



Fanfiction by CaraNo

Beta'd by HollettLA and pre-read by Kitty Vuitton

Disclaimer: I don't own Twilight.

1.

BPOV

"Good morning, Ed," I say in a singsong voice as I enter his apartment. As always, he's lying on the couch. For some unknown reason, he doesn't like his bed. "You sleep okay?" I fluff his pillows before taking a step back.

"Good enough," he grunts and mindlessly flips the channels on his flat screen. "The breakfast sucked."

I laugh and walk over to the flowers in the window that have withered; time to throw them out.

"You always say that," I point out with a smirk.

"It always sucks."

I shake my head. If only he knew how good he has it. This retirement community is pricey as fuck. He gets his own little apartment, and the list of activities for seniors who live here goes on for days, it feels like.

"Can I get you some coffee while I'm here?" I ask. Another thing Ed hates: his kitchenette. As a former chef, he refuses to set a foot in there. If it's not a restaurant kitchen, he has no business there. His words.

"Masen Rule Number Seventeen: no coffee—"

I cut him off, rolling my eyes. "—before eleven AM." Trust me. I know all the rules. I was just trying to be polite, dammit. "Excuse me, your highness." I bow my head and curtsy. "If there's nothing else, I'm off to see your neighbor."

He grunts again. "Tell that old hag to keep it down, will ya?" Old hag? Ed Masen is seventy-five. Shelly Cope, the sweet lady living next door, is seventy-two. "She's always singin' along to those godforsaken talent shows." He points the remote at me. "Now, there's a reason she ain't on those shows."

I giggle, 'cause the Masens can work their charm regardless of how rude they are.

Speaking of other Masens... "Your kids stopping by anytime soon?" I ask.

His face falls, and I know he's thinking about his youngest son. *Edward Junior*. Trust, there are several photos of him on the walls, but he's never visited, and I've worked here for two months now. Alec and Alice, the older Masen siblings—also twins—stop by often enough. They look nothing like Ed with their raven hair and light blue eyes; that's after their mother. Only the junior looks like Ed, and...it's actually scary. It's practically like looking into the future. While Ed's rocking his grey disarray, his son's own mess is reddish brown. Same shade of green eyes, same sharp jaw, same

mouths, same everything. Well, Ed's not as fit as I'm willing to bet he once was. But...ya know.

"Guess Alice is coming this weekend as usual," he mutters and rubs the back of his neck. I purse my lips, pushing down my observations. "Alec was here a couple weeks ago, as you know, and the drive down from Boston doesn't take five minutes." He shrugs and stares out the window, a faraway look on his face.

When I first started here, it took great effort to get him to talk. The Masens, they're a stubborn bunch. Now, I'm only twenty-seven, but I swear to Christ, it wouldn't surprise me if I wake up one day soon with grey hair. However, they're easy to love. Just...*so fucking stubborn*.

"And Edward?" I ask, already knowing the answer.

"Nope."

I sigh and turn to leave. "Catch ya later, old man."

2.

BPOV

"By the way, Bella," Alice says, placing her hand on mine, "I tried that recipe you sent me. *Delicious*."

I grin and lift my coffee mug to my lips. "I told you, didn't I?" Not that it's my recipe, but whatever.

She chuckles and leans back in her seat. "You did. Jasper and the kids loved it, too."

"What recipe?" Ed grunts.

I didn't even know he was paying attention, 'cause his eyes are on the flat screen.

"A recipe for this amazing roasted salmon," Alice gushes. "I swear, it's the best I've ever had."

Ed scoffs. "Bullshit. *I* make the best roasted salmon."

"Nope!" Alice smirks. "Anyway, I better get going. I gotta pick up Leo at the sitter, and Jasper will be home with Andrea soon."

My stomach clenches, as it always does when she mentions her children. I've met them a couple times, and they're just so adorable. Leo's five and takes after his daddy, but Andrea, their seven-year-old, is a mix between Alice and Ed. Edward too, really. And at that thought, my eyes wander to the countless photos on the wall.

"Bring my grandchildren next time," Ed grunts. "It's been a while."

Alice nods and stands up. "You got it, Dad. I'll even bring a surprise guest for you." She grins and leans down to kiss her father's cheek. "Love you." As she passes me, she squeezes my shoulder and says, "I'll bring the pastries next Saturday—you here around two?"

I nod. "My shift ends at three."

"Cool. See ya next week, hon."

3.

BPOV

"You need some sun," I say and point to the chair next to me. "Now, sit your saggy ass down here and I'll help you out."

Speaking nicely to Ed doesn't work. You gotta use his own language. And this lovely Thursday has given us some sun; we should take advantage of that.

"Stop bustin' my chops," he groans. "Get outta here, woman."

"Ed." I tap my foot and put my hands on my hips.

He gives me a look. "Masen Rule Number Four: when a man is busy, leave him be." I was mouthing the words with him. He grunts. "Don't be cute, Bella. I'm warning you—I can always get another nurse in here and tell her you're a demon in disguise."

I grin wryly. "They already call you the grumpy devil, so..."

He's about to shoot back something sarcastic, I just know, but the ringing of my cell cuts him off. Now, I usually don't even have the sound on on my phone, but it's "Home" calling, and Rose is watching Emilia because there's a flu outbreak at her day care. My best friend, though she loves kids, has the tendency to treat little ones like adults.

"Sorry, but I gotta take this." I hold up a finger and place the phone by my ear. "Rose?"

"*Mommy!*" Emilia squeals. "*I gots'ta talk to you!*" Ooh, my four-year-old has put on the stern voice.

"What's up, baby girl?" I chuckle.

4.

BPOV

She huffs, and I hear Rose laughing in the background. "*Auntie Rose tolded me I can get a diamond in my tongue when I'm a big girl.*" She's

talking about a tongue ring. Again. Jesus Christ. *"But, 'member? You already call-ed me a big girl."*

I can't help but giggle. "Oh, honey. You gotta be an even bigger girl. Ask me again when you're sixteen, and I'll say no. Then you can get a tongue ring when you're eighteen and don't need my permission. Sound good?" I click my own tongue ring to the back of my front teeth. It's the only piercing I wear at work that's somewhat visible.

"Here—lemme talk to Mommy," I hear Rose say, and my daughter grumbles complaints. *"Bella? It's Rose."*

"Hey." I grin to myself.

"Don't you 'hey' me, missy," she huffs. *"That a-hole of a husband of yours dropped off a bunch of pamphlets—and told me to go to hell, mind you—and Kid found them. Now, I love that little girl with all my heart, but you try to talk a four-year-old outta getting her nipples and tongue pierced."*

I laugh. "Rose, you don't talk to a four-year-old about piercings. You simply tell them it's out of the question. But hey, she's a girl after my own heart."

And I totally ignore her comment about that "a-hole of a husband of mine."

I hear it too often.

She keeps asking when I'm divorcing him...

"Now, was there anything else?" I wonder and smirk at Ed who's actually about to sit down in the wheelchair. *Atta boy!*

"No, that's it. You'll be home by seven, right?"

I nod even though she can't see me. "A little over." I'm meeting Cullen before. "I'll bring Chinese with me."

After ending my call with Rose, I apologize to Ed, and then I wheel him outside for some sun.

I sit on a marble bench next to his chair.

It's quiet, save for some chirping birds.

We just watch the park that surrounds the retirement home.

The leaves on the trees are turning yellow, orange, and red.

I love fall.

"I didn't know you had a kid, Bella," Ed says quietly.

I smile down at my lap, hands folded there. "Emilia. She's a four-year-old ball-buster."

"Like mother, like daughter?" There's a smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth.

I don't comment.

Ed sighs after a while. "Hold onto her. And don't let petty bullshit get in the way."

Tilting my head, I stare at him intently; meanwhile, he keeps gazing out over the park.

"My youngest son—the one you often ask about?"

I let out a shaky laugh, wondering if I really ask about Edward that often. I mean, the only thing *Ed* has told me is that his youngest hates to be called Eddie, Junior, or Ed. It *has* to be Edward. Or simply Masen.

"Yeah, you got a crush on him or somethin'?" He gives me a sideways grin. "Always with the questions."

I roll my eyes, though I can't hide the flush on my cheeks. "Get on with it, old man."

With a sigh, he falls silent for a while again, but I can see he's building up to it.

"I haven't seen him in ten years," he whispers thickly.

5.

BPOV

Before I can say anything, he goes on. "You have to keep in mind, Edward wasn't planned. I was old as fuck—already forty-five, and Elisabeth was diagnosed with cancer when Edward was three. I was..." He swallows hard and scrubs a hand over his scruffy face. "I don't know. I was set in my ways. Alice and Alec were twelve when Edward was born." A humorless chuckle slips out. "I thought my diaper-changing days were over."

My eyes narrow; I try not to get angry, but...fuck, if you get pregnant, you gotta step up to the plate, dammit.

"I love that boy with all my heart," he croaks, melting my heart just a little. "But I wasn't the best father to him."

"What about Alice and Alec?" I ask tentatively, knowing the answer already. "Do they talk to him?" I want to ask him what happened between him and Edward, but I'm not sure he's ready to answer. I've spoken to Alice—

"No," he admits, interrupting my thoughts. "Edward and I, we had a falling out. He left. Packed up his stuff and left Philly—including Alec and

Alice. God knows where he is now. What if—" He puts his fist to his mouth and swallows his emotions. I find myself pushing down my own heartbreak. "He might have kids, a wife...I have no idea. My boy's thirty now—turned in June."

I blow out a heavy breath and stare out at the slowly setting sun.

"It's never too late, you know," I say quietly. "He can't be that hard to find. Have you tried? I-I could help."

His jaw clenches, eyes tightening. "He didn't have to leave."

"Ed." My shoulders slump, but at the same time my hackles rise. "Stop being so stubborn. He's your *son*."

Masen Rule Number One: don't ever give up or in.

I've lost count of the times I've heard it.

It's the rule I despise most.

"I've told you before, Bella: Masen Rule Number One—"

"I get it," I spit out.

"Well, he could call me, too!" he argues.

Jesus Christ.

6.

BPOV

We're by no means loaded or anything, and the row house we live in isn't huge. Two bedrooms, a pretty small living room, our kitchen is oddly big on the other hand, and a tiny bathroom that we all share. Well, it's tiny because we've stuffed in our washer and dryer in there. But it doesn't

matter. We love this place, and as soon as I come home, it smells amazing and I hear, "Mommy's home! Mommy's home!" Which is followed by the sound of little feet running barefoot over the hardwood floors.

"Hey, baby girl." I grin and squat down as Emilia runs into me. "I've missed you today. And—" I take a whiff "—is that pizza I smell?"

"Yes! Daddy comed home early." Her smile is so wide. "C'mon! We can eat Ch'nese food also." She widens her eyes and jumps up and down, causing her dark curls to bounce. "We got'sta hurry, 'cause Daddy and Auntie Rose are fighting again!"

I groan, kick off my shoes, gather the bags from our local Chinese restaurant, and let Emilia drag me into the kitchen. And yeah, there's a glaring contest going on.

"Honey, I'm home," I sing, trying to break the tension.

At least Emilia's giggling. Behind her hand, even. Too fucking cute.

As sad as it is, she's used to the animosity between her father and my best friend. She finds it funny; I find it annoying. Especially since they're usually arguing about *me*. See, I grew up with Rose, and therefore she's protective of me. Sisters before misters, hoes before bros, ladies before shadies...and all that shit. And it doesn't help that she's a man-hater, period. Her game is pussy, and her girlfriend's name is Kate.

"Daddy!" Emilia shouts. That does it, and he finally turns to face me. She points up at me. "Mommy's home."

"Hi." I smirk.

Edward smiles sheepishly. "Hey, baby. Didn't see ya there."

7.

BPOV

Closing the distance between us, Edward pulls me in for a tight hug and a deep hello kiss. When our tongues meet, we both chuckle as our piercings click together. I nip at his bottom lip, sucking gently on his ring there, and he groans quietly and cups my ass.

Emilia's squeal and Rose's gagging bring us back to the present, and we break away, breathing heavily.

"How was your day?" he murmurs, lust in his voice. "Did the meeting go well?"

I hum and slide my hands up his inked arms, just savoring this feeling. Reaching his shoulders, I lock my arms around his neck, which means I'm standing on my toes. "Same old, same old—good. Cullen says hey." I smile and slip my fingers under his black beanie, gently scratching his scalp. "How was yours?"

He always answers with the same word. Because he loves his tattoo shop. In my opinion, he's the world's best tattoo artist, but I'm his wife. Of course he's the best to me. In truth, though, he *is* very successful.

"Great." His green eyes twinkle. Our daughter inherited them. "Well, it was until I got home and Ms. Butch ruined my Thursday." I chuckle and roll my eyes at him. "Hm." Now his eyes are trained on the dermal anchor next to my left eye. "You take the stud out when you work, right?" I nod. Facial piercings are a no-go at work. "You should probably leave it for now. It's a little red." And he slips into work-mode. Not that he works with steel, but Emmett—who's Edward's partner—does. It was actually Emmett who did all my piercings, although Edward stood guard when I had my clit done. "Just cover it if it's necessary."

"Okay," I say simply. "When did you get home, by the way?" Emilia tugs on my hand and tells me she's *staaarving*, so I walk over to the kitchen counter and pull out the containers of Chinese food. "You can go wash your hands, honey."

She runs out.

"About fifteen minutes ago," he answers and opens a large pizza box. "We gonna save this for later?" Yeah, we both have a thing for cold pizza, so that sounds good. "Butch, you stayin' for dinner?" he asks Rose gruffly.

I giggle and bump my hip to his thigh. "Be nice, hubs."

To be honest, I think they like hating each other. They're like siblings, only without an ounce of love.

"To her?" He cocks his pierced brow. "Not in this fucking lifetime."

"Pig," Rose sighs behind us.

"Bit-"

"I'm done!" Emilia comes running in, saving Daddy from saying that wonderful word. "Look!" She shoves up her wet hands for Edward.

He grins and dips down to kiss them. "They smell like soap, baby girl!"

Emilia scrunches her nose and waves a hand in front of it. "You still smell like fart, Daddy."

I stifle a smile and arch a brow at Edward. No, he doesn't smell bad, but I do know that he loves to let one rip in Rose's presence. Just to bug her. Sometimes he even eats plenty of beans at work if he knows Rose is babysitting. Then when he comes home...well.

"This is my house," Edward says with a shrug. "Butch can't handle that... by all means, she knows where the fucking door is."

"Bleep!" Emilia squeaks, scooting her butt onto her chair. "A buck in the jar, Daddy," she sings.

Edward winks at her. "You're going to the Ivy League, mark my words."

I believe him. He's a foul-mouthed one. We both are, but I manage to keep it down in front of the baby girl. Edward does not, and the swear jar is for Emilia's college fund.

"All right, let's eat," I announce and carry a tray with containers over to the table. "Honey, can you get plates?"

"Already on it," Edward replies, and while he does that, I get glasses and drinks. Milk for Emilia, Coke for Edward, orange soda for Rose and me.

Around the round table, I sit down next to Emilia. Rose is on the other side of her, and Edward takes the empty seat, petulantly moving it closer to me. *Children.*

"So, how was work today?" Rose asks me while we fill our plates.

I give her a look; she *knows* my husband. Who is a fucking Masen.

"Masen Rule Number Nine: no talk about work at dinner," Edward grunts and shoves an eggroll into his mouth.

I offer a tight-lipped smile.

Edward and his father are more alike than they think.

8.

BPOV

"Masen Rule Number Seventy-Eight: no beanies at the table," I shoot back and steal Edward's beanie. He pouts, left with a disheveled mohawk. I level him with a look. He grunts. Emilia laughs. Edward puckers his lips at her.

"There is no rule number seventy-eight, you know," he tells me as an afterthought.

I sniff. "It's a rule now."

"My bossy woman," he teases and steals a smooch. I grimace through a chuckle and wipe away some hot sauce from my lips. "Okay!" He rubs his hands together and looks to our daughter. "Baby girl, what'd you do while Unemployee of the Month took care'a ya?"

Rose glares at my husband—not that he gives a rat's ass.

"I learn-ed a new word," Emilia says proudly. "Blimey!"

Edward and I exchange a glance before we crack up.

