



Fanfiction written by CaraNo

Disclaimer: I don't own Twilight

Special thanks to LuvMeSomePapercuts for her help with the American Sign Language (ASL)

Translation

Regular font between asterisks = Sign language.

"Regular font" = Talk.

"Italic font." = Talk *while* signing.

EPOV

Chapter 1

August 2010

As I carried Emma into the car, I couldn't help but sighing at the goddamn frustration I felt. Yet another family dinner had passed, and yet another speech had been forced upon me.

"Edward, you need to get out there. You can't close yourself in forever. It's not healthy. We just want you to be happy. It's been four years."

The same speech every time.

Four years since what?

Four years since my daughter turned one and her mother walked out. Giving up, stating that she couldn't live with a *deformed* daughter.

After she said *that* word about my girl, I opened the door for the bitch. Showed her out. Out of my life.

Our life.

Papers were signed, an engagement ring was returned, and that was that.

I was suddenly a single father at the age of twenty-four. Father to an amazing little girl who couldn't hear me. Couldn't hear when I told her how much I loved her.

When we found out that Heidi was pregnant, I... freaked out.

I had just started my new job after studying music for five years. Ironic, I know. Music's always been a big part of my life, and then I have a daughter who is deaf. I'm not bitter, though. I love that girl with every fiber of my being, and she's truly perfect just as she is.

But anyway, I freaked out when we found out Heidi was pregnant. Partly because I wasn't ready to become a father, and partly because Heidi and I were... not compatible. I know we loved each other for a while, but it didn't run deep. And it was mutual. It was for the time being.

We met at Juilliard; she wanted to become a singer, and I wanted to compose music.

But I stepped up to the plate, asked her to marry me, and when Heidi started to show, I found myself drawn. Longing even, to become this child's father. And we made it work. I made good money as a jingle

writer, and it was perfect at the time. Heidi, however... was not so excited. But she 'coped.'

Emma Cullen was born June 19th, the day I turned twenty-three... and soon, Heidi wasn't coping any longer.

We found out our daughter was deaf.

All of us were devastated of course, but Heidi was downright appalled. And she gave it a year before she said 'enough.'

I didn't give a flying fuck for myself, but I was disgusted by her behavior toward the angel she birthed.

Glad the bitch is gone.

Thanks to my sister Rose, and my mother, she has females in her life. Women who know how to react when Emma screams bloody murder because Daddy can't braid her hair.

Yeah, I need Rose and Mom as much as Emma does.

Anyway, I'd say my life is good. Somewhat.

I love my job of two years where I compose music for shows on Broadway, and I live with my girl in a nice apartment literally five minutes away from work. And with a view of Central Park, the location can't get much better.

The thorn in my goddamn shoe is my mother's incisive talk about finding love.

Yeah, bullshit like that.

I don't give a rat's ass about it. Women don't exist for me and haven't for the past few years.

After Heidi was done and she had moved to California, I tried dating a few times, but it always ended in disaster. It was when I brought someone home with me to introduce her to Emma that everything went to hell. The date or girlfriend or whatever would start walking on eggshells around Emma, and simply shy away – no matter how many times I told them to just relax. Because my girl is not only smart, but she's also easy going, and you don't need sign language to convey simple things. But yes, they shied away, which in turn made my girl believe people didn't like her.

I ended those relationships rather fucking quickly, because no one matters more than Emma.

Doesn't matter. I'm fine without women. Companionship. Someone to share things with.

Don't need it.

Nope.

At the age of twenty-eight, I'm doing just fine on my own.

*O*O*O*

Late August 2010

I felt the plastic on my leather cuff vibrate on my wrist, and I spun around to see where Emma was.

We were grocery shopping and Emma just loved to run around. I wasn't worried, though, because Rose was with her. But that didn't mean she didn't love to annoy the shit out of me with our bracelets.

It was my best friend – Jasper – who gave them to us last year on our birthday, and it was a clever thing. But that was just Jasper. High tech

and inventive, and especially in this situation, having a daughter who was deaf, too.

He had bought me a regular leather cuff for my wrist and a silver bracelet for Emma, and then he had attached a flat square-shaped piece of plastic on the inside of my cuff that vibrated when Emma pressed the button on the small plastic charm on her bracelet. The charm on her bracelet simply sent a signal to the receiver I had on my cuff, and yes, she loved to press that button.

I made a mental note to talk to Jasper to see if I also could get a goddamn button. That way, I could annoy my girl right back. However, knowing my girl, that would probably only make her laugh.

After checking several aisles, I found her and Rose by the ice cream. And there was another woman, too.

One with a very spectacular ass I must say.

What, I'm still a man.

But what stunned me was when the brunette squatted down and started signing with my daughter. Apparently it shocked the shit out of my sister, too.

It didn't take a genius to figure out that I walked over to them.

I'm five years old, I saw my girl sign, and I figured the long-legged brunette had asked how old she was.

Emma saw me then, and her shy smile turned into my lopsided grin as she waved me over.

You're killing Daddy with that bracelet, princess, I told her with a wink as I approached.

She just laughed at me, of course.

Then I focused on my sister and the, Jesus... *beautiful* woman.

"Edward." Rose smirked. "This is Bella. We work out together at Emmett's gym. And Bella, this is my brother, Edward."

I smiled and offered my hand. "Nice to meet you, Bella."

She smiled brightly and shook my hand as she replied. "Nice to meet you, too, Edward. I take it little Emma here's yours?"

"She is." I grinned, looking down at where Emma was watching us curiously.

That always tugged at me—to see her so curious about what she couldn't hear.

Apparently Bella noticed as well, and when she spoke again, she signed at the same time. Once again shocking the hell out of me.

"She's an adorable little girl. Rose told me about her niece, but I'm afraid her words didn't do her justice." She smiled, winking at my girl.

Emma's face lit up like a Christmas tree, and it was for such a simple thing as being included.

"Thank you," I chuckled, still stunned.

"And Bella, you didn't tell me you could sign," Rose said.

"Guess it didn't come up." Bella shrugged. "But seriously, what do we talk about when we're on the treadmill, Rose?"

It was a pointed look that told me this was not for a brother's ears.

I was however disgustingly intrigued about Bella's part of those conversations.

"*Alright, alright,*" Rose conceded with a chuckle. "So, how come you know then?" she asked curiously. And I had to say I was curious myself.

"*My mother taught me,*" Bella replied softly. "She was born deaf," she added without signing.

"I'm sorry," Rose offered politely.

"Don't be," Bella said dismissively, still smiling at my Emma. "*It was never a problem. Besides, signing is fun, right, Emma?*"

Emma grinned widely and replied. **Daddy said it's like a secret language. Because not many know how.**

I just stood there, grinning like a fool at her. So goddamn cute when she got excited.

"*Daddy is right, sweetie. It's for cool people,*" Bella laughed quietly.

The three of them continued to 'talk' and I was just... actually just enjoying the moment. I loved watching my girl and how animated she got when something was funny.

It didn't exactly make things worse when Emma was talking to the most beautiful woman I've ever seen either.

She was really gorgeous. At least a head shorter than me, and her body screamed perfection. It wouldn't surprise me if she was a dancer. She looked so comfortable in a pair of denim shorts and a t-shirt, and her posture reminded me of the dancers we always saw back in school. And also of course the dancers I encounter at work when it's rehearsals.

After a few more minutes, Rose and Bella said goodbye, saying that they would see each other at the gym tomorrow, and I sorta tried, but failed to think nothing but proper thoughts.

"You were not subtle, big brother of mine," Rose snickered as we left the grocery store.

"Whaddya mean?" I asked as I fastened Emma's belt.

"Well, to be blunt, you eye-fucked her."

"You're always blunt," I pointed out. "And I wasn't eye-fucking anyone," I added, grumbling... lying.

"Whatever," she sighed, clearly not believing me. "But just so you know; she's looking for a babysitter-job."

Huh...

"And you're looking for someone who can take Emma when you're holed up by the piano," she said pointedly as I started the car.

I was.

I had a busy fall ahead of me, with three big projects, and I needed at least four hours every day, of solitude, in my music-room at home. And that of course meant I needed help with Emma. Especially since the daycare center where Emma went only had her between eight AM and three PM. Stupid hours, I know, but finding a daycare that has what my girl needs ain't easy.

And I was always at the studios during those hours, working with Jasper and his crew.

So, if Bella can sign... and has experience with Emma's situation...

"Tell me about her," I sighed.

When it comes to Emma, I've come to realize that it's just plain stupid to throw away a good possibility, because the truth is that you don't know when an opportunity like this will present itself again.

"Yes!" Rose grinned in victory, making me roll my eyes at her. "She's really great, Edward... Okay, so, I don't know everything about her, I mean, we've only known each other for six months or something like that, and when we work out, we talk girl-stuff, ya know. So, I'll just tell you what I know, okay?"

"That'd be great," I replied dryly.

"Okay, so, she's nineteen years old and-"

"Wait, what?" I choked out. "She's only nineteen?!"

Nineteen!

Holy fuck. I'm a pervert then.

"What does her age have to do with fitting as a babysitter, brother?" Rose asked smugly with a cocked eyebrow.

Yes, what indeed.

Crap.

After clearing my throat, I replied, "Nothing. Go on."

"Right," she sighed. "She's nineteen, but... she has a birthday coming up in September..." She trailed off, seemingly thinking out loud.

Okay, so twenty?

Still too young for me to even fantasize about.

"Anyway, she's starting her third year at Juilliard. She's studying to become a dancer."

I nodded, unsurprised. She really did look like a dancer.

A stunning one.

But... huh, on her third year already?

Rose continued to talk about Bella for the rest of the ride; she did seem perfect for the job, and since I lived not more than ten minutes from her school, it would be easy for her to come over after her classes.

In the end, I asked Rose to talk to Bella about the whole thing, and if she was interested, we could set up a meeting.

Chapter 2

As luck would have it, Bella *was* interested, and Rose helped me set up a meeting for the following week.

That's also the period of time it took me to convince myself that I could look at Bella without feeling like a creep.

Clearly I was an idiot, because a week later when I opened the door for her, I had obviously not convinced myself that I could do this. No, instead I had evidently suppressed the memory of how she looked.

Lord have mercy on me, I thought as I took in the sight of her.

It was only four PM, so I quickly understood that she had come here directly from class.

A dance class, no doubt.

Snug, black yoga pants, ponytail, and a t-shirt with 'Juilliard' on it. Oh, and a gym bag.

"Bella." I smiled. "Nice to see you again." *And so much of you...* "Come on in."

Thank God I decided to wear jeans. You know, more resistance. Also, thank God I didn't wear my ragged Juilliard t-shirt that I like to wear after working out. That might have been a tad too much. No, the black one I settled on was definitely better.

"Thank you for agreeing to see me," she replied, smiling brightly. "I have to say I was surprised when Rose approached me at the gym about this".

"She's not one to waste time, that one," I chuckled as I gestured for us to sit in the living room. "And I guess if the opportunity is there..." I trailed off.

"Absolutely," she said, nodding in understanding. "Wow, this is a nice place," she murmured then, and I noticed her eyes resting on the baby grand I had in the corner.

It's home.

To be honest, it *is* a nice place. Thanks to Mom and Rose, of course. I'm not one for decorating, but they sure are.

When we moved in, it was simply an apartment with four bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen, two baths, and a hallway, but once Mom and Rose finished, it was the place I pictured myself living in for the rest of my life. And the living room is without a doubt one of my favorite rooms. With beige, brown, and white, the square room is warm and homey, and that was all I ever wanted. And the plush couch sure helps. God knows I don't want to live in something stiff and too stylish. And when you have kids, you don't really want things that are either too breakable or hazardous.

But the favorite thing about the living room is obviously the large windows. Living on the 15th floor gives you an awesome view of the park, and it's definitely one of the reasons I wanted the place.

"Thank you," I responded politely. "How about a tour before we talk?"

"Sounds perfect. Where's Emma, by the way?"

"She's with my parents over dinner. My mom takes care of her a few afternoons every week," I explained.

"And that's why you need a sitter," she guessed.

"Exactly." I nodded. "That, and the fact that my fall will be busy with work."

Since we had taken left in the hallway, I figured we could just continue, so I led her out of the living room, pointing at the doors as we passed them, 'guestroom,' 'bathroom,' 'my music-room,' 'my bedroom,' which we passed quickly, and then I stopped outside of Emma's room.

"And this is Emma's room," I said and opened the door.

It's pink. Everywhere. All pink. Pink and fluffy shit in pink.

Quite the contrast of the rest of the apartment and its nature themed colors. You know the ones; brown, beige, white, green...

But this... so fucking pink.

"Hmm, I wonder what her favorite color is," Bella joked as she looked around.

"Grey," I deadpanned.

"Wow, you're all sorts of fun," she laughed before turning back to the room. "But seriously, this room must be every girl's dream. Is it wrong for me to assume that you had female assistance?"

I snickered. "No, that's very correct."

Bubblegum, that's what her room reminded me of. Pink walls, *white* ceiling – but(!) the ceiling had pink stars here and there – pink bed with pink sheets, pink painted dresser and rocking chair, pink pillows in her fairytale-corner, pink drapes, pink rug... not a pink floor, actually.

After a good dose of pink, I led Bella to the kitchen on the other side of the apartment, and this was the only place that was less homey. I still loved it, though, and I have to admit that it's a... sexy kitchen.

Yes, I can say that and be straight.

But seriously, with cupboards in glossy black, a countertop in glossy white, and kitchen furniture in red, it *is* a sexy kitchen. And I'm trying to *not* picture Bella on the countertop right now... with less clothes on.

She's nineteen, she's nineteen, she's nineteen.

She'll be twenty soon.

Shut the fuck up.

"Cool kitchen," she commented. "Very different from the rest of the apartment."

"It is." I nodded, gesturing for her to have a seat at the table. "Easy to hose down when Emma's been baking with Nana," I chuckled.

"That I can imagine," she giggled. Yes, giggled.

Down, boy.

"Can I get you anything to drink?" I offered. "Coffee, juice, soda..."

"Water's fine."

I nodded and headed for the fridge for two bottles of water.

When I returned to the table, I didn't waste time.

I took my seat and handed her a bottle of water. "So," I sighed. "I guess we both have questions."

"Yeah." She smiled. "I suppose hours is one of the main things... And I guess you should know how I act with children," she chuckled.

"Yeah, although I did see enough to know that you're relaxed around Emma, and that's the most important thing," I said. "I don't really have any demands on previous experience more than common sense, and like I said, that Emma's comfortable."

And then I added, "I mean, the tasks won't be anything difficult, and I'll even be home for the most part. I just need someone to be there for her when I'm working in my office."

"What do you work with?" she asked curiously before taking a sip of her water.

"I compose music," I answered. "Mostly for Broadway shows, but sometimes for commercials and movies. As long as it doesn't entail travelling."

Bella was impressed, and I enjoyed that a little bit too much.

"But... uhm, wow... That's rather impressive for being twenty-eight," she mumbled, almost to herself, and I tried not to think about the fact that she knew my age.

Had Rose mentioned it casually when explaining my situation about Emma, or had Bella asked?

Jesus, time to stop.

Act professional for God's sake.

"I've worked hard, I guess." I shrugged. "But I always knew what I wanted, and thanks to my family, I could achieve it even when I had Emma."

The smile that Bella gave me was almost too much to handle. It was as if she was in awe of me, and I was, well, I wouldn't say modest, but it made me *feel* stuff when she was the one looking at me like that.

I also wondered just how much Rose had told her about my life, because I knew that Rose loved to bitch about Heidi, and what a skank she was. Rose's words, not mine, although I'm with her on that one, 100%.

Time to change the subject.

"So, I suppose the only thing I really need to know is if you think there will be any issues with taking care of Emma what with her condition and all," I said.

I already knew the answer of course, but confirmation was needed, because I wanted this to work.

"Absolutely not," Bella assured. "I sign fluently, and the this isn't really foreign to me." She paused. "Partly because I grew up with a deaf mother, but also because she was a single parent. So, in a way I suppose I can relate to Emma in a way."

My mind sure as hell spun as I listened to Bella. Firstly, because she seemed so mature and easy going, understanding and relaxed, but also

because I was curious to know more. More about how she grew up with her mother, and how they handled everything, because truth be told, it was a life that needed adjustments, not to mention patience.

I can't take anything for granted; I can't expect people to just know how to act around either me or Emma, and it's those reactions that have sort of made me shy away from the outside world. Not that I'm hiding or anything like that, but I simply keep to those that are already close to me. I'm hardly one to meet new people.

"Are you and your mother from New York?" I asked curiously.

"No, we're from Washington," she chuckled. "I grew up in this shitty little town, four hours from Seattle. And I sorta hated the place so much that I managed to graduate high school two years early. So, New York was quite a change of scenery."

Ah, so that's how she's already at her third year...

"I can imagine." I grinned. "Rose told me you're starting your third year at Juilliard?"

"Yeah." She smiled excitedly. "The semester just started yesterday, and I'm excited to say the least. At first I was hesitant to move so far away from home, but once I got here, I just knew that this was the city for me. And I love Juilliard; everyone's so creative, you know?"

"I do." I nodded, grinning like a fool. "I went there myself, though I studied music."

"Yeah, Rose told me," she said... and blushed.

What's that about?

Before I could ponder further, Bella changed the subject. "So... what are your thoughts around all this with Emma? I mean, what are you looking for in a sitter?"

You, I wanted to say.

"Basically a friend of some sort," I said instead. "Someone who keeps her company while I work. Like I said, I will be home for most part, it's just that I need to be able to close myself in and focus, you know? I can't really do that with my mind on what Emma's up to.

"So, yeah, a friend... And someone to be there and help her with going to the bathroom, or help her if she's hungry, and then be there for bath time."

She nodded, taking it all in, and it didn't seem like there would be any issues, which made me relieved.

"I take it, we're both on the same page about the hours," I added. "I mean, I know you have classes, and since I work from home, it's pretty much up to you.

"Emma has daycare from eight to three, and after that it's up to your schedule. As long as you can stay for at least four hours a day during the week, I don't have a problem with anything."

"Sounds good. I get off at different hours most days, but I know that I'm done around five at the latest. But usually it's around four."

"Okay." I nodded, inwardly way too happy that this was actually happening. "Do you have any other questions revolving hours?"

She pursed her lips... pouty lips, thinking about it.

"Well, the only thing I can think of are recitals, late night rehearsals, and auditions. Though they don't come too often, it would be on those nights I'm unavailable," she said softly.

"That won't be a problem," I assured. "Just give me a heads up as soon as possible, and I'll make arrangements with my parents or Rose and Em."

"Alright," she replied simply.

"What's your major?" I asked... just because I wanted to know so badly.

"Ballet," she answered. "I thought briefly about Modern, but ballet is more me... when it comes to dance anyways."

God, that just led to more questions.

But yes, watching her... she was perfect for the ballet, with her slender figure. Supple and so naturally beautiful.

Fuck, this will be harder than I thought.

My intercom rang then, and I excused myself to go get it.

"Yes?" I answered once I reached it in the hallway.

"Mr. Cullen, Mr. McCarty is here with Miss Emma."

Always so formal those doormen, I thought, rolling my eyes.

"Send 'em up, Eleazar," I chuckled.

After hanging up, I walked back to the kitchen to warn Bella about my brother-in-law.

It was necessary.

"Emma's back." I grinned. "But you're also about to meet Emmett, and though you may see him at the gym... He might act differently with you *here.*"

"Um, okay?" she replied, confused of course.

I didn't want to tell her that Emmett would be suggestive.

So, I didn't.

But that was just the story of Emmett McCarty.

Despite being a year older than me, he acted like a five year old, and I wasn't surprised to hear that he was bringing Emma back. We all knew how much Emmett loved Emma, and to be honest, he was the best uncle she could ever have.

Maybe 'cause they're on the same intellectual level...

Kidding. Somewhat.

The doorbell dinged then, and I motioned for Bella to stay while I got the door.

I was seriously aching to see my princess, but I was also dreading Emmett's colorful words.

"*Hi, you two.*" I grinned after opening the door.

Hi, Daddy, she signed, yawning as she did so.

My little girl was, unsurprisingly, looking very tired in her ruffled pants and t-shirt – both items of clothing, pink – and I could only imagine what Emmett's done.

Monkey bars, is all I'm saying.

Emma bounced toward me with open arms, and once she was situated on my hip, she didn't waste time to snuggle into the crook of my neck.

"You went to the park, I guess?" I smirked knowingly at Emmett.

"Hell yeah. Spider Monkey and I had a blast," he laughed.

His features changed then, and I knew. Already knew.

Goddamn.

"She still here?" he asked, waggling his eyebrows.

"Yes, she is," I sighed, shaking my head at him. "Wanna come inside for a while?"

"Of course," he replied, his eyes lighting up in excitement.

"Don't say anything stupid, alright?" I warned him.

"I would never," he replied, way too innocently.

Sure you wouldn't, I thought, squatting down on the floor with Emma. And once she was standing, I kissed her cheek to get her attention as I removed her shoes.

We have company, Princess, I told her, smiling.

This had her attention of course.

Who?

"Remember Rose's friend – Bella? From the supermarket?"

She nodded.

"She is in the kitchen." I winked.

Two seconds, and Emma was gone.

"I guess Bella made an impression, huh?" Emmett chuckled as we followed her.

"Apparently," I snickered.

On me, too.

By the time we reached the kitchen, Bella and Emma were already in a deep conversation about the monkey bars in Central Park, and Emmett barely got a half wave from Bella before she turned back to my girl.

Yes, Bella will be perfect for Emma.

It was hard not to stare, but damn, watching Bella look so excited over what Emma was telling her... it did stuff to me as a dad. It mattered so much, because that's always been the issue with Emma.

She's so outgoing and happy, and loves to meet new people, and though she knows, and is aware of her situation and can't communicate like others, she's not one to shy away. And this, having Bella as a new friend, will definitely be a great thing in Emma's life.

Of course she has friends in her own age, from daycare, and a few of them really close, but unfortunately they don't live on Manhattan, except for Katie of course. And it's not easy to get to Jersey, Long Island, or Brooklyn just like that when I work.

"I want to talk, too, Emma." Emmett sulked playfully.

Imagine my surprise when Bella gave him a firm no, and Emma just shook her head before going back to talking swings and slides.

Even Emmett was stumped.

"I think you've got some competition, Em," I laughed.

His playful sulk turned into a real sulk.

Eventually my princess yawned more than talked, so I told her it was time to say goodbye to Bella and Emmett, but not before Bella and I decided that she would come by tomorrow with Rose to 'try' a night.

We briefly covered the issue of payment also, and I thought it was odd when Bella didn't seem interested in the matter.

Isn't that why people get jobs? To pay rent, food, and utilities?

It wasn't until after we had said goodbye, and I was on the phone with Rose that I got my answer.

Apparently Bella was a trust fund baby, and worked because she *liked* it.

Just another thing that makes Bella an enigma.

Chapter 3

EPOV

Mid September 2010

Bella's been with Emma now for a month, and it's... hard.

She comes by everyday a little before five PM, and after five or ten minutes of small talk, Emma demands her attention.

And damn, they are thick as thieves.

This is what I've found out about Bella so far, and it isn't much. She's nineteen- Well, twenty now. She hates attention. I learned that when it was her birthday on the 13th and I congratulated her. She just grimaced before she and Emma took off.

She lives in Chinatown where she shares an apartment with her friend Alice. She's not just a friend to Emma; she's also a huge inspiration, especially when it comes to Emma's creative outlet, which is painting. Bella encourages her, helps her, and teaches her new things all the time. Which means that Bella is a very natural caretaker. And it's always there. The way she can subtly suggest something to Emma without making her feel inadequate. Or the way she can encourage Emma to watch her Signing Time DVDs without making it sound like it's something Emma *needs* to watch.

She makes learning fun for my girl, and it's amazing to watch. Yes, I watch sometimes. Fucking sue me.

For instance, the first week Bella was here, and I found them in the kitchen, talking about their sign-names.

Flashback

I stood in the doorway, smiling like a goof as my girl explained the sign-name I had for her—instead of finger-spelling her name.

I'm Daddy's Princess... Emma smiled proudly, proceeding to show Bella how I sign the letter 'P' for 'Princess' over my heart. **...Over his heart because he loves me so much.**

It was quite emotional to watch her.

And to see Bella smile so hugely for my girl, that was also... big.

"Of course he loves you, Emma. You're so adorable," Bella replied, smiling widely, and if I didn't know any better, I'd say her voice was...huh...thick with emotion?

"Can I have my own sign-name for you?" Bella asked excitedly then. And Emma was just as excited, nodding furiously.

Bella looked thoughtful for a second, even tapping her chin, making Emma giggle in anticipation, and I couldn't look away to save my life.

Bella had made up her mind then, and signed 'Sweetheart' or 'Sweetie' before adding the letter 'E' for 'Emma,' and I... was stunned. Completely overcome with... *something*. But I felt it in my chest.

Is that okay? Bella asked, and I fought the urge to laugh at the absurd question, because I knew that Emma would adore it. And I was right. Emma smiled so widely I thought her face would split.

Yes! was her reply. **Can I also have one for you?**

"Of course," Bella answered, her eyes lighting up with excitement again.

It didn't take many seconds before Emma signed the letter 'B'.

Over her heart.

I swallowed hard before heading back to my room.

End Flashback

So, yes, I watch them sometimes.

I make it seem random or casual, though. Pretty fucking stealthy if I say so myself. To Bella I just may come off as a person who really, really loves his coffee, because God knows I leave my music-room for it... a lot.

Anyway, Emma loves her of course.

Oh, and so does the rest of my family.

Yep, Mom and Dad just "happened to be in the neighborhood"... a few times.

They think she's great for Emma.

I do, too.

What else do I know about Bella?

Nothing. That's it.

I know her name, her age, I know where she lives, I know what she study, and I know what a great friend and caretaker she is when it comes to Emma.

Do I have questions? Oh, yes. A million or two.

The thing is that Bella's an open person. That's easy to see, and she's always happy, but I don't know how to ask her anything without coming off as... someone who's interested.

Not that I'm interested in Bella in that way... well, that's a lie.

Fuck.

Confession time.

I've turned into a hormonal teenager. And I shower a lot. Very, very cold ones.

But I refuse to jerk off to the image of her, because that would make me creepier than I already am.

It means I'm a horny mess, because if I try to get off, the image of her body just magically appears in my head, which leads to turning the hot water off.

My balls are blue to be honest.

And don't get me started on that blush of hers. Yes, I've seen it, and it's slowly but surely making me lose my goddamn mind. I guess I don't

understand why she blushes, though. I mean, sometimes it's when she arrives, sometimes it's right before she leaves, sometimes it's when I get my damn coffee, and sometimes it's after we say goodnight to Emma.

Don't understand her one bit.

But I want to. God, I really want to.

It doesn't really help that she knows everything about me. Yeah, Rose's spilled the beans about everything, including Heidi and all that. I'm not bothered by it, because I wasn't the one that fucked up. I have nothing to be embarrassed about. That's all Heidi. I just wish I had someone who could spill the fucking beans about Bella.

Last but not least.

The way Bella dresses.

Usually it's those tight yoga pants and a snug t-shirt seeing as she comes right from class, but sometimes... oh, sometimes it's skinny jeans and some sexy top.

Her ass, it's out of this world. Her breasts are... out of this world, too. It's all out of this world. Her gorgeous eyes, her slender body, her neckline, her skin, the way she smiles radiantly, the way she lights up when she sees Emma... her mouth... her voice... it's...

Time for a cold shower.

*O*O*O*

When, Daddy?

I gave her a pointed look, which she understood.

She was getting lazy with her mouthing and facial expressions, and that wouldn't do if she was to learn more, and I knew she knew this.

When, Daddy? she repeated, mouthing this time.

Perfect, Princess. I'm very proud of you, I told her with a huge smile.

Jasper and Katie will be here soon.

She nodded before running towards the swings.

We were meeting Jasper and his daughter here in the park like we always do on Saturday mornings, and I knew both Jasper and I needed our manly gossip-hour.

Jasper and I met a few years ago when we both had our girls going to the same playgroup, and when Emma and Katie clicked, we did, too.

He's as much of a brother to me as Em is, if not more since we have so much in common. Not just with our daughters, but we're both in the music business, too. Me being a composer, and him being a producer and technician. And we actually work together on several projects, too, which mean we see each other most days. However, work is busy and that's why our Saturdays are important.

Emma and Katie play together, and Jasper and I vent.

He knows about Bella of course, and he knows I'll be bitching about that today, and I know about his trouble.

It's called divorce.

Jasper is getting divorced from his wife Tanya, and God knows he can use all the support he gets. I saw it as soon as I met Tanya.

She's not a true Heidi, but she isn't far off. And I saw that. Nasty bitch.

Tanya wants Katie to go through every possible exam in the world to see if 'Katie can be fixed.'

I shudder just *thinking* about Tanya and Heidi.

Jasper's more like me on that subject.

Of course we've gone through tests and all that, but I refuse to have Emma go through procedures and procedures of prodding and poking just to be heartbroken when nothing happens.

I want my daughter to have her childhood without spending all that time around doctors, and if Emma one day wants to go through all that, it will be when she understands the ramifications of it all. Basically when she's old enough to understand, period.

Emma and Katie can have a wonderful childhood as it is, but if they go through all that potential bullshit and it doesn't work, they'll never get their childhood back.

If Emma and Katie decide they want that when they're older, and it *does* work, their childhoods will still have been good ones.

Then of course there's the issue of hoping. Both Jasper and I know how much hope you can have despite bad odds. Even if you're given a single percent of success, as a parent, you easily put a lot of hope in that percent. And that's not something you want for yourself *or* for your child.

Fuck, I'm digressing here.

Jasper's getting divorced, and it's their fighting over Katie that is the reason.

So, today I know he's gonna vent about that.

My cuff vibrated then, and my eyes quickly searched out Emma who was waving happily from the sandbox.

This is one of those moments where a mother had taken a picture.

I waved back, snickering.

That girl had me so wrapped around her finger.

I have to say that though her hair is slightly lighter than my hair, most her features are mine. Reddish brown hair – curly has hell, which is far better than my straight mess – my green eyes and pale skin. The only thing I can see in her that's Heidi is her nose and the blond streaks in her hair, but to be honest, I wouldn't want my five year old girl to have Daddy's rather fucking manly nose.

She does have my lopsided smirk perfected, though. And I have to say hers is far cuter than mine. She's even got a dimple.

I love you, Princess, I signed to her.

I heard her giggle from across the playground as she signed back. **I love you, Daddy.**

Cue content sigh.

"Edward," I heard a familiar voice drawl behind me.

Before I could follow his voice's direction, a small body crashed into me. Or my leg.

Looking down, I had to laugh when I saw Katie's goofy grin.

"Hello, little one," I chuckled. "How are you today?"

Good! Where is Emma?

I nodded in Emma's direction. *"By the swings. Be careful, okay?"*

She nodded with a roll of her eyes before she darted off towards Emma.

Katie was a year older than Emma and God forbid if you treated her like anything but a lady. Adorable and gorgeous as hell, but the girl had sass like no other. And many things were obvious to her. Oh, and if you accidentally touch her hair, you're in for a world of pain. Which means that many have experienced that, especially women who just love her blond curly hair. Well, you know how Jasper looks. That's the hair.

Women...

"Jasper." I smirked, turning around to face him, and once I did... "Shit, you look like... well, shit."

"Don't I know it," he sighed tiredly.

With circles under his eyes and his hair in a clusterfuck – even in my standard – I'd say Jasper hasn't been sleeping for a long time.

"Wanna sit down?" I asked, motioning for the benches not far away.

He nodded once.

Once we were seated, I was sorta concerned, because no matter what, Jasper was always one that managed to see the positive side of things.

"I'd ask who'd died, but I guess Tanya did something?"

"Yeah, you could say she did something," he huffed, rolling his eyes.

Sorta like Katie.

Sighing again, he explained. "I think she's leaving."

And boy did I know what he mean.

"Has she said anything?" I frowned.

"Said that if we didn't do what we could to get Katie's hearing back, she wouldn't be able to stick around. She said it hurt too much," he replied sarcastically.

"Fucking bitch," I muttered in response. "That's blackmailing, Jasper."

"I know, and I have no fucking clue on how to deal with this, 'cause I really don't wanna put Katie through all that shit, but... I don't wanna be the reason her mother's not sticking around," he groaned in frustration.

Safe to say, we talked about Jasper's clusterfuck since my issues became kidsplay in comparison to what Jasper had to deal with. I mean, divorce is one thing, because that will still allow Katie to have both her parents, but to have Tanya walk out? That is something I'm too familiar with.

My wrist vibrated then, and in my peripheral I could see Jasper react to his own leather cuff.

After scanning the playground, I found our girls in the far corner, but they weren't alone.

Fuck.

"Who's that?" Jasper asked and pointed at the brunette.

"That would be Bella," I sighed.

Apparently she's also a dog walker.

Emma and Katie waved at us frantically, and I figured it was time... "Let me introduce you to my nightmare," I mumbled.

"Nightmare or fantasy?" Jasper laughed as we stood up.

Nightmare. Definitely nightmare.

God, I want her.

As we walked over, I couldn't help but notice that Bella was deeply engaged in a conversation about whether dogs could talk or not, and Katie was convinced that they could.

Emma was hesitant.

"She seem great with them," Jasper commented, obviously also watching the signing.

"Yeah, she's fucking perfect and all that," I chuckled humorlessly.

She really was perfect with Emma, and she didn't hesitate to bring Katie into the conversation. I just wish she didn't seem so perfect to Emma's dad. AKA, me.

"Hi, Edward," Bella greeted me, smiling brightly.

I fought the urge to groan at the way her voice affected me.

"Bella," I replied with a nod... and a goddamn smile. "I see you're also at the park this morning."

"Yeah," she chuckled. "I walk a few dogs a couple of Saturdays every months," she added, smiling down at the three mid-sized dogs.

"Oh, this is Jasper, and I see you met his Katie," I said, remembering my manners now. "Jasper, this is Bella, Emma's sitter."

"A pleasure to meet you, Bella," Jasper drawled, turning on his southern charm to the fullest when he kissed her damn hand. "I've heard... so much about you."

Douchebag.

"Nice to meet you, too, Jasper. Gotta say, though...your daughter's the charmer." She winked.

"Jesus," I snickered, stunned with her natural wit. "I guess you're getting rusty, Jazz."

"Hmph," was Jasper's clever response.

But he was taken with her, too. That was easy to see by how relaxed he was.

"So, play date, huh?" she asked, smiling towards the girls who were playing a few feet away.

"Pretty much." I nodded. No need to say that it was my vent-time with Jasper.

"Every Saturday morning," Jasper added.

"And what are your plans for this sunny Saturday?" Bella continued conversationally.

I found that fucking perfect. Conversing, I mean.

Maybe I could find out something about her.

"Not much." I shrugged. "We usually go out for ice cream afterward, but I guess that'll change now when it's almost October." I grinned.

It was still somewhat warm out, and a thin jacket or hoodie sufficed, but it wouldn't much longer.

"And you?" I inquired.

Please just give me something to go on!

"Well, tonight we're a bunch of people going out to a club, and I'm all out of excuses, so I kinda have to go," she chuckled.

"Not a fan of clubs?" I smirked, thrilled to add *that* to my list.

"No, not even close," she laughed. "Bars are fine, but clubs, no."

Noted.

"But other than that," she sighed, "not much here either... Oh, I'm meeting my roommate here in a few minutes for brunch, but we're just gonna be lazy all day."

"Doesn't sound half bad." I smiled. "That would Alice then?"

"Yep," she chirped before looking at something behind me. "And speaking of..."

Jasper and I both turned around to see a woman – as tiny as Bella – walking towards us with a huge smile. Dressed similar to Bella in those tight jeans, a hoodie... but Bella had that adorable beanie that just made her... yeah, I've already mentioned gorgeous a few times.

"Bella! I know how much you love children, but picking up fathers? Isn't that going a bit too far," she laughed as she approached.

Another thing quickly added to my list. Bella loves children. Apparently a lot.

"Oh, shut up," Bella replied, shaking her head in amusement. "Alice, this is Jasper and Edward... And this is Alice."

"Wait, Edward as in Emma's dad?" Alice asked, quite wide eyed.

"Um, yes," Bella said... and blushed!

What *is* that about?

"Wow, you weren't kidding," Alice murmured as her eyes roamed over me.

What the fuck does *that* mean? Has Bella talked about me?

God, I sound like a chick.

"Nice to meet you, Alice," I said politely, offering my hand.

"Good to meet you, too, Edward. Glad to finally put a face to *all* those stories." She winked. "And your friend, also a delicious DILF?" she inquired, watching Jasper like he was something to eat.

"Shut the fuck up, Ali," Bella hissed quietly. "It's Katie's dad if that's what you're wondering."

And as Jasper turned his charm on again, Bella mumbled something under her breath that sounded an awfully lot like 'Edward's the DILF.'

I made a mental note to find out what a fucking DILF was.

The dogs made themselves known then, most likely impatient, so after Jasper had dazzled the shit out of little Alice, she and Bella said goodbye to us and the girls.

That's when Jasper's eyes bugged out. Simply because Alice said goodbye in sign language.

This was one of the few things I actually already knew. Bella and Alice grew up together in Washington, spending every minute together, which somehow ended up with Alice picking up the language to communicate with Bella's mother easier.

She was from fluent, but she did enjoy learning.

"What's a DILF?" I asked curiously as we watched the girls walk away.

"Why don't you Google it, old man," Jasper chortled.

"Old man?" I asked, cocking an eyebrow at the bastard. "You do know you're three years older than me, right?"

"Yeah, well, I still know the term, and you don't. Now, Google it. It'll make your day."

So, I did.

As we headed back towards the benches, I brought out my iPhone and Googled the damn thing.

And it did make my day.

Yep, I liked that immensely. My cock did, too.

Bella thinks I'm a DILF?

Cold shower or hot shower? Cold shower or hot shower?

Chapter 4

EPOV

That Saturday night, after the park and just hanging out with my daughter, Rose and Em came over for a pizza and a movie, which thrilled me to no end.

I was still battling internally about what I found out today. You, know, the DILF thing. Frankly, I was losing my mind, and my balls were bluer than ever.

Okay, so eight years separates us. Is that really so bad?

She's legal. She thinks I'm a DILF – AKA, a dad she wouldn't mind fucking. Or at *least* someone she finds hot.

Surely it would be fine for me to take a really long, *satisfying* shower then, eh?

"Whatcha thinkin', Edward?" Rose asked.

Oh, right, they're here.

Deep thoughts go better with 'later' and 'alone.'

"Nothing," I lied, leaning back against the couch.

Emma and Emmett were in charge of picking a movie, and it didn't surprise me when they picked *Ice Age*. It also didn't surprise me that when Emma fell asleep, Emmett went for *Ice Age II*.

Rose was about to say something clever – judging by the smirk – but her phone interrupted.

"Uh-oh, someone's in trouble," she snickered before answering. "Bella, are you drunk-calling?"

Bella...

Can't catch a break, huh?

Drunk-calling, though? At nine PM? Kinda early, right?

"Where are you?" I heard Rose ask.

Then there was a loud squeal at the other end that made me laugh. "AT A PAAARTYYYYY!" Rose instinctively took the phone away from her ear, and after throwing me a wicked smirk, she turned the speaker phone on.

"Where are you, Rooose!"

This had Emmett's attention, too, and we both fought the urge to laugh as we listen to a Bella that clearly couldn't handle her liquor.

"I'm at Edward and Emma's place," Rose chuckled.

"Ooooh, he's so yumyyyyyy!" Bella slurred, making my eyes widen.

"Dude, I'd say your eye-fucking is mutual," Emmett laughed quietly.

Yeah, he had noticed it, too. The way I watched her, that is.

And Bella apparently thinks I'm yummy.

"Uh-huh." Rose smirked. "And why are you drunk this early, B?"

"*Cause I broke up with Mike today! I'm celebraaaatiing!*"

That was... definitely news to me.

She had a goddamn boyfriend?

And why did I feel anything about that?

God, so many questions! She's celebrating that she's single? She's single now, then? And again, why does that matter?

"That's great, babe! About time!" Rose obviously approved.

"*I know!*" Bella gasped. "*I mean, the dude had a two inch dick. What the hell am I supposed to do with that, huh?! Cuddle it?!*"

Oh. My...

Fucking hell.

"Yes, what indeed," Rose replied, choking on laughter. "And also maybe 'cause you never loved the guy?" she added pointedly.

"THAT, TOO!"

"Dear lord," I muttered.

Oh, but Bella wasn't done, and in a hushed and slurry voice she asked, *"Does Edward have a big, you know..."*

I choked.

Emmett guffawed really fucking loudly.

My sister let out a mixture of a gagging noise and a chortle.

Did that gorgeous, but very drunken girl just wonder about the size of my cock?

Rose recovered somewhat quickly, turning the speaker phone off, and darted out into the kitchen, and Emmett and I... well, we just sat there.

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"So, you gonna tap that or what?" he asked casually after a few minutes.

I'd say I was shocked, but I really wasn't. Emmett was just naturally crude, and his comment didn't even throw me off.

"No," I said.

No matter how much we both would find the other attractive, sexy, or hot, I'm not going to do anything with Bella. And it has nothing to do with age in that sense anymore, because it doesn't seem to be an issue for anyone else, so why would it with me? Besides, Bella is without a doubt a mature woman for her age, and she doesn't act twenty.

But still.

If anything were to happen between us, it would only complicate things.

My first priority is Emma. If I start something with Bella and it doesn't work out – which it never does – Emma will be devastated.

That night, though... fuck, I came so hard my knees almost buckled.

The image of Bella on her knees in front of me had me climaxing in mere minutes, and if Bella can ask about the size of my dick, then I sure as hell can get off thinking about her.

So, I did.

And then the morning after again. And that night. Same story the day after when Bella came back on Monday.

She didn't act differently, so it was safe to say she didn't remember shit about her call to Rose.

*O*O*O*

Early October 2010

Checking my time, I noticed that it was past five, and Bella hadn't called to say something was up... and I was getting worried.

It was a regular Tuesday, and to put things in a nice time perspective for ya, I've been jerking off to Bella for a week now. Good enough?

Anyway, she usually arrives around four on Tuesdays but not today.

Luckily, Emma's easily distracted with cartoons.

Another ten minutes later, the intercom finally rang, and Eleazar announced Bella's arrival.

It felt weird how much I breathed out in relief.

Usually when Bella knocks on my door, I take a few breaths, you know, to not seem eager, but this time I almost ripped the door open. And Bella looked... tired. Exhausted.

"I'm so sorry I'm late, Edward," she sighed as she passed me. "I wanted to call but my stupid battery died."

"And 'hi' of course," she added, smiling apologetically while removing her jacket.

"Um, hi," I chuckled once. "You look tired. Is everything okay?"

"I don't wanna bore you with the details," she chuckled humorlessly.

"You wouldn't bore me," I said quickly. You really, really wouldn't. "Come on, lets get some coffee, and I'll be your listener." I didn't give her room to argue.

Perfect, I thought as we went to the kitchen. Now I can finally learn something about her private life.

"Are you sure?" she asked hesitantly, taking a seat at the kitchen table.

"I'm really sure," I promised as I brought her a cup of coffee.

Black. One sugar. No milk.

I learned that by... you know, happening to be there when she went for coffee.

"I... well, I sorta had a fight with my mom," she said, shaking her head and keeping her hands and eyes on the mug. "We were Skyping and I told her about this art class I wanted to take, and she thought I should just focus on dancing." Um, okay? Glad- *thrilled* to learn more about her, but I

don't know what to say. I can listen, but I'm not sure if I should give her advice. Thankfully, Bella continued right away. "I always loved ballet, because it's so beautiful to watch, you know? And I sorta had this dream of teaching children the ballet, but Mom said I should aim higher and perform professionally, so to speak. But I've always been into painting and photography, too, and I guess Mom thought enough is enough."

Silence.

I don't understand. Can't she have both?

Seems pretty simple to me, and I already know how talented she is at painting and sketching, having seen her with Emma.

"Can't you do both?" I asked, sorta confused.

"Not if I wanna dance professionally," she mumbled.

"But is that what you want, then?" I asked.

Silence.

And then she shook her head in the negative, still finding the mug rather fucking interesting.

It hit me then, and it fit the image I had of Bella.

She's doing this for her mother.

Averting her eyes out the window, she spoke again. "Mom always wanted to be a dancer..."

She didn't speak more about it, but she didn't have to.

Her mother was obviously living through Bella.

I didn't want to say too much or overstep any boundaries, but... "Can't really tell you what to do, Bella, and I don't think you're looking for advice either, but... you shouldn't make decisions based on guilt."

"That obvious, huh?" She smiled ruefully, finally facing me.

"A bit," I murmured, giving her a half smile.

Damn, she's beautiful...

She drew a large breath then, and I guess the conversation was over.

Hopefully, this wasn't the last time we spoke more like...friends? Or whatever.

"Well, thank you for listening," she said, smiling softly. "It really helped, especially now that I don't have Alice."

"Oh?" I inquired. "Where's she?"

"Our lease on the apartment expired, and we're both sick of Chinatown, so she has already moved to Newark of all places."

"That'll be one hell of a commute compared to Chinatown," I chuckled, knowing that they attended Juilliard together.

"That it will, that it will," Bella agreed, grinning. "I can't picture myself outside of Manhattan, but we'll just have to see, I guess."

Right, that means she's moving.

"You haven't found a new place then?"

"No," she replied, shaking her head. "Easier for Alice since she wanted something outside of Manhattan, but it's gonna take a while for me, 'cause I can't leave here."

Understandable, but where the hell does she live then?

Bella must have seen the question written all over my face, because she answered without me asking.

"I'm staying at a hotel in Little Italy."

Huh.

A hotel?

I know she's a trust fund baby, but where the hell is all her stuff?

I mean, an apartment isn't exactly easy to come by in Manhattan.

"You're welcome to stay here if you want." I shrugged. "You've seen the guest bedroom, and I have storage space in the basement..." I trailed off.

That had to be better than living in a hotel, right?

I mean, that can't be comfortable.

Plus, it would be close for her to school.

