife is smiling as she and Alice set up our Christmas breakfast. Emmett and I would help, but since we've been up for hours already, the girls told us to relax.

Bella also told me to keep the tool belt on. She's on the naughty list.

When we finally moved down here two months ago, the house was ready, and it was just for us to move in. For almost a year, we've all been saving up for this. We've worked hard, and we're fucking deserving. But we're not done. While I worked construction back in the States, Emmett did the same down here. Still does.

I mean, we already have experience with bartending, so that wasn't anything we needed. Though, I happen to work in a bar now, too. But if we wanna build our own bar, we sure need to know *how* to build. Which we do now. At least, more than the basics. So, yeah, as soon as we arrived, Emmett and I donned the tool belts. Well, as soon as the paperwork was done. Permits and shit like that. Boring and complicated, but we have Alice there. She's some weird math whiz, and she loves a good challenge. She's also good at Spanish.

I digress.

Emmett and I are busy building our bar. Yes, from the foundation. Right on the beach – only a hundred feet or so from our house, in fact. But, as mentioned, we also have day jobs, so we have to use our time well. That's why he and I were up with the sun this morning, to put in a few hours before our first Christmas in Mexico.

And Bella likes me wearing my ragged jeans, a beater, and my tool belt.

"Ed," Emmett chuckles, nodding toward the stairs, and I follow his gaze.

"Oh, shit!" I exclaim, darting after Casey. That little kid is a fucking runner, and I may or may not have forgotten to close the gate to the stairs. "No, no, no, no, c'mere, buddy." I pick him up just as he reaches the first step. "Give Daddy a heart attack, will ya?"

I breathe out... and in... and out...

*Christ.*

"Dadaaaa!" he whines, clearly not approving of me ending his journey.

"Not a chance, baby," I chuckle, carrying him with me to the living room again. "Time for breakfast."

Bella grins at me. "Want me to take him?"

"Nope," I say, plopping down on the couch. "He's just fine here." I Eskimo Casey, at which he giggles and pulls at my hair. Lovely. "But you know, you could get that sweet ass of yours over here, too," I tell Bella as pry Casey's hands away from my hair. Damn, I need a shower. It's full of sawdust.

"Man, I need to find a girl," Emmett sighs.

I chuckle at him before waggling my eyebrows at Bella.

Oh, yeah, I'm in a good mood. I may have gotten up with the sun this morning, but so did wifey. She's already given me special attention today.

"You're incorrigible," Bella laughs softly. I shrug unapologetically. I have a hot wife. Excuse me for wanting her. Besides... "Who are you to talk, you nymph?" I huff.

She just gives me a wink in response.

And the sigh that slips through my lips is one of contentment.

The work never seems to run out, and at the age of twenty, we've seen too much, lived too hard, and gone through loads of shit. But as I sit here, in the living room with my family, the bad fades away. It's always there in the background, lurking, but the reminder makes us stronger. It doesn't break us down. It could, it can, but it didn't, and it won't.

"Should we talk about a name for the bar?" Alice suggests a while later when we're enjoying breakfast. "It's time we talk about it."

True.

On paper – fake papers – we're all Masens. Anthony Masen, Joseph Masen, Marie Masen, Casey Masen, and Mary Masen. Emmett, Alice, and I are related when people ask, and "Marie" is my wife. Not that we know an abundance of people here, but Em and Ali have lived here for a year already, after all. Of course they know *some* people. And to those people, we have our story.

Bella and I could easily be Cullens – and we're married as Cullens – 'cause we're not hiding anymore, but it was Emmett's suggestion. They are hiding, though they don't need to look over their shoulders here in Mexico, and he suggested that we keep it Masen. Just to be safe. Just in case. Because we can't be careful enough. But most of all, we don't want anything to disrupt our peace here. Now, we sincerely doubt that anyone would ever track us down – any of us – but a new identity has brought us more safety than distress. Before, I was all about being my own person. All I wanted was to be Edward Cullen. But I still am. A fucking piece of paper doesn't define me.

It's ironic, but still true, that the name Masen has given us the possibility to be ourselves.

The name works as a fence. It shuts us off from our past.

A fresh start, the one we've wanted for so long.

"Let's start with language," Emmett says, bringing me back to now. "The bar's name. English or Spanish?"

I look at Bella, wondering what she thinks. It doesn't really matter to me.

"What do you think?" I ask softly, resting my arm behind her on the back of the couch. That's also the moment Case decides to bounce over to Mommy. She smiles and kisses him, and I huff when he starts playing

with her ponytail. See, he pulls at my hair, but with Bella he fucking pets it. "Not cool, Case," I mumble.

I swear, he smirks at me. Okay, he doesn't. But... whatever.

"I have an idea," Bella says quietly, addressing us all. "How about 'Estoy en casa'?"

Uh? "Yeah, I don't know what that means," I answer. To bring in money to our family, I work nights at a hotel, and I never have to speak Spanish. It's a luxury hotel and most guests are Americans, or at least, they speak English. Plus, I work as a bartender. There aren't many Spanish words I need to know. And believe me, I know "cerveza". Emmett is intermediate but learning more each day as he works in construction, and Alice, who also works at the hotel where I work, is fucking excellent. Pretty sure she's fluent by now, but she works in the lobby and has to interact with more locals than I do.

As for Bella, she works nights at a restaurant further down on the beach, and she's learning the language quickly. After only two months here, she can easily get by on what she knows so far.

Hell, at this rate, Casey will learn Spanish faster than me, 'cause Alice – who works days – looks after Case when Bella and I work. And I have a feeling she's trying to teach him words. Which is good, of course, but nothing I'm concerned with just yet. Setting up long term goals isn't for us. We have dreams, obviously, but we set goals that are within reach. The fact that Casey will one day go to school here is something we can worry about in a couple of years.

"It means 'I'm home', and I love that idea," Alice says with a big smile, and I gotta say that I agree. It sounds perfect, and very fitting for us.

"You have my vote, baby," I tell her and wink, and she fucking blushes. That sure doesn't happen often, but when it does, I need to calm down my dick. Damn.

"Mine, too," Emmett says firmly.

"Mmmamama," Casey adds, throwing in his two cents. I grin and dip down to bump my forehead against his. "Dada!" he laughs, and I start tickling him. "No, no! Dada, noo!"

"All right, that's enough," Bella says, looking a little flustered. "Edward, you're already wearing the tool belt. You don't have to go all Daddy on me, too."

I smirk at her, leaning in to give her a quick kiss. Who knew being a dad would make wifey hornier? But it does. I often catch Bella watching me when I'm with Case.

"Yeah, I *really* need to find a girl." Emmett again.

"I need to find a man," Alice sighs.

Emmett growls. "No, you do not, sis."

I snicker.

"How about we exchange gifts?" Bella suggests, changing the topic.

And our Christmas continues.

We all revel in it.

Since we prioritize our business, we've agreed to keep our gift exchange rather small in order to save money. We also agreed to buy gifts that we can all enjoy. Alice and Emmett give Bella and me a guitar, clearly remembering the times we've talked about how nice it would be to learn

to play an instrument. I'm happy to say the least, and I know that Emmett is, as well. Then, in return, Bella and I give Emmett and Alice a grill, which is more a gift for Alice and Bella since they love to cook. But hey, Emmett and I love to eat, so it all works out.

We do, however, splurge a little on Casey.

We laugh when he gets more than a little excited over the mini playground Emmett and I built in the backyard – complete with a swing and a sandbox. Bella and Alice give him toys for his sandbox, and we're once again rewarded with Casey's excited squeals. There's hand clapping, too. And when Bella and I give him the present we bought together... yeah, he screams out his joy, not kidding. It's a bit deafening, but heartwarming. Up in his room, next to his bed, there's now a little aquarium. It's been there since last night, covered with a sheet.

"Fishies, Dada! Fishies, Mama!" he cries out, clapping his hands together. I chuckle and squat down next to him. "Fish, fish, fish!"