~oOo~

"Emilia Marie Masen, get back here!" Edward shouts as Emilia escapes the bathroom and runs into the living room. Wearing only a pair of pink cotton panties, she jumps onto the couch where I'm sitting with Edward's work schedule, and she dives behind my back, giggling like mad. Meanwhile, I don't find it very funny at all, 'cause her hair is soaking wet from her bath.

"Emilia," I complain. "Listen to Daddy." Said Daddy enters the living room with a towel for her, and I kinda have to force my eyes to leave the hot piece of ass I'm married to. Seriously, his bulky arms, broad shoulders, defined abs, muscular thighs...*fuckmeplease*. And he's only wearing a pair of grey sweats and a black baseball cap. He's killing me. All that ink on

display, not to mention piercings. Both nipples have rings, and then there's his right eyebrow, his bottom lip, his tongue and, well, his cock.

"Get that butt over here," he tells Emilia, and the only thing sticking out is that mentioned butt and her legs. The rest is hidden behind me. I grin at him and ask if he wants to trade, but he shakes his head. "Hell no. I'm not good with that shit." He really isn't. When a customer comes into his shop, he just scribbles their appointment down on a Post-it. Then someone else will have to update the schedule, and that someone is me. 'Cause Emmett's just as bad. "I'm serious, Emilia. We gotta dry your hair!" He gives me a look. "I'm not combing out those knots, honey. She screams bloody fucking murder when I get close with the brush."

"It's okay, I'll do it," I laugh and pull Emilia from behind me. "That's enough, baby. Go with Daddy."

"Fine." She sulks. "And a buck to the jar." She juts her chin out at Edward.

"Ball-buster," he shoots back, ushering her back to the bathroom.

Once they're gone, I lean back against the couch with a sigh of contentment. I hear our daughter's giggling, Edward's groans, and then his laughs, 'cause he's so whipped. I hear him chasing her down the hall and into her room, where he proceeds to attack her with smooches and animal noises.

I couldn't love them more.

9.

BPOV

I know my husband is beyond happy, but there is something missing. I know he has regrets. I know he misses his family. Though he doesn't like

to talk about his past, he's told me everything—his side of the story, anyway. Which was why I took the job at the retirement community right outside town. I tracked Ed down, hoping he wouldn't be as stubborn as his son. How wrong was I? Edward and Ed are practically the same person. They miss each other like crazy, yet they're too pigheaded to reach out.

Masen Rule Number One stands in the way.

Now, I've been with Edward for nine years. I've been his wife for five. I *know* him. I know his tells, I can decipher his sighs, I can translate his grunts, and I know each and every expression of his by heart. And as soon as something is brought up that reminds him of his family, he gets this troubled look on his beautiful face.

My husband once saved my life—literally—and now I want to pay back an ounce.

Because when we met—when I stumbled into him nine years ago in New York, I thought I was way past saving. There was nothing left of me. But Edward believed in me, took me home to his little studio that he lived in at the time, and pieced me together. Bit by little bit. At one point, he even handcuffed me to a chair, because I was ready to bolt.

He didn't let me, something that saved my life, and then we moved here, to Philadelphia, where he grew up.

If it weren't for my husband, there would be no Emilia, I wouldn't have reconnected with Rose, my childhood friend, and...I can honestly say I wouldn't have been alive.

"Hey, you." Edward appears in the doorway, Emilia thrown over his shoulder. He smiles. "The monster's ready for bed." He pinches our girl's butt, causing her to squeal.

"I'll be right there." I grin.

I just hope my husband won't hate me when he finds out his father is my patient.

10.

BPOV

On Saturday morning, I wake Edward up by sucking his cock into my mouth.

There's just something about a man in the morning that does it for me. A time where the scruff is more pronounced, hair more messy, and scents heavier. And Edward's natural scent...*ungh*. He's rugged, rough around the edges, and all man.

Don't get me started on his gruff morning voice, which I know I will be graced with any second now.

Swirling my tongue around his thick shaft, I make sure to tease his sensitive spots. My tongue ring swipes over his apadravya, eliciting a light clicking noise, but it's the feeling of it I know drives my husband nuts. He says it sends jolts of "fuckawesomeness" through him.

Since I'm a normal human being, one who actually has a gag reflex, I can't take all of him. But I make up for it by multitasking. I massage his balls, suck as much of him as I can, let my tongue soak him, and I also reach up to tease one of his nipples. Tugging lightly on the nipple ring, I tighten my lips around his cock and suck harder. My cheeks hollow.

Slowly but surely, he wakes up, the first sign being small movements and a change in his breathing. His chest rumbles with a sleepy groan, and he throws an arm over his face.

The underside of that arm is decorated with yours truly.

When I was pregnant—about seven or eight months along—he took a photo of me in profile and made it permanent with ink on his arm. My naked body is colorless, but the sheet I'm tangled in is dark red, covering my tits and hip area, and then pools by my feet.

"Mmpf...Bella...?"

I smile around his tip and reach for the small bottle of lube next to me. Then I slide a coated finger farther down to caress his ass.

That does it.

"Jesus!" He pushes himself up on his elbows, disoriented, and blinks before squinting through his eyes. *Hi, hubby.* "Oh, fuck." He slumps back down against the mattress, now fully awake. "Don't stop, honey." His hand comes to rest at the back of my head, and his hips buck upward lazily. "Fuck yeah—so good." I hum around him, pushing the pad of my index finger inside his ass. "Damn, Bella," he moans. When I nudge his thighs apart, he spreads 'em. "*Christ,*" he hisses and palms his face.

Judging by his guttural groan, I've found his g-spot, so I rub it in firm little circles, all while sucking him hard and making slurpy sounds. He digs those hard.

"Losin' my everloving mind," he pants. "Baby—I..." His thighs throb, and I feel how his balls tighten. "Shit, I wanna come inside you." He lifts his head. "Before I fucking blow it—c'mon."

With a wet pop, I release his cock and crawl up his body. "Gotta be quick. I start work soon." I straddle him and ask, "Pussy or ass?"

"Pussy." He's fast to grip his dick for me to sink down on.

And I do, and it feels... "Fucking amazing," I moan, tilting my head back.

"Yeah, you fucking are," he grunts. Sitting up, he holds my hips and controls my movements. "Gimme some tongue, woman." He grabs my jaw and claims my mouth in a hungry kiss.

Despite the fact that my shift starts soon, we slow down.

Our kisses grow lazy.

He's got a silly morning smile on his face.

"When do you get off work?" he mumbles as I roll my hips. It makes my clit ring brush against his pelvic bone, to which I shudder. "Yeah, just like that."

"Three," I whimper, dropping my forehead to his shoulder. A shiver rips through me as he rubs my clit. His calloused fingers flick, circle, push, stroke, and tug on my piercing. "Um, date night at six?" We try to have at least a couple date nights every month, and Rose never says no to babysitting. Neither does Kate, Rose's girlfriend.

"Sounds good." He nods before giving my arm a little love bite. My husband is a biter. "Restaurant?" A groan slips out when I bite him right back. This time, I bit down on one of the black stars on his neck. I love those. He's got one for every person he loves, the biggest ones dedicated to Emilia and me. Sorta like his stars, I have roses and swirls along my ribcage—one flower per person I can't live without. "Wait, I don't got any work today, right?"

I shake my head no. "I've updated all your appointments to your phone. Did it last night." He soaks two fingers along my pussy before pushing them inside my ass. "And we're so staying home," I groan breathlessly.

"Perfect," he whispers huskily. "I'll cook, and you'll give it up on the counter."

I giggle. "Okay. Make me come."

"Gotcha." He flips me over and slams into me, causing me to cry out. His apadravya makes me see God, and I need to bite down on my hand to keep quiet. "I-I—oh yeah." He grunts, sliding out, and then he pushes back in. "Can we make another movie soon?" He moans into my neck.

"Oh, yesss," I hiss. Squeezing my eyes shut, I focus on the building knot in my belly. It's about to explode—I can feel it. "Harder, baby!" I claw at his back, feeling his rippled muscles moving as he thrusts. "God—I'm almost there."

Dipping down, he starts sucking on my tits. More bites follow, especially around the spot where I have his name inked. At the same time, his thumb gently brushes over the spot on my hip where he tattooed our daughter's footprint.

"I'm losing it, honey," he grits out.

That's okay, because just then, I lose it, too.

11.

BPOV

Since this morning's sexcapades took a little longer than planned, I'm late for work.

Just as I round the corner to Ed's apartment, I see that Bree—one of the other nurses—is about to go in. But she stops when she sees me. "There you are!" There's a *Thank God* in her voice. "Saves me from talking to Grumpy."

"Yeah, sorry." I grin and pull up my hair in a high ponytail. "It's really getting cold out, isn't it?" I cup my cheeks, knowing they're flushed. "I can't believe it's almost October."

"I'm reminded of it every day by Riley." She's referring to her son. "He can't wait for Halloween. Diego's totally taking him trick-or-treating this year."

"I called a nurse!" we hear Ed shout from inside. *"I could be dying in here, you know?!"*

Bree waves her fist at his door, then faces me again. "God, I don't understand how you put up with him, Bella. *Dying*," she scoffs. "He called the front desk to complain about the soap in his bathroom. Apparently it's not fancy enough for his rich ass."

I smirk and smooth down my shirt. "He takes some getting used to."

"I've been here three years, and I still haven't managed—hey." Her brows knit together, and she points to my nametag. *Shit*. She arches a brow at me. "Since when are you Nurse *Swan*?"

Think fast, think fast, think fast.

"Oh, crap." I smack my forehead. "I accidently grabbed my old one." I roll my eyes. This'll work. After all, I've been a nurse for years, and this isn't the first old folks' home I've worked at. "I had this before I got married." I wave a hand. It's actually true, though. It *is* a nametag from before I married Edward. I use it whenever I'm tending to Ed. For obvious reasons. And it's also my reason for refusing to be late when Alice or Alec comes, 'cause I don't want them asking for Nurse Swan at the front desk seeing as she doesn't exist.

I can thank my lucky stars that Ed only ever uses first names when he hollers. When he calls, it's usually, "Gimme Bella!" or "Get Bella in hea!"

The only ones who know of my real intentions here—other than actually getting a paycheck—are Esme and Jessica. Jess works nights, and she's the one who hooked me up with this job, and Esme...well, she's around here somewhere. They're both friends of mine, and we all have Ed in common. We're the three who put up with him.

"Ah, okay." Bree grins. "Well, I'm off to change Mr. Newton's diaper." She gives me a sarcastic smile and two thumbs up. "See ya later, Bella."

Yeah, probably on our smoke break.

"Have fun," I chuckle.

Twisting the handle on Ed's door, I enter his apartment and find him muttering curses on the couch.

"Finally. You're late." He scowls.

"Ten minutes." I give him a look. "Get over it. Now, what's wrong with the fucking soap in this place?" I place my hands on my hips.

He grins. "Love it when you talk dirty."

Sigh. "Perv." Walking over to the coffee table, I clear it of plates and a couple coffee mugs. "Excited to see Alice and your grandkiddos today?"

"Yeah." He nods and leans back against the couch. "I wonder who she's bringing."

"Time will tell." I bring the dirty dishes to his kitchenette. "Any more thought on contacting your son?" I call over my shoulder as I fill the sink with hot water.

"Masen Rule Number Twelve: repeating yourself makes you look stupid!"

"You're the stupid one," I mutter.

"I heard that, young lady!"

"Well, I said it out loud."

12.

EPOV

Spending a Saturday with my daughter while Bella's at work isn't a new thing—happens often—but what is new are her attempts at bullshitting Daddy.

Cullen finds her funny.

Fuck it—so do I.

"Mommy tolded me she wants a pink one," she claims, smiling too innocently. "I mean, with a pink stone."

I grin down at her and shake my head. "You're a shitty little liar, baby girl."

She gets that from me, I'm afraid. I can't lie to save my life.

"Doesn't Bella hate pink?" Cullen leans against a wall.

"No!" Emilia scows up at him.

I tell Cullen that yes, my wife hates pink; our daughter is just full of it since *she* adores pink, and then I return to picking out a new charm for Bella's bracelet.

I will give it to her next week. It'll be her eighth one, and I'm so fucking proud of her.

The saleslady tries her thing, stating that white gold is better than silver, but we're not fucking made outta money. She even shows me charms

with diamonds, but the only diamond Bella owns is the one on her engagement ring. I just shake my head, about to flip my fucking lid, and go for the silver charm shaped like an infinity symbol.

Bella and I aren't fancy people. We work hard, both strongly believing that money ain't everything. If we only wanted dough, we would've chosen different career paths. Instead we went with what we love, and that's that. My tattoo shop runs successfully, but you gotta be on *Miami Ink* or some shit to roll in the big bucks.

Once I've paid for the charm, we leave the store and decide to hit up a local joint for some fried chicken. We'd drive, but Bella's got our beat-up Ford since she works way out. My shop is only two blocks from where we live, so I always walk. And Cullen didn't drive today.

On the sidewalk, I light up a smoke after making sure Emilia's jacket is zipped all the way up. It's really getting cold, and we need a sick baby girl like we need more lawyers in this country.

"Swing me," Emilia says, holding up her arms for Cullen and me.

"You're always polite when Mommy's around," I reflect. "Where's that 'please' and 'thank you' when I'm here?"

"That's an easy one, man," Cullen chuckles. "Bella's not as whipped as you are."

"Thank you—can you please swing me, Daddy?" Now she's batting her lashes.

Christ, she's a cute little shit.

My best creation.

13.

EPOV

I point to her and face Cullen. "That's all Bella. The way she can get everything she wants."

I cave...

Cullen does, too, and we both swing her between us as we walk toward Joe's.

Emilia giggles and squeals while Cullen and I make plans for his next tattoo. Last year, I did a big back piece on him, and now he's come back for a full sleeve. He's much like me—addicted to ink. Same age, too. And aside from being my wife's sponsor and a helluva car mechanic, Carlisle Cullen's a good friend.

"Bella's tryin' to set me up with one of her friends from work," he mentions as we reach Joe's. Cocking a brow in question at him, I pick up Emilia and enter the joint, starved for some greasy shit. "She had some weird fuckin' name—I don't know."

"'Cause it went so well last time she tried to hook you up," I laugh, remembering the woman Cullen dubbed Horse Face. I jerk my chin at Joe behind the counter and walk over to our regular booth. "Three of the usual, buddy!" I holler, and then point to Emilia. "Small portion for this one."

"Comin' up." Joe nods.

"Is he your buddy?" Emilia asks as we take our seats.

I smile and remove her beanie and jacket. "I guess so. Uncle Emmett and I eat lunch here a lot." So does Cullen when he's in the neighborhood. Though, he's usually hiding under some car, getting his hands dirty—

fucking grease monkey. If it weren't for him, Bella and I would probably be broke just trying to keep our car running.

"I've been thinking about settling down." Cullen shrugs and takes off his beanie.

"Oh-ho!" I chuckle. "Never thought I'd see the day." But I nod, lips pursed. "It's good, though. Find some woman, squeeze out a couple kids..."

"You and Bella gonna go for another?" He cocks a pierced brow.

I grin and shake my head no. "We've got our hands full with this one." I lean down and plant smooches all over Emilia's face. "We're thinking—why push it? You can't create perfection twice." Emilia mirrors the funny faces I make, giggling like mad. "Ain't that right, baby? You're perfect."

"Yeah," she laughs, head bobbing.

In truth, the wife and I have discussed it, but we're good. It's a money question as well as...I don't know, we're just happy the way it is. But yeah, kids are expensive, and we'd rather make sure Emilia has it set. College and all, clothes when she needs it, a pretty bike...the little everyday things. Plus, with only one kid, we can afford to take her to Disney World every summer, and we can also afford the trip we take each year to a tattoo convention in California. Next year we'll probably take Emilia with us, make it a longer vacation. And I mention all this to Cullen, to which he nods pensively.

Then he laughs. "Maybe the hag will tag along."

I don't fucking think so. "Over my dead body." I sit back in my seat and bring out Emilia's coloring book from her little backpack. Then, with her busy, I lean forward, resting my elbows on the table. "Even Bella's got limits, thank God." I'd probably blow a fucking fuse if she suggested Rose

come with us on vacations. But I've got nothing to worry about there, 'cause unlike Butch, my wife is happy with a simple friendship. She doesn't feel the need to see Rose every single day.