"Um, what?" she asked warily. "You... uh, what?"

Shit. Did I just overstep some line? Fuck, I don't know about crap like that, goddamnit.

"Just a suggestion," I said, keeping my ass calm. "Until you found your own place. Must be more comfortable than in a hotel, and God knows I have room for your stuff. I mean, you must have furniture and stuff like that, right?"

Shut up, Cullen. Shut. Up!

Shutting up.

"They're in a storage unit in Jersey," she mumbled, looking at her damn mug again.

That's not a no.

"Well, just think about it," I replied, shrugging again, because I seriously didn't see any issues. "The room's yours if you want it, and there's an ensuite bath as you know... And space for your own stuff."

Plus, Emma would be over the moon. That much was clear.

It'd be like a sleepover that lasted for a few weeks for her.

*O*O*O*

Okay, I said it wasn't a big deal to have Bella live in the guestroom for a few weeks while she looked for her own place.

Man, I was wrong.

She moved in yesterday – after a week of thinking about it.

I really didn't think. At all.

But Emmett, Rose, and Jasper sure as hell made me see things clearer when they came over yesterday to help me and Bella with her stuff.

Emmett waggled his goddamn eyebrows and told me how transparent I was.

Rose smiled smugly as if she had just executed a master plan successfully.

Jasper pursed his lips, stayed quiet for a few minutes before asking what the hell I was doing. Then he explained since I clearly didn't see shit clearly. Bella, the twenty-year-old girl I'm highly attracted to... will be

here... every night... sleeping two doors down the hallway from me. This apartment will be her temporary *home*. With me and Emma. Living with us.

I am so fucked. Right up there, so fucked.

I argued with him – albeit feebly – that it wasn't like that. I told him that Bella insisted on paying rent for the room, plus taking care of Emmett without getting paid. That was her condition, and I had reluctantly agreed to her terms.

Jasper then opened his yapper again, stating that that was even worse, because that means I can't even see Bella as an employee anymore since Bella takes care of Emma without being paid to do so.

So, yeah, I'm fucked.

And... showering cold again.

No fucking way am I getting off at the image of her when she's right there... down the hall.

Chapter 5

EPOV

Mid-late October 2010

"So, how's living with Bella?" Jasper smirked, his eyes still on Katie and Emma.

It's Saturday, and it's our 'play date' as usual, and Bella's been living with us for four days. Four days with cold showers. Four days of knowing that she's so *close*.

"It's all good," I half-lied, making sure I didn't look him in the eye.

Watching my princess instead.

To be honest, it could've been a lot worse, having Bella live with us. But I rarely see her. She gets up early and is ready to leave when I emerge with Emma for breakfast, so the mornings are always innocent. Just a quick 'good morning,' and then she's gone. And when she comes home around four, she heads straight for Emma, and I go to my room for work. Then she bathes Emma after giving her dinner, and when I've tucked Emma in for the night, I still have an hour left of work. So, when I do emerge from my music-room, it's passed nine PM, and Bella's already eaten by then.

In her room she has pretty much all she needs. Before she moved in there was a queen-sized bed, a nightstand and a dresser, and a flat screen on the wall. And then there's the ensuite bath, so there's not really much that makes her leave her room.

She eats in the kitchen, and she's all over the place when Emma's in charge, but other than that, she's in her room for the most of it.

"What did she do yesterday?" Jasper asked, bringing me out of my thoughts.

"Whaddya mean?" I asked.

"Just thought since it was a Friday." He shrugged. "Aren't most college kids out clubbing?"

God, he makes us sound old.

"She watched Emma right after I had brought her home from her playgroup, and then she left around seven to meet Alice. Something about going to the movies," I replied.

"Alice." Jasper nodded pensively. "I ran into her the other day."

"Really?" I asked, quite surprised.

"Yep. She's hot."

Jasper's also blunt. Usually more classy – like me, I'd like to think – but still blunt.

Not that I'm a prude – far from it. *Really* far from it – but I was raised to be a gentleman. But then again, this was Jasper and I. Our Saturday. Our locker room talk.

"She's a hyper one," Jasper added with a chuckle.

"I wouldn't know." I shrugged. "But how do *you* know?" I asked, narrowing my eyes.

I mean, running into someone doesn't mean you stay and talk to that person for any length of time, does it? And damn, they met once, here in the park... for about three minutes.

"We were both in line at Starbucks," he answered simply. "And she didn't waste any time to ask if I was single."

"W-what?" I coughed. Eyes bugging out and all that shit.

"No kidding," he laughed.

"What the hell did you tell her?" I asked incredulously.

"That I was in the middle of a divorce."

It felt like he left something out, but I wasn't one to push for answers. If he wants to say anything, he will.

But...he's thirty-one, and...Alice is twenty, also having graduated early to escape their small town.

Eleven years. That's...a lot.

"You do know she's twenty, right?" I asked.

Jasper's face paled.

He did *not* know that.

"She takes the same classes as Bella," I told him. "I thought you knew they grew up together."

"S-she said she was twenty-five," he choked out. "Said she waited for Bella to graduate so they could go to New York together!"

Hot damn.

I wanted to laugh. I really, really wanted to laugh.

So...

I laughed. Oh, God, I laughed.

*O*O*O*

"Hi, you two," Bella greeted us when we came home from the park.

Hi, Bella! Emma replied, grinning goofily.

Felt odd. Good odd.

To have someone at home.

Then I noticed what Bella was wearing.

Light blue pajama shorts and a black tank top.

That's an awful lot of skin showing...

Emma's dad appreciates that a bit too much.

"Hey," I said back lamely as I helped Emma with her jacket and shoes. "Not used to seeing you here." I gave her a quick smile. "Especially not at..." I checked my watch. "One PM."

"Yeah, well, school's out on Saturdays," she pointed out playfully.

"Touché." I smirked.

Guess I'm about to find out how Bella is on weekends.

"Do you two have plans for today?" she asked us.

"Nope. You?" I replied as I carried Emma to the kitchen.

I needed a distraction ASAP. She was just too sexy.

"No, not today."

Bella followed us out to the kitchen and took her seat next to Emma as I headed for the fridge to get... something. Anything.

"Want to watch a movie with me, Sweetie?" Bella asked Emma.

Yes! Emma replied, nodding furiously.

Yeah, like she'd ever say no to Bella.

"Is it okay if I get some snacks?" she asked me at the same time as she signed for Emma to go pick out a movie.

"Um, no of course. Go ahead," I replied dumbly.

Emma darted off towards the living room, leaving me alone with my reason for taking cold showers.

Awesome.

"Great," she responded, walking towards the cupboards. "I bought some candy yesterday, but I wanted to make sure first it was okay with you that she had some."

Of course, because Bella Swan doesn't take anything for granted.

"Fridays and Saturdays are junk-food days," I told her. "Emmett would have my head on a platter if Emma never had candy."

So would Emma, I added mentally.

"I can see him threatening you with that, yes," she laughed and poured a bag of candy into a bowl.

I noticed then that I still had the fridge door open, so after getting a Coke, I closed it.

"You're joining us, right?"

God, yes.

"Sure," I said.

Emma returned, holding up none other than *Ice Age*, and I fought the urge to groan and whine. Instead I plastered a smile on my face and followed the girls into the living room where Emma lunged for the couch while Bella put the DVD on.

No, Daddy. Bella will sit here, Emma told me with a stern look.

Feeling mildly reprimanded, I moved for the other side of the couch while Emma stayed on the opposite end.

...leaving Bella to sit between us.

Fucking A, I thought sarcastically.

With the big-ass bowl of candy in between them, they giggled and laughed as they got comfortable, and I... just sat there.

They became thick as thieves from day one, pretty much, and now, a couple of months later, they were two wrapped up in one. Almost as if Bella was her... family member. You know.

"Movie's that way," Bella teased, pointing at the screen when she caught me looking at them.

"Yes, ma'am," I chuckled, shaking my head to get rid of the shit stirring inside me.

The movie was boring. As hell.

But I already knew this, having watched it a thousand times before. And halfway through, my eyes got heavier and heavier.

A nap wouldn't hurt. So, I leaned back to get comfortable and then I closed my goddamn eyes.

It was far from restful, and I was only under for a few minutes before I woke up again, which was why I heard the unmistakable sound of my girl's giggling quite easily. Followed by a quiet 'schhh,' and I could imagine Bella motioning for her to be quiet.

Emma Cullen is a girl full of mischief, so it didn't take me long to understand that they had some shit planned, but I kept my eyes closed, kinda curious to see what they had cooked up.

The weight shifted on the couch, so I knew they got closer to where I was.

Hard not to smile, actually.

Closer.

My princess was finding it extremely hard not to giggle.

Closer.

I wish I would be able to hear a signal, but I knew Bella would keep that signal quiet.

Closer.

Then there were laughter, and two sets of hands tickling my sides, and I jerked 'awake,' and was about to catch my Emma, but she...

"Son of a bitch!" I cried out.

Bella tried but failed miserably to contain her laughter as she pulled Emma off my lap, and I... covered what was now really *fucking* harmed by Emma's *stomping* foot.

Dear lord, save my jewels.

"Holy fucking hell," I... sort of whimpered, biting down on my knuckle.

That hurt. God, it hurts.

So badly.

"Are you okay?" Bella whimpered. Mmhmm, also whimpered. But for a whole other reason.

"You know, you're failing really fucking badly at showing pity," I groaned out quite breathlessly.

"God, I'm so sorry, Edward," she fucking laughed.

Emma laughed, too.

Lovely.

Holy shit, will the pain ever end?

"I think she broke them," I whimpered yet again.

The girls laughed. Well, Bella's laughter actually got louder.

Excellent.

Emma most likely laughed because she saw Bella laugh, and also because she thinks nothing can harm Daddy. And Bella, she's vicious, and very aware of my... predicament, but is still laughing.

I think my balls died.

Eventually the pain started lifting, and I breathed through the pain. Breathed through the pain. Breathed. Through. The. Pain.

"Stop laughing, woman," I mumbled as I uncovered my valuables, and shot her a weak glare.

"You're so cute, Edward," she giggled. "I'm sure you'll survive. Just lean back and take it like a man."

I stared at her incredulously.

Ta-... Take it like a man?!

I JUST DID!

This *is* how a man takes pain to the nuts!

"Devil woman," I whispered under my breath as I leaned back on the couch, and closed my eyes.

Hot, sexy, gorgeous, devil woman.

And then I groaned as the pain finally left me.

So fucking goood...

"Feeling better?" God, I could practically hear her smirk.

If that was possible.

"Not thanks to you," I huffed petulantly, keeping my eyes closed.

"Emma, Daddy's in pain. Maybe you should give him a hug and a kiss," I heard Bella say.

I opened my eyes just in time to see Emma nod, flashing me her lopsided grin.

My girl.

She bounced her way over to me, her arms going around my neck, and you better *believe* I caught her this time. Hugging my princess back, I took the opportunity to tickle her.

I'm not stupid. Hell, I needed my payback.

Squealing and squirming, Emma tried and tried to-

"What the hell!?" I chortled.

"Set the girl free," Bella laughed as she fucking tickled me!

"Okay, okay!" I laughed, handing Emma over. *"Two against one. Not fair!"* I added once Emma was in Bella's arms.

They just laughed and nodded like it was a sure thing they would team up.

"You forgot to kiss me," I told Emma, even managed pull off a pout.

And just because I was a glutton for punishment, I didn't stop there.

Leaning towards them, Emma gave me one of her smooches that always made me sappy inside. And then I gave Bella – who was dangerously close now – a look of authority and pointed at my cheek.

“You, too, devil woman,” I said.

They both giggled like crazy, and while Emma gave me an adorable Eskimo kiss, Bella kissed my cheek.

Soft, soft lips.

I felt like the luckiest bastard on earth.

“Thank you, ladies.” I smirked as I leaned back.

This was of course the moment Emma announced that it was time for *Ice Age II*, so my awesome mood sorta flew out the fucking window. And as Bella happily put the godforsaken DVD on, I watched her... you know, bending over slightly to put it on... and I groaned internally, knowing that another cold shower was in order tonight.

*O*O*O*

A few days later, and things were bad.

Really bad.

Bella and I had entered some friend-stage, and though I truly loved spending time getting to know her better, it also made her that much more attractive.

She explained how it was growing up without a father, because he was shot in line of duty when Bella was two months old, she told me how Renee coped by moving them from Seattle to the small town of Forks where Renee’s mother lived, and Bella just... let me into her life. She

talked. And I soaked it all up, feeling more and more... *stuff*... stirring inside me.

She told me how she wanted to open her own community center for children where they would focus on being creative. A place where Bella wanted to have workshops and classes within subjects that inspired children; such as learning how to play an instrument, drawing, scrapbooking and painting, dancing and singing. And the way she was so goddamn passionate when she spoke...

Sweet mother of Jesus, that was one cold ass shower I had after that night.

Yes, night.

For the past few nights, we've eaten dinner together in the living room, and the thing is that nothing has felt forced or awkward. She's just so incredibly social and easygoing that it's impossible to feel uncomfortable around her.

She's also told me that she did decide to take that art class she wanted to take, and that though her mother was disappointed, she understood that it was Bella's life, and her decisions. And for some reason I was... proud. Of her.

Is Bella still an enigma? Oh, yes.

I still don't understand why she blushes sometimes, and I don't know why she insists that we eat in the living room and not the kitchen. Not that I don't mind, because I really don't, I just don't understand. Just like I don't understand why she's sorta shy after seeing Alice. But I've learned that the two – now since they don't live together – go to a coffee shop after school, and you know, do their girl-thing, and when she comes home after one of these dates she's shy, and blushing more.

She almost gave me a heart attack when the cleaning lady that comes once a week tried to clean her room. It was when Mrs. Cope opened the door to her room that Bella gasped out a loud 'no,' and I was sitting with Emma just a few feet away, and at first I thought something was wrong... but then when I found out why, it just confused the fuck out of me. Even more when Bella blushed furiously and explained that she had something on her bed that she didn't want Cope to see, but before I could ask her to elaborate, Emma interrupted by telling us she was hungry.

Any-fucking-way, it's Thursday today, and Emmett and Rose are coming over to talk Halloween plans with Emma.

Yes, there's an annual party.

Jasper's coming over with Katie, too.

And speaking of Jasper, that man has been weird all week at work. And I'm beginning to wonder if Tanya's done something.

Definitely gonna talk to him on Saturday.

Chapter 6

EPOV

"You think we'll see them for the rest of the night?" Jasper chuckled as we watched Emma and Katie sprint towards the pink room.

"Probably not." I grinned. "Come on, we're all in the kitchen."

Walking into the kitchen, we saw Rose and Bella whisper conspiratorially by the kitchen island while Emmett sat at the table, chugging beer. Not a care in the world.

"Ahem," I said to get their attention.

Once they looked up, they all said a quick 'hi' to Jasper before resuming whatever they were doing before.

My guess is that Rose and Bella are talking costumes.

Yes, Bella's coming to the party at Rose and Emmett's place.

"Have you thought of a theme yet?" I asked as Jasper and I joined Emmett at the table.

"That's what Rosie and B's deciding now, although Rosie decided some shit last week, but she wouldn't tell me," Emmett replied.

"Ah." I nodded.

"Where's Katie?" Emmett asked Jasper.

"In Emma's room. You didn't think they'd be polite enough to come in here first to greet ya, did you," Jasper chuckled.

"Apparently not." Emmett grinned wryly.

"Okay, we have decided," Rose announced then.

Both she and Bella joined us at the table, wearing expressions that screamed 'bad news'... you know, for *me*.

'Cause I know my little sister.

Like now for instance, the way she not-so-smoothly made sure she picked the seat between Jasper and Emmett, leaving Bella to sit next to *me* and Emmett.

Stealthy she is not.

"Don't forget that there will be children at this party," I told her pointedly.

"Yeah, um, about that," Rose said, smiling sheepishly. "Emmett and I have decided that this year we will have trick-or-treating with the kids, and then ship them off to Mom and Dad."

You're full of shit, sis. So full of shit!

"We decided that, huh?" Emmett huffed.

"Yeah, we did," Rose shot back to him, even adding the damn Rose-glare.

I'm the only one in the family who is immune to that one.

"Yeah, we did," Emmett mumbled, nodded, and looked thoroughly reprimanded.

Jasper snickered.

I sighed.

Bella grinned.

"Sooo," Rose continued, smirking wickedly, "the party is for adults."

"And the theme?" I gritted out through clenched teeth.

Don't ask me why I asked, because I know it's gonna be something insane. Something that will make sure I suffer all night.

"The theme is..." And my sister paused for that annoying dramatic effect. "Bedroom Confessions." Yep, that's bad. Oh, Rose wasn't done. "We're talking pajamas and lingerie, and there will be beds instead of sofas, there will be coffee mugs instead of glasses, and there will be... drum roll, please... a pillow fight contest."

Yep, really fucking bad.

And Bella's going?

Have mercy on me.

"When did you decide this?" Jasper asked.

"Last week." Rose shrugged. "I've already sent invites to... like, fifty people."

Dear Lord.

"Will all those people even fit in your house?" I asked, doubting like hell they would.

Sure, their apartment on Park Avenue is huge, but fifty people? Huh. Doubt it.

When they first bought that place, I thought they were out of their minds, because though Rose is a very popular event planner, and Emmett owns the biggest gym-business with gyms all over the tri-state area, they are not fancy people. But Rose stated that it was the perfect place for her.

And that was that. End of discussion.

"Sure it will," Rose assured. "We'll have the living room, the balcony, the kitchen, and the dining room. It will be awesome."

Awesome...

"Fucking fine by me," Jasper smirked. "That means the guys can just throw on a pair of pajama bottoms and be done with it."

True. Very true.

*O*O*O*

Just saw my girl off.

Which mean's it's Halloween. You know, the party.

I'm dreading seeing Bella in underwear.

And Jasper is... weird.

Can only imagine it's because Tanya insisted on going.

Anyway, I'm on my way over to Rose and Emmett's place, and I know that Bella's already there. Something about girls getting ready together. Apparently, Rose has also been introduced to Alice, and the three of them, along with a few other friends of Rose's, are getting ready.

Emmett's already sent me six texts saying that I'm in trouble.

Maybe I should've worn a goddamn jockstrap.

You know why.

Jasper was right, though. As a guy it was easy to pick out an outfit, which is why I'm wearing a pair of light blue pajama bottoms, and a black wife beater... in a cab. My jacket, too, of course.

But back to Rose. That meddling bitch.

She said that one outfit for the girls just wasn't enough. No, apparently they will start out innocently, and then there will be some damn contest – like a fucking runway – for the more inappropriate outfits.

I really am in trouble, I thought as I arrived.

At the same time as Jasper and Tanya, I noticed.

I smirked, watching them approach together – Jasper in a pair of red and blue pajama bottoms, and probably a t-shirt or a beater underneath his jacket, and then Tanya, the bitch, in something too tight for her body. Damn, she was shaking by the cold, only wearing a thin trench coat. But her legs were bare so I figured it was something skanky underneath.

Don't wanna think about that. Shudder.

"Hey, man." I grinned, kinda enjoying the scowl he gave in return.

Yeah, he really didn't want the wife here.

"Tanya," I added and nodded curtly.

"Edward," said back, haughtily.

Yep, the bitch knows I'm on Jasper's side in the whole Katie-mess.

It was quite uncomfortable in the elevator ride up.

When we arrived on the 11th floor, things changed, though. It was only nine PM, but we could already hear the blaring music and guests laughing. The door was even open, so we just walked right in

Holy fuckin'...

Didn't the girls say they were gonna start off innocently?

Guys dressed like me and Jasper. With or without a shirt. But the women... Everywhere... *Nothing* innocent about their outfits. Nothing at all. We're talking fuck-me heels, corsets, lace and satin, ruffled panties, see-through boy shorts, barely there bras...

"JAZZ, EDDIE!!!"

That would be a drunken Emmett.

"I need a drink," Jasper and I said in unison.

Emmett pounded us on the backs, ignored Tanya, and then led us through the sea of half naked people and into the kitchen where a bar was set up.

"How the fuck are ya, dudes?!" Emmett boomed before chugging a beer that – true to Rose's word – was served in a coffee mug.

"Not as good as you apparently," I replied dryly.

And I'm wondering where... you know, Bella is.

"A beer and two shots of vodka," I told the bartender.

"Same here," Jasper said.

I'm gonna need it.

"A Cosmo," Tanya said.

The drinks came, and I didn't waste a second before downing both shots. They burned heavenly down my throat.

"Two more," I said.

"Same here," Jasper coughed. "Make it three."

I chuckled.

Two more shots downed, and I was ready to chug my beer.

"Come on, guys, I'll take ya to the girls," Emmett belched, slamming his mug down on the bar.

Once again, we followed Emmett – this time into the living room, which had been transformed into a night club.

Hate clubs, for fuck's sake.

"Over there!" Emmett yelled over the music, pointing in the direction of a corner where...

"Jesus Christ," I whispered under my breath.

So ignoring my sister in the black nightie, and sorta ignoring Alice, too – way too much with the polka dots – but fuck me if Bella wasn't sinfully sexy. And no, dammit, there was absolutely nothing innocent with her outfit. A short camisole in dark blue satin, and black lace... and fuck-me heels.

She's fucking flawless.

My drunk sister was the first to notice us.

"Ed-waaaard!" she sang. "Jas-peeer!"

"God save us all," I muttered, but the music drowned it out.

"Ladies." I smirked, tipping an imaginary hat in greeting.

"Happy halloweeeeeeen!" Rose squealed drunkenly.

I turned to Emmett with a real ass warning. "You better take care of her."

Emmett may be broader and a couple of inches taller than I am, but nothing would get in my way if anything happened to Rose. She's my sister after all, and since there are only two years separating us, I had to go through two years of high school with her, and it wasn't a walk in the park. Fuck, I don't know how many dudes I punched.

"Of course," Emmett replied, and I was glad he took shit seriously. "Baby, I'm cutting you off for now," he told her, gently yet firmly. "At least for a few hours. Come on, I'll get you some water."

Rose flipped me off... with her ring finger – only proving my point, and then she and Emmett were gone.

"Wow, Edward. I didn't know you could be so strict," Bella giggled.

"She's my sister," I said simply, eyeing Bella's drink. "And who knows, I might cut you off, too." I winked.

I would, though. If she got too drunk, I would definitely be there.

"Saying I'm like your sister?" she laughed incredulously.

"Not even a little," I assured, this time eyeing her sinful cami dress.

"Really, Bella... Not even a little."

Maybe the vodka wasn't a good idea.

"I'm relieved to hear that," she teased, smiling sexily.

Is she flirting?

Am *I* flirting?

Are we flirting?

"Ahem."

Jasper.

"Bella, Alice, you remember Jasper," I sighed. Then I looked over my shoulder and grimaced slightly... "And that's Tanya. Jasper's... um, wife."

Jasper looked like he was in pain.

Tanya smiled like the fake woman she was.

Bella frowned.

Alice... glared at her.

Am I missing something here?

"Um, Edward... could I have a word with you in private?" Bella asked.

Abso-fucking-lutely!

I chugged the rest of my beer, feeling that those four shots of vodka were really working their way through my system.

"Of course." I nodded. "Lead the way, my lady."

Cue Bella-giggle.

Fucking adorable.

And lead the way she did. With my hand on her lower back, because I didn't want her to... you know, trip.

Then we were in an empty room. Guestroom.

"What's on your mind, short stuff?" I asked.

She was frowning again. Sorta not looking at me, but at the closed door behind me.

"So, um, Jasper's married?" she mumbled.

"That's what you wanna talk about?" I asked confusingly.

Don't fucking tell me she's moving on to the next DILF!

No, wait, it was Alice who said that Jasper was a DILF.

"Uh, yeah... not for me, though..." She trailed off, still not meeting my eyes.

Guess I'm smarter when I'm a bit affected by vodka, 'cause it sorta clicked in my mind at that point.

Jasper's reaction to Alice's real age.

Jasper 'running' into Alice.

Jasper not divulging all information.

Alice glaring at Tanya.

"You're asking for Alice," I stated.

Now she looked up at me.

She nodded before averting her gorgeous eyes again.

Well, fuck, that's not really what Katie needs at the moment.

"They're getting a divorce." I frowned. "And Katie's in the middle of it."

"I fucking told her," Bella hissed quietly, eyes downcast. Looking up again, she said, "Apparently they ran into each other one day, and Alice being Alice... well, she sort of hit on him."

I nodded for her to continue.

"Jasper said he was a single father," she said pointedly.

Shit.

That's not what Jasper told me. At all.

And then I remembered that it appeared Alice hadn't been honest either.

"Jasper told me that Alice was twenty-five," I chuckled humorlessly.

Bella's eyes widened. "W-what?!"

"According to Jasper that was what Alice was, yes."

"Holy shit," she mumbled, shaking her head.

We both sighed.

"You know what," she said then. "Since there's a child involved, I care. But I will care tomorrow. Deal?"

Sounds good to me. Really good.

"Yep, let's care tomorrow. You deal with Alice, and I'll talk to Jasper," I said.

"Perfect."

Damn her smile.

Damn her sexy body.

Damn her flawless face.

Damn her long legs and fuck-me heels.

We're all alone...in a room with a bed...both wearing very little.

Jesus, time to get out.

"Let's get a drink," I sighed.

An hour later, I was a bit more affected by more than four shots of vodka. And beer in coffee mugs.

Many of 'em.

Bella stayed so close to me. So close.

We were talking, laughing, drinking, complaining about the hip-hop music they played, more laughing, sitting in a bed with Rose and Emmett, even more drinking, beds everywhere, and... more laughing.

"Time to get changed, ladies!" Rose shouted.

And us men, we knew what that meant.

Bella leaned in closely then, and whispered, "I hope you like lace, Edward."

Oh, God.

"I do," I said solemnly. And nodded for her. "I really do, Bella."

"Perfect."

With a wink, she was gone.

"Fuck, her ass is outta this world," I muttered, watching said ass walk away.

A good spanking is what she needs.

"Dude!" Emmett guffawed as he lunged for the seat next to me. "I fucking love drunken Eddie!"

"Pshh, I ain't drunk," I said with a dismissing wave.

"In that case, have another!" he laughed.

A beer and a shot of something magically appeared. Right in front of my eyes.

"Thanks, man. Knew I could count on you, Em." I grinned.

The shot disappeared quickly, 'cause the glass was so little.

S'getting kinda warm, too, so I copied Emmett's move and removed my wife beater.

Much better.

S'not so hot now.

"Here's to Halloween!" he bellowed, clinking his coffee mug with mine.

"Hallowe-eeen," I hiccupped.

Beer's good.

Beer's gone. Poof, just gone. Like that.

And the horrible music vanished, too.

"Good riddance," I muttered.

"May I have your attention, please!" I heard my sister shout.

Everyone went quiet, and we looked up from where we were sitting to see my sister stand on the huge-massive bed in the middle of the room – oh, God, I'm gonna have nightmares.

"She shouldn't be wearing that, Em-Emmett," I told him, even pointing a finger for good measure.

Who the fuck wants to see their baby sister in a pink bra and panties?

Gross.

"We have ten lovely ladies here tonight that want to show you their goodies!" Rose continued.

Bella's goodies?

I can volunteer for that. In a heartbeat.

The men howled, whistled, and cheered, and Emmett and I bellowed, "Yeah, goodies!"

`Cause we're sober.

We saw the girls coming into the living room one by one, but they were wearing robes.

Well, fuck.

"Jesus, she's sexy," I groaned as I saw Bella enter last with Alice.

"Here's another, bro," Emmett laughed, handing me a shot.

Damn, how do they just appear like that?

But then it was gone.

Ladies jumped up on the bed, still one by one, and sure, they were hot – some of them... I guess, maybe – but I was waiting for the main event.

My Bella.

Mmm, mine.

Seriously, she looked so damn sinful in that short silky robe in black, her hair pulled up in a messy bun... a few tendrils falling down... and God, are those new fuck-me heels?!

I think they are!

"Seriously, Eddie, you're thinking out loud!" Emmett guffawed.

"No, I ain't doin' that." I waved him off again.

Hot motherfucking damn, I thought as I zeroed in on Bella's hip.

She had a goddamn tattoo. Of a hand. The sign for 'I love you' in sign language.

And I've never wanted her more. She's pure perfection for fuck's sake.

Alice jumped up on the bed then, wearing something barely-there in green, and I snickered. "Jasper's in trouble."

"Whaddya mean?" Emmett asked, quite loudly to drown out the howling dudes.

"Cause you know, he's banging that one," I laughed, pointing at the little thing in green on the bed.

"Holy shit, really?!" he sorta gasped.

"I know, right?" I snorted, rolling my eyes, too.

Emmett was about to say something, I think, but I shut his yapper up by clamping a hand over his mouth, 'cause I had more important things to do now.

Like eye-fucking Bella who just jumped up on the bed... and then she lost the short robe.

"Holy mother of... fucking," I groaned.

It was lace. It was black. It was barely there. It was practically see-through.

I wanted it. Her. I wanted her. So badly.

And my God, her body... toned, supple, fucking flawless.

But... Hmm... I glanced over my shoulder to see if anyone was there, and then I went back to watching Bella... because there was no one behind me, which means she's watching... me.

She winked. Blew a kiss.

I shivered. Swallowed hard.

And tipped my beer in her direction. Winked back.

Fuck me.

There were howls, whistling, cheering, a winner announced, more drinking, more laughing, loud music, so loud music, and the room was fucked up spinning. Bella was sitting right next to me. Sometimes shivering, so I sorta put my arm around her. She was so hot. Sizzling. Buzzing. Making me shiver, too.

More drinking.

Pillow fights.

Groaning and adjusting as I watched Bella take some other woman down in a mess of feathers.

More drinking.

Bella's hand on my chest. Said I was ripped, whatever that means. Also said she loved my ink. Emma's name and date of birth on my bicep.

Big brown eyes.

Swallowing hard and suppressing moans.

My hand on her naked thigh. So soft. Smooth. Caressing.

I nuzzled her neck.

More drinking.

Closer.

"It's two AM."

More pillow fights.

Room spinning faster.

Loud music. So loud.

Drinking game with Emmett.

Think I won.

“Let’s get home; it’s almost three in the morning.”

There were hugs.

I think.

Bella put on my jacket, I think. On me. Or something.

There was a cab.

Quieter now. And snuggling. With something that smelled so good.

And giggling.

“Evening, Eleazar.”

Chuckling. “Evening, Ms. Swan.”

Elevator ride. Hugging. Still smelled so good. I think I’m sniffing on hair.
But it smells so... soft. Feels so delicious.

More giggling.

Mmm, my Bella... Want her so badly...

Sounded like a gasp.

Stumbling and fumbling.

Keyes wriggling.

Smelled like home then.

I miss my Emma... and I miss a girl... companionship.

And there was a pink room.

I crashed.

Mmm, Bellemma...

Chapter 7

EPOV

It hurt.

Everywhere.

Neck. Head. Legs. Back. Throat. Did I mention my head?

Every goddamn muscle in my body ached.

Opening my eyes.

“Wh,” at the hell? What’s with the pink?

Groaning really fucking loudly – throwing in a whine for good measure – I sat up in... *Emma’s* tiny ass bed.

What the fuck am I doing in Emma’s room?

The pink clock on the wall told me it was only ten in the morning. Fuck. Kill me. Kill me dead. I wanted to cry as I stood up. It hurt so damn much. I mean, Emma’s bed... well, *half* of me fits in that thing. And my fucking *lord*, why is someone drilling a hole in my head?

First things first. Take a piss, then swallow a bottle of painkillers, drink a gallon of water, brush my fucking teeth, and take a shower.

“What the fuck happened last night?” I grumbled to myself as I headed for the bathroom in my bedroom.

The apartment was quiet.

Bella must be asleep.

Taking a piss felt sooo good, and it lasted forever.

Taking painkillers also felt good. 'Cause that'll rid the pounding.

Brushing my teeth for twenty minutes felt even better.

And when I showered, I drank the water from the spray.

You know, two birds, one stone.

Once I was out of the shower, I got my ass into a new pair of pajama bottoms, thinking that this motherfucking day would be all about watching bad movies in the living room. And Mountain Dew. Gotta love the Dew. And water. So much water. Mmm, and pizza. And more water.

Thank God Emma won't be here until tonight, I thought as I dragged my grumpy ass towards the kitchen.

Headed straight for the fridge. You know, for ice cold water.

"Morning, Edward," someone mumbled.

"Shit," I breathed, spinning around to see Bella at the table.

Not looking so chirpy today. Pink pajama shorts, black t-shirt, and a messy ponytail. Tired eyes.

And how the fuck is she still the most beautiful woman I've ever seen?

Fuck if I know.

"You scared me," I whispered, rubbing my temples.

Still pounding going on in my head, you know.

"Sorry," she whispered back, smiling tiredly. "I made toast," she murmured, motioning for the toaster on the counter.

"Thanks," I sighed. Yep, water and dry toast. "How the hell can you drink coffee this morning, woman?" I chuckled, just a little, as I grabbed my water. And then the images of beer in coffee mugs popped up in my head, and I groaned. "I'm never drinking out of a mug... ever again."

"Yeah, you sure seemed to like them last night," she chuckled.

"Don't fucking remind me." I grimaced, taking a piece of toast before sitting my ass down at the table. "God, I barely remember... anything."

The last thing I remember clearly, or somewhat clearly, is Bella showing off her fuckhot underwear.

I groaned again.

Jesus, she's so fucking hot! I wanted to whine and bitch about it for fuck's sake.

"You and me both," she huffed, rubbing her own temples. "I have blurry images of drinking, laughing... more drinking..."

"So much drinking," I mumbled, shaking my head slowly.

"Um, was I in a pillow fight?" she asked, biting down on her lip.

Don't do that, woman, and yes, you were in two of them. You won. And I cheered for you. And I think we got... pretty close to more than hugging.

Christ.

"Yeah, you were." I nodded before tipping the bottle back, gulping my water down. So fucking good.

Bella was blushing furiously when I threw the empty bottle in the trashcan across the kitchen, so I sorta figured she was remembering something new about last night.

But first I needed to know...

"How the fuck did I end up in Emma's bed?" I whined.

Bella smirked. Like a devil woman.

"You don't remember?" she teased.

"I really fucking don't," I chuckled, shaking my head. "I don't remember much after the fashion show," I added with a wink.

Don't ask me where the courage came from, but for some reason I felt so damn comfortable with Bella. It was never awkward or uncomfortable, and conversation came easily and naturally.

"Well, it was around two AM when you started thinking out loud... a lot," she said, lowering her head...and blushed.

Fuck. Me.

I must have sprouted off some major bullshit. *Or my God's honest truth.* Yep, most likely the latter.

"Sweet Jesus," I grumbled, dragging my hands through my hair. "Spare me the details of how freely I spoke, okay?"

"You don't wanna hear about how you thought I smelled soft and felt delicious?" she laughed.

Oh, God.

"I said that?" I asked, grimacing at the thoughts I most likely had about Bella last night.

"Oh, you said more than that, Edward," she assured. Of course I did. "But anyway, an hour after you started speaking your mind, I took you home, and for some reason you insisted on sleeping in Emma's room, 'cause you missed her, and apparently you were sick of being without a girl."

Goddamnit. God-fucking-damnit.

My forehead landed on the table. It hurt.

But I didn't care.

"I'm just gonna say this," I mumbled. "I'm really fucking sorry if I was out of hand."

"Don't worry," she laughed. Devil woman. "It was very... interesting to hear what you thought about my outfit. Oh, and also how shots seemingly appeared through magic."

There are no words that can ever describe my mortification.

But then again, I've always been an honest man.

"What-the-fuck-ever," I grumbled against the table. "Doesn't take a genius to see that you chicks were hot. Friggin' thongs everywhere for crying out loud."

Yeah, that was a lie, because the only thing I know I had my eyes on were Bella's black boy shorts.

Lace.

They were in *lace*.

Black. See through. Lace.

"Don't even try pulling that crap on me, Edward," I heard her huff. "Like you guys weren't half naked, showing your damn six-packs."

"And those damn biceps," she added really fucking quietly, and I wondered if that was really meant to be heard by me.

Did that mean she was checking me out?

Wait, yesterday or today, 'cause I'm not wearing a shirt right now. Jesus, I didn't even think about that.

Cullen, you're not supposed to think about her at all. Drop it.

"I am so dead," I muttered... for so many reasons.

I heard Bella sigh. "How about movies and junk food, or do you have plans?"

"I have plans." I smirked, still against the table. "Plans to watch movies and eat junk food."

"Wow, you're so fucking funny, Edward," she deadpanned.

I smiled.

Then I groaned internally as her 'fucking' went straight to my dick.

She wasn't as foul as me when it comes to language but sure, she curses from time to time. However, it's not often, and it's sure as hell not when we're alone in the apartment.

Fuck, we're alone.

Time to stop.

“Let’s watch some damn movies,” I sighed as I straightened up. “And you better have candy,” I threatened, narrowing my eyes at her. “‘Cause I need it.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, mock saluting me.

Sir. She could definitely call me that. In bed. Ah, fuck my life.

Turning into a monster for fuck’s sake.

Yeah, a monster that hasn’t gotten laid in three years...

...a monster who hasn’t jacked off in weeks.

Jesus, how am I even *alive*?

With a heavy sigh, I headed for the fridge where I grabbed four bottles of water, two cokes, and two mountain dew’s. Gotta love liquids today.

The two first movies went by, and I don’t think I watched more than a minute on each.

Spread out on the couch, our legs were a tangled mess in the middle, and when I wasn’t focused on her bare, smooth legs against mine, I was in and out of sleep. We both were actually, and Bella made the most adorable sounds in her sleep – sometimes sighing, and sometimes mumbling.

After putting on a random movie, I went back to slumber.

I may have dreamt of Bella. I tend to do that.

A lot.

Many nights.

“Oh...”

Huh?

"Mmm..."

That sound is not coming from me.

Groggy as hell, I opened my eyes.

The third movie was still on, so I couldn't have slept that long, and after checking the time, I saw it was only six PM. Emma wouldn't be here for another two hours.

"Yes..."

Fuck.

My eyes immediately found Bella, lying on the other side of the couch. Blanket drawn to her waist. Asleep. But that sound was...

There was nothing *adorable* about it.

Motherfucking God, I thought as I looked her over. *Seriously, motherfucking God.*

Her face and chest was slightly flushed. Her... nipples constricting under her t-shirt...

"Oh, God," she moaned.

Breathy moan.

"Fuck," I breathed quietly, feeling my own breathing become erratic.

My cock throbbed as I watched... and then my eyes widened as her hand went under the blanket. Holy shit. I couldn't look away. Not a chance in hell. She lied there – our legs still tangled together – and she... moaned...

whimpered... and a lazy hand found her breast, her perfect breast... and the other hand...

"Shit." She's... touching herself. Right in front of me. In her sleep.

Then she whimpered. "Oh, fuck, Edward..."

My jaw dropped.

FUCK!

Swallowing hard, I couldn't stop myself from gripping my hard cock outside the pajama pants. Just needed some goddamn friction.

It was my name. My goddamn name.

Fuck, Bella, don't do this to me.

She moaned again, and this time the movements of her hand sped up.

I just watched. Watched as she pleased herself in her sleep. And fuck, I don't think I've ever seen anything this sexy.

"More, Edward..."

Tightening the hold on my cock, I stroked it... slightly... just trying to relieve a little of the damn aching, and I stifled moan after moan as Bella got closer and closer. Closer to actually having an orgasm right in front of my eyes. More. Faster she moved her hand under the blanket, harder she pinched her nipple, and more erratic was her breathing.

"So close, Edward," she whimpered.

I bit down on my knuckles.

Yes... baby, let me see you come for me...

Then it hit me that she might wake up *after*... and I'm sitting here, stroking my cock... watching her.

Leaning back on the couch again, I willed my breathing to calm down, but I couldn't stop watching her. She was too fucking beautiful. So, after making sure that the blanket covered my raging hard on, I stayed there, watched her as she got closer, knowing that all I have to do is close my eyes... but... I have to see her climax.

"Fuck, yes! Oh, Edward!"

I held my breath, and... watched with wide eyes as she came. Panting, moaning and squirming, she climaxed right in front of my goddamn eyes, and it was *the* hottest thing I had ever seen. My cock literally wept as I forced my eyes to close, just in case she did wake up.

And she did.

She actually woke up.

Stay calm, Cullen.

"Fuck, I'm dead," I heard her hiss quietly.

She was still breathing heavily, and slowly I felt her legs untangle from mine.

"Just wish he wasn't so goddamn..." I heard her mutter then.

So goddamn what?

Wish I wasn't so goddamn what!

Bella left the couch then, and I wondered how long I would have to fake sleep.

Luckily, I actually did fall asleep, and when I woke up again, half an hour later, I heard Bella rummage through the kitchen.

I groaned at the ache in my neck that was seriously *killing* me, and I considered punishing Bella for allowing me to sleep in Emma's bed.

I'd punish her hard.

FUCK!

How the hell am I gonna get her out of my head, I asked myself as I walked out into the kitchen.

Obviously not by watching her bend over to get a boiling pan, I answered myself sarcastically as I stood in the doorway.

"Whatcha doin?" I grumbled, rubbing my sore neck.

"God, you scared me!" she gasped, spinning around with wide eyes.

And a glare.

Sexy glare.

STOP!

"That makes us even from this morning then," I teased, hoping I did a good job to hide my blue-ball syndrome.

`Cause God knows I'm suffering from it.

"Pfft," was her response.

All right then.

"And I'm gonna make mac and cheese," she said, answering my earlier question.

"Why don't you just order a pizza or something?" I asked, walking over to sit by the table. "You don't have to cook."

"Because I want mac and cheese," she replied in a clipped tone.

Huh. I've never seen Bella annoyed or pissed, but looking over at her now, I'd say that day has come.

"Is everything okay?" I asked.

She continued rummaging through cupboards as she muttered, "Yeah, everything is fucking peachy."

Is this where men back down or push for answers?

I'm gonna try push for answers.

"Everything doesn't appear to be peachy," I said softly.

There was a bang. A boiling pan landing on the floor. And then she turned around to face me.

Um, I should've kept my mouth shut, right?

Pointing a finger at me, she fucking seethed. "You know what, Cullen? Everything is not goddamn peachy. Wanna know why?" Oh, God, am I supposed to *answer*? Luckily there was no time for me to respond.

"Because I am sick of... of... some *people*!"

Yep, definitely should've kept my mouth shut.

And... what people?

Turning around to get the mac and cheese going, she continued to mutter.

"I mean seriously, how blind can a fool be? And... I'm not deaf... Hear it every fucking night, driving me insane... And especially this past week..."

Loud motherfucker... and then when *I* do it, I feel goddamn guilty... Son of a bitch...

"I mean, I get it, it's complicated... but shit, it doesn't have to be. I can't fucking help who I fall- God-*fucking*-damn blind fool... all that denying... and don't even get me started on little one... Too smart for her own good, asking me all those questions about her-... fuck... or how she's in conspiracy with Rose... I'm gonna rip that blond bitch a new one, I swear I will...

"And I just fucking know that as soon as she comes... I'm gonna be putty in her hands... so wrapped around her finger... So goddamn talented and adorable, but I'm not fooled... Oh, who am I kidding, of course I'm fooled... but it doesn't matter... she may be all that, but she's also a sneaky little thing... and I goddamn love her... And her fa-... fucking *hell*... I'm so close to kicking his blind ass...

"Oh, and fuck me if Emmett didn't pull a number at that goddamn party... so many drinks... but I blame Rose... she's the boss of him... Like they knew it would act like some motherfucking truth serum... because damn, everything he told me... about me..."

Okaaaay, so the mac and cheese is done.

And this is what I've gathered from Bella's insane muttering; Someone's loud. A neighbor? And there's a little thing she loves. I guess that's Alice, cause she's freakin' tiny. She's pissed at my sister. No surprise there—my sister has that affect on people.

Uhhmm...

Bella is one weird woman. Seriously, I don't understand her. At all.

Chapter 8

EPOV

Uhhmm...

Bella is one weird woman. Seriously, I don't understand her. At all.

Oh, but she wasn't done being weird.

When my mother brought Emma back, the three of them chatted like they've known each other forever, and Bella was cheery as hell.

Didn't exactly help that Mom adores her, stating that she is the fresh air I need. And when I had told her about Bella's age, she merely shrugged her shoulders, and told me that Bella was different.

Any-fucking-way, once we had gotten my princess to sleep, Bella was weirder than before.

No, I didn't think it was possible either.

But now she was all sugar, asking me if there was anything she could do for me, anything I wanted from the store, anything I needed from... anywhere. And I didn't understand shit. So, I just headed for the living room to watch some TV.

Bella followed.

She was fidgety.

Opening and closing her mouth as if to speak. But she didn't.

"What's on your mind?" I asked as casually as possible while I flipped channels mindlessly.

It took a while, but eventually she spoke. Or mumbled.

"So, um... you play the piano?"

I laughed. I'm sorry, but I couldn't help it.

"Yes... As you already *know*, I play the piano, Bella."

"Right," she mumbled, nodding slightly. Blushing. "Yeah, um, we have this... assignment... in school."

"Okay?" I replied.

"Um, we're supposed to pick a song... and choreograph it... and then show it to our teacher."

"Alright." I nodded, having been through this before.

They often merged the dancers together with the musicians when I went to school, and there were often recitals and assignments where we could use what others had. For instance when I had some project and I needed a dancer for it, I could always find someone if I spoke to one of the many dance teachers. And the dancers were the same. If they needed a musician, they knew where to turn, and I figured Bella needed advice on something.

Nothing uncommon, but I don't understand why it's got her so nervous.

"What did you choose?" I asked curiously.

I tried to use my experience and guess what Bella could've chosen, but I drew a blank. It could be anything. But one thing is sure; she wouldn't pick a piece that's clichéd.

Like Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake scene.

That is one scene that many decide on.

And I had to say I was curious as to which type of classical music she liked. I knew she liked it, but we had never broached the topic of which

composers we liked and such. Was she into strings, brass, piano? Did she like the calm or the stormy? The playful or the heavy? Minor or major?