"Yeah, it's fish, baby," I murmur, dropping a kiss on his forehead.

Bella asked me a few days ago what I wanted for Christmas, and this is what I want. I want my one-and-a-half year old bouncing and giggling, I want my wife smiling, I want a home, I want a family, I want a bed that I share with my Bella, and I have it all now.

There are still goals and dreams, but there's nothing wrong with this moment. For the first time in my life, I have no complaints. Sure, I still worry sometimes, but I'm no longer scared.

"Do you like the fishies, sweetie?" Bella asks softly, yet thickly, squatting down on the other side of Case. I look at her, not surprised when I see her eyes brimming with tears. This is what she wants, too.

"Yeeeah, fishies!" Case giggles, both hands on the glass. As they swim by, his fingers follow. "Fish, fish, fish," he whispers.

Behind Casey, I grab Bella's hand, squeezing it a little, 'cause I totally know what she's thinking. Yeah, she's thinking about the glass getting smudgy. Meeting my knowing look, she chuckles and ducks her head.

"I know what you're thinking, wifey," I laugh through my nose.

"No, you don't," she huffs, trying to hide her smile. She fails. "Anyway, I should get started on dinner."

I bark out a laugh at that. *Dinner?* We just had breakfast an hour ago.

She continues, ignoring me. "We could grill the fish you and Emmett caught yesterday, and-"

I cut her off there, pulling her to me roughly, which makes us tumble over and land on the floor. "Nice try, Bella," I chuckle as I pepper her face with kisses. To no one's surprise, Casey joins in and all but jumps on us.

"Ugh!" I groan when his foot lands a little too close to the family jewels.

"Aw, be careful, Case," Bella giggles. Giggles. At my pain. "Don't break Daddy."

"Why, you little..." I trail off and attack her. Casey helps me, and together we're a united front, always winning tickle wars.

In our family moment, it takes a long time before we notice that Emmett and Alice have given us privacy.

~oOo~

*The following three years were all about work and family. 2007 changed it all.*

*It's been months now since I last saw my princess, Bella. Tell Willow I love her.*

**6 days 'til Christmas...**

**20.**

*I remember the phone call...*

***December 6th 2007***

"Daddy."

"He's asleep," I grumble sleepily, keeping a hand on Willow's back. "You'll have to come back later, Case."

I sorta like working nights at our bar, but our kids don't understand why Mommy and Daddy have to sleep during the day that follows. Especially Casey. Willow, not so much. She's only eight months old, after all, and sleep is something she doesn't understand whatsoever.

"But you talkin'," Case giggles.

Right. "Sleep talk," I mumble.

Willow's still asleep on my chest, and I would love to make sure she stays asleep. As much as I adore my daughter, she's a loud one. Even louder than her brother, and that's saying a lot. Still, she has me wrapped around her tiny finger.

She was another surprise, but we were much more prepared this time around, so no panicking for me.

"Mommy say i's dinner soon," Case replies.

Dinner? Shit, I guess I've slept a long time, then.

And then another voice rings out. "Ah, Case, I told you not to wake him yet."

I smile, moving one hand from Willow's back to rub the sleep outta my eyes.

"Hey, wifey," I yawn. "It's all right. I gotta get up."

Our business is coming along well, and we're currently working on expanding. Yeah, we want it to be a restaurant, too. But it leaves me taking most night shifts since Emmett's working on the construction during the day. Usually, we divide the shifts amongst us, but with expansion comes expenses, so Alice has returned to work at the hotel we used to work at, and Bella's busy working the bar during the day. We have three employees, as well, but we try to have one of the four "Masens" there at all times, which would be between eleven AM and four AM.

"I have my next shift in a..." I trail off, slowly sitting up with Willow still on my chest. "What time is it?"

Bella smirks and sits down on the edge of the bed. "Four PM. I just got home, but Emmett is there now. And, Edward? How did Willow end up in bed with you, hmm?"

Oh, shit. Think fast. "Um, she missed me, so she decided to join me."

I smile innocently.

Bella doesn't buy it, of course. "So, you're saying that she – our eight-month-old girl – jumped out of her crib over there," she points at the crib in the corner, "walked over to our bed, hopped up on it, and crawled onto your chest for a nap?"

Hey, it could happen. "Yes?" She cocks the Mommy-brow, which Casey is often the recipient of. I huff. "Fine, I picked her up. But I couldn't help it."

I'm very aware of that you should never wake up a sleeping baby, but it's very hard, 'cause that's when they're the cutest. Almost. Sorta. Yeah. So, sue me for wanting her close when she was all sweet and quiet. But hey, it worked. She never woke up.

"Mommy, I'm hungry."

Attention diverted. Thank you, Case.

I grin at Bella.

"Oh, you're such a boy," she tells me, chuckling as she picks up Casey. I shrug unapologetically. "C'mon, sweetie. Let's finish dinner while Daddy takes his shower."

"Saying I smell bad, wifey?" I throw her a mock glare.

"Yep, so, so, so bad," she jokes. Very funny. She, of all people, would know that I don't smell. I mean, she was right there in the shower with me when I got home early this morning. Yeah. Exactly. "Nah, you don't smell, honey." She dips down and kisses me softly. Too chaste, in my opinion. "But you need it to wake up."

Yeah, yeah.

"What's for dinner, by the way?" I murmur, getting out of the bed to put Willow back in her crib. It's actually a miracle she's still asleep. "I saw the steaks in the fridge this morning." I love steaks. "Love you, sweetheart," I whisper against Willow's forehead. After tucking her back in, I turn back to Bella and Case. "So, steaks?"

"I wants steak also, Mommy," Casey says, nodding, nodding, nodding, nodding. Damn, he's just like me when it comes to food.

"The steaks are for tomorrow, sorry," Bella chuckles. Case and I may or may not pout. "But I have hamburgers that are ready to go on the grill."

And the pouts are gone.

~oOo~

"Full?" Bella asks, plopping down in my lap. I groan when she presses against my stomach, but it's pain I can endure if she's sitting on my junk.

"You can say that again," I chuckle, patting my stomach. "Thanks for dinner. It was delicious."

She kisses my cheek. "I hope so, since you had four of them."

Yeah, gotta love it.

I give her wink before kissing her on the nose. "What, I'm a man. I eat like one, you know-"

And I'm cut off by the phone.

Great.

Since it's the cell phone only Felix, Heidi, Jasper, and Alec have the number to, there's no ignoring it. We don't speak to them very often, about once or twice a month. Usually, it's Heidi, wanting to hear about Casey and Willow. She and Felix were actually here a few weeks after Willow was born, and they brought their daughter with them.

Heidi told us that she understood why we loved it here.

"Want me to get it?" I ask as Bella moves off my lap.

"No, it's okay. I guess it's Heidi."

While she heads to the kitchen, I snatch a fifth burger from the plate on the coffee table, at which Casey giggles before turning back to the movie he's watching. He's still busy with his first burger, but with age comes numbers. He'll be devouring cheeseburgers with me in no time.

But just as I sink my teeth into the fuckawesome burger, I hear Bella's rather cringe-worthy shriek coming from the kitchen.

"They *WHAT?*"

It takes a second or two for me to gather my fucking wits, but when I finally do, Casey's looking at me in question.

"Stay here, okay, buddy?" I tell him, getting up from the couch. "Daddy's just gonna go check on Mommy."

Casey nods then returns to his movie, not looking troubled at all.

"You have *got* to be fucking *kidding* me!" Bella shouts as I hurry to the kitchen.

Casey may not be troubled, but I sure am.

Bella rarely loses her temper, and never without reason.

"What's wrong, honey-?" My voice dies abruptly when I see her. She's fucking seething with anger, and it's a look I've never seen on her. With the phone in her hand, she paces the kitchen, looking like she's ready to kill someone.