"I don't know how you put up with her." Cullen shudders; I'm not the only one who's got issues with Blondie. In fact, Cullen stays clear if Rose is around.

I shrug and scratch my nose. "It's for Bella's sake." Rose is all she has left from her childhood, and I remember how happy she was when she reconnected with Rose when we moved back to Philly right before Emilia was born. I won't take that away from her just because Rose carries a hard-on for my wife.

I think Bella's the only one who's actually clueless to the fact that Rose is in love with her.

14.

EPOV

"You should be napping, honey," I mumble sleepily, sprawled out on the couch in the living room. Some Disney flick is playing in the background, but Emilia is next to me, her back to the TV, obviously not giving a shit about that.

She just hums and continues to trace my facial piercings with her fingers.

After saying goodbye to Cullen, we headed home and changed into sweats and beaters—well, a frilly little top for the baby girl—and collapsed on the couch.

"Mommy will—" I yawn, feeling my eyes moisten "—be home soon."

"When's Auntie Rose comin'?"

Lifting my head, I check the clock on the TV. "Couple of hours—after Mommy comes and after your nap."

"Kay..." Her eyes begin to droop slightly.

I smile and kiss her on the forehead.

It feels like only minutes later Bella wakes us up with whispers and soft touches to our cheeks.

"Hey—" I clear my throat from sleep and push up to a sitting position. Emilia's in Bella's arms, head resting on her shoulder. "Christ, I'm tired."

"Feel free to sleep some more." She smiles. "I'll fix Baby Girl's dinner." She tickles Emilia's side, to which the little one squirms, yawns, and whines. "Whaddya say to some spaghetti and meatballs, kiddo?"

"With ketchup." Emilia nods and rubs her eyes.

I grimace. It's a chef's worst nightmare—ketchup. Okay, so maybe I'm not a chef, but it was the plan once. My dad and I used to cook together; he'd let me come to his restaurant, and I was his little sous chef...

I rub my chest.

"What's with the frown, honey?"

I look up and smile for her sake, shaking my head. "Nothing. I'm fine."

She's too perceptive for her own good.

"How was work?" I ask, changing the subject.

In return, she gives me a look that tells me she doesn't buy my bullshit, but she lets it die for now. "It was good—it was interesting." We head to the kitchen together, and while Bella gets started on the pasta, I bring out

a plastic container from the freezer with the meatballs I made last week. "By the way, it's time to book another appointment for me." She smiles; it's small, but I see the pride in it, which is how it should be.

"I know." I dip down and kiss her cheek. I bite it, too. I like to bite. Don't know why. "I've already talked to Emmett about it."

An eighth little star will grace her collarbone, and then Emmett will top it off with a skindiver.

"So, what's this I hear about you setting Cullen up on a date?" I smirk at her and return to the meatballs. By now, Emilia wants to chip in too, so I pick her up to sit on the counter. "Remember, no touching." I arch a brow, recalling Emilia's wails from a couple months ago when she touched the hot plate.

"I 'member," she mumbles, fisting her little hands in her lap.

"Good." I wink and then turn back to Bella, waiting for her answer.

She giggles. "What? I just figured Cullen and Esme would be cute together."

"Uh-huh." I huff a laugh. "'Cause Cullen is such a cute guy. Good luck with that, baby." I throw a towel over my shoulder, thinking about what Cullen said today. Maybe Bella's not crazy for playing matchmaker if Cullen now wants to settle down, so... Perhaps Cullen and I could drive out there and visit? I'd like to see her new workplace, and it'll give Cullen a chance to meet this Esme person. Plus, we can take Emilia with us—make a day out of it. 'Cause I think I remember Bella saying there's a big park or something nearby.

"We could visit," I suggest.

"Um." Bella focuses intently on stirring the pasta. "Visit? At w-work? My work?"

I laugh through my nose. "Why's that so surprising? I've visited you before—at the other places, remember?"

"Yeah..." She nibbles on her lip.

"So, how's next weekend?" I ask.

15.

BPOV

Sorry, we have this huge outing for all the seniors next weekend.

Oh, gosh darn it, I wish you could, but we're just swamped.

I'm afraid that's impossible. I have a staff meeting.

Countless excuses run through my head as I head in to work on Monday morning, so why the fuck couldn't I have thought of at least one when Edward asked to visit next weekend? Fuck if I know, but now it's reality. Cullen's already on board, and Emilia can't wait to go to the park with Daddy and see where Mommy works.

Masen Rule Number Four Hundred and Thirty-Two: Don't visit your wife at work.

If only there was such a rule...

So...I have a week to get Ed to contact his estranged son?

Good luck, Bella.

Parking the car outside of work, I ignore the Swan nametag and light up a cigarette. I spot both Esme and Jessica by the smoking zone, so I walk

over to them. Jess looks tired, so I know she's just coming off another night shift.

"Hey, chicas." I come to a stop and adjust my bag over my shoulder.

"Hey, hon," Jess yawns, stubbing out her smoke with her foot.

"Good morning." Esme arches a brow, the first one to notice that I'm wearing my real nametag. "Nurse Masen, huh?"

I roll my eyes. "I have a week to figure this shit out. Edward's coming to visit me next weekend." I take a drag from my smoke and smirk at Esme. "By the way, Cullen's coming, too."

"Oh, fuck yeah." She grins. Then she faces a confused Jess. "Bella showed me a picture of this guy—he's so fuckin' sexy. I almost creamed my panties, I swear. Thirty years old, all inked up, bulky as fuck..." She lets out a dreamy sigh, eyes glazing over. She's like a teenager, though she's the same age as me. "Gah! We can make the cutest little babies, and I can take them to visit their daddy in his garage."

"He's a mechanic," I explain to Jess, chuckling. "He's also my sponsor."

Jess and Esme already know I'm a recovering addict. I'm actually not alone; Jess went down a similar road once, but she wasn't as deep into it as I was. Still, her story isn't pretty. Her ex-husband hit her, so she found peace in alcohol and prescription drugs. She almost lost her kids, but she managed to pull through, and now she's been sober for four years, and her ex is behind bars. She recently celebrated her twenty-ninth birthday, and though I haven't known her very long, the countless stories tell me that the Jess she is today is a happier one.

"Oh, the dirty blonde?" she inquires, having seen the photo in question. It's just a simple shot in my phone—of Cullen, Edward, and Emmett. I nod

in response. "Yeah, he's hot. But the third guy's hotter." She nods, pursing her lips. "Emmett, right?"

"That's the one," I giggle. Maybe I can set up Emmett and Jess, too. Emmett, he's amazing. Much like Edward and Cullen, he's big and brawny on the outside, but a cuddly softy on the inside.

"Yeah, but back to that other thing." Esme twirls a finger. "You've been here two months, honey. And the only thing you've accomplished is to get Ed *talking* about Edward. How're you gonna get him to actually reach out in just a week?"

Good question. "Well, I'm done playing nice." I tilt up my head and blow out some smoke. "I'm also done with the fucking charade."

Jess' eyes widen. "You gonna tell Ed your name is Masen?"

"Yeah." I nod once.

Esme speaks up next. "You're sure you can't get your husband to contact Ed?"

"It's gotta be Ed reaching out," I say, shaking my head. "And it has nothing to do with pride or stubbornness. It's just about what's right. My husband deserves an apology." I nod, liking my words. "Edward misses his father like mad, but he still needs closure from their ancient bullshit."

"Well, good luck to you, Bella." Jess squeezes my hand. "You're gonna need it."

I know.

16.

BPOV

"Ed?" I call, entering his apartment.

"Living room," he grunts just as I walk in and spot him on the couch. He really needs to get off his ass more. Whenever Esme, Jess, or I come in, there he is. Seriously, he only goes out when we bug him enough and he wants us to shut up.

"How are you today?" I place my hands on my hips, wondering how to proceed with my mission. Because it's clear that I have to go with a new approach.

"Good, I suppose." He flips the channels. "My ass itches."

"Scratch it," I deadpan.

"In the presence of a lady?" He grins slyly.

I roll my eyes. "Since when are you one for decorum?" Then I shake my head; we're way off track. "Look, we gotta talk." Sitting down in the chair next to the couch, I think back on this Saturday when Alice stopped by with the kids and a certain surprise guest. He turned out to be the man Ed owned a restaurant with back in the early nineties. Marcus. Unfortunately, their business venture hadn't lasted long, 'cause there'd been something wrong with Marcus' work permit, so he had to move back home to Italy. And they eventually lost touch...

Marcus' visit—it was like witnessing Ed returning to life. Alice had contacted him a while ago, and apparently Marcus lives in the States again now; it's a long story, but the reunion was a sight to behold. But then Ed crashed, his face falling, when Marcus inquired about *Piccolo Masen*, which was the nickname he evidently gave my husband.

I remember Edward telling me how he often rode his bike down to his dad's restaurant when he was a kid. He loved it there and vowed to become a chef just like his dad one day.

With a shake of my head, I bring myself back to the present and face a curious-looking Ed.

Clasping my hands in my lap, I steel myself and take a deep breath.

"Do you miss Edward?" I ask.

His shoulders slump. "Bella..." He shakes his head, averting his eyes. "I, I... Just don't start, all right?" His eyes meet mine again. "You know very well that I don't like to talk about—"

"Answer the fucking question," I snap.

He's definitely surprised by my outburst, but he masks it quickly. "Bella," he starts off warningly, "I can honestly say I care for you, but this is none of your business."

"That's where you're wrong." I lean back in my seat and cross one leg over the other. "It *is* my business, but before I explain, you're gonna answer my question." I fold my arms across my chest.

He rakes a hand through his hair and blows out a breath; it's easy to see he's frustrated, if not a little angry. "Yes," he grits out. "I miss my son. I miss him every fucking day, but—" His eyes widen before he leans back, looking crestfallen. "I'm a coward, Bella," he whispers.

I arch a brow. "Well, I'm glad you at least admitted that." Then, with a few flicks of my wrist, I've detached the nametag on my chest. I toss it toward him, and it lands in his lap. "Swan was my maiden name. That—" I point "—is my name now, as it has been for the past five years."

Ed holds the tag and says nothing.

His chest heaves with the shaky breath he then lets out.

"Your youngest son is my husband," I finish.

17.

BPOV

He stays silent for a long time. Minutes tick by, and I watch countless emotions flit across Ed's face. When I see resentment—or maybe it's plain anger—I'm sure it's directed at me, but I don't care. There's also betrayal, shock, guilt, sadness...though, the most prominent one is regret.

"He doesn't know you're a patient of mine," I say quietly.

His head bobs slightly, but his eyes remain on the nametag in his hands, shoulders still slumped.

"How—I mean..." He clears his throat and starts over, keeping his eyes downcast. "Is he all right?"

I purse my lips.

I won't answer that.

What I know is that Ed loves his son. I know he misses his namesake, and I know he feels guilty—that he sees himself as a coward, and that he regrets plenty. But what I don't know is if he'll ever push down his pride, grow a pair, and contact Edward. Regardless, I'm not here to appease Ed. Yes, I've grown to care for him, too—more than I thought was possible—but Edward is my husband. He comes first.

I *need* Ed to reach out to his son of his own free will.

Finally looking up, Ed sees my expression—one that says I'm not here to give him a play-by-play of his son's life.

In Ed's own expression, I see despair.

I'm not heartless; my eyes water, and I feel so sad for him. But this has to happen in only one way, and that's Ed contacting Edward. As long as he takes the first step...

"Your daughter..." He trails off.

I offer a small smile and nod. *That's right, Ed. You have another granddaughter.*

"Are—" he chuckles thickly and rubs his thumb and forefinger over his eyes "—are you really not gonna tell me anything?"

"Are you gonna tell me your version of what happened ten years ago?" I counter softly.

Just last week, Ed told me their issues were "petty," and that's true—if Edward's version is all there is—but that's even worse. Sadder. Because... shouldn't Edward be more important than pride? Than petty? That's how my husband sees it. It's how *I* see it.

"Fine," he rasps, nodding with a dip of his chin. "I'll tell you."

18.

EPOV

"Any—*Christ*, man." Cullen hisses when I hit a particularly sensitive spot near his bicep with my tattoo gun. My brows are furrowed in concentration, my teeth imbedded in my bottom lip. "Any chance you'll be done before Rose gets here?" he asks gruffly.

Looking up, I see the clock on the wall and figure it's been about half an hour or so since they called from Emilia's day care. Right after, I texted Rose and asked if she could pick up Baby Girl, which she agreed to do. So, I suppose they'll be here within the next ten minutes—maybe twenty.

They'd tried Bella's cell first, but it's not unusual for her not to pick up. She's always with patients.

"Afraid not, buddy," I chuckle and return my attention to his arm. After wiping away some blood, I continue with the outline of an old-fashioned microphone. Sorta like the one Elvis had? Yeah. "You'll just have to survive seeing Butch."

"Oh my God, I love it!" a chick squeals in the background.

Emmett has just pierced her nose.

He's as excited about that as I am to do tramp stamps.

Fucking butterflies, man.

"What's wrong with Emilia, anyway?" Cullen speaks calmly, though through clenched teeth.

I grin and shake my head to myself, falling a bit more in love with my daughter. The woman at the day care had said, "It's best Emilia takes the rest of the day off, because I'm afraid she has made many of her friends upset." See, the thing with our daughter is that she's crazy smart for her age, and she doesn't believe in Santa. Then there's also the fact that I sometimes don't know when to keep my mouth shut when she's around, and, lastly, Emilia's talent for eavesdropping belongs to a teenager.

I'd made a comment—cracked a joke once—to Bella, and now it's clear to me that Emilia heard it. And while I sincerely doubt she understands the meaning of that very last word, the rest is evidently enough to upset a whole day care.

So...today she's told her friends that Santa's just a fat guy who walks around calling people hoes.

19.

EPOV

I kinda wish I could hear Emilia say that with her own words. I imagine her standing like her mommy, hands on her hips, and speaking frankly about hoe, hoe, hoes.

Once I've told all this to Cullen, he laughs and says he wishes he could hear it, too.

Shortly after that, the bell above the door clinks and clanks softly with Emilia and Rose's arrival.

"Here in the back, baby!" I holler to her.

She takes off running toward me, and if I didn't know better, I'd say she's lookin' proud.

"Hi, Daddy!" She comes to a screeching halt right next to me, and I'm impressed. I guess she's been in the shop enough to know that it's important she doesn't touch me when I'm holding the tattoo gun. "Hi, Uncle Cullen." She waves a hand in front of Cullen's face. "Does it hurt?"

I grin and let Cullen explain his pain; meanwhile, I see Rose coming over, looking as high and mighty as ever. See, maybe if she wasn't such a bitch, my boys and I would actually tolerate her. Alas...neither of us can stand her, and I huff a chuckle when I see Emmett by the counter flipping her off.

"Thanks for picking her up," I say politely, spinning my chair slightly in her direction.

"Anything for her." She nods at Emilia. "But I'm off—got a job interview."

"Wow." I smirk. "Never thought I'd hear you say *that*." As far as I knew, she was content to let Kate support her.

"Go to hell, Masen." She glares. "You know, I got half a mind to start saying more things about you to Emilia."

I smile my best *fuck you* smile. "Then you can kiss both my girls goodbye."

I'm dead serious. For Emilia to see Daddy and Auntie Rose fighting is one thing, but feeding her bullshit is another. The baby girl knows we don't like each other, but I would never say shit to her that's purposefully hurtful to Rose. And if Rose starts talking shit about me to Emilia, behind my back, there's no telling what I'll do to get the Butch out of our lives.

Anyone who knows me knows I'm very fucking protective of my wife and daughter. I wouldn't call myself highly possessive—all right, maybe that as well—but definitely territorial, and I'll do anything to keep them safe. And happy—which my wife is with her childhood friend in her life. However, what Rose fails to believe is that Bella is the same with Emilia and me as I am with them. Rose is a friend—not family. Baby Girl and I come first, and Bella makes sure to always show it.

"Bella would never shut me out," she says confidently.

Cullen snickers and says, "Vivid imagination."

"What's a vivid imamination?" Emilia asks him curiously.

I cock a brow at Rose. "I dare you to test my wife's limits. But remember that you'll only hurt her. Fuck, both of them. Is that what you want?"

"Bella deserves better," she hisses quietly.