"Well, um," she mumbled, biting down on her pouty lip. "Most in my class chose epic pieces, and I was sorta hoping you'd help me? To choose, I mean. I have a few in mind... but I'd like a second opinion."

Huh.

Didn't see that coming.

Wait, is this why she's been all sugar for the past couple of hours?

'Cause Rose is like that when she needs something. She turns into the sweetest creature alive when she wants something.

I decided not to ask, because to be honest; I was thrilled that Bella wanted my help with this.

"I'd be happy to," I replied. "What kind of pieces has the others decided on? You mentioned epic..."

God, she's beautiful, I thought as she smiled in relief. Like she was nervous that I'd say no. Please, this is what I live for – apart from Emma. Music is as important as air.

Like I'd say no. Preposterous.

"The Swan Lake scene, obviously," she chuckled, and I grinned knowingly. "And um... as few has chosen Brahms' Hungarian dance."

"Which one?" I asked automatically.

"Huh?"

"Of the Hungarian dance," I clarified.

But she still looked confused.

Oh.

Yeah, sometimes I take shit for granted.

"There's more than one," I explained. "Twenty-one of them, I think."

"Oh," she replied, looking slightly embarrassed, which I didn't understand.

"I didn't know... but um, I heard a couple of them talking about a five or something?"

She was fucking adorable when she was shy, but I honestly didn't understand *why* she was so shy.

Focusing on her answer, I once again nodded, and couldn't help but feel that it was slightly predictable. No 5 in G Minor was definitely Brahms' most popular one, but it was a shame that only a few people dug a bit deeper than that.

"The No 5 *is* beautiful," I said thoughtfully. "But also very common. My personal favorite is No 4, though I'm more into piano..."

"Are you cold?" I asked then, noticing how she shivered.

"Um, a little but it's fine," she said dismissively. "But back to Brahms, and what you called common. That's sort of it; I don't want anything that has been done a million times before."

That is why Bella's special. She's one of those few who really stick out.

Sighing, I racked my brain for... something else.

But I needed more to go on for that.

"What are you looking for?" I asked, facing her fully on the couch.

"Something light, simple... or...?" I trailed off.

I couldn't help but picture her on a stage, and what came to me instantly was lightness. Nothing too heavy and nothing using a big ensemble. No, I saw a piano... *maybe* a few strings. Light but not too playful. Nothing that changed pace too often.

"I'd like to use a piano," she said softly.

I nodded thoughtfully, thinking of fitting composers.

"Nothing too powerful," she added.

I wanted to tell her that light and slow could be very powerful. Especially when it comes to Bella who is *naturally* beautiful. No, grand and extravagant wasn't her. But I didn't tell her that. I didn't tell her how I pictured her.

That would give me away.

I understood she meant that she didn't want anything too hugely orchestral, though. Nothing pompous. And I couldn't have agreed more.

"If you're looking for something playful," I sighed... "Hmm, well, Schubert's Scherzo in B Flat Major is a good choice. Popular, but not overly so."

"I haven't heard that one," she replied quietly. "Could you play it?" she asked, pointing at the piano behind her.

"Sure." I nodded. "But let's go to my music room. That piano there needs tuning."

I was suddenly excited as hell to share this with Bella, and I knew she had never seen this part of me before. In fact, I hadn't seen this part of her

either. It was odd since music and dance was what defined big parts of us, but still, I had no idea whatsoever what she liked most, and she didn't know that about me either.

"Ladies first." I grinned as I opened the door to my room.

Do not smell her as she passes, do not smell her.

I smelled her.

Fuck.

"Wow, this is... God, you have so many instruments, Edward," she murmured, standing in the middle of the room as she looked around.

"A few," I chuckled, closing the door behind me.

Okay, I have more than a few, but it is my profession after all.

I love it. All of it. Not just the black grand in the corner that I use daily, but also the rest. The left wall where I have my guitars lined up, the right wall where I have a keyboard, a bass, a mandolin, and my sax. The corner closest to the door where I have my drum set...

Yes, I loved it all and couldn't live without my music.

Once I was seated at my piano, I reached for the baby monitor that I always kept under the bench, and turned it on.

"The room is soundproof," I explained when Bella eyed me in question.

It wasn't noticeable unless you touched the white walls, but if you did, you'd feel that they're padded.

"Okay, so, Schubert?" I inquired and gestured for her to sit down next to me.

Big mistake. Big mistake, I thought as she was seated.

Jesus, her scent, her warmth... fuck, it radiated, rolled off of her in waves.

"Sounds great, and thank you for helping me."

"No problem," I murmured.

It was only a half lie. Nothing a cold shower wouldn't fix.

Closing my eyes, I let my fingers ghost over the keys.

And then I began.

Effortlessly. This was what I knew. Came so easily. And the tension mirrored the music. Wasn't what I wanted, but it was easy to handle. Light and playful. Easy.

"Makes you kinda happy to hear, doesn't it?" she asked quietly as I was half way through.

I smiled, keeping my eyes closed, and kept playing as I replied. "It does. But that's the point with Scherzo. The word itself means 'joke' in Italian."

"Oh... So, he named his piece 'Joke?'" she asked, chuckling slightly.

"No, uhm, the piece is called Scherzo. It's a musical term for playfulness, I suppose you could say. And many composers have pieces or parts of their bigger compositions such as symphonies or sonatas that are referred to as Scherzo for its playfulness.

"This is also a part of a symphony, but it was never finished," I added.

She was quiet then, until I had played the final note.

"You sure know your music," she said quietly, keeping her eyes downcast.

"I try," I laughed softly. "So, what'd you think? Too playful?"

I think so.

"Um, maybe something a little calmer?"

Perfect.

Still didn't like that she sounded so hesitant. It was the first time I viewed her as someone much younger than me, and though she's still very much a woman, she seems... more uncertain.

And I had to ask.

"You okay, Bella? You seem uncomfortable."

Am *I* making her feel that way? Shit, that's not what I want... at all.

I want the opposite.

"No!" she assured, finally meeting my eyes. "It's just..." She chuckled nervously as she eyed the room. "It's sorta intimidating. You're just so... amazing at all of this, and I barely know a thing."

I frowned deeply, really not liking her words. Made her sound so inferior, and she was anything but. And come on, writing, *knowing*, music... that's what I do for a living. It's what I've studied for years. It's a hobby that I started when I was six years old.

I didn't really know what to tell her, though.

But...

I sighed.

"Music's always been what I know best," I murmured, letting my fingers play absentmindedly. "It's what I know at heart, because of years of

studying it... and to me it's a way of explaining or... showing... what I feel. Just like I'm sure dancing and sketching are ways for you to express yourself."

"True," she conceded. "I hope I'll be as good at dancing or sketching as you are with music... You're kinda overwhelming to watch."

I swallowed hard, for once thankful that she was looking down.

This was beyond lust. What I felt ran much deeper... and I began to wonder just how long I had felt... more. More than just physical attraction. But that was clear now. Very clear. I had real feelings for her. Lasting ones.

Deep ones.

Jesus, I'm screwed.

"If you're not already there, then I have no doubt you will be, Bella."

I noticed then that I had begun to play one of my favorite pieces – Chopin's Nocturne #20 in C Sharp Minor – a piece that always calmed me, a piece that I often played when I'd had a good day with Emma, or something... *special*... had happened. Something. Strong. Something that made my insides soar... which didn't happen often when Emma wasn't involved. Almost never, in fact. But now... I felt it, and I shivered as I noticed that we both watched my hands, my fingers, how they danced over the keys... how they told what I felt.

I doubted she knew. I doubted she could truly understand what this was for me. How significant and... fitting.

But she did feel something.

It was there.

I swallowed hard, once again, and I felt it... right there... in the space between us.

The piece may say different things to different people, but to *me*, this was always one I loved because of the softness, the tenderness, the playfulness... the perfection of the shifting in bar 21 where the theme changes, and it becomes even more beautiful, softer, and loving...

Love.

For Emma.

And...

"So beautiful," I heard Bella breathe.

Yes, you are.

It crackled.

Made me breathe quicker. Shallow.

My entire being felt her.

Drawing a ragged breath, I reached bar 47 where the original theme came in again... and soon... too soon... it was over. The music. Not the tension. The tension was very present. But my fingers had stilled.

Palpable. I... needed something. But scared shitless to admit it. Couldn't. Wasn't fair. For so many reasons. It had become harder to find arguments, though. For how long would I be able to fight it? Fight *her*.

And then... I heard Emma's cry.

In the corner of my eye, I saw Bella's chest heave. Much like mine. Rapidly.

"I should..."

She nodded.

"Yeah... Go check on her," she whispered.

With a heavy sigh, I stood up... and left the room. Left the moment.

I wondered how much of that that Bella had felt. And how she interpreted it.

Emma was of course sleeping again when I walked over and crouched by her bed.

I watched her. Thinking if... she ever missed anything.

I knew I was enough. I knew I was a good father, and though I messed up... I mean, I'm only human. People make mistakes. But I'd like to think that I'm a good dad to my Emma.

Is that enough, though?

Were my decisions always good for her?

Will she one day hate me for not putting her through every exam known to man? Will she resent me for not trying anymore?

"Fuck," I whispered to myself.

Sitting down on the floor, I rested my arms on her bed, and lowered my forehead to my arms. Just so many things going on. But for the past four years I've been happy and content with having just Emma and my family. I've been fine on my own. Haven't needed anyone. For me. I haven't needed anyone for myself.

But now...

"Yeah, fuck," I repeated quietly.

Things aren't easy anymore. There's something I want.

Someone I want.

Badly.

But the decision affects her. Her. Emma. My first priority.

What if something went wrong?

If I... pursued... *her*... and something went wrong, which it always does, Emma will suffer.

I know Bella is interested in me to some extent, but remembering back to when I was twenty, I sure as hell wasn't interested in playing house. I wanted casual and fun. I wanted things carefree and light. But I can't have that with Bella today. I can't offer her casual, because when it ends, my princess will be devastated. And I can't do that to her. Ever.

Besides, casual wouldn't be enough for me anymore. Not since I realized... Fuck, no, it won't happen.

Chapter 9

EPOV

"Edward."

Something hurts.

Neck. Ass. Arms. Spine. And for the love of *God*, my back is *killing* me.

Christ, the aching.

"Edward, wake up," I heard someone whisper.

I recognized it.

Groaning loudly as shit, it hurt like a son of a bitch as I stretched my arms...

Where the fuck am I?

My eyes fluttered open, and I was met by darkness as I glanced around, but one thing was certain; I was sitting on the goddamn floor.

"You awake, Edward?"

Bella.

"Uh," was what I got out. Let's try that again. "Uhm..."

Excellent.

"Let's get you off the floor, shall we?"

I nodded dumbly, still confused as fuck, but as I – somehow – scrambled to my feet, I saw that I was in Emma's room.

Again.

Fucking lord, I fell asleep next to her bed.

"What time's it?" I grumbled as I rubbed my eyes.

"Three AM."

Fucking A.

And then I remembered...

"Shit, I just left you in the music room, didn't I?" I said, feeling like a complete idiot. "I'm sorry, Bella, I didn't think I'd fall asleep-"

"Edward."

"Yes?"

"Shut up, and let's get you to bed."

There's an image...

"Um, okay," I answered lamely.

She took my hand.

I gritted my teeth together, refraining myself from begging her to... do something. But fuck me if her hand wasn't perfect in mine. Warm, soft. Small.

Goddamnit, stop!

"Come on," she whispered, tugging on my hand.

Again, I nodded dumbly, and just let her lead me out... and towards my bedroom.

"Thank you," I whispered. *For everything you are...*

Once outside my room, she loosened her hold on my hand, but I had to... at least...

Yes.

I dipped down... and pressed my lips against her temple.

Breathed her in.

I wish I could linger.

"Goodnight, Edward," she whispered once I had let go.

With a hand on the door knob, I replied quietly.

"Sweet dreams, Bella."

*O*O*O*

Sunday was painful.

Bella and I both focused on Emma as much as possible.

And it was *impossible* to not think of her... of both of them interacting like daughter and...

As they played with Emma's dolls, all I could think about was how much I saw the way Emma idolizes Bella. It was there, every second. If Bella dressed her doll in purple, then Emma did the same. It went on like that, and I witnessed it all. They weren't friends. Bella wasn't Emma's babysitter.

She was her role model.

And as a dad... this is where I get protective. Of Emma. Of myself. Because what I want... it scares the shit out of me.

I retreated to my room... sat down by the piano... closed my eyes.

Played. Thought.

It wasn't playful. It wasn't light. It wasn't regular.

It shifted. Constantly as my mind worked, thinking about possibilities, outcomes... consequences. It was somber one second... shifted to frustration... to bitterness. I was pissed at one point... at her. For just... *existing*... for *ruining* my contentment. And then I faltered... because I felt her... standing in the doorway.

"You must be thinking some heavy shit."

I almost snorted. Or maybe I did.

Yeah, you could say that there's some heavy shit going on, Bella.

"Where's Emma?" I asked, not wanting to tell her why my playing was angry.

"Watching a movie."

Her voice didn't come from the doorway this time. It was behind me.

And my playing changed. Yet again, I doubted she could feel it. That she could hear it. But if she could... she would know how fucked up I am because of her. How messed up I am because I want her... here... not with me, but with *us*. And my thoughts aren't pretty because of that. Because of how easily she has disarmed me. How much she had made me want. And wish. And need.

I hate her for making me need something I don't have.

No, I don't hate her. I can't. I've tried. But I *can't*. She's impossible to hate. Too beautiful, amazing, gorgeous, and perfect.

I wish I could hate her.

No, not that either.

Christ, I'm a mess.

"You're tense," she murmured softly.

And then her hands... God... you know, right *there*... on my shoulders... and neck... pressing slowly but persistently. Yeah, I stopped playing.

Working me slowly. Ridding me of all the fucked up tension from sleeping in Emma's bed... sleeping on her floor...

"Fuck," I shuddered out in a breath.

She's good at this, too.

"Want me to stop?" she asked, and I fought the urge to laugh at the stupid, *stupid* question, because no, no, I don't want her to stop.

Ever.

"Christ, no," I groaned.

And then, yes... right there... her warm hands... shoulder blades... Shit, I *heard* that one... So many kinks.

Fuck, you're good...

"Take off your shirt."

"It's easier to massage if you don't have the sweater."

She clarified, but I wasn't going to ask her in the first place.

The shirt disappeared.

And then...

"Hhho," *oly mother of God*. I shivered. And shuddered. Her hands... on me... skin on skin.

"Feels good?"

In more ways you'll ever know.

"Understatement," I moaned.

And I want more.

Much more.

All of you.

Now.

She kneaded, rubbed, and pressed, harder, ridding my soreness... but she also came closer. I felt her... as she worked me, worked my back, and neck... that she leaned in... to add pressure. And it crackled. Set my body on fire. Breaths came heavier. My body... it woke up... *starving* for...

Her.

"Relax," she said softly.

My skin broke out in goose flesh, and... I felt more... not because she came closer, but... because I'm just so *fucking* aware of her. And all she does. I'm about... *maybe*... two minutes away... from jumping her. To take her. Right here. Right now.

Hard.

Repeatedly. Fast. Without mercy. Over and over. And over. Again. Yes. Animalistic.

"You need to relax," she whispered.

I can't.

I was so past everything sane that I didn't give a flying fuck that if she looked over my shoulder... and down... she would see my jeans straining...

Maybe one minute away.

I'm done. So *done*.

Want her to... *scream*... my name... *only* my name. As I take her... here... on my piano. Against the wall. On the floor. I'd make her come hard. Around me. On me. I moaned. Fuck. Now. Right this goddamn second.

But...

Her hands left my neck then, and...

"I'm just gonna check on Emma."

I wanted to cry.

Opening my eyes, I... watched myself, how my chest heaved, my hands clenched into tight fists, my cock ready to burst through my jeans. And Bella was gone.

.

.

.

It took a *long* time before things returned to normal. My breathing. My erection. My tensed body.

But once I had, I left the room.

Only one thing would work now, and that was my daughter. I needed her to keep me in check. She was the one that helped me focus.

Hi, Daddy, Emma greeted me as I reached the living room.

It was instant the way I relaxed.

"Hey, Princess. Where's Bella?"

Sitting down next to her on the couch, I planted a kiss on the top of her head.

Yes, calm.

Bathroom.

"*You can do better, Emma,*" I told her with a pointed look.

She rolled her eyes at me but complied, mouthing the word this time.

Excellent, I signed, knowing it was new to her.

She looked confused but said nothing. Just looked at me in question, but I wouldn't budge.

She understood after a while.

What did that mean? she asked.

Very good, I explained. And then I finger-spelled it for her, knowing that she always preferred when I spelled out the new words.

Grinning widely, she signed an 'okay' before turning back to the movie.

Bella emerged a while later and told us that she'd start dinner.

"*You don't have to cook, Bella. We can order something,*" I said.

"*No, no, I like to cook,*" she assured. "It helps when I have stuff to think about, and sort through."

With a smile, she left for the kitchen, and I wondered...What *stuff* is going through *her* mind?

Emma nudged my arm then to get my attention.

I love she is here, Daddy.

Awesome, I thought as I swallowed hard.

She is very funny. And her breakfast is better.

Great. Thanks, baby.

Ain't nothing wrong with burnt toast. It gives the bread character.

You know she is leaving soon, I reminded her.

I didn't look forward to the day Bella found her own place, and Emma sure as hell didn't either, but I needed to remind her... maybe remind both of us that... Bella wasn't here to live. It was only temporary.

She can live here, was Emma's simple reply.

Yes, to a five year old, everything was simple.

To a daddy, it's not.

To an Edward, it's not.

She wants her own place, Princess.

Why?

Yeah... uhm, because she's twenty years old and don't want a horny bastard asking her to play house.

"We don't have room," I lied. Lame lie, to boot.

Even Emma saw through that one, knowing very well that Bella had her own room as it is now.

But I'm an idiot, so I continued. **I need her room.**

She furrowed her brow at me, and I thought what a complete fuckwit I was, because I had no idea how to keep the lie going without... you know, having my five year old call me out on it.

Bella can live in my room, Emma signed then.

"*Your bed is too small,*" I argued petulantly.

Buy a big girl bed for Bella, she argued back.

"*I don't have money.*"

God, could I be more pathetic? Not only does Emma know that we have money, but our apartment is goddamn big.

She can sleep in your bed, Daddy.

Yes, can't she?

"Bella wants her own bed. Her own room. Her own place to live."

Her own life...

Aunt Rose said no, Daddy.

And now she looked sad.

The fuck?

What the hell had my sister told her?

What do you mean, Princess? I asked after I had settled her on my lap.

Aunt Rose said Bella should live here. With us.

"*When did she say that?**" I asked, forcing myself to smile.

Before. She shrugged. **She said she has a plan.**

A plan.

My sister is a class A bitch.

A lie of protection came easier. *"Aunt Rose was joking, baby. But I will talk to her. Okay?"*

I will also shout and give her a piece of my mind.

Emma settled for that... for now. But I knew she wouldn't forget.

*O*O*O*

Dinner was a quiet affair. On my part.

I watched as Bella and Emma laughed, giggled, and talked about... whatever. I think I saw them mention Katie, their playgroup, and something about... something. But I just watched, and it was painful—to see every smile... to hear my girl's every giggle.

It made me feel inadequate.

There was something I couldn't give her. But someone else could, and right now, that person was Bella.

I was a great dad, I knew that. I *knew* that. But I couldn't so animatedly talk about the coolest toys in the world that Emma had seen, that Bella knew about even. I couldn't get wrapped up in a story like that. Not because I lacked interest, but simply because I didn't know *how* to do that.

I don't know the princess-movie they're talking about, or the Barbie that is themed with the movie. Or how sparkly the damn horse is that you can purchase with said doll.

I don't know that shit.

But Bella knows. And she is the one making my girl gasp for air through her giggle-fit.

Because Bella is signing about how funny it would be if the sparkly horse and the doll... yea, something about them.

See? I couldn't even continue my train of thought, because they lost me at 'sparkly.'

But whatever it was... made Emma laugh so hard that it brought tears to her eyes.

*o*o*o*

Alright, I was a bit broody earlier.

Emma sure as hell cheered me up when I got her ready to go to bed.

Not only was she extra cuddly, but she also insisted that we had a tickle-war, because *obviously*... no one can tickle like Daddy.

"You're looking cheery," Bella said as I lunged for the couch. "I take it that Emma's asleep?"

"Yep and yep." I grinned. "She went out like a light after she claimed the winning title of yet another tickle-war."

"I see," she chuckled. "She sure is a strong little one, huh?"

Something flashed...

"...and don't even get me started on little one... Too smart for her own good..."

Little one. Bella said that in her insane rambling yesterday.

And another... *"...And I just fucking know that as soon as she comes... I'm gonna be putty in her hands... so wrapped around her finger..."*

"Edward?" Bella chuckled.

Oh, right.

"Um... yeah... she's strong," I replied dumbly.

Christ.

Bella wasn't talking about Alice.

She was talking about Emma.

Emma's the 'little one' that she loves.

Loves.

I... can't take this anymore.

And it's... wow, late. Almost eight PM. Very, very late.

"Uh, I'm tired," I lied as I stood up. "And uh, it's work tomorrow... So, uh, yeah, goodnight."

I didn't wait for her reply. It would most likely be something about me going mental, but I needed to be alone. I needed to remember.

Remember what the hell it was she muttered yesterday.

I closed the door to my bedroom, brushed my teeth, took a *long* shower... put on a pair of boxers... Lied down on my bed... stared at the ceiling.

What did she say? Something about...

"...So goddamn talented and adorable, but I'm not fooled... oh, who am I kidding, of course I'm fooled... but it doesn't matter... she may be all that, but she's also a sneaky little thing... and I goddamn love her..."

She... It was never Alice. Emma's the little one, and Bella loves her.

It's mutual.

Emma's not the only one feeling so strongly. It's Bella, too.

It shouldn't surprise me, my girl is perfection. But still... Bella loves her. That matters. More than I thought possible. It means that just because Bella moves, she won't forget Emma. She won't move on just like that. She'll stay in Emma's life. Maybe for years. Maybe forever.

You don't fall out of love with a child. That's permanent.

And God knows Bella's nothing like the bitches... Heidi and Tanya.

I found myself relaxing.

No matter what, Emma will have Bella.

Because she said it herself, Emma has her wrapped around her finger.

Fuck, this feels good.

Huh, what else did I miss in the great Bella-ramble?

Getting out of bed, I began pacing by the bed... around... on the floor... thinking... *trying* to remember.

But I came up with shit.

Because what I remember is... how... Sorry to say this, but how fucking sexy she was... walking around in the kitchen, making her damn mac and cheese, muttering annoyed as hell, wearing... very little.

Jesus, that body of hers...

Or how she looked when I saw her come. In front of me. How her taut nipples strained against her tank top, how her fingers moved, pinched them... how her other hand descended towards her pussy... and how she touched herself...

Moaning out my name.

Ah, *shit*.

I'm sick and tired of cold showers.

But as I looked down, seeing my erection strain against my boxers, a cold shower was the last thing I wanted. I wanted warm, tight... wet... wrapped around me.

Exhaling sharply, I wrapped my hand around my cock, outside the boxers, thinking how it would be to watch Bella writhe under me as I... push hard. Into her. Deeply. Yes, I would work her pussy good. Deep, long strokes. Feeling her take me in. She would moan my name.

And I need to stop. Immediately.

With an internal whine, I glanced towards my ensuite bathroom, feeling my cock deflate just by the thought of it.

It actually worked.

My alarm clock caught my eye, and I noticed it was passed midnight.

"How the hell did that happen?" I whispered to myself.

How did four hours pass just like that?

Because I'm too horny to notice, I thought as I made my way to the kitchen.

Coffee's out of the question if I ever want to sleep, so water it is.

The apartment was dark as I walked, which didn't surprise me. Bella usually went to bed before midnight when it was a school night.

I shivered as the cold from the fridge hit my chest, and quickly grabbed a bottle-

And I sorta froze, because I heard light footsteps.

Behind me.

I knew it was Bella.

I also knew that when I turned around, I would want her more. How that now was possible. But true nonetheless. And my thoughts from earlier, in the bedroom, came back. In full force.

Swallowing hard, I grabbed the water, not really interested in it anymore, and closed the fridge door.

Turned around.

And I was right.

I wanted her more than ever. Needed her. Craved her.

She stood there. Wearing a white tank top that hugged her like second skin... and another pair of those, too-short pajama shorts... that left nothing to my imagination.

She watched me.

I watched her.

Stay or go?

Should I give her another lame excuse? Should I deliver another lie?

Or should I give in, I wondered as I sat the water down on the counter behind me.

Because I knew it was an option. I knew that as I watched her watch me... and I stood here... in nothing but a pair of boxers.

Stay or go?

Her eyes were dark in the dim lighting. It could be lust. It could be the lack of light.

But her chest rose and fell rapidly.

Her breasts...

My mind was already made up, though. I knew that.

I was going to have her. Tonight.

And then she spoke. Quietly. Softly. Like the angelic creature she is.

"How long are you going to deny that there is something between us?"

Good question.

I've been an idiot. Clearly.

She's twenty years old. She will want casual.

I will give her casual. So help me God, I will give it to her.

"I'm done denying," I heard myself say. "Come here."

Chapter 10

EPOV

"I'm done denying," I heard myself say. "Come here."

But the few seconds it would take, it would be too long. So, I met her in the middle of the kitchen. Never hesitating. I dipped down as I pulled her body to me and captured her lips with mine.

Soft, passionate... *I love her mouth already...* moving urgently against mine. Her hands, up my arms, making me shiver... until they reached my neck, and I found her waist. Moaned as I felt her parting her lips for me, and our tongues met.

"Please," she whimpered in my mouth.

I had no idea what she pleaded for, but I hoped she wanted more, because I needed it. More.

My hands descended... cupped her perfect ass, and as she moaned and deepened the kiss further, I pulled her to me roughly, groaning when she wrapped her legs around my waist.

"Fuck," I grunted as she pressed her clothed pussy against my erection.

She sucked on my tongue, and with a growl, I walked her over to the counter and perched her on top of it, but still... I couldn't remove my hands from her... I needed her, so, I closed the barely-there distance, and rubbed my throbbing cock against her.

"Yes!" she moaned, her head falling back.

I kissed her neck, groaning as I tasted her skin.

Fuck, I need more.

"Oh, Edward."

Yes, more.

My hands left her ass... traveled up... her ribcage... then finally... my thumbs brushed over her taut nipples... before I cupped her breasts...

"Fuck, you're perfection, Bella," I breathed against her collarbone.

I kneaded her perfect tits, continued to rub my cock against her pussy, and fuck me if I couldn't feel how hot she was. It drove me mad.

She tugged on my hair, making me face her.

Out of this world beautiful. Lust filled eyes, chest heaving, cheeks flushed.

"Enough of this... Take me to your room, Edward."

Fuck. Yes.

I didn't reply.

But the way I picked her up and hurried to my bedroom sure worked as an answer, and soon... we were behind closed doors.

And I lowered her onto my bed.

"Gorgeous," I whispered as I hovered over her.

My body covered hers, and it did things to me, turned me into a savage, and I craved her, wanted her, needed her.

Needed to feel all of her.

Now.

"I have to have you," I murmured as her breasts pressed against my chest, and... it sent me into a frenzy.

"Yes. Please, Edward," she whimpered, pulling me closer to her.

My hands finally wandered... as her moans and pleas allowed me, and... Christ, she's flawless.

Kissing, licking, nibbling—my mouth was latched to her skin, and I had no plans on removing it. My hands also loved what they felt... her toned yet soft stomach, her smooth thighs... and then...

I cupped her pussy.

"Off with them," she whined.

I took that as a sign to get moving. Just like I wanted to. And with that decided, I hooked my fingers under the waistband of her shorts, and... slid them... down. Gone. Away. And I gawked at her. Missed the fact that she had removed her tank while I was... otherwise preoccupied.

Completely naked, bare, and flawless, Bella Swan lied in my bed. Wanting me. Waiting *impatiently* for me.

My boxers disappeared.

"Holy—" She stopped there, and I noticed that her wide eyes were trained on my cock. "Now, Edward. Now."

I think she likes what she sees.

A lot.

I fingered her wet slit teasingly, liking- no, *loving* how much she wanted me, because it gave me leverage. It gave me a sense of peace that it wasn't just me. And though my feelings for her run much deeper, I don't care. Not right now. She wants me, clearly, and I will take what she'll give me. And right now, I'm gonna fuck her.

"Don't rush me, Bella," I told her quietly and firmly, my eyes on her glistening pussy. "I plan on taking my time with you."

"Oh, fuck," she moaned as I stroked her clit. "Yes, anything."

Anything?

Hmm...

It was a travesty, I know, because when I kissed my way down her body, I ignored her breasts, but I was a man on a mission. I swear.

"Touch those beautiful tits of yours," I murmured as my mouth finally reached her pussy.

She moaned loudly, making me realize that she might be into my dirty talk... but more on that later. Now, I was consumed with two things; watching Bella touch herself... and the smell of her arousal.

I didn't feel human anymore.

Forcing myself to not ravish her immediately, I planted openmouthed kisses along her slit, parting her slick folds slightly with my tongue, moaning at her taste as well as her smell... and fuck, the sight of her kneading her tits...

"I'd pinch them, baby," I moaned against her clit. "Pinch your nipples for me, beautiful."

A small gush of wetness coated my tongue, and my restraint was slipping away. Fast. I lapped at her, sucked on her clit, entered her *tight* pussy with my tongue, and just enjoyed hearing her moaning, feeling her squirm... listening to her pant my name... pleading for me. And I knew she was getting closer and closer.

"Edward!" she gasped, and I felt her, as I fucked her with my tongue and fingers. "I... I... Shit, I need you, Edward!"

"You're gonna come in my mouth first," I muttered, very busy with what I was doing. "But trust me. I'm gonna fuck you. Very soon."

Bella moaned, louder than before, and it left me throbbing, almost wanting to... *hump* the damn bed. But I needed this. I needed to see her come, needed to feel it, to taste it, and my God, her taste...

"More, baby," I groaned as I lapped at her. "Give me more of you."

"Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck," she chanted breathlessly, her legs tensing and trembling, and I knew she was on the edge. Harder than before, I pushed three fingers inside her, curling them upwards... as I sucked hard on her clit.

That sure did it.

"Yes! Ooh, fuck! Edwaaard!"

She trembled, moaned, shook, and convulsed around me, and I was... painfully hard, having never in my twenty-eight years seen anything even remotely close to this sexy. And as she peaked, I worked her relentlessly with one hand, and my tongue... but I was ahead. Because if I don't get inside that tight pussy of hers... Which was why I pushed myself up, using my free hand, and gave her one last lick before I moved over her body... positioning myself, and... fuck... the tip of my throbbing cock... Christ, she's hot.

Bella was still recovering from orgasm as the head of my dick entered her, and fuck, the way she moaned when she realized what I was doing... well, no need to add fuel to the fire, I'm already gonna finish this like a seventeen year old.

Stretching her fiercely, I gritted my teeth together as I pushed into her, and... *Goddamn*, she's tight... Holy *fuck*, is she a virgin or something?

"Fuck," I hissed through clenched teeth.

I'm seriously not going to be able to last long.

"God, Edward," she panted breathlessly. "Shit... You're so b-... oh, fuck."

I paused, which turned out to be one of the hardest things I've ever done, but... damn, she looked like... she needed a minute.

Please, not more than that, though.

Remembering that I'm not an egocentric asshole, I dipped down and kissed her, softly, and... god-fucking-damnit, is there anything there isn't perfect with Bella? Jesus, her lips, tongue... soft, gentle... almost... *reverent...?*

"It's okay," she breathed then, breaking our kiss. "Need-... want more... please..."

I continued kissing her skin, her soft skin, as I pushed into her, and it was... overwhelming... and hard, to not... slam into her.

Soon, I was fully sheathed in her, and nothing had felt better before. Her slick, tight walls, squeezing me... fiercely, and I... really needed to move.

"Are you okay, beautiful?" I breathed out hotly against her neck.

"Yes," she moaned. "More, please..."

Thank fuck.

I continued lavishing her with openmouthed kisses, my hand trailing down to her breasts, and finally I began to move inside her. Slowly but persistently, more and deeper, encouraged by her moans, I thrust into her, allowing myself to just feel her.

I need more.

Much more.

Desperately.

"Fuck, Bella," I groaned... I have to... "I need more, baby..." please...

"Yes, fuck yes, Edward!" she cried out, and her nails dug into my shoulder blades.

It spurred me on, and I pulled out of her, and pushed hard.

Fuck!

"Edward! Oh... ungh, yes, more!"

"Goddamnit," I grunted, finally setting a pace I had been dying to... and then... I fucked her. Sitting up slightly, I held onto her hips, and just... let go. In and out, harder and deeper, I fucked her, and goddamn, she propped herself up on her elbows, and we both watched as my glistening cock disappeared into her.

It was a motherfucking magnificent sight, and... the thought of only having Bella once...

Fuck no.

"You better let me fuck you again, baby," I grunted. "Not... just tonight... ungh, *fuck*, you feel perfect around me..."

Goddamn, yes, I have to have more. Tomorrow. The day after...

"Anytime," she cried out. "Anywhere..."

Yes.

It was becoming harder and harder to hold myself off, and... fuck, I wanted to feel her come around me... I had to.

With that decided, I drove as deep as I could, grinding into her, and luckily found her g-spot, and Jesus, the way she clenched around me... I thought I was gonna come right then and there.

"I'm... yes, oh... close, Edward!"

Thank you.

I rubbed her clit with my thumb and continued to fuck her deep, hitting her spot with every thrust, and my head lolled back, and I just... in... out... harder... feeling her constrict... moaning and groaning as she squeezed me... grunting when she became louder and louder...

Tighter.

Harder. Faster. *A lot* faster.

She screamed.

Bella. She *screamed* out *my* motherfucking name as she came, and it turned me into an animal, and I watched her, with wide eyes, not wanting to miss a fucking thing. And then it was my turn. My turn to do what I had fantasized about since I saw her.

Gripping her hips tightly, I slammed into her without restraint, making me groan out loudly as fuck, and it didn't take many seconds, many thrusts... just a few... and then... yes... my orgasm took over... and with my eyes clenched shut tightly, I came hard... spilling my cum into her addictive pussy.

Have to have her again, I thought as I panted my way down from my high. Over and over I thought, *I have to have her again*.

Completely spent, I pulled out of her and collapsed next to her, but... I refused to let this become awkward, which was why I decided to tell her that I wanted her... tomorrow again. That this wasn't anything I would regret.

So, I opened my mouth to speak.

"I hope you're sleeping here with me tonight, beautiful."

Huh.

Um, that was not what I was going to say. At all.

Shit.

Double shit.

I couldn't look at her, so I kept my eyes closed, wishing I could bury my face in my pillow, but... that might fuck shit up. More.

"You want me to stay?" I heard her ask quietly.

Well, yeah, I do... Could you stay forever while you're at it?

"Of course," I said, pretending to be casual.

Then I forced myself to chuckle as I added, "I mean, you don't have to, obviously..."

But please, please stay.

I counted to seven before she replied.

"I'll stay if you want me to."

I want you to. More than you'll ever know. Because I sorta lo-

Fuck my life.

"Perfect." I grinned, still not opening my eyes, though.

She chuckled a little then, so I relaxed a bit, but-

Wait.

A minute.

SHIT!

Shooting up in a sitting position, I gulped, wide eyed and all, and you know... thought about how well we... contributed to the condom industry... or how well we *didn't* contribute.

"Uh..." Yeah, keep going. Get. The. Shit. Out. "We, uh..."

Perfect.

"Edward? What's wrong?"

Yep, she was worried now. Covering her spectacular breasts with the sheet.

A pity, really.

Focus, Cullen!

Right.

"We... heh... condom," I forced out.

"Oh," was her reply, and that was so *not* the reply I was looking for at all! Not. At. All!

"Um, well I'm on the pill," she mumbled quietly, and *that* was the reply I wanted to hear, but why did she look hurt? "And I mean... you don't have to worry, I'm clean."

Oh.

Shit, did I hurt her feelings or something?

That was not supposed to happen.

"Christ, beautiful." I was so relieved, and I lied back down on the bed, not giving a shit if I crossed some fuck-buddy line; I pulled her body to me as I continued. "I never thought you weren't, Bella," I assured her.

Jesus, I knew her well enough to know *that*. She wasn't one of those women.

"I was more thinking that I didn't want to be left alone with another child," I chuckled... and, yea, then I realized what I had just said.

And as Bella backed away with an expression that was... fuck, I don't know... but she was horrified, so I figured it was time to clarify, explain, and apologize...

Right now!

"Bella," I sighed, grabbed her hand, because the woman was on her way up. "I'm sorry... I didn't mean it like that... well, I sorta did, but definitely not towards you. I know that you're nothing like that, and you have to believe that I would never think of you in that way.

"I mean, fuck, I've seen you with Emma, and..." *you're the mother I wish she had*. "You're perfect, Bella, and God knows she adores you... Fuck, I'm rambling... I didn't mean what I said. About you and the whole-"

"I get it, Edward," she said, cutting me off. And she was smiling.

Yeah, shut up, Cullen.

"Shutting up," I said... sorta to myself.

"You're adorable when you ramble, you know," she giggled as she returned to me... to my arms... resting her gorgeous face on my chest.

And there's no denying it.

Not anymore.

I'm in love with her.

"I can live with that," I murmured, tilting her face up... and I kissed her, softly... Didn't wanna freak her out, so I ended it... too soon for my liking.

And we fell asleep like that. Together. In my bed.

*o*o*o*

When I headed to work the morning after, I was thoroughly content.

Though I had woken up alone, Bella had left a note – a note that made me feel confident that things wouldn't get awkward for us.

Her note?

Morning, Edward.

*Have an early class, so no mornin' lovin' for me. Yeah, I'm sad about that.
Maybe a sexy piano playing man will approach me tonight?*

/Bella.

I fucking *loved* that note.

And yes, a piano playing man will approach her tonight.

If casual is what I can have with her, then casual it is.

What I really want is for her to move in with me. What I really want is for her to be mine. What I really want is for her to be Emma's mother.

And while I'm at it, I also wish that Santa was real.

But I live in the real world, and I know that what I want is... impossible to get. And with that knowledge, I'm taking whatever she'll give me.

And that's sex.

Could be worse.

*o*o*o*

I had dreaded this all day.

This morning at the staff meeting, I had seen Jasper in the back row, and... he did not look well. I wanted to talk to him, but I had rehearsals with the ensemble as well as a meeting with the fuckwit of a director. But now I was here.

Knocking on the door to Jasper's studio.

I also made a mental note to talk to Bella about Alice.

Jasper opened the door after awhile, wearing headphones, so I knew he was somewhat busy.

"You have a minute?" I asked.

"Let me just wrap this up and I'll give you ten, then I have a meeting with my lawyer." He smiled ruefully.

I nodded, followed him inside, and stayed in his little pre-room while he wrapped up in the studio. And this was the perfect time to text Bella about the fuckery we sorta promised each other to deal with.

Hey, beautiful. About to talk to Jasper now. Have you spoken to Alice yet? – Edward.

That was casual, right?

It better be, I thought and pressed 'send.'

Bella's reply was instant, and it sorta hit me that this was the first time we've texted each other without discussing her hours with Emma.

We have our Starbucks-date after school. Gonna talk sense in her then ;) Let me know how it goes? – Bella.

Damn, even in a text, she shows concern. In this case for Katie.

Absolutely. I'll text you later. – Edward.

I was about to pocket my phone, but it buzzed again... and a part of me wished I never read the text.

Great :) Btw, does Emma like mushrooms? Mom gave me a recipe for homemade pizza. Figured I'd try it for dinner tonight. – Bella.

I didn't like that text at all. Just made me want her more. Not for cooking, obviously, but for how Emma's on her mind, for how she takes Emma into consideration automatically.

Bella often cooked at home, but now that I was admitting to my feelings, eating dinner... like a family... that's gonna be hard.

Time to reply.

Afraid she doesn't. Emma's a plain cheese kinda pizza-girl ;) – Edward.

I almost laughed when I sent that, thinking that it was most likely the first time I ever sent a smiley face.

No worries. I'll just put cheese on her half then :) You like mushrooms, though, right? – Bella.

"Stop being so fucking perfect," I muttered to myself as I replied.

Yeah, I do. But Bella, you don't have to cook. – Edward.

But I don't mind it if you do... at all.

You always say that, Cullen. Got something against my cooking? ;) I told you, I love to cook. – Bella.

Good thing she's teasing, I thought as I rolled my eyes, because the woman can cook. Like a damn... a damn... chef-goddess.

That's right.

"Edward," I heard Jasper say then. "I'm done now."

"Alright." I nodded, sending one last reply before following Jasper into his office.

Like I'd ever stand in the way of your cooking. Crazy woman. Gonna talk to Jasper now. – Edward.

Okay... let's deal with this fuckery.

Chapter 11

EPOV

"How's Emma?" Jasper asked once we were both seated in his office.

"Katie sure threw a tantrum 'cause we missed this Saturday's play date."

"She was with my parents, so I wouldn't know," I chuckled, knowing that Katie's tantrums were... hysterical.

He smirked. "Oh, yeah? Just you and Bella on Saturday then?"

So not why I came here.

Jasper's stalling.

"You gave me ten minutes, Jazz," I reminded him. "We're not gonna talk about what I did on Saturday. We *are* however going to discuss Friday."

His smirk vanished.

"What the hell, man? You told Alice you were single," I said, half in disbelief, half accusing. "But you told *me* that you had told *her* that you were getting divorced."

Christ, I feel like a gossiping woman.

"Bella told me," I said as he looked confused, most likely as to how I knew that little tidbit.

"It's complicated," he offered weekly.

"Yeah well, make it *un*complicated, 'cause you already have too much shit on your plate, and Katie's in the middle of it," I shot back.

"How about I make my own decisions, huh?" he replied with a glare. "It's my life, Edward. Not yours."

I knew that. Pinching the bridge of my nose, I tried to figure out how to talk to the man, 'cause yeah, I knew it's his life, but... fuck, he should be thinking about Katie.

"What if Tanya finds out about you sleeping with Alice?" I asked.

It hadn't been confirmed that they had slept together, but judging by Alice's expression at the party, and Jasper's reaction to finding out about her real age, I'd say they left Starbucks *together*.

Jasper said nothing, just pulled at his hair, so I took that as confirmation.

"Tanya could use it in the divorce to get Katie," I pointed out.

He still said nothing, but I could see him processing my words, and he knew I was right.

"I know," he sighed, frustrated. "I don't know what to do, man."

To me it was obvious, but... I didn't know the entire story.

"What is this between you and Alice?" I asked.

He shrugged, not replying... at first.

But then he did. "She's different."

I waited for him to continue.

"I confronted her about the age-thing after I found out," he mumbled.

"And she admitted she was twenty... but I still didn't leave."

Didn't *leave*?

"You went all the way to Newark for this?" I asked incredulously.

Just how well did those two know each other?!

"How long have you been seeing her?" I asked, deciding that that question was more important.

Thankfully, Jasper answered straight away, not beating around the bush.

"For about a week before I found out her real age..."

Holy... shit.

"And then a few times over the next few weeks before the party," he added tiredly.

Jesus.

"At her place?" I pressed.

He shrugged. "Sometimes... and sometimes here."

Ah, shit. Yeah, I stood up from my chair.

"Fuck, dude. Not there," he said, rolling his eyes.

Thank fuck!

We were quiet then for a while, and I knew the ten minutes had passed.

He knew it, too.

"I'll tell you all about it on Saturday, yeah?"

I nodded. "Fine."

*O*O*O*

I want Bella to do it, Daddy!

I gritted my teeth.

Emma was throwing the tantrum of the year, screaming, crying, shouting, and whining... all because Bella texted me, saying that she would be twenty minutes late.

Twenty minutes. That's it.

But apparently that's enough for Emma who doesn't like it when I help get her paints and brushes out.

"But if I do it, you and Bella can start painting as soon as she comes home," I told her.

No! And then she screamed.

Lovely.

And I'm done. *"Go to your room, Emma."*

She stomped her foot before sitting down on the kitchen floor. **No. I want Bella. Now.** She squeezed her eyes shut, effectively cutting off our communication.

In my periphery, I saw Bella all of a sudden.

Fuck, she looked beautiful.

Walking over to where Emma sat on the floor, I crouched down and nudged her arm, to which she gave me a classic Emma-sowl and one eye open.

"Look behind you, Emma," I sighed.

I'm tired. So goddamn exhausted.

And it's only five PM. Jesus...

Emma complied, and... yeah, tears were gone, and she started giggling as she ran towards Bella.

Hi, Bella! I want to paint now.

Yeah, she was all sugar now.

Hey, Sweetie, Bella signed, smiling carefully before turning to me. "Tantrum?"

"To say the least," I muttered, sitting down at the kitchen table.

Bella nodded and crouched down to Emma's level. *"Daddy told you to go to your room, Sweetie."*

I watched them intently. For obvious reasons.

We always paint first, Emma argued. Still smiling, though.

Bella nodded. *"Yes, but you need to apologize, because you can't yell like that. I thought you were a big girl."*

Anyone who walked in here now would think that Bella's her mother.

Me included.

And I'm... so fucked up in love with her.

I want to paint! And I am a big girl, Emma replied, scowling, and I knew another fit was coming, but before I could step in, Bella continued perfectly.

"You're not acting like a big girl," Bella said, her face showing softness at the same time as she showed strength. She wasn't caving on Emma. *"Big girls apologize if they have done something wrong. And if you won't apologize, there will be no painting."*

I had nothing to say. She handled Emma perfectly. Just like I would've handled the situation. Instead of letting me take over, like she could've done, she stayed put – on my side.

My thoughts were interrupted, by Emma screaming.

And I stood up.

"It's okay, Edward," Bella said. "I'll take her. She needs to know I won't cave."

Before I could respond, Bella picked Emma up, and carried her to her room. Screaming, squirming, arms flailing.

But Bella just pulled through.

Could she be more perfect?

I doubted it.

When Bella returned to the kitchen, she just chuckled while grabbing the groceries she had with her.

"Well, I survived my first tantrum with her."