*Sexy.*

"I can't believe this," she breathes out, eyes wide with anger and disbelief. "It's just... I mean... I can't..." Whoever she's talking to speaks

then. I approach her slowly, both worried and... well, turned on. Mostly worried, though. Especially since it's someone from Chicago calling. "It's insane," she whimpers, and I'm no longer turned on. Her eyes are now brimming with tears, and I move to stand in front of her. "It's fucking unfair." With that said, she drops her forehead to my chest. She suddenly looks defeated, exhausted, and unbelievably sad.

It scares the shit out of me.

"Wifey," I whisper pleadingly. "What the fuck is going on? Tell me, baby."

She doesn't respond. Instead, she hands me the phone.

Her head stays where it is, and I cradle her to me with one hand behind her neck as she cries silently. My other hand brings the phone to my ear.

"Hello?" I say. After years living under another name, I've made it my practice to rarely actually use my name. Neither of them. Bella and I usually call each other by nicknames, and same goes for my friends. It's just easier.

"*Hey, man.*" Jasper. He doesn't use names, either. Precaution. "*How is she?*"

"Not good," I reply bluntly. "Mind filling me in?"

Jazz doesn't miss a beat. "*Her parents were on the local news last week. I didn't call sooner, 'cause I wanted to make sure I had all the facts straight.*"

Her parents. Charlie and Renee. "The hell are you saying?" I grit out, feeling my spine go rigid.

"Yeah, they won the fucking lottery," he chuckles bitterly. I stop breathing. "Deserving people, eh?" I can't believe it. "They won seventy-four million dollars. Seventy-four million motherfucking bucks."

I drop the phone.

~oOo~

*That those fuckers won... It was like a slap in the face.*

*I miss you, Bella.*

**5 days 'til Christmas...**

**21.**

*I remember our decision...*

**December 8th 2007**

Two days after Jasper's phone call, we're all gathered in our living room.

All of us, except for Jasper and Felix.

But we have them on speaker.

The phone is right there, on the coffee table.

We haven't said a single word out loud about what we want, but we all know.

Emmett and Alice sit down on one couch. Rose is also here. She's another runaway. Growing up with drug addicts, she left as soon as she could, and much like me and Bella, she's made it on her own. Now she's an English teacher for the Americans who have kids here in Ensenada.

She's also Emmett's fiancée.

Then we have Heidi and Alec on one couch. Madison is asleep upstairs with Case and Willow.

Bella and I sit in one of the chairs, her on my lap.

Last but not least, Diego in another chair.

He works at the hotel I used to work at. His job is simple. He's to fly rich hotel guests to and from the States. And since he only works a few hours a day, he said yes right away when we needed a part-time bartender at Estoy En Casa. He also became a trustworthy friend, and he's been with us for two years now.

"*Everyone there?*" Jasper's voice rings out over the phone.

"Yeah, we're all here," I reply.

My eyes are on Bella. I know she's freaked out, but most of all she's livid. Her parents shouldn't have that money, and we're all in agreement, which is why we're gathered here now. We just have to voice the thoughts we all have.

But before I can do it, Emmett does it. "So, how can we get that dough from *them?*"

I smirk at him. No, I have no idea how we're gonna do this, but I'm glad that we're all on the same page. Or rather, to have it confirmed.

"First things first." My wife speaks up quietly. "Who's in?"

I look around as everyone gives a nod with their "I am".

"We'll split everything," Bella murmurs, and I squeeze her thigh, agreeing with her. "We are the ones who deserve that money."

So true.

Emmett saved his little sister's life. In return, he was charged with assault and kidnapping.

Alice grew up getting beaten up on a regular basis.

Rose grew up with crackheads who didn't give a shit about her.

Bella and I grew up with alcoholics who barely fed us.

Felix and Alec lost their parents, and since then, Felix has been a provider. Not just for his little brother, but for me and Bella, too. Same goes for Heidi and Jasper. They also had good-for-nothing parents. They ran away, they lived on the streets, they survived on their own. And now they're two of the most helpful people out there. They have saved us over and over.

Diego's story isn't much better. He's been on his own since his parents abandoned him in Mexico City at the age of eleven. Like the rest of us, though, he made it on his own. He worked hard.

So, Bella's right. We deserve our break.

*"We're in," Felix says, sounding surprisingly eager. "But we're not leaving Chicago. With our jobs, we can get more done from here."*

Granted.

*"Plus, I have my connections here in the city," Jazz adds. Then, after a brief pause, he continues. "This is what we've found out so far... They have won seventy-four million dollars. They took the lump-sum payout, and the money is in their possession already. I also know that they have left their old apartment."*

Figured. "Where have they moved?" I ask.

*"Fancy neighborhood," he replies rather dismissively. "They are already spending the money like it'll never run out, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that they are going on vacation."*

I chew on my lip, already understanding where he's going with this. We will strike fast, and if they're leaving Chicago... Yeah, that can definitely work in our favor. Vacation means they will be in a hotel, I assume.

"Where are they going?" Emmett asks.

*"Vegas."*

Of course. Motherfuckers.

*This is where Felix takes over. "Pros and cons. Money flows in Vegas. No one will bat a fucking eyelash until it's too late. This is what will work in our favor."*

*"Vegas is packed with security, which is the biggest con. It will be hard to get by without being spotted." I nod to myself, immediately excluding Emmett and Alice. "One more con: Vegas is secluded. You'll be surrounded by sand. We need a safe escape."*

"I am a pilot," Diego says, grinning. "I fly rich gringos in and out of country all the time. I also have co-pilot."

I wish my Spanish was as good as his English. Seriously.

*"That's good, man," Jasper says thoughtfully. "So, I'm thinking we need a couple of rich guests."*

I smirk. "I like the way you think." But then I get serious. "There are a few people who are out of the question." I give Emmett a pointed look, and he frowns. He knows he can't enter the States. Same goes for Alice.

Which, I tell Jazz, though I use their fake names. "Joe and Mary are out. And..." I clear my throat. I know it's coming. "Marie, too."

*Smack.*

"Ow!" I groan, rubbing the back of my head. "The fuck, wifey?"

"You have no right, *Anthony*." She sneers at me. "I'm fucking capable, all right?"

I sigh. "I *know* you are. But we're not leaving the kids without at least one parent."

She knows I'm right there.

"I can go," Alec says, interrupting the glaring-contest between me and Bella. "I'm not from around here, so I can check into the hotel where the pilot works," he looks at Diego, who nods, "and I can be the rich guest he's flying out. I mean, we're gonna be able to pay as soon as we get back, yeah?" He smirks.

Doesn't really work that way. "The hotel has no reason to treat you as a high roller, so to speak," I tell him. "The private jet is for the millionaires. Which means they will do a background check to see if you're loaded."

*"Don't worry about that,"* Jazz interrupts, chuckling. *"I'm already working on a list of papers you'll need after all this is done. I'll add Alec to that list. One millionaire coming up."* Um... All right then. *"But back to serious. You're all aware of that you need to move, right? Your location is too close to the border. You're gonna need new identities all over again."*

Okay, that stings. But it's all right. It's worth it. It's not like we're leaving empty handed.

After exchanging a few looks, we nod in agreement.

"We're aware," I tell Jazz.

*"Good. Now, we need more than the rich guest. He will be a cover."*

"I can go," Rose murmurs. "I have no wish to return to the States after this, anyway."

"Same here," I say, locking eyes with Bella. She doesn't look happy, but she knows that one of us needs to go, and she also knows that I'm capable. Plus, if she got anywhere near her parents, I'm pretty sure she'd rip them to shreds.

*"I will be there, too,"* Felix says, and I frown. *"Only in the background, but yeah. And I will be there to hand over your papers."* He clears his throat, and when he speaks again, it's quieter. *"Brother, you do know that you can't return for a while, right? Even if you don't get spotted, you need to lay low."*

I look over at Alec, surprised to see him smiling. "What do I have back home? I flip burgers for a shitty pay, bro. Trust me, I don't mind staying in Mexico for a while."