I just shake my head, amused. She's off her fucking rocker—delusional. Maybe she's a good friend and a good aunt—I know she is—but...she's fucking bonkers if she thinks I'm not a good husband. Make no mistake, Bella and I screw up at times; we're human. Comes with the territory, but we'd never intentionally hurt one another, and loyalty and devotion come first.

"And what is it you think she deserves, huh?" I tilt my head, chuckling. "I can tell you one thing—Bella needs something you don't got." I cup my junk and smirk.

She lets out a sound of disgust. "God, you're such a fucking pig."

"Get over yourself, Rose." I spin my chair back to Cullen. "Good luck at that interview." My very polite way of dismissing her.

"Bella and Emilia are everything to me," she whispers.

I stiffen and clench my teeth together; she's never been this up-front in the past. I know, and she knows I know. But we've never voiced anything; we've never acknowledged the elephant in the room out loud.

I point to the door. "Get the fuck out," I say quietly, menacingly.

She leaves...

And I begin to wonder if there's a shitstorm coming our way—if Rose will ever act on her feelings. My wife is a fucking sweetheart, so I know she'll feel bad about letting Rose down, and then I can only imagine the awkwardness and discomfort that'll ensue.

20.

BPOV

"I suppose it started pretty early..." Ed rubs the back of his neck. "I was—as a chef, you work late. I wasn't home enough, but Edward used to come to me then instead. Alice and Alec were never interested, but I could see a lot of myself in Edward." *Ain't that the truth.* "And he was..." He blows out a breath and smiles a little crooked smile to himself. "He was good in the kitchen—great, actually, and...it became our thing."

I nod, remembering the stories my husband has told me.

Edward is amazing in the kitchen. The recipes I sometimes exchange with Alice... If only she knew they belong to her little brother, huh?

"But I let him down," Ed continues, wincing. "The restaurant got busy; *I* got busy, and he felt left out. I didn't come home when I said I would, leaving him with a sitter. And—" he swallows "—I tried to make it up to him by setting aside time for us to cook together, make new recipes, when I was at home..."

"But you cancelled a lot," I finish softly.

His head bobs. "Yeah... And eventually he stopped waiting for me to come home."

So far, everything Edward has told me is spot on. I obviously believe what my husband tells me, but I honestly expected Ed's version to be at least a little different. Maybe...more in his favor? I don't know.

"Then when he was eighteen..." I trail off, urging him to continue.

He gives me a quick grin before it fades. "He's told you everything, Bella—I'm sure it's all the same. You know what happened next."

I do. Edward came home with his first tattoo when he was eighteen, and that was the beginning of two years of fighting, nagging, and bickering. Edward and Ed grew apart; his father didn't like his new hobby. When my

husband declared that he wanted to become a tattoo artist, Ed blew a gasket. In truth, I think Ed was hurt. Cooking together was their thing—their bond—but it was Ed himself who severed that by always being a no-show.

It was never about carrying on a legacy. It was just that Ed held on to something—the cooking they shared once—even though he's the one who threw it away.

As we grow up, our dreams change. *We* change—as people. My husband still loves to cook, but he loves his chosen career a lot more.

And then one night, about ten years ago, Ed and Edward fought for the last time, resulting in Edward's leaving Philly behind for New York.

"Your last fight—" I clear my throat "—can you give me your take on it?"

"Worst day of my life," he mutters, scrubbing his hands over his face. "I was an asshole. The things I called him..." Leaning forward, he rests his elbows on his knees and palms his face. "I don't blame him for leaving."

21.

BPOV

Ed doesn't have to clarify; I've already gotten everything confirmed.

He called his son a disappointment, a disgrace, and a traitor...all because Edward didn't want his father's dreams anymore—something that took Edward years to get over. Maybe he hasn't gotten past it completely, still to this day, and that is why Ed has to take the first step toward something both stubborn-as-fuck men want: a reunion.

Ed needs to man up.

"Thank you for telling me," I say simply when it's over.

He looks up, eyes pained. "Can you—can you tell me how he is?"

I offer the same small smile as before and shake my head no. "Only he can do that, Ed." I pause. "But I wouldn't have tracked you down if your name was foreign to me. I also wouldn't have tracked you down if being an asshole was all there was to you." My lips quirk up.

Edward hasn't just told me about the bad times, after all. Not even close. If that had been the case, I wouldn't be here. Like I said.

"So, he's talked...about me?" He looks so nervous all of a sudden. Nothing like the gruff I-don't-give-a-fuck attitude I'm used to.

In response, I shrug. "Only one way to find out."

He nods and averts his eyes.

"Ed?" My voice softens, and I lean forward. "I'm here to help—I want this, okay? But you need to take the first step." When he nods, I lean back again, annoyance building up at the thought of a certain rule. "Swallow your pride and say 'fuck you' to Masen Rule Number One."

"Those rules define me—"

"Trust me," I chuckle darkly, cutting him off, "they define your son, too. In a way, at least. You're both so stubborn I could just—" I raise my hand as if to backhand someone; it's for lack of an appropriate word, I guess.

"You sound like my wife," he chuckles, smiling wistfully.

I smirk. "Smart woman."

"She was," he whispers and then clears his throat. "She woulda kicked my ass."

"Hey, if that's what you need," I offer cheekily.

22.

EPOV

I think it's psychological.

'Cause there's a pattern: if Bella's had a bad day at work, she usually comes to me at night needing a bit more than what we usually go for. And this time the video camera's catching all of it. Standing on its tripod next to the bed, it captures it all. Bella's in front of me on all fours, facing the foot of the bed, and I kneel behind her, fucking her jackhammer-style.

When she moans, I spank her ass hard.

When she begs for more, I fist her hair and pull back.

I fuck the kink outta her.

Okay, that's bullshit. It can't be done.

I don't know...sometimes she just wants me to use her like she's my little whore.

Good thing we're versatile screwers.

In our DVD cabinet here in our bedroom, we have it all. Fantasies we've used—filmed. Doctor/patient, teacher/student...the librarian...lovemaking... every fucking hole...boss/employee, Dom/slave—Bella as a Dominatrix is hella hot, for the record.

But tonight she's my fuck-toy.

She wails through moans as I ram my dick up her pussy in sharp, quick, forceful thrusts.

I bite her, groaning in pleasure.

"Oh God, oh God, oh God," she cries out breathlessly.

"Shut up," I spit out, panting. "Just be a good little slut and take whatever I fucking give you."

I'm practically bouncing her off my cock, and it feels so...*fucking*...amazing. Beads of sweat trickle down my back, my chest, my temples. Smacks ring out when I slap her ass. Yet, she pushes back for more...

In the end, I clamp a hand over her mouth before I come all over her ass.

Then...Wednesday is very different. She acts like a silly-cute teenager with her first crush, indicating she's had a good day. She's sweet, all smiley, and full of compliments and romance. This is the Bella I usually see. And with my hovering over her, pinning her to the bed with my body, I drive my cock into her over and over, Monday's brutal fucking just a memory—one I'll probably go back to watch sometime on the small TV we have in here. Hell, Bella will watch it with me.

"I love you." She hums and stretches out under me, lazily dragging her short fingernails along my back. "God, I really fucking love you."

"Glad to hear it," I tease and bite her chin. "I love you, too."

I grunt a curse as she clamps down, tightening her hot pussy around me, to which I reciprocate by rubbing the head of my cock against her sweet spot. It takes some grinding and swiveling, but I get her good.

"Jesus," she breathes out, grinding the back of her head into the pillow. That exposes her neck to me, so I dip down and suck, lick, kiss, and bite some more. "So good—fuck, close..."

"Come on, baby." I kiss her on the lips. Forehead to forehead. And I watch as she climaxes. I feel it—I fuck her through it. "Love you," I mumble and

screw my eyes shut. My hips push into her, and she takes my release deep into her as I come. "*Fuck. Fuck, fuck.*"

At this point, who knows how we'll have sex next time?

Though, when she comes home on Thursday, pissed and ready declare war on all humankind, I've gotta feeling I'll be her bitch. But it's all good. I ain't complaining for shit.

First things first, however. "What's wrong?" I ask her, watching as she paces in the living room. She's fuming, muttering to herself, and waving that fist around. "You look like someone just told you Aerosmith sucks."

Don't *ever* tell my wife Aerosmith sucks.

She loves Aerosmith.

23.

BPOV

Oh, that little... How *dare* she?! God, she's *such* a—such a...a...*c-word*.

Alice motherfucking Whitlock.

Her heart may be in the right place, and I don't think it'll take too long for me to get over this, but right now...I just wanna *throttle* her.

But I can't say this to Edward. As he stands in the doorway to the living room. Asking me what's wrong.

"System failure." I tap my temple then let out a frustrated breath.

His mouth twitches in amusement; he looks down for a sec, and then up with a soft smile. "Any time you wanna talk, I'm here." It's a simple statement, but it's so perfect. We know each other. I'm not ready to talk,

and he knows. I'm the same with him. If he's not ready, I let shit go. Temporarily. It's how we function. All I gotta do now is reassure him.

"Very soon." I place my hands on my hips—hubs calls it a *Bella move*—and nod for good measure. "Just gotta figure some shit out."

"Cool. So, I'll get started on dinner, and you..." He waves a hand. "I guess, make sure your systems are a go?"

I grin. "I love you." Had to say it.

He winks and kisses two fingers—it's for "you too"—then heads to the kitchen.

Left alone, I collapse onto the couch and stare up at the ceiling.

So...whatta fuckin' week it's been so far!

On Monday after my long talk with Ed, I felt guilty about going behind my husband's back with all this. Those bouts of guilt come every now and then, but I always manage to talk myself into a better state eventually. It's for Edward's sake I'm doing this. And it's another thing that is "us"; we sometimes take charge, knowing what's best. We obviously haven't done so always, but once we realized we knew each other inside and out...

Moving on.

By the time I fell asleep on Monday, guilt was gone for this time. Edward's punishing hardcore fuck also helped. Big time. After a round like that one, I feel...I don't know, cleansed? Eh, whatever.

Then Tuesday—Tuesday was an okay day. Ed vented a lot; he got out his frustration with me—that I'd kept my intentions hidden for two months. He called me a sneak. He even glared and stubbornly ignored me for a little while. But I figured he needed to get all that out. It's okay. Justified.

Wednesday...*yesterday*...was an amazing day. Ed only bitched a little, but then he started pestering me about Edward. And I thought it was sweet—still do. Oh, and before I left for the day, he squeezed my hand affectionately and said, "Guess I'll see ya tomorrow...daughter-in-law." He was all gruff about it, but that's how he is.

Yesterday only improved when I got home and Emilia was in a cuddle mood. We built a fort and colored together while Edward made dinner. Then we sat down, ate...it was just a good day. Simply like that. So, I got a little silly when hubby and I went to bed—we made love, and I couldn't stop crushing on him. I can be a bit of a nut.

Then today...

"Ugh," I groan and rub my eyes. Sitting up, I pull my scrub-like top over my head—the one I always wear at work—leaving me with my standard long-sleeved t-shirt. I wear it to hide the ink, mainly, but also because the scrubs are too airy. I get all chilly.

This Alice thing...luckily, I'll see her tomorrow. Hopefully, that'll give us time to work out our differences before Saturday. But on top of that, I gotta figure out what to tell Edward, too. I don't wanna ambush him on Saturday, but on the other hand, I'm afraid he won't come out and visit if he knows Ed is there.

"Mommy!" Emilia yells—from the bathroom, I think. *"I'm done!"*

Pushing myself off the couch, I tell her I'll be there as I walk toward the bathroom. On the way, I pick up stray toys and clothes; it's time to do some laundry, I reckon.

After helping the baby girl in the bathroom, she's off to play in her room again, but not before she gives me her regular bathroom speech. The one where she tells me she doesn't understand why she has to wash her

hands when I do the wiping. And in return, I patiently explain to her—as always—that it's best to make it a habit. When you're done in the bathroom, you wash your hands. 'Nuff said.

Walking out to the kitchen, I find Edward with a spoon in his mouth and a jar of peanut butter in his left hand. The right one is stirring something on the stove.

"System still failing?" he asks as I hop up on the counter.

"Eh." I shrug and accept the jar when he passes it to me. "Can I have a taste?" I nod at the pot on the stove. Whatever it is, it smells beyond delicious.

He purses his lips, staring down at the sauce. "Soon. Gotta add garlic and basil first."

Masen Rule Number Forty-Five: No tasting until the chef is satisfied.

"By the way, you wanna do something on Sunday?" he asks softly. I smile to myself, blessed to have a hubby who's so invested in my past—my recovery. "You know I'm proud of ya, right? Eight years, baby." He comes to a stand in front of me, hands on the counter. I nod and kiss his chin then his lips. "Cullen's proud of you, too." I know. He's asked me to come to a meeting and talk about my recovery. With heat rising in my cheeks, I remember that he called me an inspiration.

"Couldn't have done it without you," I say simply. "And on Sunday..." I release a breath, worrying about *Saturday*. That's something we have to get through before. "After you've tatted me up, we could always just have a nice dinner at home," I suggest. "Maybe Rose and Kate can babysit Emilia for the night."

"Sounds like a plan to me," he murmurs, playfully biting my jaw. "Uh, is Emilia busy?"

"Now?"

He nods.

"I think so—why?"

He grins slyly and grips my hips. "Just thinking it's time to do laundry."

At that, I can't help but giggle. "You just want a quick dicking." Giving him a push, I hop down from the counter and return the peanut butter to the cabinet. "But we actually do need to do laundry, so I'll go and get started, and you can continue cooking." I wink at his pout. "Tonight, honey," I promise.

And his grin is back.

24.

BPOV

"Thank you for being here today," Alice says politely, all businesslike, as I sit down on the couch next to Ed. And in response, he and I exchange a little look, 'cause...well, I work here. Of course I'm here.

It's my lunch break, so I dig in to the food I brought—leftovers from dinner last night.

"What's that?" Ed points to the plastic container in my lap.

I give him a sideways grin. "I don't know what it's called, but it's *a-may-zing*." Edward told me the dish's name yesterday, but it's in Italian, and I don't remember. I was too busy inhaling my food to remember. And now it's here again. In my lap. It's pasta—excuse me: penne—some ham with an Italian name too, and this creamy *sauce*, and it's... Yummy for my tummy, as Emilia would put it.

"Edward made it, didn't he?" Ed's mouth quirks up.

I nod and shovel some food into my mouth. *Mmm.*

"I don't think that's why we're here now," Alice points out, looking frustrated, "to talk about food."

I cock a brow and point my fork at her. "I gotta be honest here, Alice, and..." I chuckle darkly. "I'm pretty fucking pissed at you, so if you don't play nice, this fork might be shoved down your throat." That brow of mine rises a little bit more. "We clear, hon?"

She's taken aback by my threat, but she gives as good as she gets. "Are you outta your fucking mind, Bella?" She smiles. It's that *fuck you* smile my husband also has, although it looks more *fuck you-ish* on him. "You're in no position whatsoever to make threats—"

"Settle down, girls," Ed cautions, more amused than anything. "As cool as it is to have two womenfolk arguing over me, it doesn't work when it's my daughter and daughter-in-law."

I give him a look. "With all due respect, but isn't it Edward we're arguing about?"

"Buzzkill!" He glares at me.

I snicker and face Alice again. "So, lemme get this straight. It's okay for *you* to threaten *me*—" I place a hand on my chest "—but it's not okay for me to threaten you. That what you're sayin'?"

Because *that* it just what she's done. That Ed called Alice a couple days ago and told her everything didn't come as a surprise to me. I almost expected it. She's Ed's daughter, after all. He wanted her to know, and he wanted to get it off his chest; he simply needed to talk to someone about

it. But then the fury of Alice rained down on me yesterday, hence my being in a pissy mood when I got home.

She's saying that if she and Alec can't be here tomorrow—for a meeting that might not even happen—she will go to my boss and say I've pretended to be a Nurse Swan these past two months. And I don't wanna get fired. Now, I knew the risks. What I got into did demand some sneakiness and lying, but I'd do it again in a heartbeat. However, I don't like that Alice came at me, all threatening and cunt.

So...Ed proposed this little get-together today—to talk shit out.

25.

BPOV

"What *I'm* saying—" Alice points to herself "—is that Alec and I should be here tomorrow when Edward gets here."

"And you're threatening me in order to have it your way," I finish flatly.