Chuckled! Doesn't she see how huge this is? Well, for me... the lovesick puppy.

"You sure did." I smiled, half forced because I needed to act casual, and half... because I was just so goddamn amazed by this woman. "And you did great, Bella, really."

Blushing slightly, she sent me a beautiful smile before she got started on the cooking.

I knew I had loads of work to do in my room, but I didn't want to wait discussing the matter of Jasper and Alice, and thankfully Bella felt the same when she initiated the topic, stating that Alice wasn't easy to talk to.

She then proceeded to tell me that Alice was in love with Jasper, and... I didn't know what to say. I mean, seriously... she's in love with him?

I know what it's like to fall in love with someone.

I know how it feels to not have that love reciprocated, because of all the complicity... and shit.

Which is why I'm not speaking up about my feelings regarding Bella.

But Alice, well, according to Bella, Alice says she can't back off, and when Bella reminded her of Katie, and the divorce, Alice just said that she would be on Jasper's side as long as he wanted it. As for Katie, Alice had no problems with the little girl, despite having only met her once.

I understood quickly that Alice is a wonderful girl, but a bit flaky and naïve, because the fact remains; if Jasper loses Katie, I know he's gonna be ruined. And Tanya *would* use his affair as a weapon if she finds out.

It doesn't matter that Jasper and Tanya are 'over.' They are still married and that's what matters in court.

Before I retreated to my music-room, I told Bella about my talk with Jasper, and admitted that he would probably put their 'fling' to an end now that he realized just how bad this could get.

But if they have real feelings for each other, surely they will be able to wait until the divorce is finalized, right?

*O*O*O*

Mid November 2010.

The last couple of weeks have gone by fast, and Bella is... Jesus, there are no words.

Let's just say it's hard to get out of bed after the nights she's spending in my room. But that's sorta my rule. To get out of bed before her, to not... suffocate her... or whatever.

It's far from every night that she sleeps in my bed, though.

For instance, if we have sex in the shower – and my *God*, that's fucking hot – she goes to her room that night. But if she does sleep in my bed, I make sure to get up early.

It's the only thing stopping me from telling her to stay forever, because... hell, watching her with Emma... there are no words describing what I feel.

I know I'm setting myself up for a total heartbreak, but I can't *not* be with her. I crave her too much.

I love her. More than I ever thought possible.

Emma loves her, too.

And to be honest, I'm not really comfortable with how attached Emma is to Bella, because she, Bella, is closer and closer to leaving us. She's looking for apartments often, and with her trust fund, no one will deny her once she's found something she likes.

Okay, what else...

Jasper, Tanya, and Alice... Christ, what a fuckery that is.

The divorce is in full swing, and Tanya's relentless in trying to gain full custody of Katie – something that makes my blood boil, because Katie's been a mess whenever Tanya takes her to the doctor for yet another exam. And Jasper is close to falling apart.

He is however glad he broke it off with Alice because Tanya's been digging for shit that could make Jasper look like a bad husband as well as a bad father. Thankfully, Alice realizes, too, that this is for the best, and I have to say I was surprised when Bella told me that Alice will in fact wait for

Jasper, and that certainly shows she's mature. Not to mention how deep her feelings must be.

I asked Jasper, call it morbid curiosity, if he felt the same for her, but he's dealing with too much to think about it. Though, it didn't go unnoticed how he reacted to me just mentioning her name.

I do believe it's mutual between the two.

Good for them... I suppose.

I'm so fucking thrilled for them.

Sense the sarcasm.

I ain't nothing but jealous.

*O*O*O*

"Mmm... you know, that's sorta... distracting." Bella hummed.

She's cooking. I'm kissing her neck, because... I haven't had her in two days.

I hate it when she spends the night with Alice. It happens too often.

It has happened once.

Like I said; too often.

And I love my princess more than anything in the world, but she's been one helluva cockblocker this evening, demanding not one, but four bedtime stories.

"Can't really apologize," I mumbled against her neck. "Cause I'm not sorry."

She giggled – a sound that goes straight to my already hard cock. And it doesn't help when she rubs against it, you know.

"Edward... I'm... hungry... haven't eaten all day," she moaned.

"We can order in," I replied, nibbling on her earlobe. "And guess what we can do while we wait for the food to arrive."

I rubbed my dick against her ass, eliciting a moan from both of us, and...

"Okay."

...I had her convinced.

Turning around in my arms, she reached up as I leaned down, capturing her lips with mine, and fuck, it was like sweet reunion.

Pushing me backwards until I hit the counter, we kissed passionately, pretty much ravishing each other. Just the way I loved it. But the damn woman broke the kiss then.

Then she fished out her phone from her pocket, handing it to me. "Order us pizza."

And then she sunk to her knees in front of me.

Fuck!

"Now, Edward." She smirked, already unbuttoning my jeans.

Yes, ma'am, I thought, swallowing hard as I punched in the number to Amsterdam Avenue Pizzeria.

Then she had my cock in her hand. Fucking hell. And planted an openmouthed kiss on it as I waited for the *fucking* pizza place to answer.

"Goddamn," I groaned, feeling Bella suck me in hard... and *shit*, deep.

Pouty lips wrapped around my cock. Hard. Wet. Oh, God...

"Welcome to Amsterdam Avenue Pizzeria, may I take your order?"

FUCK!

"Um... yes..." Oh, *fuck*, that feels good! Yes, so fucking deep. "Shit... uhmmm, number... 47 on the-ungh... menu..."

I looked down, not caring one bit about how smug she looked to have me rendered speechless, because all I could focus on was her mouth. Hot, wet mouth... pumping my cock... in and out...

"Anything else, sir?"

Oh, right...

"Ungh... no, that's good..." Yes, teeth grazing. "So fucking good!"

Bella giggled – fucking *giggled* around my cock – and I just... fought, and fought, and fought... not to moan out loudly...

My cock glistened as she worked me harder and harder... fuck, hitting the back of her throat... ungh... yes... panting... feeling the... tensing...

"Um, okay... And your address?"

"14... West... 69th street." *Did I even get that right?* "For Cullen."

I couldn't wait, so I just hung up, and...

"Holy *fuck*, Bella," I moaned, dropping the phone on the floor before threading my fingers through her hair. "Definitely gonna... punish you... for that... ungh!"

She moaned around me, and I was losing it.

"Close, baby," I grunted, thrusting slightly into her hot mouth.

I looked down, to see her nod...

Jesus!

I pushed harder this time, already fighting like a goddamn warrior not to come, but this... this was too hot to rush through. And again she moaned, apparently turned on when I thrust. But... shit! Too close, too close, too close!

"I'm coming," I gritted out, and then it all washed over me, or through me, or whatever.

Deep in her mouth, I came hard in several spurts.

I am way over my head with this one, I thought as I regained my breath. Goddamn sex... sex-goddess for fuck's sake.

"Fucking hell, beautiful," I breathed, pulling Bella to a stand.

Then she made a show of licking her pouty lips, and I just... well, I think I sorta lost it for a second. You know, eyes glazing over and shit.

"Told ya I was hungry," she giggled.

Giggled!

Vixen.

As I pulled the smirking woman to me and kissed her, I started scheming. Definitely gonna work her good later.

"Holy shit, you can kiss," she mumbled against my lips, and I sorta beamed in pride.

And there was that blush.

Now I knew that she blushed either when she was embarrassed, turned on, or humbled. I had learned that over the past weeks, and now, right this second, I knew that Bella hadn't meant to say that out loud.

"So can you," I chuckled breathlessly, breaking the kiss. "Like no other... Fucking love your lips, beautiful," I added truthfully.

But she averted her eyes to the floor, and I feared that I had gone too far.

Just thinking that we're... friends with... benefits...

Tastes horrible for fuck's sake.

Time to go back to casual.

"The pizza should be here any minute," I sighed, zipping my pants at the same time. "And then I'm gonna get back at you for that stunt you pulled with the phone."

Oh, and I love you.

Stay with me forever?

Twenty minutes later, we were sitting in the living room, chucking pizza, and I decided it was time to broach a certain subject. I was dying to know myself, but it was my mom forcing me to actually ask.

"Thanksgiving's coming up," I said, keeping my eyes on the flat screen. You know, to keep it light and casual. Like I'm merely curious. "Mom and Dad are inviting you to their Thanksgiving dinner."

And I really want you to come.

"Oh," was her reply, but then she continued, and I didn't like her answer. "Wow, um... well, uh, I'm going home. Alice and I both are."

Home. To Washington. Across the fucking country.

"But make sure to thank them for inviting me," she added softly. "I really wish I could go, but I haven't seen my mom since July."

Right.

"Of course," I said, even nodding in understanding. "When are you leaving?"

I did understand of course, but that didn't mean I liked it.

"Two days before, and then I'll be back two days after."

I nodded, doing the math in my head.

I have five days with her before she leaves, and then she'll be across the country for five.

It felt... awful.

Chapter 12

EPOV

"A Caesar salad and a Diet Coke, please," my sister told the waitress.

"I'll have the same but with water, thank you," Mom said.

Weird chicks.

"Double cheeseburger, extra fries, onion rings on the side, and a large Mountain Dew," I ordered, handing the waitress my menu. "Throw in some mozzarella sticks, too. Oh, and a few of those hot wings."

Having lunch with my mom and my sister – I'm gonna need good food to survive this.

Dad – the traitor – cancelled, so now I’m facing the chicks by myself.

The four of us did this once every month, and it was my parents’ way to keep track on me and Rose. But I knew that this lunch would be about me.

“How’s Bella, dear? Have you asked her out yet?” Mom asked me once the waitress had left.

“You’re not wasting any time, are ya?” I chuckled dryly.

When’s my burger coming?

I also regretted not picking Emma up early from her playgroup. She could’ve been here to help me. Or maybe she wouldn’t... now that I think about it.

“Seriously, Edward, you need to get a fucking grip,” Rose huffed. “She’s not gonna stay single forever.”

Gritted my teeth. Dragged my hands over my face.

When *is* that goddamn burger coming?

“I need you two to back off,” I groaned, frustrated as hell. “I mean, seriously, when are you gonna get it? She’s twenty! And I have Emma.”

And no, they don’t know I’m sleeping with Bella. Only Jasper and Alice know about that.

“Bella’s different,” Mom said. “She adores Emma, you know. And I don’t think you’re alone in having deep feelings.”

“I don’t have any deep feelings for her,” I lied.

Both Mom and Rose scoffed and rolled their eyes at me.

Lovely.

"You should ask her to the premiere," Mom continued, obviously ignoring my previous comment.

The premiere. Yes, one of the projects I've been involved with is premiering soon, and I always get five tickets. The premiere is in two days, and Bella knows about it of course, only, she thinks she's watching Emma. I've already given my parents two tickets, and Rose one, because Emmett's been banned from that particular theatre.

Not kidding.

You know how you sing along when you're at a rock concert... Yeah, well, Emmett thought it was no different when you're at the opera. Didn't matter that he couldn't understand a word of the Italian lyrics, he sure as hell could bellow some bullshit anyway. And I would've laughed my ass off... had it not been for the fact that I was being reviewed that night for an exclusive music magazine.

"Emmett could watch Emma," Rose pointed out.

I sighed. Pulled at my hair.

Did I want Bella there?

Of course. I would *love* to have her there, to share my work with her, because though I don't play the actual music during the acts, I'm in fact the writer and composer behind many of the pieces. And this time it was a musical I had loved working on.

I love writing music period, and though I like composing for operas as well as plays, I do have a thing for combining my love for rock music and theater, and this time it is in fact a rock musical.

There's no denying that I want Bella there for that.

But could I ask her casually? Could I ask her without coming off as a lovesick puppy? Could I ask without coming off as desperate? Could I ask without things becoming awkward?

Christ, so many questions.

"Ask her, Edward Anthony," my mother said firmly.

My head snapped up. "What the fuck are ya middle naming me for, Mom?"

She just shrugged. "Thought it was appropriate. But you really do have a stick up your ass."

"Mmhmm, he sure does." Rose nodded.

I couldn't fucking believe those two.

If Dad's bailing the next lunch, then so am I.

Oh, my dear sister wasn't done. "There's gonna be dance performances, yes? You can always mention that to Bella. She is a ballet major after all."

Huh.

That's... actually not half bad.

Maybe I could ask her, tell her that since she's into dance, she will enjoy it.

That could definitely work.

I'm gonna do it. I'm gonna ask her.

Casually.

After I conceded, we spent the remainder of our lunch, talking about the premiere and how big it was, because it truly had captured the media's attention. Most likely because of the famous actors and musicians starring, and there were billboards all over the city, not to mention the buzz I haven't been able to escape, you know, gossip. This time about the two leading actors, and whether or not they're involved.

Safe to say, I work from home whenever I can, but that doesn't mean I don't see it when I'm on set with the crew.

Goddamn is all I'm saying.

And I can't say I look forward to the red carpet, but luckily, the likes of Jasper and I, can walk through without anyone caring.

*O*O*O*

"No fucking way, dude," Emmett said, shaking his head.

"No," Jasper agreed. "Absolutely not. You can't ask her that."

My fucking God!

Yesterday I was so confident. I was gonna ask Bella to come with me to the premiere of *Volturi Rock*, but now, the day after, I'm having a late lunch with Jasper and Em, and they're telling that there is no way I can pull it off and come off as casual.

Emmett doesn't know about my relationship with Bella, but he sure knows about my feelings about her.

They all do for fuck's sake.

"Not even if I-" But I was cut off by Emmett.

“Doesn’t matter what you’re gonna say, bro. Anything you say will still result in the two of you dressing up in some fancy shit, and you’re still gonna take her there, and you’re still gonna take her home. Ain’t nothing about that that won’t scream out that it’s a date.”

Fuck.

A date. God, I would love for it to be a date. Maybe have dinner with her before the show...

Yep, that’s a date.

I can’t ask her.

DAMMIT!

“I mean, I think you should ask her, ‘cause she’s a cool chick. But it *would* be a date. Don’t really understand why you don’t wanna date her, though. Why does it have to be casual?” Emmett rambled.

Oh, I wanna date her, I thought as Jasper and I shared a knowing look. But Bella doesn’t. She wants casual.

“I want casual,” I lied.

“No, you don’t,” Emmett huffed before stuffing his face with a slice of pizza.

“Bella’s not the kinda girl that’s into dating,” Jasper covered for me, and I could’ve kissed him. Almost.

That was a good lie. Well, in this case it was no lie.

“Really?” Emmett asked, not really convinced.

“Uh, yeah, she’s hinted that she’s not ready to date,” I added to the lie, shrugging.

“Huh,” Emmett responded, clearly not thinking that about Bella.

I was a mess.

*O*O*O*

I was a mess later that night, too.

I really wanted her there with me. I really wanted her to sit next to me, dressed to the occasion, watching why I’ve been holed up in my room for the passed months.

“You okay?” Bella whispered, and I tightened my hold on her, loving the feeling of her lips against my jaw.

And was I okay? Far from it, but I didn’t wanna think about that when I had the love of my life naked in my bed.

“You’ve been a bit off today,” she continued quietly, still planting soft kisses on my skin... and it felt amazing... warming...

Loving.

Just want her to continue. Definitely don’t want to talk.

“I’m fine,” I murmured, rolling us over, so I was on top of her. “Stay here tonight?” I asked, hiding my nerves by kissing the spot below her ear. And I loved it. Kissing her soft skin. Flawless and so responsive, easy to read. Because that was what her body was; easy to read. I knew that the spot below her ear was a sweet spot that made her shiver. I knew that when I skimmed my nose along her jaw, her skin broke out in goose flesh. And I knew that when I brushed my thumb over her hipbone, she moaned quietly, half in content, half in excitement.

I knew her body, loved her body, and adored playing her like an instrument. An instrument I worshipped. An instrument I wanted to savor, love, and protect. An instrument I wished to know all about.

"Yes," she gasped, and I hoped... hoped it was in answer to my question, and not because I pressed against her, wanting, needing her for a second time this night.

I pushed into her pussy, moaning and shivering at the feeling I had become addicted to. I moved inside her purposefully, only wanting and needing to feel her. To be closer. To feel the way she always arched her back to be closer.

I love you.

My hands found their way, playing her, as she did with me, and it was the same. She knew me, too. She knew I shivered in pleasure when she kissed my sternum. She knew my breathing hitched when she clung to me, letting her nails dig into my shoulder blades. She knew I loved it when she threaded our fingers together above her head.

I love you.

I averted my eyes, knowing they would betray me, knowing they would tell her exactly what I felt for her. Instead I buried my face in her hair, increasing my pace, reaching further, reaching that spot inside of her that makes her clamp down on me, that makes her moan out, that makes me groan, that brings us closer.

"Oh, Edward," she moaned, like I knew she would, and I loved it, craved it, needed it.

I love you.

"I can feel you, baby," I breathed in her hair. "I can feel you're close."

She pulled me to her then, making me face her, and she kissed me. Hard. Passionately.

I love you so much.

Tighter and trembling. Yes, she was close. Slick, warm, and so tight.

“Come for me, beautiful,” I whispered, breathless from the kiss.

And she did. She fell apart under me, convulsing and moaning... and so fucking beautiful that it almost hurt to look at her.

I followed, because... there was no chance in hell I could ever restrain myself after watching her orgasm. And with a breathy groan, I came hard, tensing, holding her tightly, throbbing and holding my breath as I spilled into her.

There was nothing casual about this at all, I thought, breathing heavily as I pulled out of her... very reluctantly.

Christ, have I freaked her out yet?

But as Bella rested her head on my chest, and began to draw lazy circles on it, I relaxed, knowing that it couldn't have been too bad if she's still here.

And that's what matters. That she's here.

For two more days, and then she's off to Washington.

The premiere is tomorrow. Could I ask her casually, playing on the whole last-minute-thing? Maybe I could tell her I got an extra ticket.

Yes.

I decided to ask her tomorrow morning before she takes off for school.

*O*O*O*

"*Good morning.*" Bella smiled as I joined her in the kitchen, carrying a very sleepy Emma on my hip.

For once, Bella had woken up before me, but I knew she had a breakfast date with Alice before class where they would discuss their departure... for tomorrow.

"Good morning, beautiful." I winked, setting Emma down in her chair.

Emma grabbed my hand before I could head for the fridge...

What did you say, daddy?

"*What do you mean, princess?*" I asked, confused.

After good morning, Emma clarified, but I was still confused.

A quiet voice clarified further, though, as she brought cereal and milk to Emma.

"You called me beautiful, Edward."

Oh. Shit. That.

I often called Bella that, but not in front of my very perceptive daughter, who was getting better and better at reading lips. It's definitely a slow process, but my girl's only five, and she *can* read well, especially for her age. And she probably knows how to read 'Good morning' when I say it. So, if I add to that phrase... of course she's going to be curious, because that's my daughter.

Great.

Time to fess up, because there's no way I'm lying about words. That will only confuse her in her reading—set her back.

"I said Beautiful," I admitted, sitting down with my own cereal.

Emma... well, she grinned. Widely. Like... face-splitting widely. And I saw secrets in her eyes. She may be smart and perceptive, but those are my genes. She got that from *me*, and I think I'm going to give my sister a call later.

"Alright," I heard Bella sigh behind me. "I'm off..."

And this is where I need to get my shit out. Fast.

"Uh, Bella, wait," I said.

I already knew that Emma would watch me like a hawk, so I motioned for Bella to follow me to the hallway.

Once we were both there, Bella started putting her shoes and jacket on, and I... ah, crap, I'm just gonna say it.

"Emmett's offered to take Emma tonight, and I have an extra ticket."

There. I've said it.

And perhaps I should breathe. I hear that's vital.

Right.

"Um, okay?" she replied, softly but... she wants me to elaborate. She wants me to spell it out.

Terrific.

"Yeah, so, uh... will you go with me?" I asked, and then I realized it sounded like I'm asking her out, so I continue... like an idiot. "Um, I mean,

Rose and my parents are gonna be there, and um... well, it's just if you want... and then you can go home when they do, or you can stick around... with me... for the party."

SHUT UP, CULLEN!

I held my breath, trying... but probably failing at appearing casual.

Emmett was so right. So right. I can't ask her casually... and I didn't.

But then Bella said, "Sure. Sounds like fun. Count me in."

And her face was unreadable.

Actually, *she* was casual. Because that's what we are to her. Casual. She wouldn't read into how I acted, because she doesn't think I feel more for her.

"Great," I forced out.

*O*O*O*

Can we go to the playground?

I chuckled at my girl. "*You have to ask Uncle Emmett, Princess.*"

We were walking through the park, toward Rose and Emmett's apartment, and Emma had spent the past twenty minutes asking me what she and Emmett would do tonight when the rest of us "visit Daddy's work."

I had told her this morning about where she was spending the night, and when I picked her up from her playgroup, Mrs. Goff informed me that Emma had spent the entire day talking about her sleepover with Uncle Emmett.

Can we have ice cream, Daddy?

Oh, she was having fun now, knowing full well that I didn't know how she and Em would spend their time.

So, I gave her the same answer I had given her for the past twenty minutes.

"You have to ask Uncle Emmett, Princess."

I winked at her, and stifled a laugh at the same time as my chest constricted when she tried to wink back at me.

So fucking cute.

And today, walking with her through the park, watching her in her pink overalls, pink, fluffy hat, scarf, and mittens... and her lopsided smile... her gorgeous eyes... her dimple... the cold November making her cheeks a little pink... the sunlight dancing on the curls that framed her gorgeous face...

There are no words.

Can we watch movie, Daddy?

"You have to ask Uncle Emmett, Princess," I laughed.

Can we eat candy, Daddy?

Time to play.

With a straight face, I told her, *"You can never have candy again, Emma."*

She stopped short. I... oh, God, I wanted to laugh as I saw her horrified expression.

"I'm kidding, sweetheart!" I laughed.

She squealed and charged at me, and I laughed as I picked her up, positioning her on my shoulders before I took off in a run.

And let me tell you, hearing your child laugh... It makes life worth living on a whole other level. Contentment becomes bliss.

Good thing I'm fit, because whenever I slowed down, she pulled my hair like I was her goddamn pony, demanding I keep running, and it wasn't until we reached the end of the park that I lifted her off me, panting like a madman and positioned her on my hip instead.

Tired? she asked me, giggling like the cute creature she is.

I've been running for the past fifteen minutes with a squealing giggle-monster on my shoulders. No, I'm not tired. I'm fucking exhausted.

Didn't say that, though.

Just nuzzled my nose with hers, to which she always put her hands on my cheeks and pushed them together.

Funny face! She giggled before doing it again.

Christ, she's perfection.

It still hurts. Only sometimes, but it stings sometimes that Heidi could walk out on her. For Emma's sake it hurts. *I'm* glad she's not here, because she doesn't deserve it. But... I just don't understand how one can walk out on a child.

"I love you," I mouthed to her, overcome with... something. It was overwhelming. Made my eyes prickle.

I love you, Daddy, she signed, at last letting my cheeks go.

I didn't let her go, though. Needed to carry her for some reason.

Thankfully, Emma didn't insist on walking like she usually does, you know, 'cause she's a 'big girl' now. Bullshit to me. She'll always be my baby.

A few minutes later, we reached Rose and Emmett's building, and we greeted old Felix – the doorman who always had a smile for my girl – and Emma wasted no time in squirming her way down to the ground so she could hug him.

"How are ya, Felix?" I grinned.

"Getting old," he replied, smiling at Emma. "Nah, things are good. And you, Edward?"

Hi, Felix! Emma giggled.

I smiled. "All good."

Hi, pretty girl. Felix chuckled.

That was pretty much what he knew of sign language, but it was enough to make my girl beam with joy, because the official story was that she had taught him the signs.

It was a few months after Rose and Em had moved into the building that Felix had approached me, and asked if I could show him a few simple signs. Safe to say, I was happy to help.

The ones fluent in my family are me, Mom, Rose, and Emmett. Dad isn't far behind.

I was just ecstatic that they all insisted on learning for Emma's sake.

Daddy, tell Felix I'm here on sleepover, please, Emma told me.

I obeyed, cause you do that.

“Sleepover with Uncle Emmett,” I chuckled, and Felix laughed, knowing what that entailed.

Yes, he too, knew how connected Emmett was with his inner child.

“You just missed your sister and her friend, by the way,” Felix said as she tickled Emma. “Bella was her name, I think.”

Huh.

Why would she be here? It’s not even four. Shouldn’t she be in school?

I made a mental note to ask Emmett.

Speaking of...

“Here ya are!” I heard the booming voice of my brother-in-law exclaim.

I turned around just as Emmett reached us, and grinned knowingly at him, because the only time you see Emmett in jeans is when he’s preparing for a date with Emma. You know, ‘cause jeans are sturdy, and you need that when for the park and you have a niece that loves to roll around in the sandbox. And no, Emmett’s not like a parent. That dude won’t ever sit on a bench and watch Emma play. He’s right there with her, rolling around in the sandbox.

In other words, he’s an amazing uncle.

“The Gym-master without sweats or basketball shorts,” I chuckled. “Can I assume you have plans for my girl?”

“Hell to the yeah,” he laughed. “I was just gonna go out buy some must-have’s for the evening before you got here, but I suppose Emma can tag along, eh?”

"Sure thing." I smiled, reaching down to tickle Emma to get her attention, and once I did, and she saw Emmett behind her... well, there was no use in trying to get a word in. We're talking squeals and laughs, and truth be told, I'm pretty sure one of those squeals came from Emmett at one point.

"I think you're forgotten, Edward," Felix snickered, watching Emmett and Emma wrestle on the ground.

"I think so, too," I chuckled.

"Ready to start our day of fun, Spider Monkey?" Emmett asked Emma.

More squealing, oh and some furious nodding.

"Alright, say goodbye to Daddy," Emmett laughed.

Emma spun around with her massive grin, flew into me, and squeezed the living shit outta me as I lifted her up for a hug.

"I love you," she mouthed before giving me one of her sloppy smooches.

"I love you, too," I mouthed back, giving her an Eskimo kiss before lowering her to the ground. *"Be nice to Uncle Emmett, Princess."*

Not too nice, was her standard reply, and I winked at her.

"Hey, I saw that," Emmett chuckled.

"Don't know what you're talking about." I shrugged as Emmett lifted Emma up to sit in his shoulders.

"Uh-huh," he huffed. "But karma's a bitch, Eddie," he added cryptically.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked.

"Let's just say that Rosie just took Bella out to buy a dress for tonight. Your sister has plans, you know."

I gritted my teeth.

"Yes, your *wife* is a relentless little shit," I groaned. "What the hell does she have planned this time?"

I hate my sister, I whined internally... a bit petulantly, but seriously, my sister has gone too far, and judging by the way she themed the Halloween party, one can only guess what she'll dress Bella in.

"I have no idea, but there was shopping and a spa appointment on the to-do-list, though I stopped listening when they started yapping about jewelry and something called La Perla... I don't know what that means. Oh, and she'll stop by your place, too, because she's getting you an outfit for tonight."

No surprise there, really. Rose often bought me shit, especially for events like the one tonight, and since it was a rock musical, I could only imagine her following the theme.

I knew many were doing that, and Jasper had grinned in approval when we were told that tuxedos were not necessary.

But what the hell is La Perla? I've heard of that... I think. A jewelry store?

Ah, well, I better prepare for a long night of agony.

After another goodbye to Emmett, Emma, and Felix, we parted ways, and I headed home, mentally preparing myself for the non-date where I'll see Bella in a dress... most likely a sexy one to go with the rock theme.

Have mercy on my valuables.

Chapter 13

EPOV

I'm sitting in our- *my* kitchen, waiting for Bella who is in her room... getting ready... and, well, I'm getting a bit antsy.

By the way, La Perla is a fucking lingerie store. Yeah, I looked that shit up when I saw the big bag Bella came home with. That just couldn't be jewelry – with that big bag – so I Googled it.

I'm in trouble. S'all I'm saying.

Anyway.

Rose and Bella came home around five, and like Emmett said, Rose had bought me clothes for the night, and now I'm sporting grey dress pants, a grey shirt with the sleeves rolled up, black shoes, a black skinny tie, and a studded cuff for... you know, that rock-feeling... or whatever my sister said.

"Okay, I'm leaving now," I heard Rose say... just before she reached the kitchen, and once she did... um. "I'll be going with Mom and Dad, so we'll see you and Bella there."

"No. No, no, no, no, *no*," I said, shaking my head at her. "You're not wearing that, sis. Uh-uh, no fucking way. No."

I knew exactly what her dress was called.

Slutty.

Many characters in the musical are wearing those dresses, and I believe I've heard the term 'Lolita-dress,' and yes, yes, yes, I have pictured Bella in many of them, but on my sister? Fuck and no. It's short, it's frilly, it has a corset that makes her, you know... female parts... show, and I'm cringing... Thinking about calling Emmett to put a stop to the fuckery, but then I realize that Emmett probably knows already and is looking forward to when Rose comes home tonight, and I cringe again.

"Nice try, brother of mine, but yes, I am." She smiled sweetly. "It's the theme, you know."

"But do you have to take shit that far?" I asked incredulously, eyeing her high, high heels in leather. "I mean, you, Mom and Dad aren't even on the carpet. You don't need to follow the fucking theme!"

"But it's so much fun!" was her excited reply. "Anyway, I'll see you tonight, Edward." She walked over to me, kissed my cheek, and I hated the fact that I loved the bitch, 'cause I could never stay mad at her. "I'm proud of you, brother," she finished softly, winking at me before straightening her not-so-there dress.

"Yea, yea, get outta here, woman," I grumbled, cursing myself for not being able to stand up to her. It's a Cullen curse, I swear, because Dad's the same. Neither one of us can stand up to the women in our family. We're always caving.

"Do you have my list, by the way?" she asked from the doorway.

I rolled my eyes at her. "Yes, I have the damn list."

"Good. Love ya!"

"Love you, too," I chuckled, shaking my head at her as she left.

Whenever I had a new project, Rose would bug me for days to find out about the actors starring, and when the premiere came up, she would hand me a list with names. Names of the people she wanted autographs from. And yes, I was the poor fucker who had to ask them.

After a few minutes, my head snapped up 'cause I had sorta been resting it on the table... but now, now I'm hearing heels clicking... approaching. And my jaw dropped.

Bella. In the doorway.

Oh, my fuck.

I... I can't breathe. Is... is it hot in here or what?



Blood flow's gone south. Way south. The south shall rise agai- the south *is* rising. In a rapid speed. Yep, them pants are mighty tight about now.

Oh, God.

"You like?" she asked coyly, twirling around once before walking over to me, and did I like? No, how about 'I love.'

How about 'I fucking adore.'

Her dress, in black and white plaid, so fucking tight, so damn sinful, and for the love of... Shit, her heels. High, high heels, and good *God*, her lips.

Deep red. Plump and luscious, just begging for my cock. And my mouth. Yes, God, I want to kiss the shit out of her.

Claim her as mine.

That's what I want.

"Yes, that's what I want," I heard myself say huskily, and yes, I just voiced a thought, so here comes the not-so-smooth cover, "I mean, yes... Fuck, I like... a lot... Christ, Bella, so fucking sexy."

Shut up, Cullen.

Right.

I sighed. Made a bubble face. Closed my eyes. Shook my head to clear it.

We need to leave. Now. Before I take her on the counter.

Hard.

I'd just lift that dress up, slide her panties aside, and then-

STOP!

"Ditto," Bella murmured then, and I opened my eyes to see her darkened ones, her cheeks slightly flushed... oh, God, she's turned on.

Fuck.

Not now.

"We need to go," I blurted out, and then I thought, *fuck it, might as well tell her the truth.* "Before I do something stupid."

"Maybe later tonight when we get home? And hopefully you'll like my black thong that I bought... oh, and the corset, of course," she said, giving

me that coy smile again, and I'm nodding, cause yeah, later tonight: it's on.

I haven't even seen it yet and I'm already planning on sending La Perla a big fat gift basket to show my appreciation.

I am a gentleman after all.

*O*O*O*

"We're here, Mr. Cullen," the limo driver announced.

Yes, limo. All important employees arrive in one, and apparently I'm one of those this time. Who knew?

"Thanks, Paul," I said, reaching for the door.

"You ready, beautiful?" I grinned at Bella who looked a little nervous.

She was also holding onto my bicep. Hard.

I didn't mind at all, but she seemed... off.

"Um, yeah, so there's a red carpet?" she asked hesitantly, biting her bottom lip. Her plump bottom lip. Mine.

"Yes?" I chuckled, confused, because she knew this. "I told you, didn't I?"

"Um, yes. Yeah, you did... S'just..."

Good God, woman, stop biting your lip. I beg you.

"What's wrong, beautiful?" I asked gently, releasing her lip from her teeth with my thumb.

`Cause that was just distracting.

"Okay, um... So, yeah, I'm normally a somewhat graceful person," Bella rambled, and yeah, I know she's graceful. "But I sorta have this thing... or rather... Well, heels don't like me."

I understand nada.

"Um...?" was my reply.

She sighed heavily before looking me in the eye. "I'm afraid I'll fall on the carpet when I'm wearing these heels. Rose convinced me to wear them, and now I'm killing her in my mind. With an ax... or maybe I'll use these heels."

Ah.

"Well, what am I here for?" I grinned. "Come on, beautiful, I won't let you fall."

As I opened the door, I thought I heard her mumble something like 'Already fallen, just wish someone else could do the same,' but I didn't understand. If she had already tripped with those shoes, then why the hell would she wear them now?

I held my hand out for her, swallowed hard as she grasped it. It never ceased to amaze me how right it felt when she was near me. In any way. And hand holding was new for us. We didn't exactly hold hands at home. Sure she could lie in my arms, but there was never a reason for us to hold hands, but now... as she took my hand to get out of the limo, it struck me how much it mattered. I suppose it's considered to be a small thing, but that's just it; to many hand holding is a normal thing. A small gesture. But for me it's not. For me it sort of represents us being together.

We're not, though.

"God, I'm just a glutton for punishment, being here," she muttered quietly as she got out of the limo.

"Just because of the shoes?" I laughed quietly, still thinking how much of an enigma Bella Swan is.

"Oh, um... yeah, cause of the shoes," she chuckled awkwardly.

Weird girl.

That I love.

Fucking hell, just stop it, Cullen!

"Ready to go?" I asked, giving her my best smile as I held my arm out for her. Even threw in a wink for good measure.

"Hum? Oh, uh yeah," she replied, her eyes slightly out of focus as she watched my face.

Was something wrong?

"You sure you're okay, swe-beautiful?"

Close call. Too close.

Call her 'sweetheart' and she'll run, you fuckwit!

I sighed.

"Yep, I'm sure," she replied, seemingly giving herself an inner pep talk or something.

Linking her arm with mine, she also hugged my bicep with her other hand, effectively staying very close to me, and in my pathetic little mind, she didn't do it out of fear of tripping. She did it because she loved having me close.

So pathetic, Cullen...

Whatever.

We reached the red carpet then, and sure enough, there were cameras and screaming people everywhere, so I quickly gathered that the leading actors were already here somewhere.

"This is surreal, Edward," Bella commented as we passed a few of the actors that were being interviewed. "Oh, my God, is that Chelsea James?"

I cringed internally.

Chelsea James was one of the leading actresses who also sang a lot in the show, and I was forced to work with her on more than one occasion.

"Yep," I sighed, and then I decided to change the subject. "And that's Ben Cheney she's standing with. You know of him, right?"

Ben and I had worked a lot together for this project and he was a terrific musician, a great actor, and a genuinely nice guy, although I had no fucking idea why he was with Chelsea, 'cause the not-so-subtle looks he'd been giving Jasper's assistant – Angela – had been like I said; not so subtle.

Maybe it's PR, I thought. I mean, they are the leading actors.

"Oh, of course I've heard of him. He's great." Bella nodded just as we passed them.

Jesus, I couldn't imagine being in the spotlight like that. 24/7. Fuck no.

"Actually there he is. Hey, Edward! Come on over here, man," I heard the unmistakable voice of Ben call.

Goddamnit.

Turning around again, I saw Ben motion for me to come over and I really, really didn't want to. I mean, they were being interviewed for fuck's sake. Cameras and shit. But I manned up and headed over with a confused Bella on my arm.

"Ben." I grinned, shaking his hand. "Excited for tonight?"

"Absolutely, and Gianna here just asked me how it was to write music for the show," he replied.

What the hell does that have to do with me?

Lastly, could they stop taking pictures?!

God, so much shouting, too!

"Edward here was the lead composer for *Volturi Rock*," Ben said then, to the goddamn reporter, and I cringed internally *again* and brought Bella's hand to mine, threading our fingers together. Because truth be told; I needed her touch if Ben was actually going to talk about *me*... to the fucking media!

At least Bella didn't seem to mind.

"Oh, of course!" the reporter exclaimed. "Edward Cullen, yes? You also wrote the music for *Breaking Dawn* last year!"

"Uh, yes," I replied, really uncomfortable with the microphone shoved in my face. "I was one of the composers at least."

"And now you've worked with Ben Cheney and Chelsea James amongst others. How was that?"

Take me away.

"Ben's a great musician, and it was fun working with him," I answered, avoiding the Chelsea-part, 'cause she sure as shit didn't write. I merely helped her get her shit in order and changed a few parts when she couldn't hit the high notes.

The chick's all nasal.

"Oh, Edward and I had so much fun," said the mentioned nasal voice that belonged to Chelsea James. "He's *such* an amazing writer."

Stepping in between Ben and me, Chelsea linked her arm with mine and I was very close to, I don't know, run away and hide?

As politely as one can do in front of cameras, I got free from her claws, tightened my hold on Bella's hand and leaned towards her. "Please save me," I whispered pleadingly.

I don't think people understand how much I hate this!

Bella gave me a mischievous smile, and I... didn't really know what to do or think or anything.

"Yes, isn't he?" Bella said... to Chelsea... I think. "*Such* an amazing *man*."

And then her hand was on my chest. I liked that. *Loved* it.

"Did you also work with them on the show, Ms...?" the reporter asked, smiling politely at Bella.

"Bella. And, no, I didn't work on the show," Bella replied, smiling beautifully as she positioned herself closer to me. "But I *live* with Edward and have had the great pleasure of watching him work on the musical from home, and Ms. James is right. He's *such* an amazing writer."

Please don't talk about me like that, Bella!

I truly felt like a petulant child in this mess, and I was so out of my element here. I didn't know what to do or say. Didn't know how to interpret Bella's words. Just... I just didn't wanna be in the goddamn spotlight.

But I was confused. Why did Chelsea and Bella sneer at each other?

Lord, I really don't understand women.

"Well, I think we should move on, Chelsea?" Ben suggested, making the reported leave us alone and shove her microphone up some actor's face. I could've kissed him. Almost. "We need to get ready before the show."

"Yes, of course," Chelsea replied. Before turning to me. Batted her fake lashes. "I'll see you later for the party, yes?"

I wanna go home.

I can hide in Emma's room.

Forever. Pink isn't *that* bad.

"Of course, *we'll* be there. Unless we'll go home sooner, that is," Bella responded, smiling sweetly, once again putting her hand on my chest. "I'm sure you understand, I mean, look at him. Why go to a party when you can go home and have him *all* for yourself."

Um.

Okay, I'm gonna give this whole reading-women thing a try, alright?

Did Bella just...um...huh?

Because if I didn't know any better, I'd say she was... you know... staking claim.

But I'm wrong, right?

"Right," Ben smirked, "I'll catch ya later, Edward, and it was nice to meet you, Bella."

"You too, Ben. Good luck tonight," Bella told him, still with that sweet ass smile.

Finally, with a smile and a nod, Ben dragged a glaring Chelsea James away. Out of my sight.

I breathed out in relief.

"Thank you," I sighed deeply, once again in nothing but relief.

"No problem." She shrugged. "But I don't like her anymore. Fucking skank."

Fu-... uh?

Then she just took my hand and motioned for us to head inside.

I was gaping at her.

"What?" she asked as we reached the entrance.

"What? You're asking me what?" I laughed incredulously. "Fucking skank?"

"Well, she was. She was flirting with you," she said, smiling in thanks as I held the door open for her. "And you don't do that when you're clearly not here alone."

God, I want her.

The lobby of the theatre was obviously full of people and it was mingle-mode amongst the guests as the actors got ready for the show, and of

course, it didn't take long until we stumbled on my parents and my sister in the crowd.

"Oh, Edward, my baby, I'm so proud of you!" Mom squealed—as if I was the genius behind the musical.

"Mom, please," I complained quietly.

She just *wouldn't* stop *hugging* me.

"Leave the man alone, Esme," Dad chuckled after greeting Bella.

"Seriously, darling. Let the boy go."

Finally, she did.

"I'm just so proud! I can't hug my son?" Mom argued, and then she crashed Bella in an equally tight hug.

I rolled my eyes at her. Mom, that is.

"How are you, son? Excited for the night?" Dad asked and squeezed my shoulder.

Men don't hug in public.

Or in this case, Mom hugged me for the both of us. And I'm good 'til Christmas. Next year.

"I'm fine." I nodded. "My work is done, so now I can just sit back and relax. You?"

"All good here."

"Don't relax too much, Edward. You still have my list," Rose reminded me, linking arms with our dad.

"About that, Rose," Bella chimed in. "You might wanna get Chelsea James off that list."

"How come?" Rose asked, frowning in confusion, and I wasn't sure if I wanted to hide or die.

Or listen intently.

"How about I tell you while we go to the ladies room," Bella suggested.

"Esme, you too, right?"

Mom beamed. "Of course!"

The next thing I saw was three women, linking arms, as they walked off towards the ladies room.

I didn't understand.

Dad didn't either.

Why would Bella bring that up? Why... just why. Was she really bothered by Chelsea's flirting?

That possibility thrilled me. Immensely.

But was it really possible, though? I mean, wouldn't that mean... I mean... don't you need to have feelings for someone in order to get jealous?

Could Bella have feelings for me?

Real ones?

*O*O*O*

By the time the chicks returned, it was time for us to take our seats, so there was no time for me to ask Bella if everything was okay. And Rose

closed the subject by pointing a finger at me, saying, "Get that bitch off my list, 'cause she just made my shit-list instead."

Even Mom piped in with, "That Ms. James is a bitch."

I don't really have to say that I don't understand women, right?

Anyway, Bella and I made our way to the balcony reserved for employees, and my parents and Rose headed toward their seats on Balcony C.

Obviously we ran into Jasper, but after a quick greeting, we took our seats. But of course Jasper managed to throw me a sly smirk before. Hence the *quick* greeting, because I knew it was coming, and I didn't want Bella around for that.

"I'm so excited, Edward," Bella murmured quietly, giving me that smile that made me swallow hard. "I can't wait to see your work."

I love you.

Fuck, why does she have to be so... Why is she so... *caring*. And *interested*. Is it because of the whole friend-thing? 'Cause we're friends? Is that why she's so animated about my work?

Snap out of it, you're over analyzing.

Right.

"I hope your expectations aren't too high," I chuckled quietly, trying to lighten the tension.

"I doubt they could be," she replied, leaning her head on my shoulder as the lights dimmed.

The tension didn't lighten. Not one bit. Because right now, I have the love of my life, sitting next to me, in a dark theatre... and God, she just put her hand on my thigh. No, not in a sexual way. But it felt intimate.

Like we were here on a date.

I couldn't stop myself.

There was no way I could.

Tilting her head up, I dipped down and kissed her. Softly. She didn't protest one bit; instead she kissed me back. With gentle eagerness, parting her lips for me. It was this I loved most. The way our tongues met caressingly at first. Lovingly. And always so sensually.

"Edward," she breathed, placing a hand on my cheek.

It triggered me and I deepened the kiss, only slightly, but I needed it. Her. I needed her. Always. Fuck, tomorrow would be a pain. I kissed her harder, trying not to think about saying goodbye to her tomorrow.

It was getting out of hand, and very, very, reluctantly I slowed the kiss, ending it with a few chaste ones. With my eyes closed.

Foreheads together.

I love you. Stay with us.

More soft kisses. We both lingered, and it felt very...mutual.

"Skipping the party later?" I whispered against her lips.

"Yes," she breathed, kissing me once more.

Chapter 14

EPOV

"I have to get up," she whispered quietly. "I need to take a shower before I leave."

Stay.

I nodded once in the crook of my neck, but instead of letting her go, I rolled us over so I was on top of her. Kissed her hard, with all I had. Needing her again.

We had barely gotten through the door last night before we were all over each other, and as Bella positioned my cock at her entrance, needing one more time, too, I slid into her with the thoughts of yesterday urging me, spurring me on.

"Right now, Edward, right here," she had moaned, as I sucked hard on her neck.

I moved faster, kissed her harder, moaned as she clung to me.

She shoved down my pants and I ripped off her thong, unable to help myself.

I pressed her up against the wall, sliding my nose against her jaw. "How do you want me, baby?"

"Hard," she whimpered. "Against the wall."

I groaned, rolling us over, needing to see her, and she, fuck, moaned my name as she rode me. Leaning back, she placed her hands on my thighs, letting her head fall back, and goddamnit, she was the most beautiful creature alive. Greedily, my eyes took in every movement. How her breasts bounced slightly. How her chest heaved. How her tight pussy clenched around me. How her wetness coated my cock.

"Fuck, baby," I grunted, meeting her every thrust with one of my own.

I slammed into her without restraints, moaning loudly when her nails dug into my back, even through my shirt, and with her legs wrapped around me, with her heels digging into my ass.

I fucked her hard.

It was anger and love combined. Love for everything she had brought me in such a short time. Love for how perfect she was for me. Love for how wonderful she was with Emma.

Anger because it wouldn't last. Anger because she was leaving. Not just for Thanksgiving, but soon, eventually, she would find an apartment. I fucked her hard because close wasn't close enough. I drove deep because still, I needed more. More of her. Deeper. Closer. I wanted her like she already had me.

"Harder, Edward!" she begged. "Need... all of you!"

You fucking have me, I shouted internally, angrier than before because she was leaving me behind. Leaving to start her own fucking life.

Gripping her hips tighter, I pounded into her, feeling remnants of the anger from last night.

She was close. Moaning and gasping. Tighter around me.

"Fuck," I panted breathlessly.

Sitting up, I crashed my mouth against hers, thrusting my tongue into her mouth as I pushed her down hard on my cock. I would follow. Like always when she climaxed, I couldn't hold off.