Looks like we're all in need of a damn break. A well-deserved one.

*"All right, folks..."* Jasper sighs. *"Let's plan this thing. We don't have much time. The targets will be in Vegas 'til December 23rd."*

~oOo~

*And plan we did. For a solid week.*

*Perhaps it's best you don't show up on the fifteenth, sweetheart. They don't believe me.*

**4 days 'til Christmas...**

**22.**

*I remember how we became millionaires...*

**December 17th 2007**

Rose and Alec are the high rollers, pretending to be married. They're the cover.

I'm not here. Officially, that is.

They check in at the same hotel as the Swans. A suite.

I stay outside, waiting for their call.

I already know that by tomorrow morning, I will be on the news.

But I also know I will also be back in Mexico by then.

The hotel is packed with vacationers. People going in and out all the time.

This will be easy. Very easy, but only because I'm giving up my identity.

You can't exactly walk about with a hood over your face here and not get noticed.

When the phone in my pocket vibrates, I enter the hotel, looking like a businessman.

It's the first time in my life that I wear a suit.

Fucking hate it.

What I don't hate is the gun tucked into my pants.

Don't worry, I won't use it. Hopefully.

Felix's look – when he gave it to me earlier – told me that he wished I wouldn't use it, either.

In one of the bars, I sit down to take a drink. A Coke.

And I know that Rose and Alec are currently on their way down to the casino to see where the Swans are.

I wait.

I busy myself by pretending to read a paper.

"Hi, handsome."

Apparently, it doesn't matter that I'm wearing a wedding ring.

"Not interested," I mutter, not bothering to look up.

I'm a bit surprised by how calm I am.

But thoughts about Bella and the kids have always had that effect of me, though.

A moment later, my phone vibrates again, and this time I check the text.

**Suite 628. We're on our way down again. Btw, they're both drunk.  
– A.**

Thank you, Alec.

Standing up, I chug down the rest of my soda,

"Bill it to Suite 628," I tell the bartender with a grin.

I leave the bar and head straight for the elevators.

It feels like the elevator ride takes forever.

I'm just so fucking ready. And I can't wait to get back to my family. Saying goodbye to Bella this morning was hell.

*But I'll be back soon, baby.*

In the meantime, I know she's busy with the rest of the guys. We all need to leave, so we're closing down the bar and packing up the house. It may be permanent. We don't know yet.

*Ding!*

Finally. I step out of the elevator.

I pat my pockets, making sure I have everything.

I do.

Suite six hundred... six hundred and...

Twenty-eight. Here we go.

I knock once, twice. Sharply.

From inside, I can hear Renee's giggling. The bitch is hammered. Which will work in my favor.

I feel cold. Detached.

The door opens, and... Damn, the years have not been kind on her.

"Well, *hello*," she slurs.

I stifle my amusement. She doesn't even recognize me.

"Mrs. Swan," I say smoothly. "I was wondering if you and your husband could give me a minute or two of your time. May I come in?"

Straining my ears, I can hear the sound of a shower, and I presume Charlie's in the bathroom.

"Sure!" And she holds the door open wide. Wow, that was... easy. "Do you w-work at the hotel, hmm?" She closes the door behind me, and then she ushers me toward the living room area. "They've been so nice to us here, offering us a bunch of l-luxuries."

"How nice," I deadpan. Turning to face her, I tell her my real reason for being here. "Actually, no. I don't work here. Although," I smirk, "much like the hotel casino, I'm after your money."

Before she can even get a word out, though she just looks confused at first, I cover her mouth with my hand. And she's too fucking pathetic and drunk to even try to put up a fight. Damn bitch. So, it's safe to say that it doesn't take long for me to tie her up.

In the end, she's sitting in a chair. Hands and feet tied. Mouth duct taped.

It's quite satisfying to see her this way.

"You really don't recognize me, do you?" I chuckle, taking out my gun. Her eyes widen when they land on the Glock – with a silencer – that Felix provided me with. "Well, it *has* been a while," I sigh lightly. I can hear the water being shut off. It won't be long until Charlie's back. "Give it a moment, Renee. Maybe it'll come to you." With that said, I walk toward the bathroom door.

Renee's muffled screams are all I hear as I wait for the man of the hour.

They're far from loud, but still annoying.

So, when the door to the master bath opens, I'm pretty fucking pissed.

As he walks out, or stumbles out, he has his back to me. A towel around his hips, and a black t-shirt on. His hair has grayed over the years.

"Hello, Charlie," I say quietly, pressing the gun against his back. He stiffens. "Not. A. Word."

Much like Renee, it doesn't take long before I have him tied to a chair. Hands, feet. Only, his mouth isn't covered. But that's because I need him to talk.

"Recognize me?" I snicker when he narrows his eyes at me. He looks like a complete idiot. Cross-eyed and all. "Don't worry, it'll come to you." Or maybe it won't. "Perhaps."

Straddling a chair in front of them – with my forearms resting on the back of the chair – I tell them, "Congratulations on winning the lottery."

Renee keeps crying behind her taped mouth. Most of her mascara is now on her cheeks.

Charlie, however, doesn't look panicked at all. He's just fucking hammered.

"Here's what's gonna happen," I sigh, pointing the gun at Charlie. "You're gonna call Mr. Jenks – that's his name, right?" I smirk, sending a silent thanks to Jasper for being so thorough in his research. "Yes, Mr. Jenks. You're going to call him, and he will help you get all the money transferred to your account here at the casino." I pause. Charlie gulps. Good. That means he's at least listening. "Now, Mr. Jenks is going to try to talk you out of it. But you don't pay him to make your decisions. You do what you want." I grin. "Actually, you do what *I* want."

"And if I don't?" he slurs, head swaying as he speaks. Pathetic.

"I didn't bring this for no reason," I tell him, chuckling as I hold up the gun. Again, his eyes widen. "Now. As soon as the money's been transferred, you're gonna ask the hotel to bring it all up here. In cash." I'm curious about how much we'll end up with. Obviously, we won't get away with seventy-four million dollars. Almost half is gone – gotta love taxes, right? And of course, they've already spent a shitload on expensive crap. Lastly, it wouldn't surprise me if they've lost a fortune already in the casino. "One more thing," I tell him. "The hotel is first going to advise against having so much cash in your room. It may even go against regulations or what-the-fuck-ever. But you're a high roller," I chuckle, "and they tend to bend the rules for you. So... when they agree to your demand, they will offer you protection, and you will say no. Then you're going to sign for the money. Understood?"

Charlie just stares at me.

My patience is wearing thin.

I already know that this is going to take hours. No need to draw it out even more.

So, I point the gun at Renee's foot... and cock a brow at Charlie.

"I'm not fucking around, Charlie," I say, slowly shaking my head.

Renee whimpers.

"Fine!" Charlie cries out.

Good.

~oOo~

Five hours later, I put duct tape over Charlie's mouth. The money is tucked away in their suitcases, and I'm eager to leave. But first, I make

sure they can't go anywhere. I move Renee into the closet. Still tied up properly. Tape going around her head and over her mouth. I don't want it to be something she can scratch off from any surface that will give her a hold. I even take a sheet to secure her better. Then I do the same with Charlie. Only, he's in the bedroom, and his chair is tied to one of the posts of the bed. He's not going anywhere.

"I hope you're comfortable," I tell him. "The cleaning lady will be here tomorrow, I suppose." I grin. "Until then... sit tight."

Leaning in close, I add, "Still can't remember me, can ya?" I know that he recognizes me, but I guess eight years of heavy drinking will do that to you. Plus, I've changed. "Let me help you. It's Edward Cullen."

As soon as they've pointed me out on the footage from the hotel, they will know my name. They will know my history. There's no use in hiding it.

Behind the tape, Charlie starts shouting, though it's very muffled.

And it's time for me to go.

So, I take out my phone, sending a quick text to Diego, who is waiting nearby.