She huffs a breath. "Look, that's my little brother—"

"Don't even go there." It's my turn for the *fuck you* smile. Hubby taught me good. "The sister act—just don't." In the past, I've spoken a little with Alice about Edward, and I know they were never really close. Their twelve-year age difference ensured that. I'm certainly not bitter about it; that was just the natural way of things. By the time Edward was six, Alice and Alec were both off to college in Boston, where they stayed for eight years. Well, Alec still lives in Boston. Alice moved back when Edward was fourteen. But then she met Jasper, got started on her own career, settled down...

Alice has told me that she tried to track down Edward after he left. She did it more than once, but the only clues she got were New York and an

address to a tattoo shop where my husband was an apprentice at the time. And I remember that. I remember Edward coming home to the tiny studio apartment we lived in and said that some chick had called his boss asking for him. His guess had been Alice or Jane—the old woman who used to babysit Edward when he was a kid. Either way, the hubs told his boss to deny his whereabouts. And that was that. The studio wasn't ours; it belonged to his boss, and there was no lease. No names signed. No mail. I sure as hell didn't get mail back then; I was under the radar, and Edward's only proof of being in New York was the tattoo shop. When it came to where we lived...damn, we were poor; we couchsurfed, basically. A few months here, a few months there. Until we could stand on our own feet. And Alice stopped looking...

Edward doesn't hold a grudge against his siblings simply because they were never close. There was no animosity or anything—it just was what it was.

Finding us today wouldn't be hard. When we returned to Philly, we were more than ready to set down roots. We'd gotten married, we signed away our lives for one helluva mortgage on our row house, Edward met Emmett and the two quickly decided to open up shop together, and I'd gotten my nursing degree right before we left New York—something that was possible since I don't have a criminal record...no records of my addiction.

Shaking my head, I bring myself back to the present. I sigh a little and pick at my food. "In my opinion, this is between Ed and my husband," I tell her, then...I don't know. "First and foremost, anyway."

Alice is pissed, clearly not calling my opinion hers. "Who're you to decide who—"

But Ed cuts her off. "I think Bella's right, sweetheart." At Alice's incredulous expression, he goes on. "I get that you're concerned and that

you wanna be here, but..." He scrubs his hands over his face and leans forward on his knees.

Alice sits back in her chair; I think she's a bit shocked that Ed agreed with me.

Then Ed turns to me. "Tomorrow when Edward and your daughter come out here... I'll make sure to stay here in my apartment. Alice and Alec won't be here, either." He shoots his daughter a quick look before he speaks to me again. "Do whatever your plan was—is..." He waves a hand, and I find myself holding my breath. What's he saying? "And when you get back on Monday, we'll talk about how I'mma get my foot outta my ass and contact him."

I release the breath I'd been holding, my eyes well up, relief surges through me, and I smile *so fucking wide*.

26.

EPOV

"It's quiet out here," I comment, not counting Emilia's giggles as Cullen engages her in a leaf war. You know, a war where you throw leaves on each other? Yeah.

As fun as Emilia thought it was to have all the nurses at the retirement home to gush over how cute she is—trust, she loved that; hell, so did I, the proud daddy—she likes the park more. Here, she can run.

"Peaceful." Bella nods, and we sit down on a bench near the playground. That friend of Bella's...I forgot her name...is staring dreamily at Cullen a few feet away. The wife is proud—another matchmaking success for the books.

The park is all red, gold, and orange. It's that time of fall where there're as many leaves on the trees as there are on the ground.

"You like working here," I state, smiling, and throw an arm around her shoulders. It's sure as shit a good environment for her. She always wanted to be a nurse, but after her first relapse, that dream died for a while. She said it'd tempt her too much, and that the stress of working in a hospital would only add to it.

She threw herself into research that'd back up her fear. Apparently, addiction is common with nurses. The stress, the availability of drugs... But I nipped that in the bud and suggested a calmer environment. Still, it took a long time for her to even consider it. Though, once she started, I remember seeing a new side of her. *Passion*. And while the availability is still there—all the prescription drugs—there's no stress. Plus, when she started working at her first old folks' home, she'd been clean almost two years. By that time, there was still a fear of returning to her old ways, but she was strong enough to keep fighting and, also, moving forward at the same time. She went to meetings and saw her old sponsor often, but she surged forward like a woman on a mission, which she was.

And tomorrow will mark eight years since I drove her to rehab the second and final time.

"I love it here," she agrees softly.

I crack a grin, watching her. She's a little conundrum, the wifey. She craves peace but takes on Emilia's tantrums and wild personality as if she was born to do it; she does it eagerly, even. She loves a quiet night at home, but she can rarely sit still. Like right now: she's the picture of serenity, but her knee bounces a little and she's playing with my lighter. She fidgets—she always gotta keep her hands occupied.

I know this is something she picked up while getting clean. Cullen shares that habit.

27.

EPOV

"Emilia, no!" Bella shouts, snapping me outta thought. My eyes whip to the sandbox, and I watch as our daughter scowls and drops the handful of sand. "Throwing leaves is fine, but you don't throw sand."

"You little firecracker," Cullen laughs at Emilia and tackles her.

The giggles and squeals return.

Bella chuckles at the sight, lights up a smoke, and rests her head against my chest. "Cullen will make a good daddy, you know."

Glancing over at what'shername, I say, "I think your friend would agree." I lean back against the bench, my fingers hidden under her hair, stroking the soft skin of her neck.

"Oh yeah," she giggles, "Esme's already planning their wedding."

Esme. That's the one.

"Maybe she should wait until he's actually asked her out." I laugh and scratch my nose. "You women—or most of 'em." Snatching the smoke from her hand, I take a drag then return it. "I'm glad you're not like that."

I can't handle tiptoeing and reading between the lines. I gotta know up front, and I gotta have honesty. Don't fucking tell me everything's fine if it's not, and if you're on the rag, please give a dude a heads up. Women often say men are afraid of commitment, but I don't think that's true. We're just scared shitless of being trapped with someone who says one thing and means another. They bitch and complain about having

boyfriends who don't understand them; well, say what's wrong then, goddammit. Don't sit there and seethe in silence while you wait for your man to suddenly be able to read minds. Ain't gonna happen, sweetheart.

Thankfully, Bella knows this about me.

I vividly recall the day I got home from work and she told me, "Just so you know, I'm ready for you to propose." Then again, she knew I was ready, too. I had been for a while, but I didn't wanna pressure her. I didn't even bring it up. Her recovery was still our first priority back then, and there was no way I'd jeopardize that. So, she told me in her blunt way, and I thank God for it.

"Guys..." Esme walks over to us. "I'm gonna go back in. I'm working a double shift, so..."

Bella nods and stands up. "I'll see ya on Monday." Looking down at me, she adds, "We ready to head home?"

"Sounds good." I stand up, too. Behind Esme, I see Cullen and Emilia walking over. I look to Bella and ask, "You got anything back at the...?" I wave a hand in the direction of the old folks' home. Earlier, once Bella had clocked out, she just grabbed her jacket and we came here to the playground. No bag or nothing.

"Um." Bella glances between Cullen and Esme. "No, I'm good. Hey, Cullen—you should make sure Es gets back safe." She nods, lips pursed.

I look down at my scuffed boots, hiding a smirk. The wife is relentless.

"Sure..." Cullen humors Bella. Good guy. "I could do that."

So, we stay behind while Cullen walks off with Esme.

"Smooth, Bella." I shake my head in amusement. "Real smooth."

She giggles but ignores me.

"Mommy, I'm hungry." Emilia tugs on Bella's hand. "Can we get cheesesteaks?"

Our baby girl knows good food.

We head home... We pick up food on the way. We eat. We goof around a little with the baby girl. I go out for a quick run. Bella goes through my work schedule for next week. We put Emilia to bed. We clean up in the kitchen. We end up having a quickie on the kitchen table. We shower. We pick out a movie to fall asleep to. It's all very normal-Saturday-at-the-Masens.

Until Bella nervously says, "There's something important I have to tell you."

28.

EPOV

We're both on the couch, and I'd been looking forward to some Grade A cuddlin' with the wife. I mean, this is the time of day she's the sexiest. Her hair is still damp from our shower, and she's wearing my clothes. Well, those black cotton panties are all hers, but she's just topping it off with one of my hoodies, making her look all snuggly and delicious. Not an ounce of makeup. Miles of legs. Cold feet that only my calves can warm up. And I'm sitting here, wearing only a pair of sweats—that coincidentally go with her hoodie—ready to push play on the godawful, weepy feel-good movie we picked out, wondering why on God's green fuckin' Earth she wants to *talk*. Of all things. Right now.

"Ya kiddin' me, honey?" I cock a brow—the pierced one that usually ends all conversation when it comes to the wife. I'm sorta hoping it'll do the trick now as well. 'Cause this shit's just not right. We're supposed to

cuddle down under the blanket—beer for me, orange soda for her, chips for us both, and...no talking.

"You're gonna be mad," she says, chewing on her thumbnail. "But it's important."

I nod and cover her with the blanket. "Well, if I'll be mad, then I don't wanna know." I reach for my beer and then tuck Bella to my side. "So, you ready to waste our new 42-inch screen on *The Pursuit of Happyness*?" I grin down at her. We bought our new flat screen a couple weeks ago—our very first flat screen, actually—but it's not football season or baseball season, so our Sony has been dedicated to my wife's chick flicks and Emilia's Disney. But just you wait 'til Superbowl in February. *Jesus Christ*.

"Hubby," she whines a little, pouting. "I'm serious."

I grimace as she sits up straight, and I steel myself for *talking*. On a Saturday night.

Then I nod, ready to bargain. "Will I get a blowjob out it? Or a pussy lickin'?"

"You don't have a pussy," she deadpans.

"Funny." I give her a look.

She sighs. "You know what? If you want me near your cock after—"

"Or your pussy," I say, 'cause let's not forget the pussy, please.

"Right." She offers a tight-lipped smile. "If you want me near your cock or your mouth near—"

"I always want you near my cock." I laugh. She's being silly.

"Edward!"

"Fine." I wave a hand. "Sorry. Go on."

She lets out a little snarl. Fucking cute. "If, when I'm done talking, you still want pussy, or me to suck you off, then fine. Anything you want."

Well, now I'm really curious about what she's gonna tell me, 'cause it'd take a *lot* for me to not want a blowjob or to eat her out. Just sayin'.

"Love it when you talk dirty," I growl playfully against her cheek.

"Christ, you're just like your father!" she cries out, to which I snap up to face her and nearly choke on my tongue. "Oops." She laughs shakily and runs a hand through her hair.

"I'm just like *who*?" I cough. My eyes are all wide.

Blowing out a breath, Bella takes my beer and sets it down on the table.

"Ed—your dad?" She fidgets with the hem of the hoodie. "Um yeah, he's my, um, patient. He lives—out there. I tracked him down."

29.

EPOV

I sit unmoving—jaw clenched, vision blurry, hands balled into fists—as she launches into the story about how she tracked down my father and took a job where he supposedly lives now.

"...met Jess—her aunt handles the hiring—and I knew they were looking new day personnel..."

My ears begin to ring.

"...and I told Jess my story, that I wanted to get to know Ed Masen; she took pity on me, I think—at least at first..."

I swallow hard as she admits that she went by Nurse Swan when my dad was around.

"...My first shift, Edward..." She lets out a shaky breath. "All those photos on his walls—photos of Alice, Alec...*you*."

"Jesus Christ," I breathe out and lean forward, elbows on my knees. I palm my face, repeating, "Jesus *Christ*."

"...eventually, and we started talking; he opened up little by little..."

My stomach drops, twisting painfully. Memories from ten years ago assault me, only making me nauseous.

"...and I'm so sorry for going behind your back, baby, but..." Now she's sniffing, crying. *Fuck*. "If I didn't see good in him, I would've left—confessed it all to you sooner, and...I don't know. But he misses you, Edward. He misses you so much."

I want her to *stop*.

"...Then I met Alice and Alec, too. He still lives in Boston, but Alice visits every weekend. She's got two kids..."

"*God*," I groan into my hands. *Stop, stop, stop*.

"...so, I came clean to him, 'cause I didn't wanna ambush you today when you drove out there..."

At that, my eyes snap to hers. My heart pounds frantically in my chest. Motherfucking emotions.

"You—" It's all but impossible to choke out anything. "He *knows*?"

She nods, all nervous. "Since this week. And he wants to see you, Edward." She makes a move to touch me, but she doesn't. Apprehensive

as fuck, she backs away again. "I told him it's up to him," she whispers, wiping her cheeks with a sleeve. "He needs to take the first step since he's the one who..." She trails off.

My head bobs, and I avert my eyes, unable to get a grasp on what I'm feeling. It's too much. Anger, resentment, bitterness, that fucking nausea. Memories. Promises. Lies. Fights. It's a goddamn mess in my head. He didn't fucking care about me. Bella's not supposed to lie to me. Sadness. I...I don't even know. Jesus fuck. My wife, she just... And Ed doesn't fucking apologize. It's actually not a rule, but Rule Number One still implies it. *Never give up or in.* Now he misses me? Right. Asshole. He always cancelled. Didn't care. Bella lied. *Care.*

I'm losing it.

"Did you—" I gotta clear my throat, then I start over. "Did you encourage him to contact me?" I give her a sideways glance, hoping to see the truth in her eyes. "Did you convince him? Talk him into it?"

Fresh tears roll down her cheeks. She hesitates to answer.

But that's answer enough for me.

He doesn't wanna contact me at all. Bella's putting him up to it.

30.

EPOV

Too pissed at my wife, I get off the couch and tell her I need a smoke. I don't look her in the eye, knowing that her teary ones will only summon me back like fucking beacons. In our bedroom, I quickly locate another hoodie, and then I make a beeline for the hallway. I grab my beanie, slip into the flip-flops I usually go with when I run out to buy the paper on the weekends, and then with our smokes and a lighter, I leave the apartment.

It's not like I go far; we live on the first floor, and I end up sitting my ass down on the stoop.

The October night air is crisp.

The nicotine feels good.

Elbows resting on my knees, I look out unseeingly. A car here and there drives by, but that's it. The street is basically dead, the complete opposite when you think about the fucking storm raging inside me.

Fucking hell.

I mean...I obviously already knew that my father lives here in Philly. He'd never leave this city, but it's a big one. I sure as fuck didn't expect our lives to ever intertwine. And now Bella's gone and tracked him down... Along with Alice and Alec. *Christ*. I hate that they—the thought of them—still affect me so much. After ten years, I'd hoped they'd be history. Forgotten. But I assume the fact that I have good memories with my dad prevents me from forgetting. I don't know. It's just... It sucks. I may have been a disappointment to him, but so was he to me. He was once my fucking hero. Then he left me behind...

Taking a deep drag from my smoke, I think about when I left Philly. I think about coming to New York. I think about the anger I lived with. I wouldn't call myself broken back then—pretty far from it—but I was so fucking *angry*. And disappointed. And jealous of Alec and Alice. 'Cause they got Dad when he was there to be a father. They got Mom, too. I barely even remember her, but my siblings do. They've got memories of family dinners and vacations.

But what if you hadn't left?

I look down between my knees, at the spot Emilia's drawn on with those colored chalks. She wanted to make our building's stoop pretty, and I

almost didn't have the heart to tell her that it'd be gone the next time it rained.

I wouldn't have met Bella. If I never left. And there wouldn't be any rainbows, weird-looking animals, or flowers on the stoop right now.

Our beginning was rocky as hell; we both screwed up a lot, but we came out strong—solid. The first year was the worst, yet I fell so damn hard for that girl.

31.

EPOV

I'm not too surprised when Bella joins me a while later on the stoop, Emilia's old baby monitor in her hand.

"Can I sit with you?" she asks timidly.

I nod with a dip of my chin and flick away some ashes from my third smoke.

"You're gonna get cold," I mutter, looking out at the street. She's still only wearing my hoodie, and while it reaches her mid-thigh, it ain't enough for October. Not even when she brings her knees up and pulls the fabric over her legs.

"We need to talk about this," she pleads quietly.

"There's nothing to talk about," I argue. "It—" Fuck. I lick my lips and take a pull from the cigarette, then I stub it out as I exhale the smoke into the air. "It doesn't count." That might sound childish, but it's how I feel, dammit. "He wouldn't've wanted to contact me if it weren't for you. It's because of you."