"So close, baby," she cried out.

We weren't even kissing anymore. It was mouth on mouth, exchanging breaths as we got closer and closer.

Our eyes closed... or at least mine were.

Stay.

Goddamnit, *stay!*

“Yes! Oh, Edward!”

I swallowed hard as she came around me, and like I knew, I followed, unable to stop, and I watched her now, watched as she came undone. It was painful to watch her, painful knowing that she wasn't really mine. Not really. And as I emptied myself, deep inside of her, I wondered just how long I had left with her.

We sat there for what should've felt like forever, but it was mere minutes later that our breaths had returned to normal, and with a passionate kiss, our morning in bed was over.

I tried to smile as she excused herself and headed to the bathroom.

Didn't work.

I felt like a needy child, but I couldn't have cared less. Sure, I had never truly been alone. My family had always been there for me. Helped me. Guided me. Comforted me when I had no clue about how to be a single father.

But now, thanks to Bella, I knew that though I was never alone, I was still lonely.

Fuck this.

*O*O*O*

Saying goodbye was awful.

It felt like it was more than for five days. It felt permanent and I hated it. It actually hurt. Physically, it hurt.

The goodbye? A hug and a chaste kiss.

She was the one ending the hug, ending the kiss. Of course.

Not me.

Never me.

I think she knows about my feelings. Not the extent but she knows I want more. I'm sure of it now, because the look she gave me right before she left... it broke me. She looked like she was in pain, and I can only imagine her spending the next five days coming up with ways to let me down easily.

*O*O*O*

Is it time, Daddy?

"*Not yet, Princess,*" I chuckled.

It's Thanksgiving and we're all gathered at my parents' house for the family dinner, and Emma has a Skype-date with Bella in an hour. It took time, 'cause I'm not very skilled when it comes to technology but Emmett helped me set it up, and Emma sure reminded me to bring the laptop today. Reminded me more than once.

"I'll come get you when it's time, sweetheart. I promise," I added.

That worked and she took off, most likely to play with Emmett before dinner, and I returned to filling the dishwasher as Mom and Rose prepared the dessert, all while yapping about woman-stuff that I couldn't escape.

So, when the doorbell rang, I sure took the opportunity to haul ass.

As did Dad who had been peeling potatoes.

Yes, opening the door takes two grown men.

I swear.

"Are we expecting anyone?" I asked curiously.

It was always just us for Thanksgiving because our grandparents on Mom's side were dead, and Dad's parents lived in Florida and we didn't see them often.

"Nope," Dad replied as we reached the foyer.

I opened the door, and... huh.

Jasper and Katie.

He looked like shit and Katie's eyes were red from crying.

Fuck.

"Come on in," Dad murmured, obviously noticing the same. "I'll leave you alone." He smiled softly at Kate before retreating to the kitchen.

As I watched Jasper help Katie with her coat and shoes, I think it dawned on me, but... dear God, I hope I'm wrong.

"Want to go play with Emma while I talk to Uncle Edward, honey?" Jasper asked quietly, crouching down at Katie's level.

I continued watching the two. Jasper's slumped shoulders, his expression one of sadness and exhaustion, and Katie's trembling lip, eyes full of unshed tears.

I could kill Tanya.

Literally.

I'm still hoping I'm wrong, though.

You will be back, Daddy? Katie asked, her tears falling over then.

Oh, God.

I swallowed hard as Jasper tried to hide his emotions. *"Of course, baby. I will always be here. Always. Do you believe me?"*

Yes, I could kill her. Kill her dead.

Katie nodded, only once, and then her eyes flickered to me.

"Hey, beautiful," I murmured, smiling gently. *"Want me to put on a movie for you and Emma?"*

Yes, please.

I nodded and motioned for her to come to me, and once she did, I picked her up and kissed her cheek before positioning her on my hip.

"Dad's study, Jazz. There's whiskey," I told him.

He understood.

Emma was of course ecstatic to see Katie, so was Emmett, and after I quickly told him what I knew, he took on the role of entertainer for the two girls as I followed Jazz to Dad's study where we could talk privately.

We both sat down on Dad's leather couch. A bottle of whiskey, too, of course.

My heart broke for Katie as Jasper shook his head, leaned forward on his knees... and defeat took over. "She left. She fucking left her," he whispered.

There it was.

I said nothing as I poured two doubles... or maybe it was triples.

She left. She actually left.

"I can't do this any longer. I'm done with this bullshit. This wasn't what I wanted for myself."

"Heidi, you can't be serious!"

Staring down at the glass, I swirled it around as the bitter memories hit me.

Now Tanya was doing the same, only worse. She didn't leave before Katie could remember her. She left *now*. When Katie's six years old and is depending on her mother.

"Do you really want this, Edward? Spare me the crap, and be honest."

"You're out of your fucking mind! You're actually asking me if I want my own daughter?!"

"She said she was done pretending," Jasper chuckled humorlessly before tipping his glass back.

I followed suit, letting the liquid burn its way down my throat.

I missed Bella. Needed her here with me. Needed more than sex and casual. Much more. So much more.

Two days without her had been painful. Three more days to go. Two and a half, really, because I'm counting.

"I'm not stupid, Edward. I know you put this ring on my finger because of... because of her."

"We both did it for Emma!"

It was wrong from the start. For both me and Heidi. There were never any lasting feelings. Not ones strong enough to pull off a marriage, anyway. But I *would've* done it for my princess, just like Jasper would if Tanya hadn't started her bitching about 'fixing' Katie like she was a damn object.

With a heavy sigh, I poured Jasper a new drink before I returned to my own.

"She left when Katie was there, Edward." His voice cracked. "I had to explain to my six year old girl that her mom isn't coming back."

Again, I swallowed my emotions. Let my glass go before I crushed it.

No words can describe the disgust I feel towards Tanya and Heidi.

I suppose I'm still in a somewhat good place in my life, though, because I'm grateful that Heidi left so early. Emma will never miss her personally. She doesn't have any memories of that bitch. But Tanya...

How *could* she? Where's her humanity?

And with Katie right there?

"Did she say anything to her?" I asked quietly, taking my glass again.

The burn was good.

"Yeah," he choked out. After taking a few calming breaths, he continued. "She said that Katie would be happier with only me. Then she left after handing me an envelope."

Envelope.

"I've already signed the papers. All you have to do is sign the dotted line, and she's yours."

"What the hell are you talking about? What papers?"

Heidi threw me a manila envelope that day. Already prepared. It was already planned. *She* had it all planned.

"Tanya signed everything over to me. She just wanted out. Wanna know something funny? She's already met some rich fucker from the Hamptons."

Another humorless laugh.

More whiskey.

"Fucking hell," I sighed tiredly, closing my eyes as I leaned back on the couch.

"You'll make her happy, Edward. I know you love her."

"You're actually walking out on her. What kind of person does that?! You're her mother, Heidi!"

She wasn't, though. She gave birth to her but she was never her mother. Heidi never stopped what she was doing just because her daughter lit up the room. Heidi never trailed off the path she was on. Emma didn't get in the way, because to Heidi, Emma wasn't even there to begin with. She didn't name her. She didn't care that I wanted Emma to be a Cullen. She just left it up to me. I was the one naming her Emma.

"How can you even consider leaving your own child? I just... I don't understand."

"This was never me, Edward, and you know it!"

"I wasn't me either, Heidi, but it changed! How can it not?! That little girl in there is everything to me!"

Heidi was a coldhearted bitch, and I told her that.

But Tanya has been a mother. Tanya who may have disagreed with Jasper and acted like a true bitch, too, has still been a mother. Yes, Jazz was always more a father than Tanya was a mother, but she was still there. She smiled for Katie, loved her. I thought at least.

But you can't really love someone if you leave them.

Right?

If you love someone, you stay.

I swallowed the rest of my drink and forced myself to not let my thoughts wander to another one leaving. Not that it's the same. Far from it. Bella's a beautiful person. Inside and out. She'll never leave Emma, because she loves her.

Fuck, I wasn't supposed to think about that now.

I sighed again.

What a wonderful Thanksgiving.

"You're staying here tonight, right?" I asked.

He nodded once. "If it's okay."

"Of course."

We were both quiet again.

I knew Jasper's thoughts were focused solely on Katie right now, but I promised myself right then and there to make sure he thought about

himself, too, because I didn't when I was in his shoes. I didn't think about myself at all. I didn't want to. Truth be told, I couldn't. It was too much, because if I did, I would break down. Not because of my feelings for Heidi – obviously – but for Emma, and how to raise her alone. And it took an intervention from Emmett and Rose for me to snap out of my zombie state back then.

I was just so focused on my girl. Always thinking 'if I don't focus on her, then who will?'

"She's not normal! She's... she's... she's deformed!"

"Get the fuck out, Heidi."

I flinched.

That was the last of Heidi.

And thanks to my family, we pulled through. I went to a therapist a few times to talk things out, just... to get it all out. And then we grew stronger. We studied ASL together as a family, we stayed close, making sure that Emma always had more than one person around her... and my family of course made sure I didn't close myself in, for which I'm thankful for today. Because I know today, that I couldn't have done it alone. I couldn't have done it without my sister's annoying love for being girly with Emma, and not without her every-once-in-a-while moments where she and I talked like friends and not brother and sister. Not without Emmett's childish behavior and his love for his Spider Monkey, and not without his support. He's always been there for me, and he's obviously not always childish, but his first priority has always been Emma, and that's just the way I love it. That's how it's supposed to be.

Same goes for my parents. I couldn't have done it without them. They've been supportive all the way, both as grandparents to Emma, and parents to me.

And now...

Now Jasper has to go through the same. But with a six year old.

A few more minutes passed, and then Jasper said that he'd like to be alone for a while, and I knew all too well what he would do now. So, before I headed towards the girls, I watched Jasper as he headed for one of the guestrooms.

He would break down.

Just like I did once, when my shock had worn off.

Sighing and rubbing my face, I took a few breaths before making the turn for the living room.

They were all there.

"How is he?" Mom asked, nothing but concern in her voice.

Rose and Emmett were on the couch, and I was a bit relieved when I saw Katie asleep in Rose's arms. Hopefully she would be out for a while, so Jazz could get his shit out in private.

"As expected," I sighed, checking my watch.

"Katie didn't say much but..." Emmett trailed off.

I knew what he wondered about, though, and I nodded as I walked over to the couch where Emma had her eyes glued to the screen.

Ice Age, you know.

"Yeah, Tanya walked out," I confirmed, and I had to smile just a little as my sister let out an impressive line of profanities under her breath. Mom did the same.

Hi, Daddy. Emma smiled crookedly, and it was the same but it was different. Now with the whole Jasper-mess I felt the need to see for myself that Emma was happy. I knew she was of course, but still... with all the old memories resurfacing from when Heidi left Emma, I needed more. Confirmation, if you will. And thankfully, I know what will make her smile wider now.

"*Hey, Princess. Ready for Bella?*" I asked, winking at her.

Yes!

I was right, and it felt like my entire body thawed when I heard her giggle and saw her furious nodding in excitement.

"*Alright,*" I chuckled. "*I'm just going to call her and make sure everything is ready, okay?*"

Okay, but what is the sign, Daddy?

"*For what, baby?*" I asked.

For talking on the computer, she replied, giving me the God-you're-so-dumb look.

She did *not* get that look from me. That's all Rose.

"*You mean Skype,*" I laughed softly, a bit amused by her sass.

As long as it didn't go too far, I added mentally.

I don't want a Rose, because God knows I remember her growing up.

My cell phone rang then, and I excused myself to get it when I saw that it was Bella.

"I'll set up the laptop, bro!" Emmett called after me.

"Thanks!" I replied, halfway to the kitchen.

Ignoring the feelings stirring, I brought the phone to my ear.

"Hey, beautiful."

Silence.

"Bella?"

Then I heard sniffing.

"Edward?"

Her voice was... *fuck, she's crying.*

Now what!

How much can go wrong in one day?

"Bella, what's wrong?" I asked, trying not to panic as sat down at the table in the kitchen.

She just cried.

It *killed* me.

I didn't know. I didn't know what was wrong. I didn't know how to fix it. I didn't know *anything*.

And this day *sucked*.

"Baby, please, what's wrong?" I tried again, pulling at my hair in frustration.

This is just... *too much*. Too much for one day.

"*I just... my Skype won't work, Edward,*" she sobbed, and I think I stopped breathing for a while. "*I tried, but... Even drove to Port Angeles... for better reception... but no connection...*"

Didn't really know how to react here.

A part of me wanted to breathe out in relief, and I think I did, because it wasn't worse than Skype, but... it still hurt me to hear her cry, and I was so *over* this. So fucking over feeling like shit wasn't *enough*. Too much *shit* everywhere.

"*I'm sorry,*" she whispered brokenly.

Fuck that.

"Don't fucking apologize, baby," I said, firmly but still a bit pleadingly.

"Don't worry about it. Seriously. Don't..." *cry. Please, just don't cry.*

Ever heard of Murphy's Law?

"*But I... I just... miss her...*"

Oh.

Fuck!

That's... *that's* why she's *crying*? Because she misses my daughter?

For once in my life, I truly wished I was a kid again. Just so that I could, I don't know... maybe just cry. Or whatever.

"She misses you, too, beautiful." *We both do... and I really fucking need you.* "Two more days and you'll see her."

Considered banging my head against the wall, but, maybe that would be a bit too much. Maybe. I'm not ruling it out quite just yet.

"Yeah... okay..."

Still crying.

I racked my brain for *something*, something that would make her feel better, but I came up with shit, and it pissed me the fuck off, because I needed for her to feel better. To feel good.

"Is... is anything else wrong?" I asked carefully. I mean, was it really *this* hard for her to be away from Emma?

"No... I'm just... homesick, I guess... and I really miss her."

Closing my eyes, I sighed and dragged a hand over my face, thinking about what she just said. She misses Emma so much it has her in tears. She's homesick. Is that New York? Or her... *temporary* home. The home I wished she shared with me and Emma. Forever.

"We'll pick you up," I said then, out of the blue, but I found myself loving the idea. "At the airport. Emma and I will be there to pick you and Alice up, okay?"

Come home.

"Yeah?" she asked, sniffing.

"Absolutely," I replied, nodding even though she couldn't see me. "And once we've dropped Alice off, we'll take Emma to the park... or something."

"Thank you," she whispered, and I breathed out in relief as her crying seemed to calm down some.

I was confused, though.

"Why are you thanking me?"

And at this, she actually chuckled. It was a beautiful sound despite the sniffing. I wanted to hear more chuckling. No, what I really wanted to hear was her giggling. The way she did with Emma. That was one of my favorite sounds. Those two, giggling together. Emma and Bella.

"Because you made me feel better, of course."

Another chuckle.

Thank you.

"I aim to please," I said, grinning when it seemed to lighten the mood, and fuck me if she didn't giggle once.

"Seriously, Edward," she murmured after a few seconds of silence. *"Thank you. I'm sure you didn't plan on spending this time consoling me."*

"Not a problem, beautiful, really," I murmured back, wishing I could tell her how much I missed her. "I'm... here for you."

I allowed myself to say at least that.

"Well, I wish I could be there for you when you tell Emma about our Skype-date. I mean, it shouldn't be you," she mumbled, and I hurried to reassure her before her sadness came back.

"Don't worry about it, baby. I'll tell her about our plans for the day you come home. That will brighten her up, I promise."

And I knew it would.

Emma would be ecstatic.

Bella and I ended the call a few minutes later, and for a while, I just sat there... missing her like the pathetic man I've become.

No. Fuck that. I'm not pathetic.

Just happened to fall in love with the one woman that...dammit. Time for the pity-party to end.

Thanksgiving dinner was next. Was I up for that?

Not really, no.

But what-the-fuck-ever.

As I got up from my seat, it sounded like someone was there, in the doorway, but I dismissed it as I saw nothing.

Chapter 15

EPOV

Just got off the plane! You guys here? xo – B.

You bet. We're both very eager to see you – E.

Don't really care about sounding casual right anymore. These past five days have been fucked up. Horrible and awful, you name it. I probably don't have much time with her left, anyway, so I'm going all out until she dumps my sorry ass.

Aside from the misery Jazz and Katie are going through, not much has happened. I've kept myself busy with either work, or hanging out with my girl.

Now I just need my other girl and I'm fucking perfect.

Not my girl?

Fucking sue me.

I'm pretending.

I smiled then as I heard Emma humming.

We were standing in the waiting lounge at Newark, and she was hugging my leg while I dragged my fingers through her curls. I suppose that's another thing she's gotten from me, 'cause God knows I've been purring like a goddamn cat when Bella does it to me.

When, Daddy?

Yes, she's eager, too.

"*Very soon, Princess,*" I said, winking to her.

Holding her arms up for me, I complied instantly and picked her up.

"I love you," I mouthed.

"I love you, Daddy," she mouthed back, nuzzling our noses together before she – of course – pressed my cheeks together to make those funny faces.

I can quite easily live on her giggles. No doubt about that.

What are we doing today, Daddy?

I chuckled and gave her a pointed look, because she knew very well that I had no idea what we were doing. It was all Bella. She had insisted on planning our day with Emma, and I had told Emma a million times when she'd ask. *I don't know, Princess.* Over and over.

There was a throat-clearing then, and I looked in the direction of it...
Goddamnit, nearly passed out when I saw her there. Just looked at her.

Emma hadn't seen her yet.

But I had.

She stood there, with Alice, holding her luggage... eyes glassy.

Timid smile. Biting down on her lip.

Fuck, I'd missed her.

Nuzzling Emma's cheek to get her attention, I then nodded to her in
Bella's direction.

Then I watched as Emma – after squirming her way down – ran over to
launch at Bella. Giggling and squealing, most likely suffocating Bella with
hugs and kisses. But that's not what forced me to avert my eyes to the
floor. It was the unshed tears in Bella's eyes falling over as she hugged
Emma right back. Soon, they were both on the ground, still hugging.

I heard her sniffing.

Couldn't watch it.

It was just... too much.

"Hey, Edward," I heard a voice say quietly. A voice of distraction.

Looking up from the floor, I plastered a smile on my face.

"Hello, Alice. How was your Thanksgiving?" I asked politely.

Cocking an eyebrow at me, she actually *huffed*. "Like a slow fucking
death, as I'm sure yours was, too."

This was the second time I'd met Alice.

Second.

I suppose politeness is no longer necessary.

But hey, she's right on the money. Why deny it?

"You have a way with words," I replied with a nod.

"Mmhmm, that's what I thought," she said cryptically.

I looked down again, 'cause I sorta understood what she meant. Bella's obviously told her about my feelings.

Then, quietly, she asked, "How's Jasper?"

Of course she knows.

I sighed. "Not very good. He took Katie and went to his parents in Houston for a few days."

We didn't speak again.

After a while, Bella came over, carrying Emma on her hip.

I didn't hesitate to wrap them both in a hug, and it was like sweet reunion to feel her, to touch her, to smell her.

Stay.

"You okay?" she asked.

Yeah, she's probably wondering why I'm still hugging her.

But I'm still pretending she's mine.

"I am now."

Yes, those words flew out of my mouth.

She tensed, I grimaced internally.

"Sorry," I mumbled, releasing her. "S'just been a fucked up few days."

She nodded as set Emma down on the ground. "Yeah, I heard about Jasper. That's awful. Can't fucking believe she left like that."

And of course this is why Bella thinks my holiday's been horrible.

Desperate to change the topic, I quickly came up with a safe subject.

"What's on the agenda today? Emma's been a bit... persistent, in finding out." I grinned. Forced grin.

With a bright smile, she said, "We are going to the aquarium."

A family outing. How wonderful.

Well, pretending won't really be hard, now will it?

*O*O*O*

"Something wrong?" I asked, noticing Bella's thoughtful expression.

We had spent the past two hours watching animals and a few exhibits, and Emma had been bouncing off the walls with excitement ever since we arrived at the aquarium, but now it was time to get something to eat. So, we were sitting in one of the restaurants, and I was glad to see Emma distracted by her pizza and the coloring book and crayons she'd been given, because man, oh *man*, she's a handful when she's excited.

"Oh, um, no," Bella replied, seemingly snapping out of her reverie. "I was just thinking about my recital the day after tomorrow."

I smiled, remembering how she had proudly told me that she was one of the five students in her class, chosen to perform at the annual November Ballad that Juilliard hosts.

"Excited?" I asked, excited myself since she'd asked me a few weeks ago to come see her, and there was not a chance in hell I was missing that. I'd even taken off from work and arranged for Emma to be with Rose and Em.

"Yeah, it's gonna be fun," she replied, but then she seemed to hesitate, glancing at me before averting her eyes again.

"Tell me," I murmured, giving her a small but knowing smile.

She sighed then, and... blushed.

"Um yea... so, you- I mean, do you remember-" She stopped there, cursed under her breath and I was as confused as ever as I watched her blush harder and harder.

Then she just blurted it out. "You're coming, right?"

Does-... I mean, doesn't she want-... uh, what?

"Yes?" I eyed her warily. "I mean, that's the plan."

"Oh," was her reply, but then she sorta smiled. Hugely. Like, in relief.

That's good, right?

"Unless you don't-" I started to say, but she cut me off.

"I do. I was just wondering, 'cause maybe you forgot. I mean, it was a while ago I told you," she rambled, blushing again, and this time, I didn't care – I took her hand that was on the table.

"I wouldn't miss it, Bella."

*O*O*O*

Later that night, I allowed myself to keep pretending as we were in the bathtub together.

The day had been long and filled with nothing but fun, and it was easy to pretend with Bella and Emma. They both loved each other completely, and I stayed quiet, just watching them laugh and goof around. And now, as she's sitting between my legs in the hot water, humming as I kiss her neck, it's still easy to pretend that she's mine, that we're both parents, tired after a day with our girl.

My hands roamed her flawless body, slowly and sensually, memorizing her. My mouth was on her skin, my tongue tasting her, my teeth nipping slightly, making her moan quietly. She was my everything in this moment. She was mine, and as I trailed down, caressing her stomach, I pictured our future. Perhaps another child. It hurt to think about it, and I knew I was being an idiot, setting myself up for heartbreak, but I couldn't stop the images. The images of having a family with her, of *being* a family with her.

She would open her community center.

I sighed, closing my eyes tightly as my hand trailed down further, reaching her bare pussy, and teasingly, I fingered her, thinking I could live off the sounds she made. Lazily and gently, my middle finger entered her as my thumb rubbed circles on her clit, and my other hand found her breast. It made me swallow hard to feel such perfection, and I was harder than steel behind her, but was that weird? It had been five days. five long days without her. Five days of misery, and this, this wasn't just what my body wanted. It was what my entire being *needed*.

"Oh, Edward," she breathed, tilting her face up to kiss my throat.

"I love your body, baby," I whispered, claiming her mouth with mine in a passionate kiss as I continued using my fingers on her. First slowly and gently, then I dipped a second finger inside of her, making her moan into our kiss, and I deepened it, thrusting my tongue inside her mouth.

"Please, Edward," she whimpered, breaking our kiss. "I need you."

God, yes.

Turning around, she straddled me and kissed me hard as she positioned my cock at her entrance, and we swallowed each others moans when she lowered herself until I was completely engulfed by her. Hips meeting hips. Mouth on mouth, kissing harder and harder. Her hands tugging on my hair, my hands cupping her ass.

I groaned as she rolled her hips, and I breathed heavily, feeling her clench down on me, and then she – slowly but surely – moved on top of me. Kissing me everywhere, Bella controlled the movements, and it was more than I had ever felt before. Her tongue tasting my skin, hands in my hair, her breast moving, slick from the water, against my chest as she... I couldn't say she fucked me, because this was... something else. This was more. Was it more for her, too?

"I love your body, too," she whispered, nibbling on the skin below my ear, and I found myself tightening my hold on her, needing more. All of her.

"Bella," I moaned quietly, meeting her thrusts as I moved one hand towards her clit. "God, Bella... you feel so fucking perfect."

My eyes were closed and our mouths connected again, once again passionately, our tongues caressing, stroking, savoring, tasting, and we moved together in the water persistently, slowly, deliberately.

My orgasm was approaching quickly, and I felt her, too, tighten and tremble, holding me closer, breathing heavier.

"I... I missed you," she whimpered, and my breathing hitched as her words registered. Missed me. She missed me.

"I missed you, too, sweetheart," I breathed, feeling a new urgency trigger me, and I kissed her. I kissed her hard, and mumbled between kisses. "Missed you so fucking much, Bella. You have no idea."

"Oh God, Edward," she cried out, and I felt her.

As her head lolled back, she constricted fiercely around me and moaned out my name over and over as the orgasm assaulted her body, and just as I felt her relax, I dipped down and captured her nipple between my teeth, and she surprised me when she gasped loudly, tensing all over. Again, then. Fuck, she's coming *again*.

I kept rubbing her clit as I thrust upwards, hitting her sweet spot, and then... I couldn't hold it any longer. She was just so fucking tight around me, pulsing, throbbing... squeezing me... so, with a loud groan, I followed, coming hard inside of her, as I sucked on her nipple, loving everything about her. Her taste. Her touch. Her constricting. Her breathy moans.

"Fuck, Edward," she panted breathlessly, collapsing against my chest. "I think you killed me."

I chuckled, also spent and breathless, as I held her to me, dropping lazy kisses on her shoulder and neck.

We sat there in silence until the water started to get cold, and then we washed each other, making me realize one thing.

Our time is definitely coming to an end, and Bella – the twenty year old girl I've fallen in love with – may not want what I have to offer, but one thing is clear. She does feel something for me, and our 'break-up' will definitely be hard for her as well. That much was evident in the way she looked at me, the way she kissed me... the way she soundlessly followed

me to my bedroom... the way she fell asleep in my arms... the way she sighed my name in her sleep.

She has feelings for me.

Dare I hope?

No. She has her life ahead of her, which makes me sound old, and I'm not, but I have everything settled. I live in the apartment I love, I have my Emma, I have my dream job. I have what I want and need when it comes to everything besides her. But again, remembering back to when I was twenty, I didn't want what I have today. I didn't want this.

She can't either. And if she's harboring some crush on me, I'm sure she'll get over it once she realizes that there are so much out there for her. Travelling, experiencing new things...

*O*O*O*

When I woke up the next morning, there was no Bella in my bed, but there was a note.

You said you express yourself through music.

I'm the same when it comes to dancing.

Remember that.

And, we have to talk after the show.

~Bella.

I had a feeling it would be a long day. An awful day.

I'm scared shitless that tonight is the night she'll end it.

Chapter 16

Song: *Every Time We Touch* by Cascada (ballad version)

EPOV

"You wanted to talk?" Rose said, taking a seat at the kitchen table.

"Yeah," I replied, nodding once as I sat down next to her. "Um, have you talked to Bella much lately?"

"We talk whenever we see each other at Em's gym, and sometimes we call. Why?"

I was beyond tired and yeah, just whatever, so I decided to just show Rose the letter from this morning. Of course I knew that Rose would now probably put the pieces together and find out about my relationship with Bella, but I just didn't care any longer. I couldn't find it in me to care.

So, I pulled the note out from my pocket and handed it to Rose.

She was quiet for a while, her face was blank, which I thought was weird.

Then, all she did was quirk an eyebrow at me.

"What?" I asked.

"How long have you been sleeping with her?"

So she figured it out.

I sighed.

"Since a few days after Halloween." I grimaced.

Had it really only been a little more than a month?

Felt like a lifetime of angst to me.

Rose nodded. Not surprised, which surprised me.

"I heard you talk to her on the phone, Edward," she sighed. "At Thanksgiving."

That I understood immediately.

I remember thinking that someone had been in the doorway.

"God, Edward, you're so in love with her."

It was a statement and I- well, like I said, I was done denying.

Instead, I nodded.

And now, for the reason I called Rose over. "I realize this will sound so fucking ridiculous but-

Rose cut me off with a smirk. "You want to know if she's confided in me... about you."

I grimaced again, but managed to nod because it was the truth. That's why I called her. I need something to hold on to, even if it's gossip or what-the-fuck-ever. Something that might calm my ass down before facing Bella tonight.

"If she talked to me, Edward, don't you think I would've told you by now? I mean, seriously, I've known about your feelings towards her for a long time now, and yes, I may have talked to Emma a bit, you know, to find out about how you two are, living together. And I wouldn't have done that if I had Bella's words to go on."

My sister wasn't done. "I mean, I've suspected that Bella feels *something* for you, especially after *Volturi Rock*, but whenever I've tried to broach the subject, she's dodged it. I think Alice is the one she's talking to about this."

I don't know how many times I sighed. Just sorta sat there and did nothing. Expect sighing and pulling my hair. I tend to do that. A lot. Pinching the bridge of my nose, too.

That Bella has feelings for me is quite obvious, but what I need to know is if she's leaving. Christ, I'm so desperate that I've even contemplated calling Alice, but... just, no. I'll just have to wait until tonight.

"I'm curious, though," Rose mused. "How did this happen? I mean, how did you decide it would be casual and not a relationship? I assume it was *you*, 'cause I doubt Bella would ever broach the topic of starting a friends-with-benefits relationship."

I blinked.

Frowned in confusion.

And then I was met with my sister's glare, and she fucking seethed at me. "Fucking shit, Edward, did you two even talk?! Or did you just assume!"

Uh...

"Edward, what if she had feelings for you from the beginning and you just assumed it would be casual! Christ, you're a fucking idiot. What if you hurt her!"

I pulled at my hair. Looked down.

Did Bella and I ever talk?

No.

We just sorta fell into a routine. Right?

Fuck, what a mess.

But could I have done that? Hurt her? Oh, God...

"I need to know, Edward. How did all this start? I mean, did the tension or whatever just become too much? Or were you guys drunk? Did you hit on her, did she hit on you?"

I groaned. I shouldn't have called my sister. I should've called Jasper.

"So then what?" she continued. "After you hooked up, or the morning after or how it now happened, you just left? Or did she leave? Enlighten me!"

"Fuck!" I snapped. "We never talked, okay? And..." I sighed. Again. Pulled at my hair. Again. "The morning after, she wasn't in bed, but she left a note about me 'approaching' her later that night."

Take me out of this mess!

But Rose was relentless and didn't miss a beat. "Did you ever make her believe *anything*? Or did she have to figure it out on her own that it was one way and not the other..."

If I close my eyes, will she disappear?

I just... Goddamnit, I don't know anything. I don't know if- wait.

"You better let me fuck you again, baby," I grunted. "Not... just tonight..."

That's what I remember telling her. That first night when we had sex.

That's what I told her.

If she wanted more from me then, then that's how I told her that what we had was casual. That was how she found out, *if* she wanted more. In the middle of sex. That's how she found out. Because what I said, that's not what you say if you're starting a relationship. What I said is something

you say if it's casual, and I said that... because that's what she wanted, right? She never wanted anything else, did she?

No.

She's twenty years old. She-... no. She wanted casual, and now she's ending it because she probably knows about my feelings for her.

Right?

Yeah...

"You better fucking talk to her, Edward. I'm going home, and Em will stop by after work to pick up Emma. Call me tomorrow, and be lucky if she didn't dump your sorry ass."

Right. Love you, too, sis.

*O*O*O*

My hands are faucets.

I'm freaking out.

But I'm here. At Juilliard, and too many fuckers have approached me just because I'm somewhat known in this business, and what I want is for them to disappear, because I'm here to see Bella. Here to see her before 'we talk.' Here to pretend for one last night that she's mine.

There have been dance performances, in many categories, and there's been acting, singing, and playing, but now – after this intermission – it's time for Bella's solo performance, and I have no idea what she decided on. I mean, I remember all those weeks ago, in my music room; I know it was for this recital, for this event, and she made it. But whenever I asked her what piece she decided on, she simply shook her head.

Once I was back in my seat, I pulled out my phone and sent Bella a quick text.

Good luck, beautiful. Not that you need it ;) – Edward.

I really didn't expect a reply since she was on in five minutes, but I was proven wrong when my phone vibrated.

I'm so fucking nervous! I'll see you after? – Bella.

I chuckled and replied.

Of course, baby. I'm in the back, so I'll slip out right after. I'll wait for you by the exit. – Edward.

Okay. I'm up :S – Bella.

Yes, you are, I thought, pocketing my cell as one of my old professors took the stage.

"Welcome back," he said into the microphone. "Next we have Bella Swan, a ballet major on her third year, and she will be accompanied by Claire Ateara on the piano, and Rachel Black on vocals. The stage is yours, ladies."

I couldn't hide the grin when I saw three petite women take the stage, and my chest, Christ, there was some massive fluttering going on all over, and it was all Bella.

Wearing a simple black outfit that clung to her like second skin, she took her spot under a lone spotlight, and it was exactly how I envisioned her, even back when I knew so little about her. Just a piano, just... simplicity and her.

My professional side obviously noticed the perfection in her posture, and she truly had an amazing body, graceful, beautiful, and supple, perfect for what she was about to do.

I was also curious now, especially since there was a singer next to the pianist.

She must have chosen something entirely different, and I couldn't wait to find out.

Before I could bounce in my seat like a goddamn kid, the song began, slowly and beautiful, just the piano at first, and it was modern. Kinda recognized it but I couldn't be sure. Then, both Bella and the vocalist followed.

I still hear your voice, when you sleep next to me

I still feel your touch in my dream

Forgive me my weakness, but I don't know why

Without you, it's hard to survive

I let out a shaky breath, leaned back in my seat, and stared at her. At Bella. And I listened to the lyrics, because they...huh. Did they mean something?

'Cause everytime we touch, I get this feeling

And everytime we kiss, I swear I could fly

Can't you feel my heart beat fast, I want this to last

Need you by my side

'Cause everytime we touch, I feel the static

And everytime we kiss, I reach for the sky

Can't you hear my heart beat so

I can't let you go

Want you in my life

I could barely breathe.

Bella, she moved slowly to the music, and she was a vision. Flawless and so goddamn beautiful. Indescribable. And then the lyrics. They nagged at me. Was this what she meant? She told me to remember that she, too, expressed herself... but she said 'dancing,' that she expressed herself with dance. But this... fuck.

Your arms are my castle, your heart is my sky

They wipe away tears that I cry

The good and the bad times, we've been through them all

You make me rise when I fall

Breathe, Cullen, for fuck's sake, breathe.

I gulped.

Is... shit, are the lyrics for me?

Did she choose this for a reason?

'Cause everytime we touch, I get this feeling

And everytime we kiss, I swear I could fly

Can't you feel my heart beat fast, I want this to last

Need you by my side

'Cause everytime we touch, I feel the static

And everytime we kiss, I reach for the sky

Can't you hear my heart beat so

I can't let you go

Want you in my life

As I paid attention to Bella, as I focused hard, it was suddenly very clear that her movements mirrored the words.

Truth be told, it was emotional to watch her, and if... if this was her way of... I don't know... perhaps telling me that she wants more, that she wants...

Could that be it?

Could she want us?

'Cause everytime we touch, I get this feeling

And everytime we kiss, I swear I could fly

Can't you feel my heart beat fast, I want this to last

Need you by my side

As slowly and softly as the song had begun, it ended. The performance- can I call it that? Was it a performance?

Or a confession.

I wish it's the latter.

I really fucking wish it's the latter.

The audience erupted in cheers and applauds, and God knows I wanted to do the same, but I couldn't. I was too frozen at the moment.

*O*O*O*

If I thought I was freaking out before, I was wrong. Because as I waited for Bella to come out, I was pacing like a madman outside the auditorium. You know, pulling at my hair, too. And then when she did appear, wearing a long cardigan, and still her black leggings from the show, she said nothing... almost. Her face was completely blank as she told me that we were going home, and then, it got even worse, because we walked in silence. A deafening one.

I tried to tell her how amazing her performance was but the words got stuck in my throat, which pissed me off, because she truly was amazing. She is a terrific ballet dancer, and she deserves to hear it, but I couldn't get the fucking words out.

The walk between our- my place, and Juilliard isn't a long one, but it felt like a lifetime when no words were exchanged. The tension was... palpable, and truth be told; I was vulnerable.

I was afraid I had fucked this up so royally that it couldn't be fixed.

Had I hurt her?

I can only imagine, that if I wanted her – which I do – and I find out, *as we're having sex*, that all she wants is casual... Christ, I would've been heartbroken.

And hurting Bella... that *kills* me.

"Evening, Ms. Swan, Mr. Cullen," Marcus greeted us, holding the door open for us.

I nodded in return, and then did the same as Eleazar greeted us from the front desk.

The elevator ride was long.

And quiet.

Wriggling the keys as I unlocked the apartment set my body on fire, but this time it wasn't sexual. Now it was full on clammy-mode. My hands, my chest, my eyebrows, my armpits, my entire goddamn body was clammy as I motioned for Bella to enter first. My breathing sped up, too, and it hurt. My chest constricted.

Why couldn't I read her face?

Bella walked to the kitchen once we had removed jackets and shoes, and I followed dumbly.

Then, as we reached the kitchen...

"Sit down."

Yes, ma'am.

She grabbed two bottles of water from the fridge as I took my seat at the table, and I sat there, elbows on the table, my hands clasped in front of me, just waiting for...

"I can't do this anymore."

That.

Yep, that was what I waited for.

She sat down across from me, pushed my bottle towards me, and I left it untouched.

She can't do this anymore.

Exhaling deeply, feeling all air leave me, I scrubbed my hands over my face. I couldn't face her for this. Hurt too much.

Fuck, it *hurts*.

"Don't leave Emma," I pleaded quietly, shaking my head slightly. "Please."

With my hands threaded in my hair, I kept my eyes downcast, pretending to love watching the table.

"You don't really know me if you ever thought I'd do that," she said.

Her voice was confident, a bit condescending, which I understood, because she was right. She would never leave my girl, and it was practically an insult for me to bring it up.

"You're right," I replied, feeling my throat close up.

Silence.

I sat frozen, just listening as Bella picked the label off her bottle.

"I've found an apartment."

No.

Please.

My eyes prickled, so I shut them tightly.

"Look, I know you have feelings for me, Edward, and after my recital, I'm sure you know I feel the same if not more, but I just... I'm done with this."

Fucking shit, this pain is *unbelievably*... painful. "A part of me wish I could keep this little game going, but I can't. I can't deal with your mood changes anymore. It hurts me."

Uh... right... what?

"Mood changes?" I asked, lifting my head to face her.

Still that blank expression.

She cocked an eyebrow at me then, silently asking me if I'm serious.

I am, because I have no fucking idea what she's talking about.

"Jesus, you're serious," she muttered. "I'm obviously talking about the way you've been acting around me, Edward. One second you're the most loving man on earth, and then the next second, you shy away as if I'll bite. I mean, you can't hold onto me the way you do, and then set the alarm just to make sure you get out of bed before I do."

Ah, *shit*.

"Yeah, you think I didn't notice? Please, you're so fucking transparent it's ridiculous, Edward," she snapped. "I've known about your feelings from the start, so imagine my surprise when I find out that all you want from me is casual fucking!"

I flinched.

Rose was right.

I fucked up. Royally.

And Jesus, Bella knew?

But then again, stealth was never my name, now was it?

"Since I'm a glutton for punishment, I stayed, and I played along. That, and the fact that I couldn't leave Emma, but I'm done now. You can't have casual when you treat me the way you do. You can't expect me to stay neutral or whatever when you look at me the way you do, or the way you always stay close. I'm just done. I'll move into my new apartment, and then I'll be here for Emma while you're working."

FUCK!

"I just want to know one thing before I leave, Edward."

My head snapped up.

She's leaving now?! Right now?!

Then I cringed as I saw the hurt. Her expression wasn't blank anymore, it was hurt. Eyes welled up, trembling lip, creased forehead...

"Since you clearly have feelings for me, why did you only want casual with me? Was it my age? Am I not good enough for you? Am I not good enough for Emma-?"

WHAT?!

"No! I mean, fuck!" I choked out. "Are you fucking kidding me, Bella? You're better than-... fucking hell, I can't get shit out right..." I took a deep breath, rubbed my goddamn eyes to rid the stinging. "I didn't know, Bella," I sighed, and I was being a coward because I couldn't look her in the eye. "I never knew you wanted more. Christ, I wanted- fuck..." Exhaling sharply, I finally found my balls, and then I looked right at her, ready to be honest for once, because no matter what I told her, she wouldn't leave Emma at least. "Bella, I wanted more all along. I've wanted a relationship with you from the start, but... I-I mean... you're twenty year old..." I trailed off weakly.

Tears ran down her face. "So, it's my age then. I'm too young for a relationship with you, but casual fucking is all-fucking-right?"

"Stop saying that!" I snapped, feeling my temper flare, because it was *never* casual to me. "Those mood changes you mentioned were never about shying away from you! That was me forcing myself to act casual for you, so that you wouldn't walk out!" I groaned in frustration, but I needed to get this out, so I continued. "Don't you get it, Bella? You're not too young for me, it was never about *me*! I was thinking about *you*, and how you're too young to want what I have. I'm already settled in my life. I have Emma, my job, this place. I'm not going anywhere. But you... I mean, when I was twenty, I barely knew what I was doing the next weekend!"

"But I'm not you, Edward!" she shot back. "Couldn't you for one goddamn second stop to consider the fact that I'm different?!"

"I know you're different," I argued. "I've known that all along. Why the fuck do you think I started having feelings for you? Because you were like the rest of them?" I chuckled humorlessly. "My only reason for holding back was because I thought you'd feel suffocated and think I was too much. And then, sometimes... I mean, when I got closer or whatever... when I complimented you or... wanted you near me, you got all tense. Is it so fucking weird that I forced myself to hold back then?"

"You're such a fucking idiot, you know that, right?"

That's her reply?

Wow.

"I'm very aware," I replied dryly. "Trust me, I've heard it before."

"No, seriously, Edward. How clueless are you? I mean, can't you understand that my reason for *tensing* as you so eloquently put it, was

because your mixed signals were making me lose my fucking mind? I 'tensed' because you were confusing the shit out of me!"

Uh... oh.

"Wait," I muttered, sorting my thoughts as I, you know, pulled at my hair.

"So, you... um, really wanted more from the beginning?"

"Wow, welcome to the show, Captain Obvious," she snarked.

She's fire. Fire and more fire.

So, she wanted me?

"I wanted you, too, from the beginning," I mumbled. And fuck my life because I'm pretty sure I'm blushing.

Christ, I'm a fuck-up.

"I know, Edward," she replied, softer this time but she was still upset.

"And had you only discussed this with me..." She trailed off.

And since I'm the idiot, I argue like a goddamn child. "If you knew I wanted more, then why didn't *you* talk to *me*?"

I shouldn't have said that.

Her fire was back. In full force, and I fought the urge to cover my balls.

"You are un-fucking-believable!" she... well, she shouted. "How the hell was I supposed to know that your reason for holding back was *me*?! I'm a rational human being, Edward. Don't you fucking understand that since you didn't start a relationship with me, I assumed there was something missing in me? I mean, when I gathered that you had feelings for me, and then start a casual fling with me, I obviously thought you didn't want me

too close to either you or Emma. I thought there was something wrong with me! I thought I wasn't enough!"

Oh, shit.

What have I done?

I felt sick. Nauseous.

I made her feel inadequate.

I made her think I didn't want more.

Fuck that.

"I really am an idiot," I mumbled to myself as I rested my forehead in my palms. "God, I'm sorry, Bella... So fucking sorry for hurting you..."

"So am I," she whispered.

Then I heard her chair scrape against the floor, and I snapped up as she stood up.

"Where are you going?" I asked warily.

"I'll find a hotel until my apartment is ready."

No!

She left the kitchen then, and I had one thought left in my fucked up brain: FIX IT!

"Bella, wait!" I called, standing up to go after her.

There was no way I'd let her leave without a fight. I had fucked up royally, but I needed to know if there was any chance I could fix it. Apologize. Make amends. Make her see how much I want her. How much I need her.

In the hallway, I walked over to her, took her jacket from her and let it fall to the floor before backing her up against the wall, and there, I cradled her face, leaned my forehead against hers, ready to beg.

"Please," I whispered, closing my eyes because they hurt with that stinging again. "Let me fix this, baby... Please..." Fucking say it, Cullen! "I can't lose you, Bella," I breathed, and I opened my eyes, watching her through a blurry vision. "I'll do anything... anything..." I shut my eyes tightly, cursing the traitorous tear falling. "I love you, and I'll do anything to make it up to you, to make you see that I want you, to make you see that I need you in my life. Permanently."

I heard Bella exhale shakily, but I kept my eyes closed, because I couldn't face her if this was it. If this was it... if I had fucked shit up so royally that I had lost the only person I've ever been in love with, I will curse myself forever.

I need her.

I need her to need me, too.

"Edward," she croaked. "Are you even aware of that you just told me you *love me?*"

"Yes," I replied, nodding once against her forehead, because I was. I knew I said it, and it may be the worst timing ever, and the least romantic setting, but if she'll give me a chance, I'll show it to her for the rest of my life. I'll show her how much I love her. "I do. I do love you, Bella, and I'm sorry for everything I've done. I'm sorry for making assumptions about you when I should've talked to you."

I opened my eyes again, and found myself drowning in her teary eyes.

God, she's so close.

"Please," I repeated, determined to give her my all. "I want you here. With me, with us... we both do, Emma and I. We need you here."

"I want everything with you, beautiful. I always did," I added, because I wanted her to know, to hear the actual words.

Please.

"Goddamn you and your words, Edward." She sniffled then, and is that... is that a smile playing on her lips?

Please!

"You want everything with me?" she asked, chewing her lip as if she was contemplating.

I nodded. "Everything. Give me a chance, and I'll show you."

She huffed adorably as she blew a strand of hair from her face, and then she rolled her eyes... then she cursed under her breath... then she shuffled away from me, only slightly, but our foreheads weren't touching anymore... then she groaned and shook her head... I think I heard a growl, too. A small one. It was cute.

"You love me?" she asked.

I nodded firmly. "More than I ever thought possible. You and Emma are my life," I told her truthfully.

We have a smile, people! It's small but so there!

"Fuck you, Cullen," she muttered, but I ignored it 'cause she was still smiling. Only a little but my life depended on that little smile right now.

She huffed again.

"You have one week to show me how serious you are, and you better stop being stupid."