**I'm ready – E.**

And a few moments later, I walk out of the hotel with two suitcases.

Diego steps out of the car, wearing a disguise as we agreed upon. It's nothing that makes him look weird, just different. A suit, a hat, shades, some makeup, and a light brown mustache.

"Mr. Cullen," he greets formally, taking my suitcases. Nice, dude. There was no accent. "Where to, sir?"

"Home to Seattle," I lie, loud enough for the valet next to me to hear it.

"But..." I smirk. "I have business to tend to in Reno first."

"Yes, sir."

As soon as I'm seated in the car, I exhale.

We're not done, but... almost.

"Felix is waiting," Diego says as we leave the hotel premises. "Everything okay?"

I nod. "Thirty-six million."

He lets out a low whistle, and I grin.

Forty minutes later, we reach the spot in the desert where Felix is waiting.

After a few words are exchanged, we put the money into four smaller bags.

Ironically, the money's heading back to the hotel.

"Alec and Rose have their work cut out for them," Felix chuckles quietly.

Fuck yeah, they do. I may be going home now, but Rose and Alec are gonna stay. Diego's not scheduled to pick them up for another two days, and until then, they're gonna let the money circulate. They will change the money into chips, and then they will play a little, only to exchange the money to cash again. This is what they will do until it's done with all thirty-six million. And they will do it all over Vegas.

"All right," he sighs, getting serious. "Let's recap, shall we?" I nod. "Who's been seen with who?"

I reply as I shrug out of my suit jacket. "I had already boarded the jet when the co-pilot boarded back in Ensenada. And when we landed here,

Diego kept him occupied while I deplaned. So, he never saw me. As far as he knows, it was only Alec and Rose on the plane." I take a breath, thinking. "Rose and Alec took a limo from the airport to the hotel. I took a cab. And inside the hotel, we were never close. So, I know that I haven't been seen with them." I take another pause, rubbing the back of my neck as I think back on my every step. Earlier when I met Felix, it was out here in the middle of nowhere. "No, I haven't been seen with anyone," I murmur, quietly but firmly. "Only Diego, but he's dressed like that," I add, nodding at Diego. What he wears now hides everything about him. You can't see his eyes, he has a fake mustache, the hat hides his dark hair, and the shoes make him two inches taller than he really is. Gotta thank wifey for that idea. Last, but definitely not least, he's wearing foundation, making his skin tone lighter. Also Bella's idea.

"To sum up: Alec and Rose are safe to move around," Felix concludes, satisfied.

I nod. "And they have fake papers to cover their tracks."

"About that," he says, reaching into his own car, "I have your new identities." He hands me the envelope – thick fucking envelope. "Only use these papers in Mexico. It's a complete set for each and every one of you."

I hum in acknowledgment, shifting through the papers. Driver's licenses, birth certificates, passports... And apparently I'm Daniel Gale now. The hell? Talk about a lame fucking name. Wait 'til wifey hears about this. She's gonna laugh, I just know it.

"Jazz doesn't think there's any problem with your old papers, but it's just to be safe," he says. "So, no more Masens."

"Gotcha."

"So, we can leave now?" Diego asks. "I need to get the jet back to the hotel."

Yes. Let's leave. Now.

"Yep," Felix answers. "I'll see you in two days," he tells Diego before turning to me. "And this is it for you, kid. You probably can't enter the States again."

"Fine by me," I chuckle dryly. Really, I have all I want in Mexico.

"All right." He smiles and squeezes my shoulder. "We'll visit when everything's settled down, yeah?"

"Looking forward to it," I reply.

Then we go home.

And I was right. Bella laughs at our new name.

Anything to make her smile.

~oOo~

*Rose and Alec joined us outside of Cancún a few days later.*

*Are you there now, Bella?*

***3 days 'til Christmas...***

**23.**

*I remember last Christmas...*

***December 25th 2010***

"Fuck," I exhale sharply. I sit up; my mouth goes straight to her breasts. I lick, suck, nibble, and kiss as she rides me slowly, deeply. "God, you feel so fucking amazing," I mumble breathlessly. My hand slides over her soft, yet toned stomach, and I wish... I mean, we're young... so... maybe she wants it, too?

When I reach her clit, she moans loudly, softly, breathlessly. "Damn, Edward... Oh, yes..."

Her pussy is hot, wet, perfect. Muscles squeezing my cock which is slick with her arousal.

"I'm close, baby," she mewls, placing her hands behind her on my thighs. It makes me moan against her breasts, and I suck a nipple into my mouth. Hard. She swivels her hips, taking all of me. "Oh, fuck!"

"Dammit, Bella," I grit out. She's not the only one who's close. I suddenly need more, and I need it fast. So, without warning, I roll us over. Then, with a tight grip on the headboard, I slam into her.

The last thing I see before I close my eyes in pleasure is Bella's beautiful face as she comes.

I follow, spilling into her in thick streams.

*Holy heaven. Every fucking time.*

It takes minutes for me to catch my damn breath, and I'm so fucking comfortable with my face buried between her tits. Seriously, I could stay here forever. Through deep breaths, I kiss and nuzzle.

"Am I crushing you?" I mumble against her soft flesh.

She giggles sleepily, threading her fingers through my hair. "No."

Good. "Then I'm stayin'."

But after a while, when I can feel my cock hardening again, I pull out and collapse next to her. As much as we could go another round, we have to get up early tomorrow morning. Well, technically it's Christmas now, I notice as I check the time. Lots to do. We're having Christmas at our house in the morning, and there's no way Casey and Willow will allow us to sleep in.

"I love you, Edward," she sighs softly, snuggling against my chest.

I kiss the top of her head. "Love you, too, Bella," I murmur. With one hand behind my head and one hand in her hair, I try to gather the courage to ask her what I wanna ask. "Are you cold?" Um, no. That wasn't the question, but she shivered, so...

"Mmm, no. Just feels good what you're doing," she mumbles.

I smile and keep playing with her hair. It's so long, full, and fucking shiny.

She looks healthy. I know she is, but I won't exactly forget how she looked when we were kids. How skinny she was, how pale her skin was, how her smile never really reached eyes, or how lifeless her hair was. It's quite the opposite of what we have... and are... nowadays.

The past three years have been our vacation. Something we've earned.

Sure, we may be loaded now, but we're not big spenders. However, we don't really work at the moment, either.

As soon as we arrived in a little town outside of Cancún, we bought a piece of land to build our houses. Right there, on the beach. Emmett and Rose have their house. Alice and Joseph have one. Diego has one. Bella and I have one for our family. Then we have one guesthouse for when Felix's family visits. Alec lived in it for a year before he returned to the States. He wanted to go to college. But he also said that he wants to return one day. He loved it here, just like the rest of us do.

They're all haciendas about the same size.

Four bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen, two baths.

And together we have a massive backyard with a pool.

Life down here is fucking perfect, I gotta say.

But... yeah, okay, there is one thing I want. Dammit, I want another kid.

We're only twenty-six, ya know.

I know that Emmett and Rose are trying for kids, too. And seeing Alice with her little Joseph... Yeah, that does shit to me, all right? He's what, almost two months old now? The result of a very short relationship Alice had with some guy in Cancún. The douche was English – backpacking his way through Mexico before continuing toward South America – and no, he didn't want the kid. Emmett and I were probably more angry than Alice, 'cause she's thrilled. She loves Joseph, but she sure as shit never saw that asshole as anyone she wanted long term.

Anyway, that little kid is almost as cute as my own little ones, and I want another.

"Baby?" I whisper. "Are you awake?"

She stirs a little, but it's clear that she's too far gone.

So, maybe I can talk to her about it tomorrow.

*Tomorrow. Christmas.*

We have plans.

While the kids are busy with their presents, the rest of us are going to discuss our future. We're growing a bit bored, to be honest, and I think we all want to have another go at our own restaurant or bar. This time in

Cancún, which is only twenty minutes away by car. Rose is actually the only one who works at the moment. She's Case's teacher – in a small school for Americans here. Willow also goes there, but only for a few hours a day. She's not even four years old, so for her it's just a way to be around other children her age.