"Edward." She gives me a look. "Lemme ask you one thing."

"By all means," I reply dryly.

"This is your dad we're talking about, and..." She huffs a breath and combs her fingers through her hair. "Can anyone really *make* Ed do *anything*?" The brow is cocked and loaded.

I blink, processing.

She's got a point, man.

I grimace.

Masen Rule Number One: Never give up or in.

Masen Rule Number Thirteen: Stand up for yourself.

Masen Rule Number Twenty-One: Beat a bully, get a buck.

My dad doesn't give up or in. He stands up for himself. And... I chance a glance at the wife; well, she hasn't come home with a shiner, so I doubt she has bullied him into anything.

Though, I think he made up Twenty-One when Alec was a kid and came home with a black eye. Like, he gave Alec permission to beat the kid who had bullied him. So, I'm not sure that rule comes without conditions.

"You know I'm right, baby," Bella murmurs, climbing onto my lap. "I have most definitely influenced him—talked to him and tried to get him to contact you, but..."

I get it. In the end, only he can reach out or whatever. And he'd only do it if he wanted it.

"Still," I grumble.

"So stubborn," she sighs softly and touches my cheek.

I turn my head away from her touch and scowl at her. "I'm still fuckin' pissed, Bella."

32.

EPOV

She sobers. "I know."

I hold that scowl in place when she starts to kiss my jaw and lets her hand roam down my chest.

I know what she's doing, but it ain't gonna work.

"Please," she whispers in my ear.

A groan slips through my lips, and I close my eyes.

Traitorous fucking cock.

"Lemme make you feel good, baby." She slides her hand down to my junk. "Please?"

I'm shaking my head, but I can't bring myself to say no out loud.

She rubs me teasingly, causing my breathing to stutter.

Fuck me, I have no shame.

"Right here," she says seductively. Her hand disappears into my sweats and she finds me naked and hardening. I barely register the cold air hitting my dick. "Right now."

Another shake of my head. I bite down on my lip as she swipes her thumb over the head and my fucking piercing.

I hiss.

"But I'm so wet for you." She pouts.

"Jesus," I complain.

Complain, Masen? Really? You're about to get your dick wet for the second time today.

Besides, didn't you go behind Bella's back when you contacted her brother?

Fuck. That's true. And Bella's not even using that against me.

I growl and buck my hips into her hand.

"Say yes," she begs.

I squeeze my eyes shut as she guides my hand to her panties.

That hand of mine moves of its own volition, tracing her wet slit. *Christ.* And a second later, I'm knuckle-deep in her pussy. This wasn't the plan.

"Yes," I hear myself mumble.

33.

EPOV

She pushes her panties aside and sinks down on me...

"Fuck," I mutter, tilting my head to find her mouth. I kiss her deeply and unzip her hoodie, then slide my hands up to cup her full tits. She shivers and rolls her hips, effectively taking me deeper. Meanwhile, she keeps whimpering out apologies to me. "Stop it." I moan into her mouth and tease her nipples between my fingers. "Stop—talking." I don't want her apologies.

A couple cars drive by...

"I love you," she breathes out. "And I'm so, so—"

"Shut up." I claim her mouth in another kiss.

She fucks me slowly and deeply.

But eventually, we grow desperate.

Gripping her hips, I pull her down on me hard. My cock is completely coated in her arousal, and I groan at the hot slickness.

"I hate it when you're mad at me." She drops butterfly kisses all over my face. "I hate it, hate it, hate it."

I chuckle, out of breath, and bite down on her shoulder. "Fucking deal with it, woman."

"I'm sorry."

"I know." I do. I just need time to get over it. "Do you regret it?" I look into her eyes as I start rubbing her clit. She keeps moving, I keep moving her, we keep moving. I palm her luscious ass under the hoodie and tell her to answer me.

"I can't." She rests her forehead to mine. "I can't regret it, Edward."

I nod, torn. If she'd regretted it, her scheming woulda been for nothing, and that might've hurt more. Yet, to have her lie to me...her own fucking husband. That stings.

"I'm so *fucking*—" I slam her down on me, gritting my teeth "*—angry* with you." I shake my head. "But..." But I did the same to her once, and I can't regret it, either.

A car honks, but we ignore it.

"I love you," she says again.

"I know that, too." I lift one hand to wipe her cheek. "Don't fucking cry, honey." I hate it when she cries. Her bottom lip quivers, so I kiss it, nibble on it, suck it into my mouth and bite it. "You know I love you, too."

"I-I..." She moans as I flick her clit ring with my thumb. "Oh God. I...I wanna make you smile."

Nuzzling her throat, I wonder why she's so fucking desperate to get on my good side again. Fights happen. She knows I'll get over it. So, why she can't just chillax is beyond me. But then she starts humming *that* goddamn song, and...I can't help but crack a grin. Jesus Christ, this woman.

"You *really* don't like it when I'm mad at'chu, do you?" I chuckle through a groan when she clamps down on me. She shakes her head no and kisses me on the lips. "My badass, hot-as-fuck Mustang Sally." I bite her nose.

One of the funniest days of my life. It was in New York. And I heard Bella laughing for the first time. Not a giggle, a snicker, a chuckle, or a soft little laugh. But a real fucking laugh—a liberating laugh—squeals and fist-pumps included.

She grins impishly. "We *were* pretty badass that day, weren't we?"

We were, yeah. But I wasn't the one who stole that car. She was, and maybe that was the day I fell in love with her. Could be.

"Make me come," I grunt, feeling my balls tighten. "*Fuck.*"

"Okay, baby," she breathes out. Leaning forward, she goes nuts on me, doing stuff only she can. While working my cock, tensing her muscles around me, she kisses me devouringly, plays with my nipple rings, and bucks her hips a little faster, a little harder.

My undoing is when she slips a finger through the wetness of her pussy and sticks it into my mouth.

With a low groan, I loll my head back and explode inside of her. I barely manage to bring her with me, but I do right as I peak, my cock pulsing in her contracting pussy. Her breathy moans near my ear make me tense up further, and she draws another little stream of cum from me.

"Holy shit," she gasps.

"Yeah..." I rest my forehead on her shoulder and try to catch my breath.

"Um." She kisses my cheek. "Want me to sleep on the couch tonight?"

I roll my eyes and face her. "Don't be stupid." Then I think on it for a second and add, "But you owe me a lifetime of blowjobs."

She gives me a look again. "You know, you're getting a little cocky. One, blowing you isn't exactly a hardship—well." She giggles at her pun. I gotta grin at my freak. "Uh, two—I have a feeling you're gonna thank me soon."

"Thank you?" I chuckle incredulously. "Why the fuck would I...?"

She smirks. "'Cause when you and your dad hug and bury the hatchet—"

"Getting ahead of ourselves, are we?" I roll my eyes again.

I sincerely doubt Dad will call me. Maybe Bella has him wrapped around her finger, but I'm not that important to him.

"Quit with the frowning, hubs." She smooths out the crease between my brows. "You gotta have faith." She nods, pursing her lips. "He loves you so much."

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever."

34.

BPOV

"Good morning!" I burst into Ed's apartment on Monday morning with a huge smile on my face. I can feel it; nothing can ruin this day. "How ya doin', Grumpy?" I start picking up dirty dishes from his coffee table.

Ed grunts, as always seated on his couch. "Someone got laid."

More times than I can count.

While the hubby's still a little angry with me, he set those feelings aside yesterday, and we had an amazing day together to celebrate my eight years of being clean. Dinner, sexin', Edward's own chocolate mousse for dessert, a new star and skindiver on my collarbone, this mad beautiful charm for my bracelet, and more sexin'.

Not that I tell my *father-in-law* this. Instead I leave the dirty dishes in the sink before returning to the living room and put my hands on my hips as I stare him down.

"What?" He looks extra grumpy today. "You're in the way of the TV."

Removing the rubber band from my wrist, I pull my hair back into a high ponytail and say, "I know how you can contact Edward."

"You're still in the way—"

"Ed! I swear to Christ!"

"Shit, I'm sorry." The grump is gone. Now he looks properly chastened.

Good.

"You got balls," he mutters.

I shrug and sit down in the chair nearest the window. "I grew up in Kensington."

He nods, eyes slightly wider. "Well, that would explain it. So, uh..." He clears his throat. "What do you have in mind?"

"Send him a text." I grin. "Neither of you're looking for a grand reunion, so I'm thinking you start slow—ease into things. Texts take away the awkwardness, if nothing else."

"Masen Rule Number Seventy-Eight: Fight against the cell phone industry."

I am not amused. "First of all—" I hold up a finger—"you just made that up. Second of all, I already filled that slot. Seventy-Eight is now: No beanies at the table."

His shoulders slump. "I didn't get the memo."

I stare at him.

"Fine!" He throws his hands up. "My God, woman. Maybe I can think about sending a text message."

"*Maybe* you can *think* about it?" I arch a brow; he's gotta do better than that. At first, I thought Ed could call Edward, but then... Can you imagine those two men trying to hold a conversation over the phone? It'd be grunt that, and grunt this.

It'd be painful.

And emails are even less personal than texts—*too* impersonal.

Ed appears nervous and thoughtful at the same time, so I explain to him that I've already admitted things to Edward; I tell him that his son doesn't expect him to contact him. Ed runs a hand through his hair more than

once, and I smile at the mannerisms he shares with my husband. Then, eventually, Ed nods and tells me his phone is in his bedroom.

I'm quick to locate it and return to him, and I gotta chuckle 'cause the phone is still in its original box. At my amused expression, Ed just shrugs and says it was a Christmas gift from Alice and he hasn't found the need to use it yet.

But he does now...

"What should I write?" he asks hesitantly as I boot up his phone.

"I'll help you type something out," I assure him. "And then you'll send it tonight when I'm home."

"*Tonight?*" Oy. More nervousness. "No time to prepare or nuthin'."

I pat his hand. "It'll be fine, Ed."

"But—" he swallows "—if I do this, can you show me a recent photo of him?"

He melts my heart when he says things like that.

"Absolutely." I smile, getting a bit emotional. "You're really amazing underneath all that grumpiness, you know?" I lean over and peck his cheek.

"Um." I'm think I just made a seventy-five-year-old man blush. "Uh, thank you."

35.

EPOV

"Why're you staring at the clock all the time?" I tilt my head in Bella's direction. But Emilia, who's sitting on my lap, abruptly pulls my face back to her. I chuckle.

"No reason," Bella replies too innocently.

I bet she has no clue what's on TV, but she's sure watching it intently right now.

For the record, I know it's the news, and I'm trying to watch it, but the baby girl has other plans.

"Okay, there's a reason." The wife reiterates. "And you'll find out soon. I hope."

Uh. All right.

"Daddy, how many inkie's did'ju make today?" Emilia asks, tracing the stars on my neck.

"Tattoos," I correct with a wink. "And I did two."

She scrunches her nose. "S'not many."

"Depends how big they are," I explain. "Uncle Cullen's arm takes a long time, 'cause he's having so much done."

"Mommy's new one is little," she comments, referring to the one I did on her yesterday. "It's so pretty."

"Yeah, that one didn't take long," I answer.

I make another attempt at watching the news, but this time my fucking phone chirps in my pocket.

I grunt. "There should be a rule against cell phones." I shake my head and reach for it; meanwhile, Bella's suddenly facing me completely on the couch. I almost wanna tell her that the TV's thatta'way.

"Come here, baby." She holds out her arms to Emilia, who happily bounces over to cuddle with Mommy.

Phone in hand, I furrow my brow at the wife. "What's up?" 'Cause she's still staring at me.

"Read the text." Why the fuck does she have tears in her eyes?

But she's smiling...

With a shake of my head at the weirdness that is my Bella, I look down and read the fucking text.

Hello, son. This is your dad. Ed. Bella gave me your number. I hope that is okay, and I hope you are well. –Ed Masen

36.

EPOV

I don't know how long I sit and stare at that text, but it's gotta be a while. I vaguely register that Bella brings Emilia ice cream and puts on a Disney movie for her, and then I have the wife next to me...then closer...and closer...and then on my lap, where I fucking need her.

"You okay?" she whispers.

I don't know. I honestly don't know.

My fingers tremble, so I put the phone away from me. Not that it matters; my vision is too blurry to read the words again.

Resting my forehead on Bella's shoulder, I close my eyes and hug her tightly.

I take shuddering breaths.

Never in a million years did I actually think he'd contact me.

He broke the rule—the biggest one.

"He loves you, Edward," she murmurs, kissing my head.

"He broke the rule," I croak. My eyes sting, so I screw them shut harder, willing myself not to cry like a bitch. But I can't fucking believe it. He broke the rule. "He broke the rule." He broke the fucking rule. Ed Masen lives by those rules, and as much as I hate to admit it, I do too. Most of them, anyway. "Fuck." I sniffle, backing away, and wipe my eyes. Truth be told, I'm a little pissed at myself. I wish it didn't matter—that *Dad* didn't matter. I think. I don't know. "What happens now?" Too chicken-shit to look her in the eye right this second, I bury my face in the crook of her neck.

"That's up to you," she replies softly and weaves her fingers through my hair. I shiver and swallow my emotions. "If you're not ready to answer, I can always tell him as much tomorrow." She kisses my temple. "He'll understand, baby."

I nod, undecided, and let her touch calm me down.

37.

EPOV

As much as we dedicated yesterday to celebrate Bella's eight-year struggle, we also spent a lot of time talking, and now I've got several stories about Dad, Alice, and Alec running around in my head—stories the wife told me. She told me about Andrea and Leo, Alice and Jasper's two kids. She told me about Alec, who's still a bachelor who's all about his job. And that doesn't surprise me; he's a lawyer, and when I was a kid, he was always busy with school, internships, and...stuff. And Dad...well, comparing stories, I'd say he hasn't changed much, either. Bella says he's still grumpy and very set in his ways. That's always been him. But in the past, it wasn't an issue for me, 'cause I admit I can be the same. In other words, it wasn't an issue until it was me he couldn't push aside his rules for.

Ten years later...maybe he's learned something from my meddling wife. And maybe she was right—I gotta feeling now that I will thank her soon. 'Cause if this is really happening...

"I should write something back," I mumble nervously, giving my phone a sideways glance. It's just laying there, next to me on the couch, and it suddenly looks intimidating. "What should I write?" I look Bella in the eye, seeing her eyes brimming with tears, but I don't comment on it. I don't wanna make a big deal of it; I already feel out of sorts.

"I helped your dad type," she says with a smile, "I can help the junior, too." She winks.

I just give a jerky nod, my stomach a knotted mess.

About twenty minutes later, I'm satisfied with the text and shoot it off before I can back out.

It's all right. Yeah, I'm well. I think. What about you? –Edward

"Don't be surprised if it takes a while for him to respond," Bella murmurs. "He might call a nurse to help him. Jess is working, so that's good."

I blow out a breath, still nervous.

"He contacted me," I state, just putting it out there. But I still can't believe it.

The wife offers a soft smile. "He did."

Yeah. I nod absently. "I think I need my beer now."

Bella giggles and hands it over.

I chug.

38.

BPOV

A few days later, I happen to have the day off, and since Emilia's still at day care, I invite Rose over for some catching up—it's been a while since it was just the two of us. So, seated at the kitchen table, she fills me in on her endless string of job interviews that lead nowhere, and I finally confess my plan to reunite Edward and his father.

It's been a bitch keeping it to myself all this time.

"You're too good for him, honey." She shakes her head and blows some steam from the coffee mug. "I can't believe he got mad at you."

My forehead creases as I look down at my soda can, thinking about Edward's reaction to my scheming. But I don't think he had a bad reaction. He was pissed, rightfully so, but he's coming around—especially these past few days—and he knows my heart's in the right place. Plus, he went and tracked down my big brother all those years ago. And I know it's

only a matter of time before Edward thanks me for this—just like I thanked him.

Ed already has.

The day after they sent their first texts to each other, Ed was close to tears when I showed up at work. He couldn't stop smiling.

I shrug. "I think he reacted the way anyone would." When my husband went behind my back and contacted Jason, I was furious at first. But I got over it, and if it wasn't for Edward, I wouldn't have had the chance to say goodbye to my brother before he died.

I never had the chance to say goodbye to Sean, even though I was there when he died.