I grinned. Widely.

And Bella cursed under her breath again as she took off her shoes.

Then she headed for her room.

At least she didn't go to a hotel.

And I have one week.

Chapter 17

EPOV

I was ready.

I was prepared.

I was determined.

Bella will be mine. I'll make sure of it. Goddamnit, I'll make her fall in love with me, and that's that.

End of.

Day one. Here we go.

I paused outside her door.

"You can do this, Cullen," I mumbled to myself. "Just... just tell her. Explain and... yeah, just tell her... She will be fine... right? Of course she will."

Shit.

I'm nervous.

Bella told me to stop being stupid, and I hope this doesn't fall under the stupid-category, because I prefer to see it under the this-is-Edward-Cullen-showing-how-serious-he-is category.

Yes, there is such a category.

I created it.

With a deep breath, or fourteen of them, I opened the door.

And there she was.

Looking so fucking cute in her little dresses. Yes, she dressed herself, apparently, and she's wearing one purple dress and one pink dress.

As I walked over to her, she looked up and smiled like the gorgeous girl she is, and I sat down in front of her... on the floor.

Don't worry, I won't fall asleep here this time.

Good morning, Daddy. I am playing.

"I can see that, Princess," I chuckled. "Bu why are you wearing two dresses?"

Because I like them both.

Of course.

Looking down, I stared dumbly at her Barbie's, thinking; why the fuck are their heads gigantic?

That's not how I remember Rose's Barbie's. You know, the ones I set on fire after she banged my first guitar on the floor because she was playing rock star.

Barbie's burn brilliantly. Or melt.

And the hair smells when it burns. Or melts.

Back to the point, Cullen...

Right.

"*I need to talk to you, Emma,*" I told her, smiling.

Talk, was her short reply before brushing the hair on a gigantic Barbie-head.

I don't buy that sparkly stuff. Mom, Rose, and Bella does.

Speaking of Bella – the love of my life – she is having breakfast with Alice this Saturday morning, and I wonder; is Bella spilling the beans about what a complete fuckwit I've been?

Probably.

Anyway... I need to get this over with before we meet Jasper and Katie at the park.

As I sorted my thoughts, I realized that the Barbie's with gigantic heads could actually be of help here. You know, to make a five year old understand.

"It's a secret, so you can't tell Bella, okay?"

This had her attention of course, and she was cute as hell when she looked in the doorway just to make sure we were alone.

Then she nodded furiously as her eyes lit up in excitement.

Here we go.

"*You know how Barbie and Ken are girlfriend and boyfriend?*" I asked, feeling like a moron for no reason.

Emma stared at me like I had... grown a big ass Barbie-head.

Awesome.

Daddy, this is not Barbie, she told me and it was again, you know, that look; you're-so-dumb.

"*Okay, what did you name it- her, then?*" I asked, pointing at the doll with godawful make up.

It sparkled.

It is Bratz, Daddy, she replied, rolling her eyes at me as she finger-spelled Bratz.

She named her Barbie to Bratz?

Weird gal.

What-the-fuck-ever.

Attempt two.

"*What did you name Bratz's boyfriend?*" I asked then.

Daddy! Her name is Bella! Not Bratz! She is a Bratz!

Good God, what?

Roll with the punches, Cullen!

Right.

Okay, the Bratz who isn't a Bratz but is a Bratz and a Barbie, her name is Bella. Sure, I get it. Uh-huh. Of *course*.

Yeah...

"Of course. I understand," I lied. *"What is Bella's boyfriend's name then?"*

I asked, trying to get to the point.

His name is Daddy, of course.

Umfhumph?

She was still brushing the hair on Bratz-Barbie-Bella, by the way.

I just stared at her dumbly.

Daddy and Bella?

Uh...

What was the secret, Daddy? she asked.

Well, it seems you already know everything, Princess.

Christ, it's not just women I don't understand; it's girls, too.

I took one of those big breaths to clear my head, and then I just... got it out.

"Daddy likes Bella, Princess, and I want her to be my girlfriend like your dolls are boyfriend and girlfriend." Then I hesitated... *"Do you understand, sweetheart?"*

Yes, Daddy. You love Bella.

My eyes bugged out.

She went back to brushing the hair on that gigantic head.

And this wasn't news to her.

My five year old knew. How? Fuck if I know, but I'm thinking... Rose.

Yeah.

"Yeah, I do," I murmured to myself.

Daddy?

"Yeah?"

Boyfriend and girlfriend kiss. You have to kiss Bella. And hug her a lot. And buy her flowers and candy. I like candy. I love Skittles.

So, I'm taking dating advice from my daughter? And she's okay with this?

Shit, I'm a mess.

"*I know you love Skittles,*" I chuckled, shaking my head to get some fucking clarity. "*But baby, are you okay with this? Is it okay with you if I hug Bella a lot and kiss her?*"

Yes, because if you don't kiss, there will not be more babies.

And that's how the air escaped my lungs.

In a whoosh.

This conversation is so over. I came here to ask her about me and Bella, and *clearly*, Emma is fine with it.

"*Okay, Princess, but don't tell Bella about this yet, alright?*" I choked out. Good thing she couldn't hear my voice for once.

Babies? Holy fuck.

I have to win the woman over first, goddamnit.

I promise. Can we go to the park now? And can I have Skittles today?

"Sure, baby." I snickered. "But only if we change your clothes. It's too cold for dresses."

Even if you're wearing two of them...

*O*O*O*

"Fuckin' frigid," Jazz muttered, making sure his jacket was zipped properly.

I agreed. New York in December wasn't exactly tropical, and Jasper and I were sitting on a bench, freezing our asses off as Emma and Katie were running around on the playground. But the cold didn't matter that much. I'd much rather be here than in one of those indoor playgrounds where there are germs all over the place. And here, the kids have fresh air.

Cold, cold, cold, but fresh.

"You look happy," Jasper commented.

I eyed him curiously. "I do?"

"Mm," he replied, nodding before turning back to the playground. "Could it be because of last night's talk with a certain Bella?"

Oh, for the love of...

"And you heard that through the grapevine?" I asked, sarcasm lacing my voice.

Not that I cared but fuck, how fast can Alice talk? I mean, it's quite fucking obvious that Bella's told her, and now... Jasper knows? Of course it's Alice.

"Alice called me right before we got here," he said, cracking a small smile.

It was the first one I had seen that didn't come thanks to Katie.

It felt good.

Emma and Katie came running towards us then, but not because we're awesome dads that they wanna hang out with. No, it's cause we have the juice boxes and the Skittles.

Then they ran off again.

"So, she gave you a week, huh?"

"Yeah," I chuckled.

It was carefree, and Jasper was right. I did feel happier, and if I felt it, I probably looked happier, too.

If I don't fuck up again, which I won't so help me God, then I might have Bella soon. As mine. No casual. Just mine. And I'll make it forever.

I'm curious about her feelings towards me, of course, but they have to be somewhat deep for her to want this, right? I mean, you don't enter a relationship where a child is involved if it's just a minor crush. And though she might not be *in* love with me yet, I've made it my goal to make sure that happens.

I'm done screwing up. I'm done making assumptions.

"So, what's the plan then, Cullen?" He smirked.

"I talked to Emma this morning," I said, smiling as I watched her and Katie by the swings. "Told her that I liked Bella, and that I wanted her to be my girlfriend. In the end she was the one telling me how things worked."

"To be a fly on that wall," he mused quietly.

I chuckled. "Seriously, man—I went for the Barbie-and-Ken story. I thought it would be easier for her to understand, but somehow she already knew that I not only liked Bella, but that I loved her."

Jazz didn't need many seconds to put it together. "Rose?"

"Most likely." I nodded. "I mean, I know Rose and Emma's been talking, and Rose has crossed a shitload of lines, but in the end... I can't really be pissed, because everyone knew the obvious when I didn't."

"And Rose and Mom *have* tried to talk to me, but I wouldn't listen," I added in their defense, because it was the truth after all. "They've been telling me that Bella's different from the start, so I can only blame my own stubbornness." I shrugged.

Then there's the fact that my princess is perceptive as hell, and thinking back on everything now... yeah, I can't really rule out the possibility of Emma suspecting things.

We were quiet for a while longer, and though I wanted to ask him about his own mess, I could see that he was still dealing with it so I kept quiet.

I'll give him a while longer before I step in.

"Okay, so you've talked to Emma," Jasper said after a while. "What's next?"

I smiled and faced him.

"I'm finally going to be able to show my true self, of course."

He smirked. "Asking her out?"

"Yep."

*O*O*O*

Bella was home when Emma and I returned from the park, and though I was thoroughly nervous about seeing her, I was determined to get this right.

She had left before I woke up this morning, so I expected her to still be upset with me of course, but it wouldn't get in my way. I was going to be myself now, and Emma was aware.

After helping Emma out of her overalls, we headed for the kitchen, 'cause it was time for hot chocolate and marshmallows.

Bella stood with her back to us as we reached the kitchen, and I gave Emma a pointed look to which she grinned and nodded back. Yeah, she was excited about my plan to win Bella over, and yes, I had told her that this was the plan 'to win Bella.'

Our plan was detailed and elaborate, and it had taken the entire walk home from the park to get it right, because Emma was very demanding, and... I'd say persistent.

When it came to certain things.

"Hello, beautiful," I said, winking at her as she spun around with a confused expression.

"Um, hi?" she replied.

Hi, Bella!

"Hey, Sweetie."

Yeah, Emma got the big ass smile. But don't worry, I'll get it, too. Sooner or later.

"Why are you so cheery?" she asked, cocking an eyebrow at me as I pulled out the marshmallows.

"No reason." I shrugged, still smiling. "By the way, what are your plans for tonight?"

She eyed me suspiciously.

I fought a bigger smile.

"What's up your sleeve, Cullen?" she asked with narrowed eyes.

"Plans," I said flatly. "Or were you speaking literally? 'Cause I'm pretty sure you've seen my biceps."

As I passed her, I tapped her lightly on the nose, and then I headed for the fridge to get the milk, because I didn't want a whiny Emma on my tail, and right now she wanted hot chocolate with marshmallows.

However, in Emma's case, I'd say it's more marshmallows with a little hot chocolate on the side. Seriously, the girl can shove an entire bag on those foamy things in her mug.

Not kidding.

"So, about tonight?" I asked again, moving to the stove.

Boiling pan. Check.

Milk. Check.

"Well, um... the plan is to head over to the new apartment and check a few things before I sign the papers," she mumbled, still a bit- a *lot*, confused as to why I'm so fucking happy.

And fucking A, by the way.

She hasn't signed the papers? Excellent.

That means less hassle.

"Cancel it," I told her, and then I brought out mine and Emma's special mugs.

I have to say I love them.

On Emma's – and yes, it's pink – it says 'Daddy's princess.' And on my blue one, it says 'Emma's daddy.' Gift from Jasper and Katie from last year, and they have the same ones.

We're that cool.

But I think Katie's is purple. Can't really remember. Emma picked them out for them, just as Katie picked out mine and Emma's.

"What? What do you mean 'cancel it'?" Bella asked.

She was in my periphery but I kept my eyes on the milk, because I tended to burn stuff when I didn't pay attention.

Hah! That thought works in other departments, too, now when I think about it.

But I'm fixing this. I haven't burnt all my bridges with Bella. I refuse to believe that.

"I mean 'cancel all of it,' Bella," I said, stirring the milk with a wooden spoon. Or ladle. I couldn't find the whisk. "You're not moving. You won't need another apartment. Don't sign the papers."

"Excuse me?!" she stuttered.

I fought another smile as I turned to Emma who was watching us from the table.

Yes, she was paying attention. And grinning. Widely.

"Emma, Bella thinks she's moving," I chuckled and rolled my eyes.

That is silly, Bella, Emma told her. **You live here.**

"Exactly," I said, nodding firmly.

Bella was cute when she was gaping like a fish.

But I turned back to the stove. Didn't want the milk to burn.

"So, you're free tonight, then?" I asked, walking over to the cupboard where we had cocoa.

"Um... uh... huh?"

Yes, that was her reply.

"Excellent," I said. "That means I can take you out."

"W-what? T-take me out?"

"On a date, silly," I snickered. "In fact, I'm going to need you to clear your nights for the next seven days."

I have seven days. I plan to use them well.

"Edward," she said quietly, standing right next to me. "What are you doing?"

Being myself.

"What I should've done from the beginning," I murmured, dipping down to kiss the top of her head. "You gave me a week, sweetheart. Make yourself available."

She looked up at me with big eyes, and I nodded, giving her my 'yes' to every question I could see in those liquid pools.

Yes, you are my sweetheart. Yes, I'm taking this seriously. Yes, I know Emma's watching us. Yes, I know I've been an idiot. Yes, this is happening.

And... "No, I won't give up," I added, pressing my lips against her forehead. "I love you, and I'm not letting you go. Ever."

I could see the war going on inside of her, but the only thing I knew she was going to find in my eyes was determination. And honesty, of course. I was done hiding. No more games, and I don't wanna hear the word casual... ever again.

My cuff vibrated, and I chuckled as I looked over my shoulder to see Emma grinning at us... but she was also gesturing towards the boiling milk... uhm...

Shit.

"Good thing we have more milk," I mumbled under my breath.

And so... I started over with the hot chocolate.

"You seem confident." Bella smirked, watching me as I stood by the stove. "Confident that I'll cave."

Woman is making me sweat.

And was I confident?

Not one bit. But I was determined to give my all. That's all I can do.

"I assure you I'm not," I chuckled, shaking my head slightly. "But a guy's gotta try, eh?"

*O*O*O*

"Spider Monkey!"

Uncle Emmett!

Squealing from Emma – booming laughter from Emmett.

After I sent Bella into her room to get ready, I had called Emmett to come over to watch Emma for a few hours. I had already texted him this morning, but I didn't know the exact time then, but now he's here, and Bella will soon emerge for our date.

Our first date.

I'm giddy.

And fucking nervous.

I'm not doing this the cliché way. No traditions. I want Bella to know that this is me, and... yeah, I'm going to show her a part of myself tonight.

That sounded naughty.

Don't worry, it isn't.

Chapter 18

EPOV

"Where are we going?" Bella asked... again.

She was fidgeting with her seatbelt, apparently unable to sit still when it came to surprises.

"I'm not telling," I replied... again.

I knew she was confused seeing as I told her to dress casual – jeans and a sweater – but she didn't know how I dated. Well, to be honest, I barely knew myself, but for some weird reason, Bella brought it out of me.

In the past I've always gone for the standard dinners, but it was always what I assumed women wanted. That's not what I want with Bella. With her, I want to be myself as much as I want her to be herself, and we're not restaurant-people. I know that.

I'm not sure I'm making sense here, but what-the-fuck-ever.

"Here we are," I murmured, killing the engine.

I rarely drive in the city, but going to the grocery store is one of the very few exceptions.

"You're taking me on a date here?" Bella replied, eyeing me like I had grown a Bratz-head.

I winked at her before leaving the car, not responding until I opened the door on her side. "You saying there's something wrong with this grocery store?" I teased, holding my hand out for her.

She took it. I didn't let it go. I even threaded our fingers together, and this was monumental for me. Holding hands. Shit, it might sound lame, but... Not to me. Apart from going to the premiere with Bella, I've never held her hand, and this... yes, this was big for me. Felt right. So right.

"Don't worry. This is just the first part," I told her as we headed for the entrance. "I'd like to call this a-trip-down-memory-lane," I added with a wink.

She was confused as hell, but her eyes shone with curiosity and happiness, and that was enough for me. As long as she was smiling, and her eyes were happy, things were good.

After taking a basket, I led the way to the ice cream – the spot I met Bella for the first time.

“Remember this?” I asked her quietly as we stopped in front of one of the freezers, squeezing her hand slightly just to... I don’t know, remind myself that she was there perhaps?

“Yes,” she whispered, looking up at me with those beautiful eyes of hers. “It’s where we first met.”

I nodded once, forcing myself to not attack her, and then I went for the Ben & Jerry’s as I continued. “Tonight will be about me being honest.” I grabbed the Phish Food for me and then Cherry Garcia for Bella, knowing that it was her favorite. “Now... I’m a man, Ms. Swan.” I smiled sheepishly, leaning against the freezer. “My first thought about you...” Yeah, I trailed off.

“Oh, do tell, Mr. Cullen.” She grinned, understanding that I didn’t exactly think about her eyes the first time I saw her.

Fuck, she’s beautiful.

Time to fess up.

I cleared my throat and put the tubs of ice cream in the basket, blurting my shit out without looking her in the eye. “My first thought about you... yeah, it was definitely about your ass.”

Her beautiful laughter made me look up, though, and I couldn’t do anything but to smile back at her. “Well, I’m glad you’re being honest, Edward. Truly.”

“Good,” I chuckled. “And I do believe the word ‘spectacular’ was on my mind,” I added, eager to see her...

...Yep, her blush. There is was.

Gorgeous.

"Spectacular, huh?" she giggled, blushing. "And now you want me to give you honesty in return?" she teased.

Truth be told, it hadn't crossed my mind, because this was about me giving myself to her. This was about me showing her that I was hers, that I was willing to give her all of me without expecting anything in return, because that was the truth.

"I'm intrigued, I'll admit to that," I admitted. "But no. This is date is about you getting to know me. I don't want you to feel obligated to give anything in return."

Her smile faltered a bit, and I knew she realized now that I took everything seriously. I was serious about this, and she might have thought I came off as cocky earlier – back home in our kitchen where I was confident and happy – but I wasn't. Cocky, that is. I'm determined to give her my all, but I have no fucking idea what her answer will be in a week. But I won't allow myself to think about that. Not now.

Bella spoke then, softly. "My first thought about you was that I thought you were dangerously handsome. And... sexy."

I shivered.

Not from the freezer.

Was this her way of telling me that she wasn't ruling me out? That she was willing to share, too?

Sexy, huh?

"The second thing I noticed was how beautiful and stunning you are," I murmured, walking back to where she stood. "I remember how beautiful your laugh was when you signed with Emma... and I remember how happy you made her when you included her." Standing right in front of her, I dipped down and kissed her forehead. "And I remember thinking you had the most gorgeous face I've ever seen."

"Edward," she breathed, looking up at me with a look that almost made me emotional.

Swallowing hard, I backed away slightly, stopping myself from kissing her properly. It was what I wanted and craved, but I had promised myself to not initiate anything like that. That was all on Bella. It was her choice.

"Let's go before I give into temptation," I sighed, giving her my crooked smile. "'Cause you're quite the sin, you know."

Her gorgeous smile was back, and with our fingers entwined, we headed for the register.

Once I had paid for the ice cream, we left the grocery store, and Bella was curious again as I started the car, but I told her nothing.

Until I parked the car in the garage at home.

"I thought we could walk from here," I said, taking the ice cream with us.

Next up was the Central Park, but since we lived right next to it, it would be stupid to even try to find a parking spot there.

"And where are we going?" she asked, smiling innocently, trying to get answers of course.

"You're cute, sweetheart. I'll give you that," I laughed softly, leading the way to the elevator. "But I'm not telling. However, there is one thing we could talk about to pass time."

"And what's that?" she asked, pressing the button for 'ground level.'

I eyed her curiously, 'cause... she was sorta blushing.

"What's with the blush?" I asked.

She blushed harder.

If Santa was real, I'd wish for the power of reading minds.

"Um... it's just... um, you call me sweetheart," she mumbled, looking down.

Oh.

Shit.

"Does it bother you-"

"No!" she assured, finally looking up. "S'just, feels weird, ya know? I mean, weird in a good way, but... yeah... Not used to it."

"I love you."

It was the only thing I could think of. It was the only thing I felt. Love. So much that it felt like I'd explode if I didn't tell her. So, I did. And she blushed harder than before. Buried her face in my chest and hugged me tightly.

No one could stop the big ass smile on my face.

"Come on, beautiful," I murmured in her hair. "We still have the rest of the date."

I lead her out of the elevator.

"Good evening, Ms. Swan, Mr. Cullen," Eleazar greeted from the front desk.

"Evening, Eleazar." I grinned. "When are you done with the Mr. Cullen-bullshit, eh?"

"Perhaps tomorrow," he chuckled.

An answer I've heard before.

"Right," I snickered. "Have a good one," I added as we reached the doors... that Marcus opened.

God forbid if I opened the door myself for once.

"Have a good evening, Mr. Cullen. You too, Ms. Swan," Marcus said, smiling as always.

Bella and I rolled our eyes at him.

Both of us had told them to call us Edward and Bella, but they never listened.

"I'm really curious, Edward," Bella... well, she kinda whined.

It was cute as hell, but I forgot all about it when she took my hand this time. Yes, I was giddy as hell.

"We're going to Starbucks," I chuckled.

It was true, though it was only a stop on the way. But seriously, we would need something warm if we were going to eat ice cream in the middle of December in Central Park.

"I'm just gonna shut up, 'cause you're confusing as hell," she huffed.

I snickered at her but said nothing, and that's how we walked. In silence. All the way to Starbucks. And we bought coffees and hot chocolates before leaving, and then again, we walked in comfortable silence. Until we reached the park.

I hadn't really thought of it, but man, it was pitch black. Good thing the playground was partly lit up.

"You're taking me to the park?" she asked, smiling, probably understanding the theme of the date now.

"Yep."

A few minutes later, we both sat down on the bench that Jazz and I usually occupied when we were here, and I brought out the ice cream and the hot beverages, glad that we weren't going to stay here for long, because shit, it was freezing.

"Ice cream in December," she giggled, taking the plastic spoon I handed her. "Good thing we're bundled up."

To say the least. And goddamn, Bella in her knitted beanie is still adorable as hell.

"I assume you want to know why we're here." I smiled.

She nodded once as she huddled closer to me and who the fuck was I to complain?

"This is – as you know – where Jazz and I take Emma and Katie every Saturday," I sighed contentedly, looking out at the dark playground. "But while the girls are playing... this is also my gossip-hour with Jazz," I chuckled, shaking my head as Bella laughed. "And you may have been the topic... more than once."

"Oh?" She smirked. Devil woman.

Sexy devil woman.

"Mmhmm." I nodded, taking a sip of my coffee. "And I remember one time in particular. It was the day after you and I had discussed our favorites when it came to foods, drinks, and stuff like that, and I complained to Jazz that I no longer could stand the smell of Cherry Garcia." Bella chuckled incredulously, obviously not understanding what the hell I was talking about, so I continued. "You remember the day, though? When we talked about favorites?"

She nodded.

"Well, do you remember what happened that night?" I asked.

She didn't remember.

I sure do.

It was a normal day. Before anything had happened between us, and since I had found out about a few of her favorites, I had bought ice cream and Italian food with me home, just because I wanted it. Just because I loved knowing things about her. It made me feel closer to her.

"We had a movie night after Emma went to bed," I reminded her, and this she remembered. "You ate your Cherry Garcia." I grinned. "And you spilled some on your leg... and then you used your fingers to wipe it off..." I trailed off, feeling my body react to the memory. "Christ, baby, you licked off your fucking fingers in front of me," I laughed. "Do you have any idea what that did to me?"

Bella laughed. Hard. So hard that it brought tears to her eyes. And I savored it, enjoyed it, wished I could replay it over and over, because fuck, her laugh is... fuel to my well-being. Not kidding.

"So yeah... I complained about that to Jazz," I chuckled. "Told him it... you know, did things to me."

And it still does.

Seriously.

"Let me get this straight, Edward," she laughed, holding the tub of ice cream up to me, and I groaned as the scent hit me. "Oh, my God! You're serious! You actually react to this? Just because I licked it off my fingers?"

"Not kidding," I huffed, adjusting myself in my jeans. "It's like Pavlov's dogs, I swear. Now get that out of my face before I attack you."

The devil woman smirked, to which I cocked an eyebrow.

"Okay, okay," she conceded in a laugh. "So what did Jasper say?"

"He called ma a pathetic jackass," I confessed. "But that's not the point."

She smiled. "Then what's the point, Mr. Cullen?"

It was hard but I managed to resist the urge to kiss her.

Barely.

"The point is that this is the kind of stuff I talked with Jasper about... before I fell in love with you," I murmured.

All traces of humor were gone, and she looked up at me with wide eyes, and her mouth shaped in an 'o.'

I smiled and pressed my lips against the top of her head before I continued. "I've known from start that there was something different about you, and I remember feeling stuff very early, but... I just didn't admit to it," I sighed, resting my cheek on the top of her head as she

snuggled closer. "I remember watching you and Emma as you gave each other sign-names, and... Christ, it was overwhelming to watch..."

Fuck, how could I have been so blind?

I felt for her for so long before I was able to admit it. Even to myself.

"I didn't know you were there," Bella murmured quietly.

I chuckled silently once. "No, you couldn't have known." Then I sighed. Again. Because I do that a lot. "I don't really drink that much coffee, you know. It was my only excuse to escape my music-room so that I could watch you two."

"Some days I barely got any work done," I added, smiling against her hair as I felt her shoulders shake with silent laughter, and then of course there was the sound of her giggling, too. Will I ever be able to hear that sound without smiling? I doubt it.

"So..." I sighed, getting back to my point. "Once I realized and admitted to my feelings, I would talk to Jazz about it... And then it was about how I wanted to date you... how I wanted to be close all the fucking time. How I wished that you weren't with me and Emma temporarily... but forever."

We were quiet for a while after that, and I could see the thoughtful expression taking over her face. I knew she had a lot on her mind, and the last thing I was going to do was to pressure her. Instead we kind of fell into a comfortable silence.

Safe to say; we enjoyed the hot beverages more than the ice cream, but still, neither of us made a move to leave. In fact, Bella moved closer and closer until I had her on my lap, and then we just sat there.

It felt so good.

It felt good when she hugged me tightly, when she played with the my hair under my beanie, when she rested her head on my shoulder, in the crook of my neck... and I knew that as long as I had Emma and Bella in my life, I'd be one lucky man.

Hopefully, she won't just be in Emma's life after my seven days.

Hopefully, she'll be in my life as well.

"The first thing I noticed about you... apart from being dangerously handsome," she giggled quietly, breaking our silence.

"And sexy," I reminded her. "Don't forget about that."

"And sexy," she chuckled quietly. "Alright... the *second* thing I noticed about you... was how you lit up as soon as Emma did something."

My breathing hitched.

"I saw it in the grocery store, even back then. It was so obvious. She's your sun, Edward."

She spoke so quietly that I barely heard her, but I still did, and I noticed the love in her voice. "It didn't take long until she became my little ray of sunshine, too."

I squeezed my eyes shut. Tightly.

Bella moved around then, hitching her leg on my other side, effectively straddling me, and we both relaxed against each others shoulders. Breathed each other in. Tightened the hold we had on the other.

God, I love you, baby.

"I love her more than anything in the world, Edward," she whispered.

Fuck.

I tried for one second, but I quickly realized that it wouldn't work. I would get emotional and that's that. There's no use in trying to hold it back. Not for Bella at least.

"I've been thinking about... all this..." She trailed off.

I stopped breathing.

I had six more days, didn't I? She promised me.

"And I realize that I understand you," she continued, and I think I started to breathe again. A little at least. "Emma's your world, and I know it's been hard for you... to let people in, and... though you shouldn't have made assumptions... I still understand why you acted the way you did."

I could breathe. Properly.

She understands?

"I know your intentions were good, and I know that Emma was on your mind every time you made a decision."

Fuck, she really gets me.

"And I believe you, Edward. I know you're serious about this... about us. I don't need six more days."

I stopped breathing again.

Where was she going with this?

"Edward," she whispered, and I shivered because her lips... were on my neck. Right below my ear. Hot breath. Soft, wet lips. "Do you love me?"

"Yes," I breathed, keeping my eyes closed. "So much it almost hurts."

Please.

I have no idea what I'm pleading for, but... please.

"You have no issues with my age?" she asked next, still kissing my skin.
Nipping. Teasing.

"No," I told her, shaking my head for emphasis.

I love you.

My body was rigid.

"You want everything with me?"

Yes. Everything. All of it.

"Everything you'll give me," I murmured, shivering violently as she tightened her hold on me.

"Good, because I want it, too."

My eyes shot open.

"My blind fool," she murmured, cradling my face as she smiled... *playfully*.
"You really don't see it, do you?"

See what? I don't know, but I-... maybe I know. Maybe my mind... my heart... is protecting me. Fuck, I'm just tired. Tired of being alone. Tired of wanting and needing but not having. Exhausted. I don't wanna be alone anymore. I don't think it's enough anymore. I want you. I need you. With me. With us. It's where you belong. With us. And I'll love you for the rest of my life. I'll show you.

I know my eyes said it all to her.

Please!

Do you...?

Feel the same?

"You really think Emma's the only one I fell in love with?"

Does that mean...?

Connect the fucking dots, Cullen!

"You love me?" I blurted out.

My eyes were wide. As hell.

"So much it almost hurts," she whispered, quoting me from before.

And I think... I'm gonna have to hear it. Over and over.

"Tell me you love me," she said softly, smiling-... or grinning. Even smirking a bit... It changed.

"I love you," I said.

She smirked. Really smirked. "I love you, too, Cullen."

"Again," I demanded.

"I love you."

"Again."

"I love you!" she laughed.

Fucking hell, she loves me.

Yeah, there's no keeping the grin off my face.

"I'm gonna need you to say it again," I told her.

She smacked me on the chest playfully, but complied. "I love you, Edward Anthony Cullen."

Fuck yes.

"I love you, too, Isabella Marie Swan," I replied, grinning like a fool. "Now fucking kiss me."

She did. She kissed me hard, and I kissed her back with everything I had.

Then my mind started spinning as our kiss deepened.

"You can't move," I mumbled against her lips, nibbling a bit on her bottom lip 'cause it's so fucking bitable. Luscious and pouty. And mine. Right?

"Tell me you're staying with us," I pleaded.

Breaking our kiss, she rested her forehead against mine. "Is that what you want?"

"Without a doubt, sweetheart," I told her truthfully. "But what do *you* want? I'm not fucking this up again, and I'm bit off when it comes to reading women..." Yeah, she nodded in agreement. "...So, you have to tell me."

"Of course I wanna stay with you, Edward," she murmured, her eyes showing nothing but sincerity. *That* I could see. "I just don't want you to feel pressured-"

I cut the woman off here, cause she was being all loony and shit. "There's no way *you* can pressure *me* into anything, baby. Seriously. In this case I'm sure I'm the fucking woman, because there's not a single scenario in our future I haven't pictured already, I swear."

Devil woman smirked again.

"And what makes you think I haven't pictured it, too?"

I stared at her.

Is she for real?

Ask out loud instead, you idiot!

Right.

"You've pictured our future?" I asked, feeling my heart trying to pound its way out of my chest.

"I've pictured it all, *sweetheart.*"

Okay.

Time to take my girl home.

Chapter 19

EPOV

Mid December – 2010.

Emma's response to when Bella and I told her that we were together... well, that was to fist pump the air. Not kidding. She actually fist pumped the air.

I swear she got that from Emmett, because I don't think she got it from Rose.

Emmett's response was, "*I knew you could do it, dude! Rosie totally owes me fifty bucks now, 'cause she thought Bella would make you wait the entire week.*"

Rose's response when Emmett called her was, "*Fucking hell, Bella. You couldn't wait, could ya?*"

And later that week when we had dinner with my parents, Mom's response was, *"About goddamn time you grew a pair, boy. Your father was the same; he couldn't believe he'd be good enough for me. So silly both of you for not seeing how good you are."* Then she chatted with Bella for the rest of the meal. Not kidding.

Dad's response was, *"You've finally found your better half, eh?"*

And now, another week later, it's time to tell Jasper and Alice. Well, truth be told, they already know, but tonight Bella and I are having Jasper, Katie, and Alice over for dinner.

It feels weird. Good. But weird.

But more on that later because right now I have the love of my life, lying next to me, pretending to be asleep as I trail my fingers up and down her spine.

She's naked.

Just saying.

And she's mine.

Just saying.

Also, she loves me.

Just. Saying!

Lastly, my cheeks sorta hurt, but that's fine. Smiling non-stop for two weeks does that for ya.

Bella's smiling a lot, too, nowadays. Right now for instance, she's trying not to smile, but I see it. I see the adorable tugging on the corners of her mouth. Her thoroughly kissed mouth, I must say, and I'm glad I told

Emma that I will hug and kiss her a lot, because I have. With both of them, actually.

I'm a lucky man, and I have my two girls with me, so obviously I'm showing them how lucky I am. How blessed I consider myself being. But I don't think Emma's complaining, 'cause she's in love with our tickle-wars. As am I.

That's the first thing I noticed the morning after I woke up. The first morning I had Bella in my bed as my girlfriend. And that's how much younger I felt. Because I did. I do. I'm happier and more playful... hence the tickle-wars with my princess.

Then there's Bella...

There's no describing the feeling I felt when my bedroom became our bedroom.

She's literally living here. Not as roommates or any crap like that. No, she's living here with me, with us, and she doesn't have her own room anymore. We have *our* room, and after some convincing, I finally began seeing Bella's stuff in the apartment.

She said that she loved the apartment the way it was, and though I was thrilled to hear that, I still wanted it to show that she lived here, too, so last week when I saw a few of her family pictures in the living room, along with some new cushions she had bought, I was ecstatic... and a bit emotional, but let's skip that part.

If there's anything to get emotional over, it would definitely be of the memory of Bella hanging up pictures in the hallway, because the pictures, it was of the three of us at the aquarium.

We look like a family, which we are to me, and everyday when I come home, I find myself staring at those pictures for a beat longer before I move along.

It's what I want.

It's what we both want, I should say, because we've talked about it. Yeah, I couldn't exactly stop myself, and I'm glad I didn't, because we talked. A lot. About the future. And we want the same things.

She might not know it – though we touched the subject briefly – but I'm already planning on proposing to her. Not yet, of course, but I don't think I'll wait forever... or even long. A few more months, perhaps. But I can't help it. I love her more than words can describe, we're both on the same page, and we both see the same things in the future. Fucking sue me for wanting that future to come sooner.

Then there's the matter of children.

I bit my tongue, forcing myself to stay quiet because even though we discussed the future already, I still considered her age, not to mention that our relationship is very new. Regardless of how you see it, we haven't been together for long. So... imagine my surprise when Bella brought it up.

Obviously I didn't keep quiet since she talked about it, and that might have been another 'moment' for me, because when she – very nervously – asked if I wanted more children, I thought I was going to burst with happiness.

I know – even to this day – that I wasn't ready to become a father at twenty-three, but thanks to my family, I haven't missed out on anything. I've done everything I wanted to get done. I traveled a bit after high school, I've experienced Spring Break in Florida, and my *God*, that was

not for me... Anyway, I haven't missed out, and though Heidi's pregnancy was unwelcomed at the time, Emma never was. I was born to be her father, and when Bella told me about her wish to have more children, I didn't waste time in showing just how much I loved her that moment. And no, it didn't go unnoticed how she said 'more children.' She could have said 'I want children of my own some day,' or something like that, but she didn't. She said she wanted more children.

It makes me wonder what Emma is to her.

And when she stated that two children was perfect for her, I had to bite my tongue again, to keep from asking whether that meant one more or two more.

I don't know if it was a Freudian slip, and I know the subject will be broached one day, but I'm in no rush. Well, no *big* rush.

Not a *huge* rush... anyway.

Another child sounds wonderful to me.

Bella's mouth twitched again then, probably because my hand had wandered south, but it's really not my fault. Her ass is out of this world, and if my hand wants to caress her perfect ass, I'm not gonna deny the fella. Or me.

Whatever.

"I know you're awake, baby," I whispered, closing in to kiss her shoulder.

"No, I'm sleepin', I swear," she mumbled sleepily.

"Are you sure?" I chuckled, threading my fingers through her hair. "Cause I was sorta hoping you'd join me in the shower."

Please!

"Kay, maybe I'm awake," she hummed, moving closer to rest her chin on my chest, and this is where I get so goddamn sappy it aint funny. But it's the smile she gives me. The carefree, the blissful... So fucking gorgeous.

"So beautiful," I whispered, almost to myself, as I cradled her face, brushing my thumb over her pink tinted cheekbone.

Freckles. She had freckles, too. Not many, but they were there. On her nose. And you had to look closely to see them, but I could do that. I could get close enough, and I loved them.

I loved it all.

"I love you," she murmured.

Indescribable.

"Love you more." I smiled.

She flashed me a wicked smirk then. "Doubt it, especially after you hear what I have to say."

"And what do you have to say?" I chuckled, knowing that there was nothing she could say that would make me love her less.

"Well," she sighed. "Alice, Jasper, and Katie are coming over around seven, yes?"

I nodded.

"Right, that means you're on grocery-duty," she continued. "I have a list for you. I would've come with you but Emma and I have plans, and we don't have much time to get ready."

I checked the time. "Don't have much time?" I asked, cocking an eyebrow. "It's nine in the morning. We have all the time in the world."

And I really don't wanna go grocery shopping alone, 'cause I tend to forget stuff.

"But we *don't* have all the time in the world, baby." Bella grinned. "It's Christmas soon, and we don't have a single decoration up. That's a catastrophe, which is why Emma and I are fixing that while you're out."

I wanted to bitch and whine about the grocery store, but all that sorta disappeared when the image of my girls decorating our home for Christmas popped up. And she's right, Christmas is just around the corner, and I don't think I have to mention the happiness I felt when Bella told me that the only thing she had planned for Christmas was to spend it with the two people she loved most in the world.

That may have been an emotional moment for me.

"Okay," I said, unable to wipe the smile off my face. "Give me the damn list. But you better expect me to forget some shit or get the wrong stuff," I warned.

"Don't worry, Edward," she giggled. "The list is very detailed."

Like that will help.

"Alright, let's get your sweet ass into the shower before we wake up the giggle-monster." I winked, actually a bit surprised she hadn't barged through our door yet.

But very fine by me, 'cause now I'll have a naked Bella in the shower with me for a while first.

*O*O*O*

"What the fuck?" I said, confused as hell, and so was Eleazar.

He was helping me up with the groceries, because Bella's list – that I've cursed a few times – was detailed, but it was also longer than Emma's wish list, and when I trudged in with five fucking grocery bags, Eleazar thankfully ran over to help.

But now, now we're standing outside my apartment, and through the fucking door, we can hear the Christmas music blaring through the speakers.

"Sounds like someone's getting into the Christmas spirit, huh?" Eleazar chuckled as I unlocked the door.

"Yeah." I grinned, but my reply was most likely drowned out, because shit!

...I don't want a lot for Christmas

There's just one thing I need

I don't care about the presents

Underneath the Christmas tree

I don't need to hang my stocking

There upon the fireplace...

It was loud.

Eleazar helped me in with the grocery bags, and laughed a goodbye once everything was in the hallway, and I was pretty much in a daze as I removed my coat and shoes, because... well, it wasn't just the music. It was everything.

I'd been gone for three hours. That's is. But apparently that's enough for our home to be transformed into some Winter Wonderland.

The lights were dimmed; Christmas garlands were attached to the archway between the hallway and living room, Christmassy knick-knacks were spread around on shelves and the dresser, fake snow was sprayed in the corners of the mirror, and you could see where Bella had let Emma take over, effectively spraying snow all over.

It was warm and homey, and this was just the hallway.

Eager as hell to see what my girls were up to, I left the groceries in the hallway and made my way into the living room... where I stopped short.

Jaw dropped.

My girls.

Holy shit.

I think I stood there for a solid ten minutes and just watched Bella and Emma goofing around in the living room as they put up Christmas decorations. It was everything to me.

The same song was on repeat, over and over, and they were giggling, squealing... dancing. Yes, they were dancing.

Fucking hell, I don't think I've ever seen anything this perfect.

My senses took it all in. The decorations, the dimmed lighting, the reindeers on the piano that Emma obviously told Bella about, more garlands, twinkle lights, Santa clauses everywhere, mistletoes, scented candles that filled the air with a smell of cinnamon, orange, gingerbread, and pine.

Bella's obviously been shopping Christmas stuff, because I sure as shit didn't have this much before. But what I saw more than anything else was Bella and Emma. Both dressed in red pajama shorts and white tank tops...

and Santa hats, of course. Both so gorgeous, and damn, they even wore matching slippers in some fluffy red material.

They were truly... Christmassy.

One more time, Bella! I saw Emma sign then as Bella stopped dancing, most likely because the song ended, and Christ, Emma was excited.

"*Okay, Sweetie,*" Bella laughed, a bit out of breath. "*One last time.*"

I backed away slightly, not ready for the show to be over, and then the same Mariah Carey song came on again, and I watched as Bella and Emma stood in front of each other, Emma mimicking Bella's moves.

...I don't want a lot for Christmas

There's just one thing I need

I don't care about the presents

Underneath the Christmas tree

I just want for my own

More than you could ever know

Make my wish come true

All I want for Christmas is...

You...

Speechless.

I watched how Bella swayed her hips, how she signed the lyrics, mouthed them, smiled for Emma, danced around, and Emma lit up like a... well, a Christmas tree, copying Bella's every move, bouncing around in circles,

giving us her own little version of 'jazz hands,' flashing her lopsided, dimpled grin.

...I don't want a lot for Christmas

There is just one thing I need

And I don't care about the presents

Underneath the Christmas tree

I don't need to hang my stocking

There upon the fireplace

Santa Claus won't make me happy

With a toy on Christmas day

I just want you for my own

More than you could ever know

Make my wish come true

All I want for Christmas is you

You, baby...

I stifled a laugh as Bella left out 'I don't care for presents' and how she changed it for Emma – that toys would indeed make her happy, and how we do need to hang the stockings up, and...that was probably a good idea for Bella to do, because Emma would argue, or to be blunt; go apeshit.

...I won't ask for much this Christmas

I don't even wish for snow

*I'm just gonna keep on waiting
Underneath the mistletoe
I won't make a list and send it
To the North Pole for Saint Nick
I won't even stay awake to hear those magic reindeers click
'Cause I just want you here tonight
Holding onto me so tight
What more can I do
Baby, all I want for Christmas is you
You, baby
All the lights are shining
So brightly everywhere
And the sound of children's laughter fills the air
And everyone is singing
I hear those sleigh bells ringing
Santa, won't you bring me the one I really need
Won't you please bring my baby to me...*

I swallowed thickly, never having felt this much love for anyone before besides Emma, but... Bella was amazing. Considerate and just a natural as she changed the lyrics for Emma – how she changed it from 'singing' to

'signing,' how she focused more on dancing and goofing around when there were words she didn't want to translate.

For Bella, everything in this moment was about Emma. Emma wasn't just the center of my universe, she was the center of Bella's universe, too.

...Oh, I don't want a lot for Christmas

This is all I'm asking for

I just want to see my baby

Standing right outside my door

Oh, I just want you for my own

More than you could ever know...

Ready for the last part, Sweetie? Bella asked, smiling excitedly as she kneeled in front of Emma.

Yes! Emma giggled, fist pumping the air again.

I swear I'm gonna speak to Emmett about that.

But all thoughts flew out the window as I watched Bella and Emma finish the song.

Over and over, they signed and mouthed the last words as they danced together.

"Baby, all I want for Christmas..."

Is you!

"Baby... All I want for Christmas..."

Is you, baby!

"Baby... All I want for Christmas... is you!"

Is you!

Frozen in spot, I just stood there.

Bella and Emma tickled each other as the song ended... only to have it begin all over again, but they stayed on the floor and goofed around, until they resumed hanging up decorations, but... yeah, I couldn't function.

For a while.

One thing was clear; this is something I will always remember.

This... no, no words can describe it.

Shit, am I still a man? 'Cause, seriously, I'm not known for being emotional, but Christ, these past few weeks...they've been nothing but overwhelming. In a very, very good way.

I smiled then. Widely as hell, because my princess just noticed me standing here.

Bella noticed me, too, then, and gave me a beautiful smile as she turned down the music a notch or five.

Daddy, you are home! She looked so damn happy, running towards me.

We have to kiss! Bella said it!

She looked like an energizer bunny as she stopped short, eyes wide and happy, and right before she reached me, she spun around to a beaming Bella while I crouched down to Emma's level.

What was the sign, Bella? Emma asked, almost bouncing in either excitement or impatience.

"You mean mistletoe, Sweetie," Bella laughed softly, holding up a small branch for her. *"You hold it above your head when you kiss Daddy."*

I'm serious when I say that my jaw is hurting after smiling so hard, but it's worth it. So worth it.

Emma ran back towards Bella, grabbed the branch, and held it above her head as she made her way back to me where I waited with my permanent shit eating grin, because I swear I'm the luckiest bastard to walk this earth.

"I love you, princess," I mouthed to her.

"I love you," she mouthed back, right before she reached me and planted a sloppy Emma-smooch right on my mouth.

Goddamn, I'm blessed.

A couple of Eskimo kisses followed of course, because that's how we roll, and then we looked over at Bella as flashes went off, and again I grinned widely, seeing her with a camera.

"I've taken plenty of pictures while we decorated," she said softly, walking over to us.

Of course you have, because you're a perfect mother.

"You're amazing. You know that, right?" I murmured, standing up with Emma positioned on my hip.

"So are you. Both of you," she replied, standing up on her toes to reach me. I dipped down, but... Emma stopped us with a screech that made us cringe.

You forgot this! she signed, giving us the evil eye as she shoved the mistletoe in our faces.

"*Sorry, Sweetie,*" Bella laughed, and I chuckled. "*Will you hold it for us?*"

Yes, I will. Emma nodded solemnly, taking her assignment very seriously as I again dipped down to capture Bella's soft lips with mine.

"I love the way you sometimes smile into the kiss," she murmured against my lips.

That makes me smile harder.

"You've made me a very happy man, Bella," I whispered, breaking the kiss slowly with a few chaste ones.

"Your words have the ability to make me faint," she chuckled quietly, shaking her head slightly. "I love you so much."

And my ego is very stroked.

"I love you more, sweetheart."

Bella and I laughed then, because Emma, who is a very impatient little girl, demanded that we continued decorating the apartment so that Katie could see it when she arrives. And as Bella and I obeyed the little hurricane and decorated for Christmas, I had one thought.

I'm *not* going to be able to wait for months before putting a ring on Bella's finger.

Chapter 20

EPOV

Do I look pretty, Daddy?

Pretty?