Tomorrow we're also gonna discuss our property that is left in Ensenada. We've laid low for three years now, and it's time to deal with what we left behind. I mean, there's no reason to pay for things we're not using, so I think we're gonna sell it all – leave it behind us.

Hell, I don't even think we have to hide at all anymore. Well, maybe I do, but not the rest of them. I'm the only one who the authorities are looking for. It's been a long time since I saw something about the case on the news, but Jasper fills us in every once in a while. The case is very much active, but they have nothing to go on. At first, it was wild. The valet outside of the hotel in Vegas had, in fact, heard me when I mentioned Seattle and Reno to Diego. This led the police on a wild goose chase all over the fucking place, but it got them nowhere, of course. And there's no other suspect. All they know is that I'm guilty – and they know all about Edward Cullen, the runaway at sixteen – but they can't find me.

But in Mexico, all is quiet and peaceful. It's old news.

Sure, I'm still a bit careful when I'm in town and so on. But I'm not really hiding. A cap and a pair of shades are enough. It's Cancún, after all. The place is loaded with tourists, and I hardly stick out in a crowd.

Then we have the quiet out here, where we're basically alone. Close to civilization, but still far away enough for us to be alone. And I sure as fuck enjoy the quiet life.

~oOo~

"Thank you, thank you, thank you, Mama!" Willow squeals, jumping up in Bella's lap to hug her. I chuckle softly, draping my arm around Bella's shoulders. And I'm next. "Thank you, Daddy! I love it!"

So much love for a fucking Barbie.

I don't get it.

"You're welcome, baby," I murmur, kissing her cheek when she hugs me.

Then she's gone again, eager to unwrap more gifts.

Damn, she's so beautiful. I love that she inherited Bella's looks. She has my eyes, but the rest is all Bella. She argues with me, though, saying that the hair is the only thing Willow got from her, but she's wrong. I sure as hell don't have dimples, but my girls do. Casey, on the other hand... yeah, he's all me.

"Anybody want more coffee?" Rose asks, standing up from the loveseat she shares with Emmett. "I'm heading to the kitchen, anyway."

"No, I'm good, thanks," I reply, grinning as Casey tries out his new Batman costume.

"I wish," Alice sighs, to which Emmett and Diego chuckle. We all know how much she longs for coffee, but she's still breastfeeding.

Yeah, about that...

"Hey, wifey?" I whisper against her temple.

She hums softly, tilting her head in my direction.

I clear my throat and give her a soft kiss as I place my hand on her stomach. "Um, how about another little one?"

Shit, her eyes well up.

My brows knit together.

*Are they good tears or bad tears?*

"I'd love that," she whispers back, and I'm like... *Oh, thank God.*

Good tears, gotta love 'em.

I kiss her again, grinning like a fucking fool. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

~oOo~

"All right. So, what are we gonna do about Ensenada?" Emmett asks.

"Casey, not so close to the pool!" I yell, ready to get up from my lounge. He may be able to swim, but Willow's not. That's why we don't allow her to be out here by herself. "Can you take your sister a bit farther away, buddy?"

He nods in understanding then takes Willow by her hand, leading her away. Toward their sandbox, I conclude, since they're both eager to play with their new buckets and shit like that. Sorry, not shit.

When they're both busy in the sandbox, I breathe out a sigh of relief and relax in my seat again. Emmett chuckles at me, but he shouldn't. Just wait, man. He'll feel what I'm feeling soon enough.

"Right. Ensenada," I sigh, getting back on track. It's just me, Emmett, and Diego out here now, but we'll talk shit over with the girls later, of course. That's the rule. No decisions are made unless the whole family is gathered. "I think we should drive up there and sell it all off. It shouldn't take much time. It's just the bar, the house, and some of the inventory."

Em nods pensively, and I keep my eyes on the kids. "You should stay behind, though. Diego and I can go."

I chuckle wryly. "No way. I'm going. But I'll stay hidden if that makes you feel better."

Emmett and Diego can deal with potential buyers, but I need to help. I can always clean up the places, and I can help fixing what needs to be fixed. After three years away, I'm pretty sure there's stuff that needs to be taken care of before we can sell.

"When can we go?" Diego asks.

I rub my chin, leaning forward on my knees. We can't go before the summer, that's for sure. After our breakfast this morning, we all talked and agreed to start another business together. Yes, another bar/restaurant. That won't happen overnight, so we're gonna need time. And we don't wanna wait, either, 'cause after three years of vacationing, we're really fucking bored. There's only so much you can do with your time here. These past years have been fucking amazing; we've spent time as a family, we've spent time separately, we've gone diving and surfing, shopping a little, worked on our houses... And I think Bella and I have taken four or five very needed – and much appreciated – honeymoons in the area. But we want to work now.

"Well, Felix and Heidi mentioned something about moving here, didn't they?" Emmett reminds us, and I nod thoughtfully. It's true. Felix, Heidi, and Maddy visited last summer, and they're sick of Chicago.

"They were talking about next fall," I say, scratching my eyebrow. "You're saying that we could do it then?"

Em shrugs. "Seems like a good idea to me. We could meet up in Ensenada, take care of everything we have there, and then travel back together."

Sounds like a plan.

And at dinner when we tell the ladies, they agree.

They also gang up on me – all of them – and tell me that while we're in Ensenada in September or October next year, I'm only allowed to be out at night.

I grudgingly agree.

~oOo~

*Not that it helped. A corrupt police officer recognized me and handed me over to the San Diego PD.*

*I'm just glad I was alone when I was arrested, wifey.*

**2 days 'til Christmas...**

**24.**

*I remember waking up this morning...*

**December 15th 2011**

My back is stiff, my neck is sore, my legs are trembling, my arms are tired.

Sitting on the pallet, elbows resting on my knees, I look down at where my wedding ring is supposed to be.

It's been roughly three months since I was arrested.

Three months since I last saw my wife. Three months since I last saw my children.

Three months of interrogations.

They know I didn't act alone in Vegas, but I refuse to talk.

What they also know is that I'm married to an Isabella Cullen.

Last but not least, they know about the Masens, which means I'm not the only one at risk. The only hope I have, really, is that my family stays away from Ensenada. And if Bella shows up today, she better wear the mother of all disguises. But if I have to be honest, I don't want her to show up. Not since I found out that they know about our identities as Masens. Well, they don't know Emmett, Alice, Rose, Diego, or my kiddos. But they suspect that "Marie" is Bella, and they know that there were at least four Masens. Obviously, they want to talk to Bella.

They would probably suspect her, too, but nothing would hold up in court. She wasn't in Vegas. Nothing she's done can be tied to the crime.

I sigh, leaning forward a bit more to thread my fingers through my hair.

I stare at the floor.

Three months.

Problem is, I'm as guilty as I can be.

I will be sentenced.

I will be found guilty.

And I haven't exactly been very cooperative.

Not in the least.

I don't know how many hours, how many fucking weeks... I've spent being interrogated.

I've said nothing.

Well, I have, but nothing they wanna hear. I've told them that I'm not with Bella anymore. I've told them that I acted alone. I've told them that I left all the "Masens" behind.

There's no way I'm outing my family.

It's not all about nobility. Hardly. It's about my kids. I want them to have a good life. Even if I'm not in it.

"Fuck," I breathe out, squeezing my eyes shut.

If only they didn't find out about our business in Ensenada.

It took time for them to do so, actually.

Which is why I held out hope for Bella to be here soon.

But that's not gonna happen.