"You let him treat you like—"

I smile. "Don't finish that sentence." Anger boils up in me, but I hide it behind that smile. I know she can see it in my eyes, though. "Enough is enough, Rose." I can handle bickering and the way they bitch at each other, but I've had it with the crap they spew out when the other isn't around. Actually, Rose is the one who talks shit about Edward behind his back, 'cause when Rose ain't here, she's forgotten in my husband's eyes.

I've never understood their beef, even though I know what it's about. Rose is protective of me—I get it—but she has no reason to think badly of Edward. He's an amazing husband and father. And Rose knows he's the one who saved me back when we lived in New York. She knows every detail, yet she treats Edward as if he's the reason I was on drugs. Which couldn't be further away from the truth.

Rose bristles. "I just don't understand what it is you see in him!"

"I'm starting to believe you never will," I say flatly, 'cause I've told her a million times. "You know, you say I deserve better..." I chuckle darkly and shake my head, frustrated. "Do you have someone in mind? 'Cause you can just never let that shit go, can you?"

She stares at me.

39.

BPOV

I can see that she's about to say something, but my phone cuts her off, so I hold up a finger for her to wait while I check the text.

It's from Ed.

Can I send this to Edward or is it too soon?: If or when you are ready, I would very much like to see you again, son. I would like a chance to apologize in person. –Ed Masen

"Oh, crap." I snuffle and type a quick reply.

It's perfect, Ed. Go for it :) –Bella

I blink back tears and snuffle some more; it's those Masen men... They may be stubborn like nothing else, but they know how to get under your skin. All week I've been privy to the texts they send to each other, and they're so much alike. So far, they haven't really sent each other anything major, but a small conversation is there and they keep it open. Whether they talk about me, Emilia, or food, it's all good for now.

"Something wrong?" Rose asks, reminding me of her presence.

"No." I chuckle thickly and wipe my nose. "It's just Edward's dad—he's so sweet. When he wants to be." I grin and wave a hand. "Anyway, sorry about that. You were saying?"

"I..." She closes her mouth again, and I wait. "Well, um." She releases a breath, looking flustered and conflicted. I cock a brow, wondering why she's being all weird. That's not the Rose I know. She never hesitates. Ever. Then her shoulders slump. "Never mind." She takes a sip from her coffee, her brows knitted. She's still torn about...something. "It's nothing." She gives me a small smile.

40.

EPOV

"You want me to love you more, Daddy?" Emilia yawns, eyes glistening, as I pull the covers up to her chin. "Dooo ya?"

"I don't know," I answer pensively. It's clear that the baby girl is about to give me some speech, so I squat down next to her bed and mentally prepare myself. Bella and I have already shot her down about getting a cat; we had one when we lived in New York, and, and...seriously, those little shits have *claws*. Fuck declawing—you don't need to do that with a puppy, which Bella and I are thinking about *maybe* getting for Emilia when she turns five. Maybe. But it's a commitment. "You love me an awful lot already." I wink at her.

"Yeah, but..." She purses her lips—such a Bella expression. "If you want me to love you lots and lots more, you can gimme an inkie." Oh, this again. "A pink little pony on my tummy."

I grin. "It's okay, baby girl. You don't have to love me more."

"Awww! But, *Daddy!*" she whines.

"But, *Emilia!*" I mimic. Chuckling, I stand up and bend over to give her forehead a smooch. "I'll send Mommy in to say goodnight, too. Love you."

"Love you, too," she grumbles.

I'm still chuckling when I join Bella in the living room. She's going through my work schedule, so there are Post-its all over the coffee table. For some reason I just can't bring myself to write down appointments in the calendar. It's easier to just scribble it down on a Post-it.

"Emilia's waiting for you." I plop down next to her and blow a raspberry on her cheek. I bite it too. "Can you update my phone, too?" I scratch my eyebrow, eyeing all the appointments.

"Don't I always?" She sticks out her tongue at me then smirks.

"Oh!" I grab her jaw. "Gimme that tongue." I happen to know it says "Fuck you" on the ball of her tongue ring. Emmett gave it to her when a shipment of piercings came in a couple weeks ago. "I should give you one that says 'fuck *me*' instead." I kiss her lips and let her go.

"I've got one of those, too," she reminds me, so I tell her to wear it more often.

"Yeah, yeah." She grins and moves to stand up. "I'll go tuck the baby girl in—then we can talk about the plans you made with Ed today." She smiles knowingly.

I feel my ears heat up.

I'm nervous again, but...I think I gotta good feeling about it. Maybe. Hopefully. We'll see.

We'll see on Saturday, to be correct, when I'm meeting my dad for the first time in a decade.

41.

BPOV

As soon as my shift on Saturday is over, I head to Ed's apartment and find him pacing in his living room. It may very well be the first time he hasn't been on his couch when I've come in.

"Nervous?" I ask with a knowing smile.

Edward's nervous, too.

Hell, so am I.

"Yeah..." Ed blows out a breath and runs a hand through his hair. He's dressed up today—if only a little—and I think he looks very handsome, distinguished, in a pair of black slacks and a dark green pullover. He also looks anxious. And then he cringes and places a hand on his hip; I know it's giving him a hard time. "Getting old sucks."

"*Getting?*" I tease.

"Oh!" He lets out a chuckle and shakes his head at me. "Way to make me feel good, honey."

"Aww." I pout and walk over to him. With a peck to his cheek, I say, "But you can't fool me, Ed." I grin up at him. "I know you're popular with the ladies around here."

He grunts. "Don't know what you're talkin' about."

I arch a brow. "So, you're saying the women on the third floor aren't competing for your attention by always bringing you the best pastries? Especially Mrs. Tanner and Mrs. Peters." The first one also happens to be Bree's mother—Bree is another nurse here. She sometimes tells me about finding her mother and Ed playing bridge in one of the common rooms on Sundays, which is a day I'm usually off.

"Well, I like a good cannoli and she buys the best ones—from Isgro's." He shrugs. "Now, stop busting my chops and go meet Edward." He points to the clock above his flat screen. "He'll be here in ten, you know."

"I'm very aware," I giggle. The hubby's been texting me nonstop since lunch.

He gives me a look, silently telling me he's not amused. "Masen Rule Number Thirty-Four: Only be—"

"—Only be late if the other party needs to know his or her place," I recite, rolling my eyes. "Trust me, I know the fucking rules."

That earns me a grin. "My son taught you well, hon. Not even Alice or Alec knows all of 'em."

"Good for them," I quip, moving toward the door. "See ya soon."

The last thing I hear before I close the door is Ed releasing a nervous breath.

And five minutes later, I'm standing in the smoking zone, halfway done with my cigarette, when I see Edward pulling in to the parking lot. What surprises me is that Emilia's in the car, too. But then I get it; Edward might want an icebreaker, and the baby girl is certainly that.

We told her everything yesterday, that she has a grampa here, and she was just excited. Our family is very small, only friends really, so she thinks it's cool. I think her exact words were, "Wow, you have a daddy, Daddy?"

42.

BPOV

Putting out my smoke, I reach into my pocket and take out a piece of chewing gum before I walk toward the entrance to meet up with Edward and Emilia, who is all but dragging him along.

When our daughter spots me, her eyes light up and she shouts, "Yo, Mommy! Yo, yo, yo!"

So...my eyebrows shoot up.

I look to Edward, but he just shakes his head and smirks.

"Yo, we're here!" Emilia's all giggles, and she hugs my thigh and grins up at me. Her brown curls are all in her face; she's not wearing her beanie, and her jacket is unzipped.

"Hey, you." I smile and squat down to zip it up. "What's with the yo's?"

"Daddy and Uncle Emmett say it all the time." She widens her eyes. "And Uncle Cullen also!"

I know they do.

Standing up again, I grab Edward's hand and give it a squeeze. Emilia busies herself by running up and down the ramp for wheelchairs, so I figure I've got a minute or two to calm down the hubby. I can see he needs it.

"It's gonna be fine, you know?" I peer up at him and remove his black beanie. When he's nervous, he tends to tug it down too much, like he's hiding, and that's not him. I know he's worried about his appearance, but he shouldn't be. He's not an apologetic man, and he never gives a shit about what someone else might think. Except when it comes to his father, but not even Ed wants that now. Which I've told Edward. I've told him about the pictures I've shown Ed, and he doesn't care about the tattoos

and piercings. He just wants his son, and he's willing to spend the rest of his life showing how sorry he is.

"Alec and Alice aren't here, right?" His eyes flick to the building behind me, and he starts to chew on his lip ring. "Fuck, I need a smoke."

I point to where the smoking zone is, and we walk over there together. Emilia continues to run up and down, making herself dizzy, but she's a little weirdo like that.

"No, they're not here," I assure him as he lights up a cigarette. He nods in response, and we grow silent for a minute. He has dressed up a little, too. Gone are the jeans with holes, the construction boots, and the leather jacket. He's not wearing a jacket at all, but that's because they've been in the car for a while. It's not the shortest ride. "You know you don't have anyone to impress, I hope." I tug on the hem of his black button-down, but I'm referring to the brand new dark-wash jeans, too. He's extremely handsome, downright sexy, but I hope he doesn't feel like he *has* to wear new clothes.

He looks down at himself, and I notice the sneakers he's wearing. They're not new, but he rarely wears them so they look the part. Still perfectly white.

"Just..." He shrugs with one shoulder and scrunches his nose. "Wanted to look nice? I don't fucking know."

"You *do*! More than nice." I smile up at him. "As long as it's not all for your dad's sake. He's not gonna judge you, that's all I'm saying."

He nods with a dip of his chin and takes a deep pull from the smoke.

"So..." I glance over at Emilia before facing Edward once more, my hand cupping his cheek. "Look at me, baby?" He does, and I see apprehension and doubt. "Ed only wants to see *you*—the person you are. You know?" He

gives a small nod, but it's firmer this time. I smile and reach up to peck his chin. "How do you wanna do this? Do you want Emilia to go with you...?"

He licks his lips, thinking, and looks over to the baby girl. "Both of youse, but..." He clears his throat and stubs out the smoke with his foot. "We can walk in together..."

I nod, understanding. "Then I can leave with Emilia when, um," I giggle, "I deem it safe?"

He finally cracks a grin. "Something like that." He dips down and kisses me. "I love you." Cupping my face, he deepens the kiss and groans quietly. "Really fucking love you, honey." With a few more pecks, he breaks the kiss and mutters, "We should go in. You know Masen Rule Number Thirty-Four."

Oh, I'm grinning. I don't say anything in response, but I'm grinning.

"What's with the face?" he asks me as I scoop up a giggling Emilia, and then we enter the building.

"What's with the face?" I mimic and do a couple funny faces at the baby girl. "What's with the face, huh?" She squeals and pushes my cheeks together, to which I try to bite her fingers. "What's with the face?"

"So, now the wife is a parrot," Edward mutters.

"Yo, yo, yo!" Emilia waves to the patients and nurses in one of the common rooms as we pass. "Yo, yo, yo!"

I laugh and shush her before answering Edward. "I just find it funny that you'd bring up Number Thirty-Four," I sing. He looks to me in question, so I go on. "So did Ed earlier."

"Oh." He huffs a chuckle. "Yeah, well..."

43.

EPOV

"You ready?" Bella asks me with a hand ready to knock on my dad's door.

"I'm ready," Emilia chimes in. She's sitting on the wife's hip, playing with Bella's earrings.

I give Bella a quick nod.

She smiles in return and knocks on the door before opening it.

Deep breaths, man.

Entering first, Bella calls out to my dad, which causes my heart to beat even faster. It was already pounding, but now it's threatening to escape my chest. *Jesus fucking Christ.* This is happening. Swallowing my nerves, I follow my girls inside, immediately hit by the same cologne my father used ten years ago. There's still an old folks' home-y smell, but Dad's own scents are there, too. He's always been a man of consistency; the same soap, toilet paper, cologne, detergent...

The hallway is small, and I can see the living room straight ahead, but not all of it. What looks like a kitchenette is to my right, and I can't imagine my dad liking it. To the left is the bathroom, and there's a door next to the kitchenette, too—perhaps his bedroom.

While Bella removes Emilia's jacket, beanie, and shoes, I remove my own shoes and run a hand through my hair. I automatically push up the sleeves of my shirt to my elbows, too.

Without any fuss, Bella grins and takes Emilia's hand before walking further into the apartment. "Hey, old man. This is Emilia." I walk in just as

Bella squats down to the baby girl and introduces my dad, but the words don't really reach my ears. I'm stuck on stupid, watching the man sitting on the couch.

He's...he's aged. A lot. His hair has lost the last of the brown, he's wrinkly, he's got a little belly going on, and he's slightly hunched. Still...aside from that, his ever-present strengths show, too. In his posture, you can see he's a proud man. Tall. He hasn't *lost* much hair, it's just...grey. His eyes crinkle as he smiles and greets one of the two loves of my life.

"Daddy!" Emilia giggles and runs over to cling to my thigh. "That's your daddy." She points, and she said that so matter-of-factly that I can't help but grin. Picking her up, I position her on my hip, and she cups her hand around her mouth to whisper in my ear. "He told me he's got juice boxes and cookies in the kitchen for me, but I don't know him yet. Cuz you and Mommy said..." She trails off, eyebrows lifting.

"That's right." Yeah, proud daddy right here. "You're awesome, baby girl." I kiss her forehead. "And very smart." I nod, meaning that shit. "But I think you can trust...him." *Dad? Grampa?*

"Baby." Bella walks over, smiling. "How about you and I get some juice and cookies, huh?"

"Yeah, Daddy says it's okay also." Emilia nods and squirms to get to down, which I allow, and then they disappear into the kitchenette.

That leaves two...

Hands stuck down my pockets, I face my dad and meet his gaze for the first time in a decade. His eyes are shining with emotion, which causes a thickness to form in my throat.

"Have a seat," he offers, visibly nervous and...anxious, perhaps.

Since he gestured to the spot next to him on the couch, I walk around the table and sit down before I can chicken out and go with the chair instead.

It's...awkward.

"Thank you for coming, son," he says quietly.

Son.

I nod and clear my throat; I gotta swallow a couple times. "Yeah..."

Fear spikes up for a second as his eyes roam over my face, my hair, my now-exposed arms, so I look away and happen to meet another gaze—my wife's. She's still in the kitchen, but I see her. She gives me a reassuring smile and points to her left forearm.

My mouth quirks up, knowing what she's referring to. The tattoo on my arm—the quote. Oscar Wilde said it: *"Be yourself. Everyone else is already taken."* And Bella found it for me, said it was perfect. I agreed. *Agree.* Now the wife is just reminding me. 'Cause she knows when I fucking need it.

So, I face Dad once more, with the confidence I usually have in myself.

44.

EPOV

"I-I..." He puffs out his cheeks and releases a heavy breath; he looks choked up, and I just feel stupid sitting here not knowing what to do or say. "I'm really glad you're here," he admits thickly. I grit my teeth, feeling my eyes sting. After hesitating twice, his hand covers my right one which is on my knee. I blink. "I'm serious, Edward."

I nod jerkily, unable to speak, and just stare down at his hand over mine.

He still wears his wedding band.

"Me too," I finally manage to get out. And it's the truth. I guess I'm just... conflicted. Dad was once my hero, the man I considered to be the greatest guy in the world, and then he let me down—forgot about me. My image of him was completely shattered.

I wasn't a difficult son. I just reevaluated my goals when Dad kept cancelling on me. I still love to cook and experiment with ingredients, but I love what I do now even more.

Yet, how could I ever wish what happened never did?

Bella and Emilia wouldn't be in my dad's tiny kitchen now.

Those two girls are my life—straight up. Plain and simple.

Thinking about Dad and our situation, mainly after talking things over with Bella, I'm realizing that—at least on some level—I set Dad up to fail. I had him on this pedestal, and the expectations were high. At that point, I was too young to worry about what he had at stake—that he was actually needed at his restaurant and how demanding his schedule was—but then on the other hand, he didn't have to make all those promises. Those were the ones who in the end made me resent him and pack up and leave. He *kept fucking promising*.

In response to these arguments of mine, my wife has given me small smiles and reminded me that humans make mistakes. She's used herself as an example; she's asked if I've ever held her own mistakes against her. And of-fucking-course I haven't. But her childhood doesn't even...I mean, there's no comparison. What she went through...and she was only fifteen when life as she knew it was over. With a shotgun going off.

"There's a lot going on up here." I tap my temple and huff a chuckle.