Pretty doesn't quite cover it.

"*You look like a princess, baby. You always do,*" I replied, smiling at her as she twirled in front of the mirror in her room.

And you're growing up way too fast.

Word, Cullen.

Seriously? Word? Christ... Yeah, I'm rolling my eyes at myself.

Anyway.

She was wearing a gorgeous little dress in red velvet that Bella had bought for her, and Emma was in love with it, stating that it was the prettiest dress in the world.

Bella had somewhat shyly explained that she had developed a slight shopping addiction when it came to buying Emma clothes and some other stuff, and I truly didn't care as long as she let me pay for it, because buying pretty dresses ain't my forte, but... the damn woman actually flipped me off when I told her I wanted to pay for it.

Literally gave me the finger.

We're gonna have to talk about that because I'm not comfortable having Bella spend a fortune on Emma, and it has nothing to do with their relationship. It's about how I was raised. Even if Bella was Emma's biological mother, I wouldn't want her to pay.

She's already insisting on paying half our rent, and truth be told, I fucking hate that. It doesn't matter that Bella's set for life because so am I, and the money-issue is one thing I'm putting my foot down on.

Dad, Emmett, and I are all pussy whipped when it comes to the women in our life, but money is the one thing we won't budge on.

I am hungry, Emma announced then, making me chuckle as she inhaled deeply through her nose, and trust me; I smelled it, too.

Bella was in the kitchen, preparing the dinner for tonight, and after Emma and I had tried to steal one too many cookies that she had made for our dessert, Bella literally pushed us out of the kitchen, ordering us to get ready.

And now... Oh, have mercy, because the apartment smells heavenly.

"Katie and Uncle Jasper will be here any minute," I told her.

"And Uncle Jasper and Bella's friend," I added hesitantly.

I had talked to Jazz and knew that he and Alice were together now, but they were moving slowly, and Katie didn't know. It was way too soon for that since Tanya left only a few weeks ago, and Katie was still going through hell, which in turn affected Jazz severely. But it was nice to hear that Alice was a great friend and huge support for Jazz because I knew he needed it. According to Bella, Alice wouldn't let Jasper close himself in. That alone was a reason for trusting Alice wholeheartedly, and I had only met her twice.

Alice. Emma nodded. **I met her on Skype.**

Ah, right.

"That's right. I remember now." I smiled.

Ever since Thanksgiving, Skype has been popular in our home, and I know that Mom and Dad are giving Emma a pink laptop for Christmas so that Emma can have her own one when she has a Skype-date with Katie. It glitters by the way, her pink laptop. I've already seen it. It was when Dad and I had lunch at their place; he asked if it was okay they gave her a

computer that I saw it, and I laughed because they had already bought the thing, so how much did my opinion matter?

I don't mind, though. I'm glad that Emma and Katie can communicate that way, and there's no reason not to encourage it, which is why Mom and Dad are giving Katie one, too, but in purple.

Since Jasper's parents live in Houston, my parents didn't waste time in adopting both Jazz and Katie, and I'm thrilled to actually celebrate Christmas Day with all my close ones.

I'm digressing.

As a 'friend,' Alice sometimes visits Jasper and Katie, and that's how Emma met her once – when Emma and Katie were Skyping.

The intercom buzzed then and Emma took off like a bat outta hell when I told her that Katie was probably here, and I followed, pretty much grinning my way through our very Christmas decorated apartment. I gotta say, I fucking love it. Not necessarily for the decorations, though Emma and Bella have done a wonderful job, but for the warmth Bella has brought into the place.

"Edward here," I answered, chuckling as I looked down at my bouncing daughter who was hugging my leg.

"Good evening, Mr. Cullen," Eleazar said, formal as always. *"I have a Mr. Whitlock here with Miss. Katie and Ms. Brandon."*

"Send 'em up," was my standard reply.

Is it Katie, Daddy? Emma asked as I hung up.

"Yeah, Princess, it's Katie. I told you." I snickered, watching as she started pacing by the door.

"They're here?" Bella asked, emerging from the kitchen looking hot damn, *sinful*.

Black, skinny jeans, oh so tight, making her ass look... uh... nope, no words there either... and then a silky top in Christmas red.

"Christ, Bella, you're beautiful," I... sorta groaned.

When the hell did she change? Were Emma and I gone for that long? I mean, Jesus, my shower took five minutes...

Never fucking mind.

"And you look good enough to eat, piano man," she purred, making my cock twitch.

Damn.

Before I could do something highly inappropriate, the doorbell rang, and Bella sent me a wink as she passed me, swaying her hips seductively, to get the door.

Mutha' fuck.

Then it was squeals all over, making me dizzy. I swear. But seriously, for a solid five minutes, Jazz and I just stood there, watching Emma and Katie goof around on the floor where they compared dresses and hairstyles and talked about... something... and then Bella and Alice... Jesus, didn't they see each other like yesterday?

Then came the hugs.

Katie and I hugged but that's nothing new, and I called her gorgeous like I often do, because she is, and she kissed my cheek like always because that's how adorable she is, but Alice? Hot damn, that woman hugged me three times, almost squeezing the shit out of me as she rambled about

how happy I have made Bella and how happy she is that we finally solved everything, and... something else. I was quite... not there for a while, because the chick can talk.

I can honestly say that I like the little Hyper, but man, perhaps someone should put her on Ritalin.

Word, Cullen. Word.

Anyway, when Alice had hugged the shit out of me, she hugged the shit out of Emma, too, but since my princess was as hyper as Alice – almost anyway – I knew that they would get along just fine. And yes, I noticed the way Jasper watched her, especially when Katie reached out for Alice to hold her hand.

They may have a long road ahead of them but it's quite clear that Jazz can already see the light at the end of the tunnel, and that's nothing but wonderful to see.

After Bella, who was suddenly carrying a clingy Emma on her hip, had hugged Jasper and Katie, all the girls headed for the kitchen, stating that they would get the last in order while Jazz and I could take a seat in the living room... or whatever.

Then it was just the two of us left in the hallway.

Yeah.

"Um..."

That came from me, 'cause was still in a daze.

"That was... surreal," Jasper said, also in a daze from the hurricane of women.

"Yeah..."

Shaking my head, I think a cleared it. A bit at least.

"Living room?" I asked.

"Sounds good."

As soon as Jasper and I had planted our asses in the living room, Bella came in with two beers for us, and just smiled sweetly before heading back to the kitchen. The whole thing felt so goddamn surreal that it ain't funny. I mean, I've never had this before. Just looking around me, I see the changes. The living room that Mom didn't decorate for me this year. Bella and Emma did. Then the Christmas music in the background. The beautiful women in the kitchen gossiping and cooking... No, I've never had that.

It struck me that even though I've always loved my apartment and always thought of it as a warm and homey place, it wasn't until Bella moved in that it became... truly our home... in a way. Perhaps it doesn't make sense, but to me... yeah, it's how I feel.

"Shit, man, when are you proposing?" Jasper joked as he popped the cap on his beer. "Make sure you don't let that one go."

And I know he's not just talking about Bella bringing us beer, which is why I decided to answer truthfully.

"Christmas morning," I said, smiling to myself as I opened my beer.

He stared at me for a beat, and then he relaxed on the couch and smirked lazily. "For some reason I'm not surprised."

Let's just hope she says yes.

Twenty minutes later, Jasper and I had talked about everything and nothing, meaning; we'd gossiped about Bella and Alice. And I was glad to

hear that Jasper was handling things well after the Tanya-debacle, and that Alice had been there for him from the start. It also meant a fuckload when Jasper told me that Alice was taking a night class to learn more sign language. It really showed how lucky we were, because we were. Both of us. We had found perfect women who were not only there for us, but also for our daughters.

"Dinner's ready, boys!" I heard Bella call then.

Jasper and I exchanged another this-is-surreal look, and then we made our way to the kitchen where Emma and Katie were playing on the floor with a few Barbies, and Bella and Alice were setting the table.

Was this really my life now?

Because I could get used to this.

"Anything I can do?" I asked, coming up to Bella from behind, 'cause... well, her neck called to me. True story.

"Hmm? Um, no." She shivered as I kissed her neck.

"Christ, I love you, baby," I whispered as I sucked on her earlobe.

"Love you, too, and it looks like you're hungry," she half giggled, half moaned, as she rubbed her ass against me.

"Fucking starving," I growled quietly, stilling her movements before this got way out of hand.

"Alright, alright, you two," I heard Alice laugh. "Not in front of the girls, okay? And *please*, not in front of me either!"

Smiling sheepishly, I let Bella go, and soon we were all seated at the table where, shit... That's a lot of food. That Bella cooked. Yeah, I'm in heaven. For sure. Again, Jasper and I just sat there for a while, taking it all in; the

way Alice and Bella filled the girls' plates with food, helping them cut their chicken... the way they talked cheerily about... something. The smiles on their faces. The giggles coming from Emma and Katie who were seated next to each other with Bella and Alice on their sides.

Lastly I noticed the complete adoration Bella and Emma had for each other when they joked about... something. I think it was about having to eat the vegetables if Emma wanted Santa to come.

We were a family.

"Something wrong?" Bella asked me, smiling curiously.

I just smiled back and shook my head, because there was no way I could explain the way I felt with words. But I think she understood anyway. For some reason, Bella just understood me.

Jasper gave me a knowing smile, too, because he most likely felt the same when it came to Alice and Katie who were not far off, already being close.

"We should talk Christmas shopping," Alice said then, and I laughed as Bella nodded furiously. "I mean, I have so much to buy now that Esme's invited me."

That had my attention, and I stopped with my fork mid-air. "You're coming, too, Alice?"

"Yeah, Esme called a couple of days ago." She smiled. "I mean... that's okay, right?"

"Of course." I grinned. "The more the merrier, eh?"

"I'll drink to that," Jazz said, holding his beer up.

And we did. Drink to that, that is.

"So, shopping?" Bella reminded Alice as we started eating again. "I have to buy gifts for Emma and Katie." Then she looked over at me. "Have you bought anything for the little one yet?"

"No," I replied, making sure that Emma and Katie were occupied, which they were. "Dad, Emmett, Jazz, and I, we sorta have a tradition. We go out together and buy presents, 'cause neither of us wanna face the malls without male support."

True. And serious.

It's war out there.

"Hear, hear," Jasper seconded, nodding solemnly.

"We should do the same!" Bella and Alice gasped in unison, and then Bella continued. "Yes, we could call Esme and Rose." And again, she looked over at me. "Is it alright if we take Emma with us, because I need her advice on your gift."

"Yeah, and can Katie come, too?" Alice asked Jazz.

Jazz and I... well, we were in a daze.

But we've already covered that, yes?

Make no mistake, Jazz and I are both in love with this new life, so to speak, and it's perfect. It's everything we've always wanted. But it's overwhelming. It's very is-this-just-a-dream? and very what-if-it-goes-away, and lastly we-need-to-sit-back-so-we-can-fucking-savor-it.

Yeah. Word.

Anyway!

"Of course," I murmured, kissing Bella's temple. "I'm sure she'll be thrilled to come with you."

I know she will.

"Absolutely," I heard Jazz reply at the same time, to Alice.

And the smiles Alice and Bella gave us were as if they had won the goddamn lottery, when in fact, it was me and Jazz who had won. Won big.

The rest of the evening was as perfect, and we talked, laughed, and played games with Emma and Katie. Girls against boys, of course, and they killed me and Jazz when we played charades in the living room.

It was overwhelming, all of it, and again, Bella saw it all and understood when she found me just watching it all at times. She just gave me one of her smiles before going back to talking or playing or... just being perfect.

Before Jazz, Katie, and Alice left, we called Mom, Dad, Emmett, and Rose, and we all made plans for Christmas shopping, and shit, next Tuesday it's me, Jazz, Dad, and Emmett against the world of women in New York. And then we'll meet up with the women for dinner once we're done. Most likely at the hospital.

No kidding.

Emmett actually came home with a bruised ribcage last year from all the fucking elbows, and I myself have been the receiver of many glares in the Christmas frenzy.

That night, Bella and I also decided to go out tomorrow to pick out a tree.

Yes, we're a family. Through and through.

I have someone to share everything with now.

*O*O*O*

"I'm scared," Emmett whimpered.

"I'm terrified." Dad shuddered.

"I wanna go home," Jasper whispered.

"I think I can fit under Emma's bed," I mumbled.

It's Tuesday. December 21st. We're standing outside Tiffany's, looking in, and it's insane. There. Inside. And we're about to go. There. Inside. To buy gifts for the women in our lives.

We do this every year. Always the same stores – first Tiffany's because you can never go wrong with jewelry.

Then when we're done at Tiffany's, we go to other stores to find something that shows *thought*... and stuff like that. 'Cause that's how we were raised. Mom would have my head if I gave away jewelry, just because it's easy, and don't worry, I'm with her on that one. It's important to put thought into your gift, but that doesn't mean it's easy, 'cause it's not. It's hard. So hard.

But right now I'm also nervous. Scared shitless is more like it.

I'm actually here to find an engagement ring.

I'm proposing.

I, Edward Cullen, am proposing.

"Alright, gentlemen, let's do this shit," Emmett said, apparently having gone through some inner pep talk, because he sounded confident for once. "And good luck, Eddie."

Then he was inside.

Yes, they knew I was here to buy a ring. I had told them this morning when we met for breakfast, and Dad's response was, "*I owe your mother a hundred dollars. Congratulations, son.*"

So, I gathered that Mom was suspecting this.

"You ready, Edward?" Jazz chuckled as he pounded me on the shoulder.

"To marry Bella? Yes. To go in there?" I said, pointing inside. "Fuck no."

But then we took the bull by the horns and headed inside. Shit. Women everywhere. And men of course. Men who had the same reason to be here as we did.

"May I help you, sir?" asked a voice, and all of the sudden I had a salesperson in front of me.

What the hell, here we go. "Uh, yeah. There are a few things I need."

And then we got started.

Emma was easy, and I found a bracelet for her. Even picked out a few charms to put on it. One with a pink ice cream, one with a pink cupcake, one pink baby carriage, one with 'E' on it, one pink lollipop, and lastly a crown, 'cause she's my princess. She'll love it, because I know her new thing is jewelry as it evidently makes her feel like a big girl. And hey, you can't go wrong with sparkly stuff, right?

Right.

Then it was Rose, Katie's, and Mom's turn. I even found something for Alice, 'cause I wanted to play it safe, you know.

They were easy, too. Bracelets. Diamonds. Enough said.

Then... oh, God. Finding a ring? Not easy.

So far, the saleslady had suggested shit and I had said, 'yes, that works.'
But finding a ring is slightly different.

"Alright, I'm done," Emmett announced, coming over to me.

Dad and Jasper were done, too, so they were hovering where I stood, completely clueless as I watched display after display with rings. There were many of them but I didn't feel anything as I looked them over, and I wanted that. I wanted to feel 'yes, that's the one.' But so far, nada.

"What'd you get for Rose?" Jasper asked Emmett.

"A set. Necklace, bracelet, earrings. It has diamonds, so I figured she'll love it."

Emmett knows my sister well.

Another display came out, and the very patient saleslady started babbling about cuts and some other shit.

"Perhaps you should look at another type of ring, son," Dad suggested, also looking at the display. "Like your mother for instance; she has a yellow diamond."

"Yes, we also have a large selection of colored diamonds," the saleslady said. "Would you like me to show you, sir?"

I shrugged. "Um, sure."

"They make colored diamonds?" Emmett asked confusingly as the lady came back with a new display.

I didn't laugh at him because my knowledge wasn't much better than his, though I did know about colored rocks.

"Well, they don't *make* them, sir," the saleslady told him, looking at him as if Emmett had said something horrifying. "They *find* them. But yes, there are colored diamonds."

"*Well*, pardon my French," Emmett replied, making us all chuckle. "But what. The fuck. Ever."

"Someone's cranky," I snickered under my breath.

It was true, though. If Emmett doesn't eat soon, he'll go berserk, and we'll have to kill him.

Focus, Cullen...

Right.

I zeroed in on the display, and... yes. *Finally*. That's the one. Thank God for colored rocks.

"That one," I said confidently, pointing at the ring in question.

It was beautiful. It was Bella.

It was a platinum ring, the lady told us, and the very light blue diamond in the middle was emerald cut... whatever that means. I'd call it rectangular but I don't speak Jewelry. Then the little diamonds around the ring were apparently 'round,' and I wondered why they didn't have a weird name. Anyway...

"Excellent choice, sir," the lady said, motioning me to come with her to the register.

I had to pat myself on the back because this morning before we left, I had rummaged through Bella's jewelry and found a ring, which I brought with me to get the right size. Yeah, sometimes I'm fucking smart.

Ten minutes later, we left Tiffany's, each of us carrying a bag with at least four of the little blue boxes, and each of us thousands of dollars poorer, but that doesn't matter, because we can now see the light at the end of the tunnel. Half the day is finally over, and now we just have to, you know, find the rest.

"Okay, what's next?" Dad asked as we stepped outside.

"I'm done." Jasper smirked cockily. "I've bought stuff online for Katie, Alice, Esme, Rose, and Bella."

Huh.

Smug bastard.

Why didn't we all buy shit online?

"Traitor," Dad mumbled under his breath, but we all heard him.

"So, you're saying that you've bought two gifts for each and every one of them?" I asked, cocking an eyebrow. "Both 'personal' and jewelry?"

"Yeah, I figured. You know, to be on the safe side." He shrugged.

Alright, so he was on the same page as me. That means I have to buy some thoughtful stuff for Alice?

Fuck my life. I need Bella for this.

Not that I mind giving her gifts, because I truly don't. After our dinner together last week, I'd say she's part of the family, but fuck! I don't know her enough to give her 'thoughtful.'

"What'd you get for Bella?" I asked.

Another cocky smirk. Like he's a genius. "A leather cuff."

"Like the one I have for Emma?"

"Yep."

Fuck, that *is* genius.

"Dammit," I sighed. "Alright, much to do then. Let's go."

Let's just say that I'm thankful for the tradition I have with the guys. We always give each other the same thing every year – Yankee tickets and a bottle of scotch. Yeah, we decide which games we wanna see, and then we pool together so each of us pay for one game for four guys. It's perfect, 'cause that means we have four games that we go to together... and then of course the four bottles of scotch we go home with after Christmas.

But women aren't that easy.

*O*O*O*

I'm dead.

Seriously. We all are.

At seven PM, we dragged our spent asses to the restaurant where we were meeting the women for dinner, and damn, this day has been long. And painful. But we pulled through. Somewhat at least. Thoughtful, schmoughtful. I found an iPod to Alice, and I bought it 'cause it had a ballet dancer on the back, and that's good, right? I mean, she's a ballet major.

It better be good 'cause I'm done.

Mom was easy, because I always buy her favorite perfume, and Rose is easy, too, 'cause she loves shoes, which is why I bought her a gift certificate at Jimmy Choo or Shoe, or whatever his name was.

Emma and Katie were somewhat easy, and after checking with Bella – who knows more about Emma’s doll collection – she gave me the green light to buy Emma the new Bratz Houze that she apparently wanted. Yeah... sure... whatever. I didn’t understand so I just showed the text to the saleslady and she showed me in the right direction, and now I have a big ass bag with two Bratz Houzes. One for Emma and one for Katie.

Lastly there was Bella. She wasn’t easy to buy stuff for, and hopefully she’ll like camera I got for her. I mean, I remember her talking about art and that she’s into photography as well, so I figured it couldn’t be awful anyway.

Hopefully the camera won’t matter much, though, ‘cause you know... it’s the ring that matters. Right?

She’ll say yes, right?

Right?

God, I hope so.

Chapter 21

EPOV

December 25th – 2010

It’s Christmas.

The past couple of days have gone by so fucking fast that my head is still spinning, and I *just* woke up. One might think I’d feel rested, but... no. Not at all. I’m wired, nervous, and elated, but it’s not just by the proposal anymore. It’s also because I talked to Emma yesterday.

I had picked up the ring after having it engraved, and I wanted to show it to Emma – show it and tell her about my plans and what they meant. But

the conversation took a new spin when Emma told me about a conversation she'd already had with Bella.

Flashback

Hi, Daddy! Do you want to play with me?

I smiled at her exuberance and walked over to where she was having a tea party with her dolls, and sat down. On the floor, not in one of those plastic chairs, 'cause Emmett's already busted two of them. True story.

"Of course, Princess. But I need to talk to you first, okay?" I said, thinking about the ring box in my pocket.

Okay.

I had already prepared my speech, so after a deep breath, I started.

"You know that Nana and Grampa are married, and that they wear rings?"

I said, hoping to God she understands enough for me to continue on.

Yes, Nana's ring is very pretty.

Right. Of course that's what she picked up on. The ring. 'Cause it sparkles, I'm sure.

I noticed that she didn't understand the married-part, though, because the sign was new to her, which I knew it would be.

"Yes, it is," I chuckled, rubbing the back of my neck. *"But do you know what marriage is?"* I asked, finger-spelling 'marriage.'

She shook her head no, and I took another deep breath before showing her the sign for marriage. She tried the sign out for herself like always, and then gave me the 'okay.'

Here we go.

"When boyfriends and girlfriends love each other, sometimes they want to get married," I said, starting off easy. *"That means they will promise to love each other forever. And they give each other a ring."*

She nodded slowly, at least catching the gist of it.

For a second I wished she could remember when Rose and Emmett got married, but she was way too young for that.

"Well, I know I will love Bella forever," I continued, and *this* made her smile widely. Me, too. *"And I want to promise Bella that I will love her forever."*

Okay, she replied, smiling wider and probably eager to know where this was going because if I know my daughter, which I do, I know that her mind is on the mentioned ring.

"When you get married, you become husband and wife," I explained. *"And-"*

Like Ariel and Prince Eric! she said then, understanding fully now, and I breathed out in relief, thanking Disney for all they do.

Fathers all over the world should include Disney when they give thanks at Thanksgiving.

I'll make sure to do that next year.

"Exactly, Princess." I grinned, even nodding for emphasis. *"You understand now?"*

Yes. She nodded, smiling widely. **Bella is Ariel and you are Prince Eric.**

Err, sure. Close enough.

"I want to marry Bella, and I have a ring for her," I said, laying it all out there. *"And if she says yes, we will get married and be husband and wife."*

Okay, Daddy. Can I see the ring?

Christ.

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. Not at her, though, but at myself, because I came in here, wanting to check with her, to make sure she was okay with all of this, but even if she doesn't understand everything, it's quite clear that Emma won't have any problems with this.

So, I showed her the ring.

So pretty, Daddy! she signed, her wide eyes fixed on the ring, but I kept my eyes on my gorgeous girl, because... Jesus, she's cute.

When will you give it to Bella?

"Tomorrow. But she have to say yes first. I will ask her, and she will answer."

It is very pretty. She will say yes, Daddy, she told me, giving me the duh-look.

Another look from Rose.

"Okay, baby," I chuckled. *"But do you understand what all this mean? If she says yes, Bella and I will get married."*

I understand, she said, rolling her eyes at me. **You will love forever. I already knew that. Bella told me.**

Umph, she did *what* now?!

What do you mean, Princess? I asked, forcing myself to look calm.

I was anything *but* calm.

All I wanted now was for my girl to spill the fucking beans.

Bella said she will always love me and you, she replied simply.

"When did she say that?" I asked, feeling myself smile at the thought of Bella telling her that.

When you started kissing and hugging Bella a lot.

In other words; when Bella and I became official. Of course.

"Alright," I laughed softly. *"So, Bella said that to you then? Do you know why she said it?"*

Yeah, I'm a bit curious.

Fucking sue me.

Because I asked if she was my mommy. She shrugged.

I choked.

And stopped breathing. For a while.

She... oh, *fuck*, she asked Bella that?

A part of me was devastated. A part was happy. A part was sad. A part was anxious to know more, but no matter what, I needed to make sure Emma was okay. In every situation.

"And what did Bella say when you asked that, baby?" I asked, smiling carefully.

Emma grinned then, so I instantly breathed out in relief. I knew Bella would never hurt Emma, and I knew how she loved Emma above all, but the fact remains; Emma is not calling Bella Mommy now, so the answer to Emma's question... well, I gotta have it.

She said I was everything to her, but I have to ask you.

Huh.

Bella said that, eh?

Wow.

I'm surprised I didn't get down on one knee the second she agreed to be my girlfriend.

But...

"Why didn't you talk to me, Princess?" I asked gently. *"Is this something you want?"*

Emma nodded but looked down, and then my heart broke as she started crying.

Fuck!

I held her in my arms for what felt like an eternity, and I hated this. I hated that she would ever have something like this to cry for, that she would hold anything of this magnitude bottled up.

She's only five years for fuck's sake. She shouldn't have to worry about parents... and who they are. Her parents should just be there. They are supposed to be constant. But I can't bring myself to curse Heidi, because... what Emma has now... with Bella, that's so much more. Much more than what Heidi could ever give her.

Once Emma had calmed down a bit, I wiped away her tears, kissed her all over her gorgeous little face, and relaxed a little as she gave me a small smile. It wasn't enough, though. A small smile will never be enough.

I had a feeling why Emma hadn't talked to me about this earlier, and that's simple. I don't think Emma could handle rejection, either from me or from Bella. So, she kept quiet. Another thing that's unacceptable. Children should always be able to talk to their parents.

"Tell me, baby," I urged gently. "You can always talk to Daddy. You know that, right?"

She nodded again and looked down as she stayed in my lap, but *sometimes* I could read my girl well, and I knew she was thinking. I knew she was thinking about what she wanted to talk to me about, so I gave her time. Just held her, kissed her, and played with her hair, which made her hum adorably.

When you give her the ring, will she be my mommy? she asked, and I swallowed hard as I saw the hope in her eyes.

This was what she wanted. She wanted... *that*.

Christ, I want it, too. But... I don't know if Bella's anywhere *near* ready for that label, no matter how much she's already playing the part.

I will however never make assumptions again, so I will simply suck it up and talk to her. Bella, that is.

"I will talk to Bella about it, okay? I promise."

End Flashback

Yeah.

Safe to say, the proposal isn't the only thing I'm nervous about.

Glancing over at the nightstand, I saw that it was almost seven AM, and though that may be early as hell, I know that Emma will wake up soon. It's Christmas after all, and she's very, very, very aware of the mountain of presents under the Christmas tree in the living room.

Which means... it's time.

I have thought about this moment thousands of times of course, but in the end, I chose simplicity. I chose what Bella and I both are, and neither of us is into grand gestures. And most of all, we both love our home, and that settled it. I'm proposing right here, right now, in our home. Our bed.

With the ring in my hand, I snuggled closer to Bella, spooning her, and started peppering her with soft kisses. On her shoulder, her arm, her neck, and it didn't take long before she started squirming.

I smiled then, into every kiss, loving the soft sighs she made right before she woke up. The way she would stretch and scoot closer to me, the way she scrunched her nose if I kissed it, because what I had learned over the past months was that Bella was extra ticklish in the mornings.

"Merry Christmas, Bella," I whispered as my nose slid along her jaw.

Slowly, a smile formed on her lips, and I continued kissing her skin, letting my hand move under the silky chemise she wore. I cursed it a bit, of course, but I'm a man. I love it when we sleep naked, but yesterday we knew that we couldn't lock the door to our room in case Emma wanted to come in at the crack of dawn. So, Bella's wearing red pajama shorts, 'cause it's Christmas, and a matching chemise.

"Merry Christmas, piano man," she mumbled as she started dragging her fingers through my hair, and that's just... mmm... distracting...

Focus, Cullen, for the love of God!

Right.

I cleared my throat, feeling myself shiver as the nerves hit harder than before. Goddamn assault of nervousness for fuck's sake.

She'll say yes, right?

Jesus, here we go.

Deep breath.

"I have a question for you," I whispered, moving myself to be on top of her.

So, she can't escape, Cullen?

Shut. Up.

"Oh yeah?" she asked, sighing contentedly as I pressed my body against hers. "And what would that be?"

As I kissed the spot below her ear, I inhaled deeply, letting her apple and cinnamon scent wash over me, and then...

"Will you be my wife?"

She froze, unsurprisingly, and I forced myself to keep kissing her, softly, gently, on her neck... her shoulder...

Please.

"W-what?" she breathed out.

After one more kiss on her shoulder, I faced her, was met by wide eyes, swimming with tears.

"I'm asking you to marry me, Bella Swan," I murmured, pressing my forehead against hers. "I'm asking you to be mine forever... I'm asking you to be my wife, and I'm promising you I will love you forever... I'm promising I'm *yours* forever."

With a hand less steady than I'd like to admit, I brought out the ring.

Please say yes. Please say yes. Please say yes.

"Oh, Edward," she choked out as the first set of tears spilled over.

Please say yes. Please say yes. Please say yes.

Holy shit, how long will I have to wait?

She's killing me with the suspense. Should I tell her that? Should I tell her that I'm close to shitting myself? Okay, not really, but shit!

"Please say something," I pleaded quietly.

Her eyes snapped back to me then after watching the ring, and finally I got a reaction.

"Oh, God!" she gasped, not answering me, though.

Please say yes! Please say yes! Please say yes!

But then she did. "Of course! Yes, Edward!"

Did you hear that?

"Again," I demanded as my own damn eyes welled up.

"Yes, I'll marry you," she spoke through her tears.

She said yes.

Oh, I kissed the living shit out of her.

"Oh, God, Edward. You want to marry me?" she mumbled as I attacked her with kisses. I couldn't help it, though. The woman had just agreed to marry me.

"With all my heart," I groaned as she arched into me. "Fuck, I need you, sweetheart."

The ring, Cullen... Get it on her fucking finger first!

Right.

Shit.

"Yes," she whimpered, already skimming her shorts off... and then my pajama bottoms... down... gone.

Now, Cullen!

"Wait, baby," I gasped, squeezing my eyes shut to get some fucking clarity, but it was goddamn hard – pardon the pun – when she positioned me... oh, God. "Shit... baby, wait..."

"But I need you, Edward," she whimpered. "So much."

FUCK!

"The ring," I gritted out, shivering as my cock pressed against her very wet pussy.

Dude, gather your fucking wits, will ya?

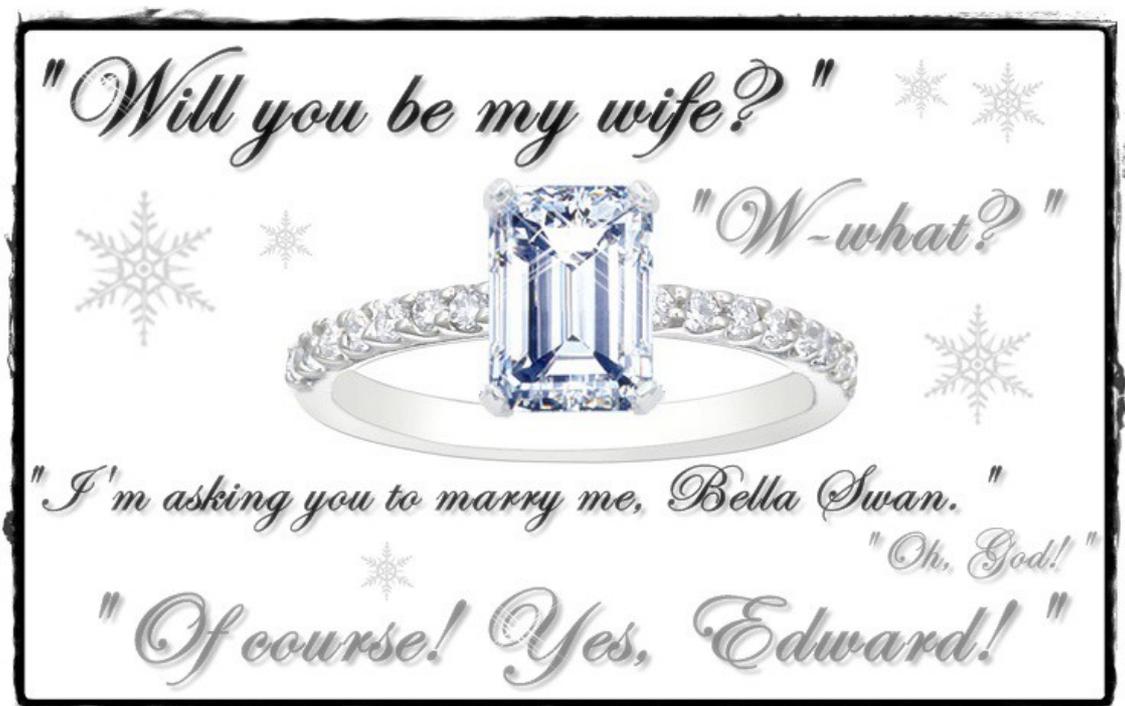
Right.

Deep breath. I opened my eyes.

"My fiancée should wear her ring, don't you think?" I asked, dipping down to kiss her softly, thinking how fucking good that word sounded. Fiancée. Shit, we're getting married.

"It's... Oh, Edward, it's so beautiful," she breathed, holding out her hand for me, and I smiled, and she smiled. We both smiled widely. And I slid the ring onto her ring finger.

We both stared at it. Her finger. My ring. On her finger. We're engaged. To be married.



"It is," I agreed quietly. "But it has nothing on you," I added as my eyes found hers. "I love you, baby. So much."

Then she gave me that smile. The smile that made me wanna tell her that I was the one winning the lottery, not her.

"I love you, too, Edward," she whispered.

No, that will never get old.

I kissed her. Slowly, lovingly, the way I was supposed to kiss her. My fiancée. No frenzy. Just taking our time. Savoring, tasting, loving.

And equally slowly, I pushed into her, never breaking our kiss. Never would I get enough of my Bella. Never would I tire of feeling her, of seeing her, of hearing her... never.

"We're getting married, baby," I breathed, unable to keep the words bottled up.

"We're getting married," she echoed, moaning quietly as I moved inside of her. Deeper. A bit faster. With passion.

I lavished her with kisses as my thumb circled her clit, and we played each other the way only we could. She kissed my sternum, making me shiver. She clung to me, making me growl and speed up as the pleasure built. I teased her clit, making her moan my name. I nibbled on her bottom lip, eliciting desperate whimpers from her.

No, I will never have enough.

"Always, sweetheart," I moaned, thrusting harder, deeper. "I will always need you."

"Yes, Edward," she whimpered. "I... ungh... you, too."

I smiled against the spot below her ear, loving that I had the same affect on her that she had on me.

"Fuck," I grunted, feeling her tight pussy constrict around me.

More.

Harder.

Deeper. Yes, that spot.

Oh, God.

"Fuck, Edward," she moaned, meeting my every thrust. "So... so... oh, close!"

Gripping her hips, I sat up, and then I *slammed* into her.

Shit!

"Oh, yes!"

"Come, baby girl," I grunted. "Need you to come on me." I looked down at where we were joined, groaned loudly. So fucking hot. "Look at us, baby. Fucking look..."

Propping herself up on her elbows, she watched us, we both watched us. The way I rammed my cock into her, the way her wetness coated me, the way she constricted, the way I throbbed...

Tensing.

Hitting that spot of hers. Over and over.

She screamed.

"Edwaaard!"

I let go.

One last time, I pounded into her sweet pussy, and then I came hard. So fucking hard. Deep inside of her. Feeling everything. My own orgasm. Bella's orgasm... the way she milked me...

Goddamn black spots for fuck's sake.

"Fucking hell," I panted.

Yeah, I collapsed on her. Her. Bella. My fiancée. Future wife.

I didn't quite catch that, Cullen.

FUTURE WIFE!

Gotcha.

"Mmm, amazing," she hummed, dragging her nails across my back, and fuck, I shivered violently, 'cause that shit is golden.

"Hmmmphyeah." I shuddered, feeling goose bumps all over my body.

That earned me a giggle from... you know, my fiancée.

It made me grin.

"My fiancée," I whispered, kissing her shoulder once before rolling off of her, 'cause I want my future wife breathing... and not, you know, crushed from my bodyweight. Her future husband.

God, I'm giddy.

And a bit obnoxious, man.

Whatever.

Okay, I didn't roll off her completely 'cause I'm totally using one of her boobs as a pillow right now.

Boobs? Really, Cullen?

Eh, better than boobies.

"Are you eye-fucking your ring, baby?" I chuckled, watching Bella's hand and how she held it up like she's checking it out.

"Absolutely," she replied, and I could practically *hear* her grin. "It's out of this world, Edward. So beautiful."

I just smiled in satisfaction and kissed her boob. Her tit. Breast. Boobie.

God, I'm insane.

And then I think I purred because mmm... her fingers in my hair.

Mmmmm indeed.

"What do you think Emma will say?" she asked then, quietly.

"I already told her," I murmured, kissing her boob again. "She's happy as hell to have you with us forever," I added, knowing that it was time to broach *that* subject. It may be early in our relationship but I owe it to Emma... and myself.

It's always easy to look back and see where you did good, and where you did wrong, and though I will never say having Bella move in with us is bad, I know now however, that it has affected Emma in a way I never considered. Because to Emma, Bella's been filling the mommy-role for more than the few weeks we've been an official couple. Even to me, Bella's been her mother for much longer, and it started way back in August... or September when she moved in. So, it's not just a few weeks. It's months. Months of having her with us every single day.

Maybe still a short time to many, but... whatever.

It's time.

"She told me, you know," I murmured quietly. "Yesterday when I told Emma about proposing to you... she told me about the question she asked you a few weeks ago."

Bella tensed for a second, stilling her fingers in my hair... so, I knew she understood. Then she started again, and hopefully she'll want to have this conversation, too. I mean, I will never expect anything from her, and I will never push her into something she's not ready for, but we do need to talk about it. Even if it's just to say that she's not ready yet. I still need to hear it. I still need to give Emma an answer. And myself.

"Um, I didn't want to assume anything," she mumbled.

I felt her swallow hard, perhaps in nervousness, and I didn't want her to feel uncomfortable so I tightened my arm around her... kissed her again.

Her boob, Cullen?

Whatever.

"I told her it's up to you," she finished softly.

I needed to see her face for this, so I backed away slightly, propped myself up on my elbow, but kept my arm around her. "It's not just up to me, sweetheart," I whispered, pressing my lips against her temple before continuing. "It's very much up to you, too. It's a lifetime commitment, and though I know you would never take this lightly, I want you to know that you have all the time in the world to think this over."

"You know what Emma wants, though, right?" I asked.

She nodded and bit down on her lip, and I tried and tried to read her, but I just couldn't. Her eyes were big and welled up with emotion, but I didn't know whether it was good or bad.

I could practically hear my own heart pound.

"I will always be yours," I added, frowning as her tears spilled over. "And you're perfect for Emma... and perfect for me." I needed to emphasize on

that, needed to make it clear to her. "Truth be told, Bella. You're in a way..." I swallowed hard. "Already her mother."

Christ.

First time I've said it out loud.

"But I will never pressure you into anything," I told her. "Just know that no matter what, you'll have me. Your decision won't affect our relationship."

It was nothing but the truth. If Bella doesn't want that label, to be Emma's mother, I know it won't change anything about us. That doesn't take away my wish, of course, but as long as Bella continues to be her perfect self with Emma, I know things will be amazing, because the fact is that Emma and I have never been happier than we are now, and that's all Bella.

"But uh... what do *you* want?" she asked.

I frowned. Didn't like the way she asked because it sounded almost as if she was afraid of the answer. But I needed to be honest.

"Isn't that obvious?" I responded quietly, smiling wistfully. "When I proposed, baby..." I trailed off, shaking my head to find the right words. Then I found them. "When I proposed, I offered all of myself to you, and Emma's part of that. She will always be a part of me, and I would never make a big decision like this without taking her into consideration. So... what do I want? I want us to be a family—labels included. But like I said, my feelings for you won't change if—"

She cut me off. You know, finger on my lips.

"That label, Edward, as you so eloquently put it..." She trailed off this time... looked down... before looking up again. And I saw determination.

"I've wanted that label for a long time. Falling in love with Emma was the most effortless thing I've done, and... it happened fast. I'm very aware of the role I've played, but I have loved every minute of it."

Yeah. Emotions. All over. My eyes are... Shit, blurry vision. So, I'm closing my eyes. Tightly. Swallowing hard, feeling my body clench and unclench.

You better check for a vagina later, man.

No way. A real man can fucking cry.

All these years of being a single father. Of being the only one to put my little girl first...

"My reason for not bringing it up was because I didn't think you were ready," she whispered, and I felt her fingers on my cheeks. To wipe away the traitorous... *moisture*. "Can you believe it? I made an assumption," she added, chuckling a little, perhaps to lighten the tension.

Years of tension left my body as I buried my face in the crook of her neck. Tension I didn't even know was there. But it was, and I felt it leave me.

It felt so good. Felt so good to know that I wasn't alone. Felt so good to know that I would have someone to share my everything with. To make decisions together. To share... yeah, just everything. Stories, laughter, memories... together.

"You're right," I heard her say then, and I listened, but I kept my face buried – where she smelled all Bella. Just loving... well, everything right now. Her fingers in my hair. Her words. Her body. Her scent. God, her heart. "I *don't* take any of this lightly, but I want you to know that I *am* ready. Not just for what I've been so far, but for... everything."

Words cannot describe the love I feel for Bella Swan.

I mean... what can I say?

You're awesome?

Thank you?

I love you?

You're the best?

All that... nah, that's lame. Inadequate. Not enough.

"You and Emma are my life," I heard myself murmur, and that was somewhat okay. Not quite there, but *okay*.

"And you and Emma are *my* life, Edward," she replied, and it felt more than okay. Overwhelming.

We both heard the opening and the closing of a door then, and I couldn't help but to smile. So widely. My princess was awake. Most likely very eager for Christmas.

Chapter 22

EPOV

December 25th – 2010

After getting dressed in a fucking frenzy, Bella and I both grinned like fools when we heard Emma knock on the door.

Back in my pajama pants, I lunged for the bed as Bella opened the door, and then... well, the reason for me lunging for the bed was because I wanted to see it. It. Them. My two girls in their Christmassy pajamas, as they wore matching smiles... that they gave to yours fucking truly.

"*Merry Christmas, Princess.*" I grinned, motioning for her to get the fuck over to me.

Merry Christmas! she replied, giggling like crazy as she bounced over to the bed, not stopping until she pounced on me. **Can we open presents now?** she asked, willing me to nod to her by nodding herself.

So fucking cute.

I sat her on my stomach, and maybe tickled her for a bit... you know, accidentally, and then I looked over at Bella in question as she sat up, leaning against the headboard... She nodded with a smile.

Yes. Okay. Fuck yes.

Sitting up myself, I mirrored Bella's position, and leaned back against the headboard, still grinning stupidly, because I knew what we were about to do, and how it would make Emma's day. Mine, too. And as I glanced over at Bella, it suddenly struck me that this, this would make her day, too. We were all on the same page. Wanting this. Wanting to be a family.

Enough with the goddamn emotions, Cullen!

Right.

"*We need to talk to you first, Princess,*" I told her.

She's jumping on the bed now, by the way.

"*Can you sit down, Sweetie?**" Bella chuckled.

Emma jumped higher. Giggled louder.

"*Sit down, Princess,*" I laughed.

Hot damn, the girl jumped even higher. Squealed, too.

I knew then how to get her to sit down, which is why I reached over Bella and grabbed her left hand... held it up for Emma to see.

Emma plopped down on her little butt.

The ring! She said yes, Daddy! You said yes, Bella!

My girl's the most gorgeous girl in the world.

I swear.

"Yes, I did," Bella laughed softly, scooting closer to hug my bicep, 'cause she sorta has a thing for it. My bicep, that is.

"Can you listen to me now, Princess?" I asked. With a nod, she gave me her attention, so I continued. "Do you remember what we talked about yesterday?"

Her grin disappeared, and she nodded shyly, which again broke me a little, and I was happier than ever to make sure that that would never happen again. Never will she doubt who loves her most, or where she belongs. Not that she hasn't known before, but there's one more that sees my princess as number one now, and Emma will never doubt either of us. Bella and I will both be there now. Not just me. Bella, too.

Do you remember the question you asked me, Sweetie? Bella asked her, smiling softly at her.

Again, Emma nodded timidly. Not smiling.

"Can it be my turn to ask you a question now?" Bella continued, and I held my breath as Emma nodded for a third time, this time in confusion.

Come here, she signed, motioning for Emma to come to her, which Emma did eagerly, positioning herself on Bella's lap.

"Is it alright if I do this?"

"Um, of course," I replied, unable to tear my eyes off Emma.

Bella smiled, in thanks for some reason, and turned back to Emma.

This was it.

I didn't know what Bella had planned, but I knew I trusted her with all my heart, and again, I held my breath as I just watched.

"You know how you are Daddy's Princess? And his girl, and his daughter?" Bella asked her, using our sign-names for each other.

Yes, was Emma's reply as she gave a small nod. Still timid and uncertain.

"And you know that you're my Sweetie?" Bella continued, and I understood where she was going. She was a fucking genius. A saint.

Emma nodded again, looked up at Bella with her beautiful eyes, and I could see so much – confusion, hope, shyness, longing. It never ceased to amaze me how bright Emma was. She understood more than what I gave her credit for, and if there was something I knew she understood very well, it was feelings. Emma showed her feelings as well as she could read them. She can for instance read *me very* well, and I suppose it's logical. Without hearing, she's relying on facial expressions, and as her eyes flickered between me and Bella, I knew she could see the happiness in us, which made her hopeful. But like anyone, she needs clarification. She needs the words.

"My question for you, Emma, is if you want to be my Sweetie, my girl, and my daughter, too."

Oh, *Jesus*.

Nothing could have prepared me for the onslaught of emotions that hit me. *Goddamn.*

I swallowed hard, keeping my eyes on Emma, keeping my eyes on her wide ones, her really wide ones. And her little mouth, now shaped like an 'o.' And she looked at me then, almost in question, or maybe in assurance or reassurance or... perhaps silently asking me if this was real. I'm not sure. But I nodded to her, because yes, this is real. *This is what Bella asked you, Princess.*

Emma nodded then, still looking at me, and I smiled as everything dawned on her and she looked back at Bella who was... shit, crying. Happy tears, though. Very happy tears; that was evident, but my fucking lord, what an emotional day.

You are my mommy now, Bella?

Yep, very fucking emotional.