I was arrested – and I use that term loosely – at four in the morning. I was on the beach, getting ready for some cleaning up. It was just me. The other guys were at the hotel. We'd found a buyer for the property where the bar was, and he was visiting that day. Well, since I was in "hiding", I had gotten up before the sun. But yeah, a Mexican police officer who patrolled the area recognized me. Using the back of his gun – we presume – he took me out with a blow to my neck. And I woke up several hours later in San Diego, handcuffed. There's been a damn ransom or... finder's fee... for me. It doesn't take a genius to realize that he approached the first American he could find, and probably told him something in the line

of, "I've found him, but I can't turn him in." I mean, the poor, poor Mexican obviously didn't wanna confess to a goddamn kidnapping, right? Exactly.

Whatever.

Now I'm here in Chicago, where they extradited me to face charges, exhausted after three months of questioning going nowhere.

My trial starts today.

I'm going down.

There's no use in hoping.

I'm guilty.

I will be locked away. For a long, long time.

*Fuck, how I miss you, Bella.*

Will I ever even get to see her again?

I rub a hand over my chest. It's painful. Physically painful.

I won't get to see my kids grow up.

I'm stuck with regrets.

But it doesn't really matter now, does it?

What's done is done.

All I have now are my memories. It's all I've had for the past few months.

*And I remember, wifey. I remember it all.*

When I hear the quiet sound of shoes approaching, I know that it's time.

I'll be escorted to the courthouse now.

"Cullen!"

I swallow hard.

Deep breaths.

*Don't do the crime if you can't do the time.*

But I seethe internally at that shit. Have I not done my motherfucking time?

With a small shake my head, I stand up.

I function on autopilot.

*I love you, Bella.*

I'm cuffed.

*I love you, Casey.*

I'm taken through hallways and detectors.

*I love you, Willow.*

Toward the police cruiser that will take me to the courthouse.

Once I'm seated in the back of the car, I look up.

And staring back at me in the rearview mirror...

Officer Jasper Whitlock.

~oOo~

*What. The. Fuck?*

**1 day 'til Christmas...**

**25.**

*I will always remember this...*

**December 15th 2011**

I feel myself go pale.

Jasper starts the car without a sound.

My ears are ringing.

The officer sitting next to him is just as quiet.

I can hear my own pulse. Or heartbeat. Whatever.

Is this...?

I mean...

What does this *mean*?

Is this some sort of goodbye?

"God," I choke out quietly.

I look down at my lap, not understanding a damn thing.

The next thing I hear is a muttered "sorry" coming from Jazz, and when I look up, I see him delivering a hard blow to the officer next to him. My eyes widen as his head lolls to the side, landing on the window with a muted thud.

My breaths come out in quick pants, and I meet Jasper's gaze again in the mirror.

Now he's smirking. "Time to go home, man. You've been missed."

I still don't understand.

Jasper seems to understand, though. I mean... he seems to understand that I don't understand. Or something. I'm really fucking out of it. All I know is that his expression turns serious again, and he speeds up.

With eyes on the road, he drives fast as hell through the streets of Chicago.

I think I can hear sirens. Somewhere. Behind me?

"This is gonna be quick," he says, making a sharp turn. The car swerves a little, and I get jostled, but it doesn't wake me up from my blurry haze. That's when I realize that I have fucking tears in my eyes. So, maybe understanding is really dawning on me?

Everything goes black then, and no, I don't faint. But we've entered a big-ass garage.

Then we stop, and Jasper's outta the cruiser. Only a few seconds later, he opens the door on my side, pulling me out, telling me to hurry.

Somehow, I manage to obey. Well, my body obeys, and we're running. Really fucking running, which isn't easy when you're in handcuffs.

"Over here," Jazz grunts, grabbing me by the arm to lead me in the right direction. "Emmett's waiting."

Em... Emmett?

*Snap out of it, Cullen!*

I suck in a sharp breath, trying to clear my head.

We keep running.

Until we reach an old van.

"Get in, buddy," he chuckles breathlessly.

And in I go. Into the back of the van. Jasper slides the door shut, and then – I assume – he gets in next to... Emmett?

I wouldn't really know, 'cause it's pitch black in the back, and I can't see shit.

Then we're moving again.

And I think I'm beginning to understand.

I'm gonna miss my trial, I think.

Yeah.

"*You all right back there, Edward?*" I hear Emmett shout, and I don't know whether to laugh or cry. Maybe both.

"I'm..." I take a deep breath. "I'm fine."

I hear their laughter, and I suppose I didn't sound fine at all, but I really don't know what else to say.

But before I can ponder further, the van comes to a stop, and I'm soon ushered out again...

...and into yet another car.

This one isn't a van, and I squint a little to get used to the light.

"Get down," Jasper instructs, and I do as I've been told.

Sitting in the backseat with Jasper, I keep my head down.

In the front, I can hear both Emmett and... Rose?

"Hi, Edward."

Yep, Rose.

"Um, hey," I mumble.

*Bella. Casey. Willow. Bella. Casey. Willow. Bella. Casey. Willow.*

"You okay to listen for a while, Edward?" Jasper asks. I nod. "Good. Now, I've been trying to keep up with the investigation, but it was out of my hands and, with planning to get you out, I had to be careful." Uh-huh. I understand. I don't understand. "But there are a few things I don't know. I'm hoping you can help me out."

*Bella. Casey. Willow. Bella. Casey. Willow. Bella. Casey. Willow.*

I swallow. "I'll do my best."

"Okay, do you know how much about us they know? Leads, names, locations, etc.?"

We hit a speed bump or something, and I grunt as my head hits the back of Rose's seat. *Jesus H.* Rose apologizes, but I don't care. All I can think about is my wife and kids.

"Um..." Deep breaths. I try to focus. "They know I was Anthony Masen. They suspect that Bella's Marie Masen, and they know that there were at least four of us Masens. They also know that it was our bar down in Ensenada."

"Shit," Emmett mutters.

"Yeah..." That would be Jazz. He sighs heavily. "I was hoping they didn't know... Okay... fuck..."

"What?" I grit out.

Emmett sighs. "I'm here as a Masen. We don't wanna use the Gale name or the Brandon name, since those are the ones we have back home in Cancún. So, I went with Masen."

Oh. Um, okay. That could be bad.

"And I guess you've used Masen here in Chicago?" I ask, not really wanting to know the answer.

But he replies, of course. "Yeah. We checked into the hotel as Masens."

We. He said we checked in. And Rose was never a Masen.

Alice?

Or...

*Bella. Casey. Willow. Bella. Casey. Willow. Bella. Casey. Willow.*

"Is Bella here?" I choke out.

I scrub my face against my shoulder. The cuffs strain. Sitting in this position makes my neck protest, and it's not so damn easy to breathe, especially not when there's a goddamn storm raging inside of me.

"She sure is," Rose answers, slowing the car down. I can't breathe. "In fact, you're gonna see her in less than a minute."

Oh, God...

"Sweet baby Jesus!" Jazz exclaims. "I forgot to get rid of the cuffs. Sorry, man."

It all happens too fast. In the span of ten seconds, the cuffs are off, the car stops, and the door opens. It's time to get out again. And as soon as I'm out, I groan as I stretch. That's when I see another van. I also notice that we're outside of the city.

Since I'm facing the passenger's side of the van, I don't see the door that opens, but I hear it. And I hold my breath.

Then she appears.

She rounds the van, never stopping.

"Bella," I whimper.

She runs. She jumps. I catch her.

"Oh, Edward," she cries against my neck. Arms and legs wrapped around me. "I've missed you. So, so, so much."

It's all too much. The things I've been through in the past hour...

I cling to Bella like she's my lifeline, which is essentially true.

"Sorry to interrupt, but we gotta go," Jasper says. "You can all get into the back. I'll drive."

I don't let Bella go as I walk on rather wobbly legs toward the van.

It's dark as we get in, but I don't care. I have my wife, straddling me, peppering me with kisses. I cradle her face, just like she cradles mine. She's here. I can't fucking believe it. But she's here.

"I love you," she whimpers, and I kiss her tears away. "I love you so fucking much, baby."

"Love you, too," I croak. "Christ, you're really here."

My hands move over her body in the darkness. I just need to feel her.

Make sure that she's actually here.

Her face, her neck, her throat, her collarbones, her arms, her chest...  
yeah, her breasts... hmm... her stomach, her-

Wait.

My hands pause on her stomach.

My mouth stills on her cheek.

I swallow.

"Bella?" I breathe out shakily.

She whimpers again, and she nods minutely, face still buried against my neck.

"Yeah?"

She nods again. "Yeah," she cries softly. "I didn't find out 'til you got arrested-" She starts sobbing, and I hug her to me, both excited and saddened. Excited because my wife is pregnant again. Saddened because I've missed three months.

But we have each other now. No more risks. No more missing out.

"We're having a baby," I say hoarsely, needing to get the words out.

And for a moment, it's just the two of us. No van, no speeding, no Emmett, no waddling Rose.

We start blubbering like fools. Questions are thrown out in between hugs and wet kisses. Like her previous pregnancies, her morning sickness is long-lasting, but apparently coming to an end... finally. Casey and Willow

are okay, safe with Alice. I miss them. They miss me, too. We kiss, kiss, kiss. To some it may seem weird to see how frantic we are, but Bella and I haven't really been apart since we were eight years old. We've held on to each other, saved each other...

"*We're here!*" We hear Jasper shout.

And here is...?

"An airstrip outside the city," Bella whispers.

The door slides open again, and sure enough, there's a jet.

"Everyone's on board," Emmett says, fiddling with a phone.

I'm still in a daze, but I follow the others, still keeping Bella wrapped around me. I have no plan for letting her go.

As we enter the jet, I see... but I don't register.

There are hugs.

Felix is here.

Heidi, too.

And Alec.

Madison.

Emmett and Rose hug me now that we can relax a little.

Same goes for Jasper.

And I hear Diego shouting his hello to me from the cockpit.

It's overwhelming.

Sorta hard to breathe.

So, I'm very thankful when everyone backs off a little – except for Bella, of course – and still wrapped up together, I sit down in a plush chair, dropping my forehead to her shoulder. Inhale. Exhale. My hands go to her stomach again. I feel the baby bump through her black hoodie. Inhale. Exhale. I breathe in her scent.

"Are you okay, Edward?" she whispers softly.

I give her a small nod, but I can't speak yet.

"We're going home," she murmurs, and I breathe out shakily as I feel her hands on the back of my neck. She presses lightly, but my quiet sounds encourage her, and soon she's giving me a heavenly massage. "Casey and Willow can't wait to see you."

I squeeze my eyes shut.

Home.

To my kids.

~oOo~

An hour into the flight, I'm still a bit out of it, but it's getting clearer.

I also have questions, so I take the opportunity when Bella falls asleep on my lap.

"What's the plan?" I ask quietly.

Felix and Jasper are the two sitting across from me.

"Plan A was simply for us to head straight to Cancún," Jazz sighs. "But since the authorities know about the Masens, I think we should leave Mexico behind. This is news that will reach Mexico now." I nod slowly,

understanding. And I don't care. As long as we're all together, I can live anywhere. "So, I have a plan B." I arch a brow, silently telling him to continue. "New papers, new destination, new life."

Anything. "Where are we going?"

He smiles. "First we're gonna pack up your stuff in Mexico. But we'll be spending Christmas in the Dominican Republic."

Huh. Doesn't sound half bad. Sounds like another place we can live on the beach.

"You say 'we'," I mention.

He chuckles quietly, looking awfully wistful. "I'm sick of Chicago, too. I'm done." He shrugs. "Besides, after today, neither of us will ever be able to reenter the States."

"Which we're fucking fine with," Rose pipes in, sitting behind Jasper. "Just take me to a beach, gimme a drink with an umbrella, and I'll be just swell."

I smirk. "Sounds good to me."

"Rosie, you can't drink. You're pregnant," Emmett chides, evidently not seeing that she was kidding.

Felix snickers and turns back to me. "What Jasper here forgot to mention is that he's head over heels in love with Emmett's sister." He nudges Jasper, grinning. "We arrived in Mexico to plan your escape," he looks at me, "but a little more than that happened."

My eyebrows rise slowly. Emmett grumbles something. Rose smacks him on the back of the neck. Heidi and Alec laugh. Jasper rubs the back of his neck.

"Feels like I have quite a bit to catch up on," I quip.

Bella surprises me by speaking... since I thought she was asleep and all.

"We have all the time in the world, baby."

Oh, how fucking wonderful that sounds.

~oOo~

*Yeah, a day to remember.*

***Merry Christmas!***

## **Epilogue**

~oOo~

### ***December 31st 2021***

With Bella sitting between my legs, her back against my chest, I pull a blanket over us. Before leaning back in the lounge, I also throw a couple of logs on the fire. Gotta love living on the beach. Our houses are right behind us, but when we face the ocean, it feels like it's just the two of us in the world.

"Still cold?" I murmur against her temple. My hands slide up and down her arms, slowly and lazily, as I kiss her hair, her temple, her neck. "We could always head back inside if you want."

She hums, tilting her head up. "No, this is perfect." I smile and dip down to kiss her. And I agree. This is perfect. The dinner with friends and family earlier was also perfect, and the party that's currently in full swing is probably also perfect... for them. But Bella and I prefer to be out here.

Judging by the sounds coming from the house, I'd say we're getting close to midnight.

I can hear Casey singing along – rather badly, I gotta say – to the music. But he's the jokester. My mini-me. And like me, he's also the protector, especially when it comes to his siblings. He was always protective over Willow, but he was also very young, and... well, she's a girl. However, when our third was born... Yeah, Case was thrilled when he saw that it was a boy. And it was with Denver that Case turned into the protector he is today. He's Denver's hero, though he's much quieter – thank God. We can only handle one Casey. Luckily, we have our fourth and youngest, too. She's the only one who can keep Case calm. Zoe is just like Willow: a Bella. Though, Willow is not the peacemaker her mom is, or Zoe for that matter.

"I hope Case doesn't have dreams about becoming a rock star," Bella chuckles softly.

Hear, hear. "Not one that sings," I laugh quietly.

I can hear Willow and her friends complaining. Emmett and Diego are cheering on, while their wives are trying to shush them. Felix, Heidi, and Alice are laughing. Jasper is shouting... with a terrible accent. Even after seven years in this place, he can't stop gushing about the accent.

We left the Dominican Republic after three years. With our kids growing up so fast, we wanted them to have everything. Or at least, a lot. So, at first we all traveled a little together. For a year, we saw many places. We had fun, we reconnected as a giant family, and in the end we settled down in New Zealand. Permanently. Jasper's having the time of his life, I swear. We all are, but he has a thing for accents.

I digress.

Our kids can have more here. There's no language barrier, and it didn't take long for our family to settle down here. *Here* is outside of Napier, and this is where we run a small hotel on the beach. A family business. It's not that we need the money, but we do need something to do.

It keeps us occupied while the kids are in school.

Kids...

Sometimes I can't believe I have four of them, but I do, and I can't love them more. Another thing I can't believe is how our parents neglected us. I'm honestly wondering, because I can't live without my own. I need Casey for his everlasting good mood. I need Willow because she's my princess. I need Denver for his cuddly behavior. He runs up and hugs you and you're a goner. Last but definitely not least, I need my Zoe, because she's my calm.

"They're counting down, baby," Bella murmurs then, squirming in my embrace until we're chest to chest. I smile, hearing Casey and Emmett's sons cheering. When they get to "five", all children join in. "I love you."

"I love you, too, wifey," I whisper. Three... two... one... "Happy New Year."

She hums into the kiss. "Happy New Year to you, too."

Life is great.

"Do you think we can sneak upstairs?" she breathes out.

Oh, yeah. Life is definitely great. I may be pushing forty in a few years, but...

"We definitely can," I tell her solemnly.

We're gonna make our own fireworks.

It's what we'll be doing until we die, I just know it.

~oOo~

*Happy New Year!*