Christ!

"I really want that, Sweetie. Is that what you want, too?"

Furious nodding. Grinning. Hugging. Squealing. Giggling.

My two girls.

For the next hour, the three of us shared a family morning in our bed, and there were tickle-wars, jumping on the bed, and more goddamn emotion, but seriously, I don't think I've ever been this happy before, because when I sat back and watched as Bella and Emma came up with new sign-names for each other, I was yet again rendered speechless. It was just everything to me.

It was Emma who broached it and asked Bella if she could give her a new name. Bella was just as eager, wanting to include 'D' for daughter. So, after thinking about it for a while, the two grinned ear-to-ear as they came up with two new names to symbolize the relationship they would have for the rest of their lives.

My jaw ached painfully from all the smiling as Emma showed me her new name for Bella – the sign for 'Mom' or 'Mommy' followed by 'B' for Bella, and then it was Bella's turn. Her new name for Emma was the sign for 'Sweetheart' or 'Sweetie' followed by 'D' for Daughter, which she signed over her heart, and when I saw how emotional this was for Bella, I told them I needed to take a shower, because it was getting out of hand.

I was all over the place, and Christ, it wouldn't stop.

Bella understood, of course. She knew how significant this was, and one look at me told her all she needed to know. Sure, I needed a shower, but hardly that badly. For the shower's sake, anyway. But I needed to be alone. I needed to calm my ass down.

Stepping under the spray, I rested my forehead against the tile and just let the hot water soak me. I just stood there. Closed eyes. Thinking about... everything.

"She's not normal! She's... she's... she's deformed!"

"Get the fuck out, Heidi."

God, I'm glad she's gone. I'm glad she was never really there to begin with.

A part of me wishes she was miserable. A part of me wishes she knows what she's missing. Because my girl is perfection. Our girl. Yes, our girl. Mine and Bella's. *Never* Heidi's. Mine and Bella's girl. Shit, that's huge. Feels so fucking good. So *fucking* good.

Bella said it herself; Emma's *my* princess, and she will *always* be my little princess. Always *my* baby. But she's *our* girl. *Our* daughter.

Bella's sweetie.

Emma is *ours*... because *we* are parents. Roles we both deserve because of who we are. It has nothing to do with DNA. Not really, anyway. Bella is her mother because she just is. It's not just a label, it's a job. It's a commitment, a life. And Bella takes it seriously, she loves her, and takes pride in everything Emma does and who she is. And now, now I'm going to calm the fuck down so I can spend Christmas with my family.

*O*O*O*

"Seriously, baby, how many toys and clothes did you buy?" I laughed.

Bella and I were sitting in the living room, on the couch, watching Emma as she opened gift after gift after gift after gift... yeah, you get my point.

After my shower, we had enjoyed breakfast together- well, maybe not enjoyed, because Emma had been bouncing in her seat, asking us every thirty seconds if it was time to open presents yet. After twenty minutes, we caved and moved into the living room, and for the past half hour or so, Emma's been glued to the floor... by the Christmas tree.

Maybe not glued, 'cause there's been a shitload of bouncing.

"I only bought essentials," Bella huffed, trying but failing *miserably* to look annoyed with me.

I doubt anything could annoy us today.

Bella's eyes hasn't completely dried even once before next round of tears filled her eyes, and I don't know how many times she's thanked me since I got out of my shower. Thanked me for making her so happy, thanked

me for trusting her with Emma, thanked me for asking her to marry me...
Yeah, the woman is full of thanks.

So am I.

We all are.

We're simply completing each other.

And still, there's no describing that feeling.

"Essentials. Right. Sure," I snickered, leaning in to kiss her temple.

Another squeal had our attention and we looked over at Emma who was showing us a new dress- an *essential*... from Bella. However, for some reason, Bella's written my name on the gifts, too, and when I confronted her about it, she just shrugged and said '*It's us now. No you or me. Us.*'

I couldn't exactly disagree with her then.

So pretty! Thank you, Mommy! Thank you, Daddy! she signed, showing us her extreme excitement by bouncing around like the cute little hurricane she is, and then she went back to opening *essentials*.

As if on cue, Bella buried her face in my chest as she got emotional again.

I knew Emma was using her knew name for Bella over and over to get used to it. Not the name necessarily, but the situation. It was big for her. Huge. And she was flying high on the feeling. Pretty much like Bella and me.

"You okay, sweetheart?" I asked softly, rubbing her back.

"Yeah, I'm fine," she croaked, keeping her face buried. "Just so happy."

I sighed in nothing but contentment. Bliss. "Me, too, beautiful. You have no idea."

Or maybe she does.

We do seem to be on the same page after all.

*O*O*O*

Huh.

Daddyward?

"What's this, Bella?" I asked, holding a *big* ass gift up.

I'm unloading the car with presents to bring inside, 'cause we're at my parents' house... or outside. It's cold as shit but Bella and Emma don't seem to care because the two of them are currently making snow angels.

"Well, what does it say?" Bella shrugged innocently, brushing snow off of her before sauntering over. "There's a note, isn't there?"

I narrowed my eyes at her. "Yes, and it says *Daddyward*."

"Mmhmm." She smiled. "It's from me and Emma. We needed a fitting name for ya. It's fitting, dontcha think?"

Damn, she's gorgeous. Cute when she's all teasing.

"So I'm Daddyward, huh?" I murmured, smiling as she reached me. "And what does that make you, baby?"

Her smile widened, as did mine.

"Mommyella?" she guessed.

Damn fucking straight.

She reached up, I leaned down-

"Are you guys just gonna stay out here all day?!"

Rose. Thanks, sis. Thanks.

After planting a too chaste kiss on Bella's luscious lips, we focused on getting everything inside, including Emma who was now covered in snow. But Emmett took care of her, already making plans with her for our snow fight later. I'm so gonna kick his ass in that one, by the way.

The teams will probably be different this year, though. I'm suspecting the women will team up against the men.

Anyway, there were greetings, kisses, and hugs all over as we all stood in mom and dad's foyer. And then...

"EEEEEEEEEE!"

That's Mom, Rose, and Alice squealing. They just saw Bella's ring.

Bone crushing hugs, kisses, and congratulations.

Us men laughed then because Emma told everyone about her new sign-name for Bella, and I swear it sounded something like this: "EEEE-NAAAAWWW."

Don't donkeys sound a little like that?

Anyway, more hugs, kisses, and congratulation, and I gave myself a mental high five for keeping my own traitorous emotions under control. For once. Not that I have anything to hide and definitely nothing to be embarrassed about, but come on... It doesn't look good when you have Mom, Rose, Bella, and Alice squealing through their tears and then add a blubbering Edward to that.

No, I don't need that from Emmett, 'cause God knows he'd be on my ass if I broke down.

Alright, so after all the greetings and congratulations were over, we finally left the foyer, and it felt surreal when I watched Bella scoop Emma up as they were ushered into the kitchen with the rest of the women. Like really fucking surreal, and Jazz felt the same. That much was obvious as she watched Alice and Katie do the same.

This had really become our life.

"Are you okay, son?" Dad asked as I added the gifts from us under their tree, and I smiled as I added my own ones to the traditional light blue pile of boxes in the corner.

"Am I okay?" I chuckled, scratching the back of my head. "Um, how about ecstatic."

Once our gifts were added on the mountain, I took my seat where Dad, Em, and Jasper sat, nodding in thanks as Dad handed me a beer.

"You know what I mean." He smirked. "Big day."

To say the least.

I tipped the bottle back, contemplated my answer... and decided to go with honesty.

"I've been an emotional mess since this morning," I chuckled, shaking my head at everything that had happened since I woke up. "It's been overwhelming. In the best way, but... yeah, overwhelming."

"The three of you are perfect for each other," Emmett said, surprising the shit out of me by his seriousness.

Not that I thought he... well, I don't really know what I thought but he's the one you count on to make things easier, to make you laugh. And though far from everything is a joke to him, he still the one that lighten everything up with his easygoing personality.

"Emma and I wouldn't have been this happy without her," was all I could say.

I knew Emma and I made Bella blissfully happy, too, but a part of me will always stand firm and believe that I was the one winning that lottery.

The four of us continued talking for a while, both touching heavy and light subjects and I was thrilled for Jazz when he told us about Katie and that she was mending well and that she hadn't closed herself in or anything. I knew about the therapist Jasper had taken her to of course, and apparently the three visits so far had gone really well and Katie had been open and talked about whatever the therapist had asked her, which was the first step to make sure that she gets better. I also think it helped a lot to have the therapist come home to Jasper and Katie and have the sessions there to keep Katie comfortable, and Jasper readily agreed because we all know what Katie's experience with anything remotely close to doctors have been.

Lastly there was Alice, and no words can describe how thankful I am for her being there for Jazz and Katie. Her patience has been endless and now when things are finally looking up for them, she can already say that she has established an amazing relationship with Katie because it's all true. Thanks to her coming over as a 'friend' she has become just that; a friend. To Katie. Someone Katie is already relying on to some extent.

And I speak from experience when I say that that *extent* will grow.

*O*O*O*

“Wait, what’s happening now?” Alice asked, confused as the men stood up.

We had just finished a fuckawesome Christmas dinner and now it was the men’s turn to take over.

Tradition.

“The men takes care of the dishes as well as serving the dessert,” Mom informed Alice with a sweet ass smile.

I snickered but said nothing as we cleared the table before heading for the kitchen.

There are many Cullen traditions, such as the men letting the women rest after dinner. The mandatory snow fights. The earplugs we use when Mom and Rose approach the blue Tiffany pile by the tree. There are Mom’s cookies of course...and the Irish coffee she prepares while the rest of us is outside. Yeah, there’s a bunch of stuff and what it all comes down to is that I’m thrilled to have Bella to share it with. And not just that, but also to have Jazz and Katie here. Hopefully it won’t be the last time he, Katie, and Alice spend Christmas here.

*O*O*O*

“This is fucking insane,” I muttered.

Dad, Emmett, Jazz, and I are standing in the living room and it’s time to exchange gifts but right now we’re thinking that we might run away and hide because Alice and Bella are just like Mom and Rose. Well, Bella isn’t squealing but she’s still excited as hell.

The reason?

Dad just uncovered the mentioned blue pile, and I swear I came close to punching my own sister because that bitch let out her excited shriek when I was standing *right* next to her.

"Edward Cullen," Alice hissed. Yes, hissed. And glared at me. What the fuck? "I may be new in this family but don't think for a second that I'm too shy to put you in place."

Uh...

Huh?

"What the fuck did I do?" I asked incredulously.

"That. That right there," she snapped, pointing a finger at my face. "You gotta stop cussing!"

Holy fucking shit.

What?

"I LOVE YOU, ALICE!" Mom and Rose exclaimed in unison.

I glanced over at Bella who was sitting with Emma in her lap, and that devil woman was hiding behind Emma's back, but I could see, damnit. I could see her shoulders shaking with laughter.

"Same goes for Emmett and Jazz," Alice continued, nodding firmly. "Don't you effing understand that the girls can read you?!" she spat, motioning at Emma who was now on the floor, playing with Katie.

I was gaping. So was Emmett and Jazz.

Alice wasn't done. Oh, no she wasn't done. "Even you, Bella, you need to quit it," she said, facing a Bella who was biting her lip to stop from laughing. Alice turned back to us guys, pointed her finger at us. "But you

men, you're the worst. Always dropping the F-bomb. Well, that stops now."

With a huff she turned her back on us and talked about... something... with Mom and Rose.

Well, shit.

Is that the kind of woman Alice is?

FUCK!

I already have a goddamn sister, I don't need another!

"You're going to marry her one day," I heard Dad mumble under his breath to Jazz.

"I uh... yeah... you might be right," Jasper coughed out.

Emmett and I were still gaping. You know, jaws dropped and all that.

But then I sorta snapped out of it... a little at least... as Bella came over and snaked her arms around my waist.

"Yeah, that's Alice," she chuckled quietly. "You gotta love her, right?"

Humph.

I guess...maybe...I mean, I suppose she has a point, but... shit!

"The jury's still out on that one," I huffed stubbornly.

Instead I focused on the woman in my arms... and her luscious lips, of course, cause they're all kissable and shit.

"Love you," I mumbled as I nibbled on her bottom lip.

Fiancée.

"Love you, too, baby," she said, smiling into the kiss.

"Alright, alright," Emmett chuckled. "There are kids here."

"Oh, so you're aware?" was Alice's dry remark.

Christ, she's another one that's all fire, isn't she?

The guys and I are fucked.

Just saying.

Mom and Dad announced that it was time then and we all took our seats around the living room as Dad took his spot next to the tree.

Another tradition.

"I love this," I heard Bella murmur softly.

I hugged her closer, knowing that she referred to everything around us, and I couldn't agree more.

The only thing missing was Bella's mom, and hopefully I'll meet her soon.

Bella and I had talked about it briefly this morning and we decided to fly her out here soon to share the news of our engagement... and of course the news about her and Emma. Apparently Renée knew all about my princess from Bella's stories and I was relieved and happy to hear that Renée couldn't wait to meet her. Emma, that is.

I told Bella that I definitely didn't mind flying out there for a visit. It would be a chance to see where she grew up, but Bella grinned and said that we could do that another time because her wish was for Renée to see that she had more here in New York than in Forks. Yes, she wants her mother to move here, and for some reason I can see it happen. My Bella is a force to be reckoned with after all.

The gift exchange started then and while everyone around me were loud and excited, I stayed quiet. Just absorbed it all. Savored it. Jasper was the same.

I grinned, smiled, chuckled and shook my head in amusement but said nothing. I enjoyed everything. Even my sister's annoying shriek when she opened her gifts from the Tiffany pile. Alice was the same. Shit, that little hyper-chick even cried as she hugged me, Em, Jazz, and Dad. Everything was perfect.

Emma and Katie loved being the center of attention of course and they received so many things that they could be buried and never found. Yeah, essentials my ass. We're talking clothes, toys, the laptops from Mom and Dad, movies, accessories, girly stuff, you know, and Jazz and I growled when Alice and Rose said, "They need it. They're big girls now." Sorry, but no. My princess will never need nail polish – even if it's made for kids – and she will never ever need bubblegum flavored lipgloss.

Just... no. No.

My beautiful fiancée was on my side... sorta at least... and she stated that Emma can use the pink nail polish on special days, and the lip gloss because she explained to me that it was more of a chapstick, so I sorta surrendered.

Jazz and I declared that only birthdays were 'special days' then.

My moping ended when Bella and Emma gave me the huge box I had carried in earlier, and I laughed as Emmett looked at in nothing but envy. And the envy grew.

Because Bella gave- sorry, Bella and Emma... shit, they gave me a family holiday.

For the three of us.

Inside the box was a bunch of Disney-stuff that Emma gladly 'took care of' for me, but on the bottom... Just fucking shit, how can I get emotional over something like Disney?

I know why.

It's not about Disney.

It's about the fact that the three of us are going to Disney World next spring. One week just the three of us.

As the family we are.

I swear I'm the luckiest bastard to ever walk this earth.

And I told Bella so.

She just said, "You and Emma are my life."

I probably squeezed her half to death when I hugged and kissed her in thanks for everything she is but she didn't complain, and I found myself hoping that I wouldn't have to wait forever until she became my wife. I'll wait forever for her but yeah, a part of me hopes that she doesn't wanna wait until after college.

Little did I know at the time that Bella would become my wife eight months and twenty days later.

On Bella's birthday.

Epilogue

EPOV

June 19th

I'm standing here, you know... in front of the mirror in our bathroom... wondering why my hair's not grey yet.

Not 'cause I'm turning thirty-five today. No, it's 'cause Emma's driving me insane.

This is the last year. The last year before she's a teenager.

Yes, you read it.

Depressing, right?

Yeah, I think so, too.

She's twelve today. I can barely believe it.

She's still all about pink shit, and refusing her to use nail polish only worked for a couple of years.

Now she wears the shit all the time. Makeup and stuff.

Not a lot because I would ground her ass, and thankfully Bella's with me on that one.

And I'm cursing my genes, you know. I don't wanna sound conceited but it *is* me she takes after, and the girl is not pretty. She's fucking beautiful, and I hate it. I fucking hate that boys like her. And the fuckers like her a *lot*, too.

Don't ask me how many boys I've told Eleazar to ban from the building.

So, yeah, I'm wondering why my hair's not grey.

Why is she not my little princess anymore? Why did she have to grow up?

That's not to say she hasn't grown up to be an amazing girl because she has. But she's not my baby anymore. She hasn't changed all that much,

though, and for that I'm thankful. She's still smart, outgoing, easygoing, happy, and fucking amazing. And when I said smart, I meant really goddamn smart.

Yes, she has the genes but I'd be a fucking bastard if I took credit for Emma's mind.

I think we all know I'm not the sharpest tool in the shed at all times, and though I may be a musical genius, I'm still clueless to certain things. But that's where Bella steps in. She's the mastermind in our family.

Shit, that makes me sound like a fucking idiot.

I'm really not, but Bella's skilled as hell when it comes to Emma and her learning.

It's not a surprise that Bella opened her community center, and it's not a surprise when I say that it's running very successfully and perfectly under Bella's hand. But what is a bit surprising is the fact that our entire family is involved. Not all the times of course, 'cause we all have our jobs, but we do pitch in. We contribute because we love it. We help because Emma and Katie, and so many other kids, are proof of how important Bella's job is.

Perhaps I should fill you in.

Bella started 'Little Skill' shortly after she graduated from Juilliard, and it's in this big-ass building next to Riverside Park, which is great because it's close to home, but shit, I'm gonna do this without digressing. Right, so she started her community center there and it's big. There's also Little Skill Daycare but Alice runs that. Fuck, I'm digressing!

Right. Little Skill.

It's a place for children. *Any* children. They can go there – or their parents can drop them off, of course, but you get my point – after daycare, preschool, playgroup, kindergarten, school, you name it, and there are classes they can take. Creative stuff like drawing, learning to play an instrument, dancing... all of it.

So, yes, my wife is a smoking hot CEO. But not really. I mean, she is, but she's not the type, thank God. Nothing prissy comes near our family. But she's the boss-lady, and under her there are many volunteering, which is where me and the rest of our family come in. 'Cause you see, it's all for free. Any kid is welcome at Little Skill, and Bella only has five regular employees.

So, I suppose we can start with Mom and Dad.

When Bella told them about Little Skill and how her wish was for it to be free, Mom and Dad immediately got themselves involved with their knowledge of charity functions and stuff like that. And that's how Little Skill is funded – donations – and I'm goddamn proud when I say that many want to help. Parents, corporate businesses, you name it.

Moving on to the classes.

Yours truly is a teacher there two afternoons of the week, and I teach kids play the piano, the drums, and the guitar. I never thought I'd have it in me but I do. Teaching is fun, not to mention rewarding as hell. Jasper's also there a couple of days every week, and he has his own tech class for little ones that have any kind of hearing disability. Jasper's there since he's into everything that's high tech, and he teaches young children to use computer programs for easier learning, and also how it's a way of communicating, like with Skype for instance.

Next up is Renée. Yeah, of course she moved here.

She and Bella teach the ballet, both to hearing and deaf children, and it's all about having fun together. I've snuck in many times to see them teach the children together and it's always a sure way to get a smile on your face.

Then we have Emmett. Mmhmm, apparently 'gym' is a skill to him and he donated a fully equipped gym to Little Skill, and he's there a few nights every week as an instructor and just... well, to be honest, he's there because he loves it. The gym equipment is of course for older kids and teenagers, and there's also kickboxing, which he holds a class in every Thursday night. I'm proud to say that Emma took his class and excelled.

I'm also proud when I say she kicked a flirty boy in the groin after he bugged the shit out of her but that's another story.

Alright... what else... Oh, shit, my sister. Can't forget about that one.

She's in charge of the small café business on the third floor, and she makes sure the children have snacks and stuff like that. Yeah, she's always been good with children but after she and Emmett had kids, she's all maternal and shit.

Not kidding.

But more on that later.

There's still Emma and Katie.

Together with one of Bella's employees – a funny old woman named Siobhan – they teach lipreading. I mean, Siobhan is the teacher of course, and she's amazing at her job, but Katie and Emma are her little assistants, and they help encourage younger children when they put their foot down or they get frustrated etc.

To say that Bella and I are proud of Emma would be the understatement of the year, and the same goes for Jazz and Alice with Katie.

So, yeah... Emma and Katie are often at Little Skill after school.

There's Little Skill for ya.

About time we touch that other subject, eh?

Such as... yes, my sister's a mother now. An amazing one but still... Christ, she's a mom. It's sorta weird for me to see. And not to one child either. No, she and Emmett have three of them. Scott is the oldest and he's the six year old tornado that takes after his old man, and then there's four year old Jake and he's a mama's boy all the way. Lastly there's Emmett's little girl. His two year old princess. Lily. His baby girl.

Fuck.

Emma's twelve.

Twelve!

To be honest, though, it's not so much that she's not five anymore. It's just that I don't want her to become... you know... a *woman*.

Shudder.

Perhaps I should buy a gun.

Jasper has. He did that when Katie turned thirteen.

He doesn't know how to use it and there are no bullets in it but the boys don't know that.

Anyway...

Speaking of five year olds.

Emma may not be one, but as of today, I have another five year old.

Yeah. My son.

William Cullen.

And William was born on... take a guess... yes, June 19th.

Five years ago... today.

Let's just say that Emma and William are the two most precious birthday gifts one could receive.

We have two days out of the year very close to our hearts.

June 19th, which is the birthday to me, Emma, and William, and then we have September 13th – Bella's birthday, and our wedding day.

It was her idea.

I asked her a few weeks after our first Christmas together if she wanted to wait until after she graduated from college, but Bella just smiled and shook her head at me, leaving it at that.

I didn't let it slide, though, 'cause that was fucking impossible, so I pretty much hounded her for a while... until she finally answered.

"We're getting married on my birthday."

I asked her why.

"Because for the past couple of days, I've talked to Mom. She's moving here after the summer, and I want her to help us plan it since Esme will, too, 'cause uh... she sorta told me that last week. And lastly, I want my birthday to be as special as yours considering you have Emma to celebrate on your birthday."

I smiled at her. Or grinned. And maybe attacked her.

"So, I hope it's okay we get married on my birthday."

Yeah, I was very okay with that.

I'm still the luckiest bastard on earth, I swear.

I'm married to the love of my life, my beautiful Bella. The mother of our children. The most compassionate woman I've ever met. Selfless, loving, sweet... sinfully sexy, beautiful, gorgeous... you fucking name it. All mine. My devil woman.

I still find myself falling for her.

And together we have Emma and William. Two children who are freakishly connected because the two of them are close. William belongs to Emma, there's no doubt about that. He looks up to his sister and she's without a doubt his hero.

He's my buddy, my little man, and comes to me when he has questions, wants to either cuddle or have a tickle-war... or wants to get away from the chicks for a while.

He goes to Bella 'cause sometimes he's a mama's boy... He might have gotten that from me but whatever.

Anyway, he's cuddler like his dad, but hey, who wouldn't be when you have two perfect- I'm not gonna say women because Emma's no goddamn woman... hmm, but I can't exactly call Bella a girl. In that sense. Ah, *shit*, what-the-fuck-ever, how can you not be a cuddler when you have Bella and Emma in your life?

What was my point?

Ah, that's right.

Even though William often comes to me and Bella, Emma is his true hero and favorite person.

I can't really blame him.

Bella and I know that when William isn't in his bed in the morning, he's in his sister's room, often watching a movie in there, waiting for her to wake up. Oh, and if William has a question about sign language, don't expect him to go to me or Bella. No, God forbid. He heads straight for Emma.

And Emma's the same. She was eager as hell from the day we brought him home from the hospital, and the girl threw a fit when Bella and I told her that just because he was a baby didn't mean he could learn Baby Sign just yet.

"Daddy! It's tomorrow now!"

And there he is.

"I'll be right out, bud," I chuckled.

Someone's eager to celebrate his birthday.

*O*O*O*

We're all gathered at my parents' house. All our close ones are here, and I'm a happy as fuck bystander. It's nothing but the truth. I love watching my family, especially Emma and William who are currently eyeing their piles of birthday presents.

"Feeling neglected, Mr. Cullen?"

Smiling at the voice, I looked over my shoulder to see Bella stand in the doorway, smiling beautifully at me.

I shook my head and walked over to her, not stopping until I had my arms around her waist. "Just enjoying the show," I murmured before I dipped down to kiss her.

Obviously this day was more about Emma and William but that never bothered me. A part of me liked it because celebrating my birthday was never something I loved. I much rather stay back and watch, which I often do, so no, I don't feel neglected.

"But I do look forward having you to myself tonight, Mrs. Cullen," I mumbled against her lips.

One of my projects is opening on Broadway tonight, so the little ones are staying with Mom and Dad while Bella's mine for the night. Call it a double date if you will because Jazz and Alice will be there, too, but I know that once the lights go down, it's just me and my date, my wife, my devil woman.

"Mm, me too, my piano man," she responded quietly, seductively, effectively waking my dick up.

Down, boy. Down.

Children all around, Cullen.

That did it.

"Mommy, Daddy!" William called. "Time to open presents?"

Bella and I both chuckled and broke our kiss, but I held her close as I turned to William. "You have to ask Nana and Grampa, little man," I told him. "And *please* tell your sister to put her phone away," I added, sighing as I watched Emma fiddle with her phone. Always sending texts, that one. I swear it's attached to her like an organ. A vital one.

She tried to hide it, too, by facing away from us but I'm not *that* stupid. For the love of God, you know. And Katie's the same, I noticed as I saw her over in a corner with Rose and Scott. Seriously, why would they need phones? Isn't it enough that they see their friends everyday in school?

Are they texting boys?

Shit.

"Baby, calm down," I heard Bella murmur.

Right.

The woman can read my freaking mind, I swear.

I sighed and positioned her in front of me, rested my chin on the top of her head, and tried to calm my ass down. But it wasn't easy. Thankfully Jazz was in the same position, and as I found him on the couch, sitting next to Alice and Dad, I grinned at the scowl he sent Katie.

"Can't believe he's gonna have to go through all that again," I snickered. "With twins no less."

It sure came as a surprise when Alice and Jasper announced that she was pregnant.

Alice had been hesitant to having children of her own, though she adored Katie with every fiber in her being, and it was mutual, too, but yeah, she was still hesitant. And Jazz thought he was done with the sleepless nights, feedings, and changing's.

Wrong.

So, yes, the pregnancy was a surprise. A shock to them. But they quickly got used to the idea, and now they're both longing. That much is evident

by the way Jazz hands are attached to Alice's belly. Much like Katie and Emma with their phones, actually.

I digress.

There was more to get used to because the pregnancy itself wasn't enough. No, they soon learned that they were having twins. Twin girls.

Yeah.

"Only a month to go." Bella hummed, referring to how long until the babies arrive. "Do you think Katie will move in with us?" she added in a chuckle.

I smiled and kissed the top of her head.

"It wouldn't surprise me," I snickered.

To Katie, Alice is 'Mom A', and has been for years, just like Alice sees Katie as a daughter, and though Katie is looking forward to be a big sister, she still claims that boys would've been better. We all know Katie's terrified that her sisters will grow too attached to Katie's pink and purple room, and you know, all the sparkly shit, but that's just Katie. She's territorial, and still a bit of a drama queen. A fancy lady, if you will.

So, in a way, I guess Tanya never left.

Lucky for us all, Katie can pull it off. She can be a little drama queen and still be freaking adorable.

Tanya couldn't and I'm glad she never came back.

I'm also glad that life has been good for Jazz, Katie, and Alice. They had a rough couple of years after Tanya bailed, but they stuck together, and now I'd say the only ones rivaling with them are me and Bella.

In other words, they're solid.

Mom and Dad entered the living room then, and... oh, God.

No.

I cringed.

"Mom, for Christ's sake!" Rose hissed from across the room. "And Dad! Gross!"

Yeah, she's with me on this one.

"What do you mean, dear?" Mom asked innocently as she straightened out her blouse. "We were just setting up the grill outside."

Dad just smirked, adjusted his tie, and headed for Emma and William.

Yeah, what Rose said. Gross.

"*Grampa, you have grass on your shirt,*" William smartly announced, making everyone laugh.

Except for me and Rose. 'Cause we're not too old to gag.

Me? Thirty-five? Pshhh. I'm a kid at heart.

And so is Renée, I thought as I watched her high-five my mom.

She's a weird lady, but you gotta love her.

"Sometimes that happens, Will," Dad laughed. "I'm getting old. I fell."

Mom blushed.

I cringed again.

"But..." William said, tugging on Emma's arm. "*Are Mommy and Daddy old, too?*"

"We're not old," Bella huffed quietly. "I'm not even twenty-seven yet for crying out loud."

I chuckled but said nothing, curious to see what William was talking about, so I stayed put with my chin resting on Bella's head.

What do you mean, Pup? Emma asked.

Yeah, William is Emma's puppy.

"*Cause Mommy and Daddy fall a lot, too,*" William concluded, and *this*, I did *not* want to hear more about. "*Remember? After the park? Twigs in their hair?*"

"Oh, God," Bella breathed out shakily before she turned around and buried her face in my chest. "Tell me your son did not just say that about us."

"Oh, so now he's *my* son?" I chuckled incredulously.

"Duh. In cases like this one, William's yours. Emma's mine," she laughed softly, looking up at me with those gorgeous eyes.

Yeah. Love her.

Content sigh. Hugging her to me. Hard.

Renée giggled and winked at me. **I am not surprised.**

"What?" I mouthed, chuckling in confusion now.

Don't give me that look, Edward. She huffed playfully. **You visit Bella at work often. I am not stupid, son.**

Ah.

Emma's turn to gag.

My turn to blush.

More laughs all around.

Terrific.

"I suppose we haven't been so stealthy after all." I smiled into Bella's hair.

She snorted. "Since when was stealth a part of your name?"

Gee, thanks, wifey.

But hey, she's right.

"Yeah, they're old, Will," Emmett laughed. "Say, how often do they fall?"

"Shut up, Emmett!" Bella and I exclaimed in unison.

Perhaps we should've told William to shut up, too, 'cause the boy answered. "Saturdays after the park."

And hot fuck, that sounds all kinds of wrong!

Word, Cullen.

Allow me to explain before you think Bella and I are doing the nasty on a playground, alright?

Shit.

It's our tradition. On Saturday nights, Emma watches William for a couple of hours after he's gone to bed, and that's when I take Bella to the park for... err... Ben & Jerry's Cherry Garcia.

It's called date night, folks.

We're parents. We need alone time, too.

I can't help it if my wife's libido is insane.

I can't help that mine is, too.

I can't help that I have a thing for Cherry Garcia.

I can't help if things get out of hand sometimes.

I mean, come on! It's dark, I have a sexy wife, Cherry Garcia... so fucking what if we get caught up.

In twigs, Cullen?

Eh.

Shit happens.

It's golden.

Aaaaanyway, the laughter died down after a while, and I prayed Bella wouldn't cancel date night in Central Park, and then Mom announced that we would start the barbecue. In Mom's words, "Get your butts outside, people. It's summer; we don't need to sit inside."

So, we headed outside. You know, to the garden.

"We should bring a mirror next time," Bella whispered, smiling coyly as I held the terrace door open for her. "So, we can check for twigs."

I grinned.

Of course she wouldn't cancel date night.

She was the one making plans for us not to get caught, that's all.

Yeah, gotta love the missus.

"My devil woman," I whispered back, winking at her.

Her response?

She grabbed my ass.

Fair is fair, I grabbed hers, too.

*O*O*O*

"Be good to Nana and Grampa," I told Emma, giving her fucking phone a pointed look. "You know there's an off-button to that one, yes?"

Bella and I, along with Jazz and Alice, are leaving to prepare for tonight, and though I'm glad Emma and Katie have much in common, and will both spend the night here, I also know it means double trouble for Mom and Dad.

Emma and Katie are full of mischief and it doesn't help that my parents love to spoil them, and can't say no.

Jazz is with me on this one.

So are Bella and Alice.

"Promise," she mouthed, mock-saluting me. **I will be good.**

Girl was giving me attitude.

Too bad she's fucking cute when she does it.

I managed to hide my amusement, though, and cocked an eyebrow at her.

I promise, Dad!

Yes, she just stomped her foot.

"Good," I chuckled before pulling her in for a hug. Don't worry, she returned it after a while. Even kissed my cheek, 'cause girl's got manners.

"*I love you, Princess,*" I said before kissing her forehead.

"Love you, too," she mouthed, giving me that lopsided grin of hers. Yeah, I'm a sap, but it's the dimple, I swear. Melts my fucking heart. **Be good to Mom. No twigs,** she added with a damn pointed look.

My eyes bugged out.

So, now my daughter's my parent?

Fuck that.

"*Don't grow up, Emma,*" I groaned.

And this is where my princess' eyes twinkle. **But I will, dad. I will.**

Crap. Fuck. Shit. And all that.

"*Whatever,*" I grumbled, trying to give her a pout, but that shit never worked. "*Anyway, did you have a good birthday?*"

The best! Thank you again for the gift. I love it so, so much. She smiled hugely. **Did you enjoy yours?**

I nodded with a smile and hugged her again.

Bella and I knew how much Emma had wished for a camera, and we were thrilled to see our girl more artistic for each year that passed. It's obviously something we encourage, so we gave her- well, since Bella's the camera-expert, she picked it out, but yeah, we gave her a Nikon, and Bella signed her up for photography classes at Little Skill.

And did I enjoy my birthday?

Well, it's not over yet, but yes I've enjoyed it immensely.

Bella had helped Emma and William with their gift to me, and truth be told, I had to swallow a shitload of emotion when they gave it to me this morning after breakfast.

The gift?

A black acoustic guitar with Emma and William's names embossed in silver.

That guitar is going on the wall in my music room.

"Wanna trade?" I heard Bella ask then.

With a last kiss on Emma's temple, we traded our little ones, and William bounced from Bella's arms to mine while Emma threw her arms around Bella.

"You're all hopped up on sugar, aren't ya?" I growled playfully as I tickled his stomach.

"Yes, sir!" he laughed. "Uncle Em's fault!"

"Hey! I heard that, Will!" Emmett laughed, throwing William a glare that soon morphed into a pout. "You're throwing me under the bus."

It didn't work in Em's favor. The pout, I mean.

"Under the bus, under the bus!" was William's giggled reply.

Oh, and he fist pumped the air.

"Alright, buddy," I chuckled. "Mommy and Daddy are leaving. You'll be good to Nana and Grampa?"

I grinned as he tried to wink. "Not too good."

“Correct answer,” I laughed, giving him an Eskimo kiss. “And did you have a good birthday?”

“Yeah!” he gasped with wide eyes. “I love the LEGO fort,” he added solemnly, even nodding. “So much LEGOs now. D’you and Mommy say to everyone I wanted LEGOs, ‘cause I got lots and lots of LEGO now. Lots!”

“Maybe.” I winked. “You’re too cute for words, you know that, right?”

Scrunching his nose, he said, “Emma says boys aren’t cute.”

Well, that’s fucking relief. That Emma doesn’t think so, that is.

“She says boys are handsome or warm,” he added.

I choked.

Eyes bugged out and shit.

SHE SAID WHAT?

“Hot, baby,” Bella giggled as she stepped closer. “Not warm. Hot.”

THAT’S NOT BETTER!

I think I whimpered as I watched Emma and Katie giggle in a corner with their fucking phones.

Are they texting boys?!

Are they?!

“Calm down, Edward,” Bella told me, still grinning.

How can she grin?

How can she?

Traitor!

"And you are very handsome, baby," Bella added to William. "Isn't he, *Daddy?*" she asked me, clearly feeling the need to remind me of my son that was still in my arms.

Right.

Get it together.

Easier said than done.

Deep breath.

"Yeah, you're... that... I mean, yeah, you're handsome, buddy," I said. My mouth was uh... sorta dry. "Not cute. Handsome."

Even put in a firm nod for good measure.

William seemed to like my answer.

And shit, he gave me that damn smile then, so he sorta had my full attention, 'cause we've already established that I'm a sap around my family, yes?

All the fucking smiling.

I don't stand a chance.

"Love you, bud," I murmured. "See ya tomorrow, yeah?"

"Yep, love you too, Daddy," he replied, hugging the shit outta me.

A few minutes later, Bella and I had said goodbye to everyone and we headed home after telling Jazz and Alice that we'd see them soon.

*O*O*O*

"Ready, baby?" I asked, squeezing her hand.

We're in the limo, 'cause apparently I was important enough to get one for this project.

Truth is, I'm considered to be important often these days.

That feels good, you know.

But yeah, work is good and I'm sorta successful.

Jazz is the same and I know he's in the limo behind us.

Red carpet is next and Bella's wearing heels.

But she has me for support.

"Absolutely." She grinned.

The door was opened for us, and I stepped out before helping my devil woman out.

Too sexy for her own good is all I'm saying.

This time it's another musical that's gathered a lot of attention from the media, but it's a black tie event, 'cause the musical is an epic piece about the Civil War. So, we're dressed to the fucking nines. Black tie and all.

Bella's wearing the tie.

Okay, not really but shit, her dress is really, really small. She called it 'the little black one,' and I agreed on the 'black' part. But little? Nah, it's fucking tiny. And so sexy, and gathering so many looks from the wrong people. The wrong people are men.

I don't like that my wife is that sexy in front of others.

What's so wrong with overalls, *anyway*?

"Stop growling, Edward," Bella whispered as we reached the damn carpet.

"You're human, remember? Not a dog."

"Can't help it. They need to stop staring."

"You don't see me go apeshit on all the bitches staring at my husband," she huffed.

I smiled. Hugged my wife closer.

'Cause I totally remember her reaction to that James-woman. Chelsea or whatever her name was.

"Cullen!"

I chuckled, already prepared for this shit.

Ben Cheney's in this musical, too, and though I started sweating bullets as Bella and I headed over, it was far worse the last time.

I had my wife now. For every event such as this one.

"Good to see ya, man." I grinned, shaking his hand firmly, and ignoring the camera shoved in our faces. "You too, Angela," I added, kissing her cheek as Ben greeted Bella.

The fours of us had grown close during this project, and when Ben finally got the balls to ask out Jazz's assistant, Angela, out, there have been a few double dates. Oh, and when Bella visits me at work sometimes, and she's late, I know I can find her with Angela in Jasper's studio.

You know, gossiping.

Cause they're women-folk.

Sorta implied, Cullen.

Right.

"Happy birthday, by the way," Ben said, slapping me on the shoulder.

"Leaving the kids home tonight?"

"Thanks," I chuckled. "And yeah, well, they're with my parents."

"Edward, aren't you forgetting something?" Bella said, giving me a wink when I looked down at her. I didn't understand. "Rose and Emma's lists?"

Ah.

Right.

Yeah, uh, Emma's like Rose. You know, for the autographs.

"Right," I said, taking out the two autograph notebooks from my inner pocket. "You made Emma's list this year, Ben." I grinned.

"Congratulations."

"Nice," he replied, grinning widely, 'cause that's what my princess does to people. Meet her one time and you'll fall in love. "About damn time. Tell her I said hi, will ya, Bella? I mean, I'd tell Cullen, but... he wouldn't remember."

"I will." Bella smiled.

"You're so fucking funny, Ben," I deadpanned.

"Oh, I know." He smirked. "But seriously, I'm in New York for the summer. Barbecue soon? Gotta meet William again, too."

"Sounds perfect." I nodded, taking the signed notepads from Ben as he handed them to me. "We can set a date at the after-party, eh?"

"Yeah, right." Angela snorted. "Like you and Bella will show up. You never do, you know."

Right.

No point in denying. We tend to skip it 'cause we have err... more important business to tend to.

Each other.

"I'll call you on Monday," Bella told Angela, giggling like the devil woman she is.

Jazz and his knocked-up Alice joined us then, and since Ben had to go change for the show, Angela walked with us to do that mingling you gotta do before. I know, boring as hell. But whatever, a heated make-out session with my wife takes care of that. And before we knew it, we were on our way to the balcony for the crew.

Once we were seated, I kissed the top of Bella's head as she hugged my bicep. 'Cause she still has a thing for that. My bicep, that is.

I don't mind.

"I love you," I whispered.

"Mmm, love you, too." She hummed, lifting her face to kiss me.

Loved it.

"Skipping the party later?" I asked against her lips, unable to stop myself from deepening the kiss.

She tasted so damn good.

"Yes, please," she replied breathlessly.

Fucking A.

"OW!" someone gasped.

Uh.

Huh?

Bella and I broke our kiss and looked to my right- oh, shit!

Alice.

I know that look. I remember it. Last time was exactly five years ago.

"Christ, honey, your water broke," Jazz also gasped.

"I'm freaking aware," Alice snapped. It was quite amusing. "It hurts, baby. Fuck, it really hurts."

"You're about to become a father again, Jazz." I grinned.

"But it's still a month to go!" Jazz exclaimed. "Is something wrong? Alice? Is something wrong with them? Are they alright?"

That'd be Jasper freaking the fuck out.

"Everything will be fine, Jasper," Bella assured. "And you know twins often arrive sooner. Didn't your doctor tell you that?"

"Yeah."

"Well, while you're having a fucking party, I'm gonna go deliver our girls," Alice said, standing up.

After that, everything passed in a blur, and the premiere was forgotten.

Well, Jazz has another premiere to tend to now, if ya know what I mean.

Did you just waggle your eyebrows at childbirth, Cullen?

Um...no?

You're a sick fuck, man.

Eh, what else is new...

Anyway.

Jazz and Alice took off, and Bella and I told them we'd meet them at the hospital after a quick change at home.

No, we don't really wanna go to the hospital in our outfits, and then there's the fact that labors... yeah, they don't happen with a snap of your fingers. You know, unless the snap of your fingers lasts for thirteen hours.

Thirteen hours in Bella's case anyway.

Yep, I remember.

Bella broke my hand when she squeezed it.

True story, ask her.

"Would Alice kill me if I asked her to keep the kids in until midnight?" I asked Bella as I unlocked the door at home. "I mean, June 19th is sorta occupied."

Right?

"Why don't you go ahead and ask her, and you'll find out," was her amused reply.

But I couldn't quite focus on whatever it was we had been talking about, cause uh... I had my wife. Alone. In our apartment. Right. Now. That's rare.

Ever heard of the gutter, Cullen? 'Cause you're there.

Damn fucking straight.

"Baby, you look like you're on a mission," Bella said as I stalked her.

She walked backward, I followed.

My cock stirred.

Yes, on a mission.

A fucking mission.

Pun intended.

I smirked then. "Heading for the kitchen, Mrs. Cullen?"

"Maybe," she replied, trying to play coy.

It didn't work.

She didn't stop until she reached the kitchen island, and I didn't stop until I reached her.

I was hard as steel.

Not wasting any time, I dipped down and kissed her hard, thrusting my tongue inside her mouth when she gasped. And she felt me of course. Hard and ready for her.

She moaned in my mouth and unzipped my pants as I threw off my jacket, and I groaned loudly when my hands were met with her naked ass under her dress. Fucking cocktease was going commando.

Kissing her harder, I kneaded her ass roughly and pulled her against me once my pants and boxers were pushed down my hips. Fuck, no time to waste.

"Fuck, Edward, I need you" she whimpered as I sucked on her bottom lip. "Right... now."

I snarled, bunched up her dress, and palmed her perfect ass. "Wrap your legs around me, baby."

She did, and I lifted her up and perched her on the counter top before I broke the kiss. Because this, I needed to see. I needed to see her body, her face. Everything. And as I stroked my cock, close to her soaked pussy, I couldn't hold in the loud moan. She was just too fucking sexy for words. And all fucking mine.

"Please," she moaned.

"Push your dress down," I told her huskily. "I need to see you."

Again she obeyed, and her luscious breasts were soon on display. All for me. Mine to devour. Mine to fuck, kiss, nibble, and suck on. And I did it frequently.

Slowly, as I teased her pussy, spreading her juices around, I lowered myself over her and sucked one nipple into my mouth, all while keeping my eyes on hers.

We moaned.

Then, the instant my cock came in contact with her pussy, I was gone, and I gripped her hips tightly before I slammed into her with a guttural groan.

Goddamn frenzy right away.

I fucked her hard.

Bella and I loved it both ways. Sweet and loving, passionate and emotional. But if I have my gorgeous wife on the kitchen counter, sweet and loving is not an option for either of us.

She clenched down on me as I rubbed her clit, and she fucking teased me. Teased me by pinching her nipples, kneading her tits, which in turn made me fuck her harder. Hips meeting hips. Her heels digging into my ass. Loud moans and groans.

Harder.

Deep strokes.

My head lolled back and I focused on just feeling her tight pussy squeezing my cock.

Tighter.

"Fuck, Bella," I grunted.

I had to see it. Her. I had to see her. I could never stay away for long because she was too fucking beautiful. So, I watched her, us. I watched us as we brought each other closer and closer to orgasm.

"Oh, God, oh, God...You feel so good, baby," she cried out. "Ungh, yes... right there!"

"Right *there*?" I moaned, emphasizing there with a hard thrust, knowing I had hit her sweet spot.

I was close. She was close.

My cock glistened with her juices that slowly trickled out of her, and I rubbed her clit harder, needing for her to come with me. I wasn't going to last.

Fuck!

"Yes, yes! Edward... I'm... I'm... oh!"

Thank God!

Tensing her already tight walls around me, she came hard, milking my cock for all she was worth as I followed instantly. Always the same. I couldn't hold back once she fell over. She always took me with her, and it was fucking heaven. Pun intended.

"Fuck," I panted as I collapsed on top of her, effectively burying my face between her perfect breasts.

You won't hear me complaining.

"I love you," she whispered breathlessly. "Christ, I love you."

Her chest heaved, much like mine, and I replied, not caring that my answer was muffled. 'Cause you know, her breasts were in my face.

Loved it. Them. Love them.

"I love you, too, gorgeous. More than life."

Shit, I'm still panting.

Yeah, well, you're not twenty, Cullen.

Right.

"Mr. Cullen?"

"Hmm?"

"Best premiere ever."

"Couldn't agree more, Mrs. Cullen."

The story is over, Cullen.

Just for the readers.

Well, I said *story*, not your fucking *life*, now did I?

Right.