Dad offers a small smile. "I can see that." Giving my hand a squeeze, he releases it and leans back slightly. "Who's winning?" I cock a brow, and he flashes me a little smirk. "Well, I suppose Bella's been the objective party, although she's obviously on your side. But I assume she's also the one who has convinced you to come here today."

I guess my dad can read me well, too. But he's got one thing wrong. "Like you, I wouldn't do anything if I didn't want to," I point out. Bella may have meddled and risked a lot to get between two stubborn fools, but in the end she couldn't actually force us to meet. Yeah, I'm taking my wife's words to heart. She's right and all that shit. Women and their ways. "I'm here 'cause..." I let the unsaid words stay bottled up, not really ready to say *I want to be here*. But at least it's implied. 'Cause I do.

"I'm grateful," he rasps. With his fist to his mouth, he clears his throat and looks away for a second. "Excuse me."

"Hey, um..." Feeling myself cracking a little inside, it's my turn to grasp his hand, and in return he covers mine with his free one. "We'll...uh, solve this. All right?"

Movement in my periphery catches my attention, and I look up just as Bella points toward the door, silently saying that she's stepping out with Emilia.

I guess she "deems it safe."

45.

EPOV

"For what it's worth—" he pauses to take a breath "—the first rule sucks."

While shock surges through me, a slow smile spreads on my lips.

It's fucking overwhelming.

Especially since my father doesn't really say anything without meaning it.

"You really mean that?" I ask, blinking away the moisture in my eyes.

"I do, son."

I let that sink in for a while, needing it. I'm not very comfortable being so emotional, and it's even weirder seeing Dad so teary, but...at the same time, it's a bit reassuring. If that makes sense.

A couple moments later, he catches me staring at the photos on the wall behind the flat screen, so perhaps that's why he suggests we go closer. But I'm happy with a break from the tension, so I walk over and listen as he tells me a little about Andrea and Leo, Alice and Jasper's kids. Dad also shows me a photo that Bella has obviously given him, 'cause it's one of Emilia and me. It's from her third birthday, and I'm squatting down next to her highchair as she squashes a piece of cake in my face.

I crack a smile at the memory.

"Bella also gave me those two." He points to the photo-covered strip of wall next to the window. One of the photos is of the three of us—Bella, Emilia, and me. Emmett took it in our shop, and I've got the baby girl in my chair; I'm giving her one of those fake tattoos. And Bella's squatting down next to Emilia, the two grinning at each other. That was just a few months ago.

The third photo is another one of Emilia and me. The day we took our newborn home from the hospital. She fell asleep on my chest—on the couch—and Bella took the shot.

"Emilia's gorgeous," Dad comments quietly.

I smile at the last photo and agree with a nod. She *is* gorgeous. More than that. And I can thank the wife for it. Aside from her green eyes, she's a mini Bella. She's also a fucking angel. With a devil on her shoulder. Mischievous little shit. *Busting. My. Balls.*

"She's fuckin' wild," I chuckle, folding my arms over my chest. "She's stubborn, too." I send Dad a sideways grin.

He winces. "Poor Bella."

"Nah." I scratch my jaw. "If there's anyone who can handle stubbornness, it's her."

"Oh, I've noticed." He huffs a little. "Bella—she's a sweetheart and a hurricane wrapped in one tiny piece of woman."

That about sums it up, yeah.

"Listen..." He clears his throat, and the tension shifts. Just like that. Back to seriousness. "There's something I have to say, Edward."

I look to him as he's looking at the photo from Emmett and my shop.

Here we go.

46.

EPOV

"I realize this can't be fixed with one conversation," he starts, sticking his hands into his pockets. "I let you down as a father, and a simple sorry won't fix that. But..." He takes a breath. I find myself holding mine. "I want you to know that I take the blame, and I'm very sorry—" His voice cracks. "I wasn't around, and then..." My eyes well up all over again; I watch as he pauses to collect himself. "When you came home and told me you wanted to be a..." He waves a hand at the photo Emmett took. "I was

mad at myself, Edward. And I took it out on you. Cooking...that was our thing." His smile is sad. "Alec and Alice never cared about that the way you did."

I look down, my throat feeling thick.

"I took you for granted," he whispers. My jaw clenches as a couple tears roll down my cheeks. His words are both heavy and liberating. "It was never about tattoos, Edward. I would've reacted the same if you wanted to be a damn lawyer."

I chuckle gruffly and quickly wipe my cheeks.

The resentment lingers—it probably will for a while. But the relief searing through me feels so fucking good. They're words I've wanted to hear for years. Make no fucking mistake, I've been happy. I *am* happy. And that's all on Bella and Emilia...and our friends. But my past, my beef with Dad, has always been there, lurking in the background.

"You always were good at sketching," he sighs, and when I look up, I see the wistfulness in his expression. He's still watching the photo of me giving Emilia that fake tattoo. "Your notebooks were always full of drawings...intricate patterns..." He gives me a sideways glance. "You remember Marcus?"

"Yeah." Marcus and Dad owned a restaurant together for a while. I was just a little shit, running around in their kitchen. I loved it there. Bella told me Marcus is back in the States and that he visited Dad recently.

"He always said you'd be an artist if you didn't become a chef." Dad claps a hand over my shoulder. "I shoulda known he'd be correct."

"Heh..." I look to the photo; I've never seen myself as a fucking artist. Even though the word is included in my profession. "I don't know—it's just what I do. I don't really think of it as art."

"Isn't it called body art?" He smirks.

I return with a *touché* nod.

"You're very talented, son," he admits. The lump in my throat is back. "I should've told you sooner. And that I'm proud of you. All I want is for you to be happy."

"Jesus fucking Christ, Dad." I scrub my hands over my face. "I didn't expect you to be so..." *Shit*. I sniffle and clear my throat. "I don't know—" I wave a hand "—apologetic?" My father has always been a proud man. He means what he says. He doesn't take it back. But now...

"It's been ten years." He puts his fist to his mouth again. I can barely even look at him. Crying is just not for him. "That's—that's a lotta time to think about regrets and what I should've done and said."

Sticking my hands down my pockets, I puff out my cheeks and release a heavy breath. It's goddamn overwhelming, and my head is swimming.

"It means a lot—" I look down at my feet, nodding slowly "—coming from you."

Another few beats later, I tell him again that we'll work things out. We'll stay in touch, talk shit out, see each other more. It's weird, but I'm both exhilarated and exhausted. So, after we've briefly talked about Alice and Alec—Dad says they wanna see me—we begin to wrap things up for today. It's easy to see the day has taken its toll on my father, too.

The visit hasn't been long, but there's still a lot to process.

Once we're standing in the hallway and I've put on my shoes and beanie, I'm kinda itching to see my wife. She's the only one who can sort out the shit running through my head—make me understand what's going on. I don't fucking know. It's just easier that way; I tell her what I can, and

then she spells it out for me. And that makes me sound dumb, but that's not it. She just knows me better. Plus, she's a woman.

"Thank you again for coming, son," Dad says quietly.

"I'm glad I did." I bite down on my lip ring. "Next time...I don't know—" I rub the back of my neck "—maybe you could come see us?"

"Count me in," he replies quickly, smiling. Then the smile is gone, replaced by nervousness. "Can—" he swallows hard "—can I...?"

Knowing what he wants to say but can't, I step forward and hug him, squeezing my eyes shut as his shoulders shake with silent tears.

47.

BPOV

I grin, watching Emilia running in circles on the big lawn next to the parking lot. I figured we could go farther into the park, but I wanna keep an eye out if Edward comes out.

"Mommy," Emilia sings, spreading her arms out as she runs. "Do you want me to love you more?"

I laugh. "No, that's okay, baby girl."

Unlike her father, I don't ask what she wants.

I already know she wants either a tattoo or a piercing. Or maybe it's the cat again.

"But, *Mommy!*" she whines and stomps her foot. "You s'pose'ta ask."

"*Mommy!*" a certain someone mimics.

My head snaps up and I see the hubby walking toward us.

That heart of mine beats a little faster, and I hope everything's gone well.

"Daddy!" Emilia flies toward him. "Catch me, yo!"

"Yo, don't I always?" he chuckles and widens his arms. She jumps; he catches. Smooches follow, and I pick up the empty juice box from the ground, guessing it's time to go home. When I reach them, Edward pulls me close and lands a wet, loud one on my lips. "Wife." He grins.

His eyes are so fucking happy.

They're a little bloodshot, too, but I had a feeling it'd be an emotional reunion.

"It went well," I state breathily, relieved beyond words.

"Yeah." He nips at my jaw and growls playfully. It makes the baby girl laugh. "It did. And I owe you."

No. He doesn't. "I just evened out the score a little, baby." I jump up and kiss his cheek. "Not that it's a competition—you know what I mean."

"Well, I'll thank you properly tonight." He winks.

"Counting on it," I tease. "But first I wanna hear all about—"

"Yeah, I'm hungry." Emilia interrupts with a huff. She also grabs Daddy's face. "So...?" She raises her eyebrows, looking like Edward.

"Cheeky little shit," he laughs and bites her nose. "Okay, let's get home. I'm cooking. And—" he squeezes my hand "—I'll tell you everything later."

Satisfied with that, we head toward the car, and I'm smiling like a fool the entire time.

But confusion takes over when we get home and we see Rosalie standing on our stoop with two suitcases.

48.

EPOV

As Bella approaches Rose, I help Emilia out of the car and try to listen in on the conversation.

"I got a job," I hear Rose say. The cheeriness in her voice rings false. Like she's only pretending to be happy.

"Come on, honey." I pick up the baby girl and close the door. Approaching the two women with Emilia in my arms, I hear Rose tell Bella that the job is in Seattle. Of all fucking places.

"Hi, Auntie Rose," Emilia yawns. She may be hungry, but she's also about to drop. Without a nap today, you don't need to be a genius to figure out why she's tired.

Rose responds with a small smile, but her focus is still on Bella.

So is mine, and I frown, waiting for her reaction.

"Seattle?" Bella asks slowly.

Rose chuckles; it's forced. "Hey, I gotta go where the jobs are. Right?"

Yeah, it's not hard to see through her. But I'm glad, and not for selfish reasons. Well, maybe a little. Still...she needs to get over my wife. Clinging to something that will never happen isn't healthy. And for Kate's sake, I hope she's not tagging along. Kate deserves better.

"I guess, but..." Bella frowns. "So, you're leaving right *now*?"

"Yeah." Rose nods and sticks her hands down her pockets. "It's an office job—I interviewed over the phone. I'm starting next week, and I have a couple friends from college living there. I'll be staying with them 'til I find my own place."

I shift a half-sleeping Emilia to my hip and scratch an eyebrow with my keys. "What about your girlfriend?"

"We broke up."

Good for Kate.

"I'm sorry—um." Bella's definitely shocked. "I...uh, this is all so sudden. I don't know what to say, Rose."

"I'm still hungry," Emilia mumbles in my ear.

I give her a quick grin. "Soon, baby."

She hums and drops her head to my shoulder.

"Yeah, it's sudden..." Rose clears her throat. "But I'm ready for a fresh start. I need it."

I won't argue with that.

While Bella and Rose hug and promise each other to stay in touch, I study my wife for her real reaction. I say real because I think she's hiding it behind a fake one. The shock is definitely real, and so is the sadness. But there's something else, too. For a moment, I'm sure it looks like she's relieved, but that doesn't make any sense. She has no clue about Rose's true feelings.

"Can I have a word with you before I go?" Rose wipes her cheeks and looks to me.

My eyebrows rise, and I just nod in return.

"Call me when you land?" Bella asks her as she takes Emilia from me.

Rose nods, and then Bella and Emilia disappear into our building.

I fold my arms over my chest. "So, what's up?"

She takes a breath and grits her teeth. "Take care of them."

Fucking bitch. "I always have."

"I could've done it better," she bites out.

"Right." I laugh and shake my head. "You're fucking delusional." My amusement is gone pretty quickly, though, and I take a couple steps toward her, towering over her. "It was never a competition, Rose." I keep my voice low, my eyes piercing. I can barely control my fury. "My wife loves you, for some *un-fucking-known* reason, but she loves you as a *friend*. Understand?" I ball my hands into fists and smile the smile Bella refers to as a *fuck you* smile. "I'm glad you're leaving Philly, 'cause my patience wearing thin, I'll tell ya that."

"I'm not afraid of you," she scoffs.

I nod. "Because you underestimate me." I jerk my chin at the street. "Get the fuck outta hea'."

Walking up the steps, two at a time, I can only think one thing.

Good riddance.

49.

BPOV

"There?"

"Yeah..." I nod and hold my breath, arching my back as he sucks on my tits. Fuck, the grinding—he hits deep, then out slightly and upward...*that* spot. And I'm panting, pleading, clawing at him. "*Please.*"

He kisses me, a hand grabbing at my ass, and drives in harder. "You sure you're okay?"

I'm sure. After having an afternoon and an evening to think about it, I realize it's for the best that Rose left. I'm still shocked, but...it was just becoming too much with the arguing between her and my husband. They've both pushed things too far, in my opinion, but Edward hasn't been as catty. He's not vindictive; he doesn't hold a grudge, and...I don't know. While he can tell someone to fuck off—he can also be incredibly crude—Rose can be meaner, in a way.

We're also not as close as we once were, and I think I'm sadder about losing her because of how close we were in the past. Like, it's the old times—the memories...that's why I'm gonna miss her. Not because of how we are today—as friends.

It makes sense in my head.

So...I guess I'm a little torn about her leaving so abruptly, but I still think it's a good thing. We've drifted apart; people do that. However, she remains a friend. We'll keep in touch—that's that.

"Definitely." I reach around him and hug his neck, needing him impossibly closer. It's just one of those nights. I need, need, need. "I've already told you." I smile up at him and brush some hair away from his forehead.

"Just wanted to make sure..." He scrunches his face together as I clamp down on his cock. "I, oh fuck, woman." He grunts, and I giggle breathlessly. "Do that again." I do, and hold it longer, feeling him sliding in so deep. "Shit." He pants. "Is there a pussy sainthood?"

I laugh as he rolls us over so sitting I'm on top. Then I hum in contentment, reveling in his muscular arms wrapped around me. Those kisses—the butterfly kind—it's with those he thanks me. Over and over. And the husky murmurs, the crooked smiles...

"You're happy," I whisper against his lips.

"So are you," he mumbles back—before his teeth nip. "We're fucking amazing together, aren't we?" He lets out a little laugh. "We go behind each other's backs..."

"All in the name of love," I chuckle and roll my hips, taking him farther inside me. "Shit, your cock, baby." My head lolls back.

"Oh yeah..." He moans and slips a hand between us to rub my clit. I hiss when he tugs a little on my piercing. "Fuck, that's sexy."

"Mmm..." I lean forward again and cup his face. Forehead to forehead. Our breaths mingle as we pick up the pace. "What else is amazing about us?"

"Tell me what isn't," he fires back with a grin. He takes charge again and flips us over, his cock finding me quickly. I laugh, out of breath, but it morphs into a moan when he grinds his pelvic bone over my clit. *Jesus*. His thrusts slow down, but he keeps going deep. Long strokes. "Have I thanked you yet?" he whispers in my ear.

"Only a hundred—" my breathing hitches "—hundred times."

He grunts and lowers his mouth to mine. "Hundreds to go." A slow, passionate, open-mouthed kiss leaves me breathless. Tingling sensations fly down my spine, causing me to shudder and gasp. "Thank you." Kiss. "Thank you for putting up with my stubbornness." Kiss. "*Our* stubbornness." God, he's going for the kill now. I can already feel my orgasm building up, about to shoot off. "Thank you for saving me from regrets."

That's what this whole thing was about.

You don't always get second chances, so when you do, make sure to grab hold.

Masen Rule Number One should now be, "Don't take anything for granted."

I know I don't.

"You're so close, honey," he grits out, hitching my leg over his hip. "I wanna see you come."

I gasp and arch and cry out and feel my insides coil up right before eruption. Heat rolls over me in waves, pinning me down, and I tense up completely. Eyes screwed shut. Fingers digging into his shoulders. Sweat beads. Ripples of pleasure. And I drag Edward with me, clamping down on him so hard; his curses are gritty next to my ear as he pumps into me, in the middle of his own climax.

The world doesn't stop spinning, but it feels like it.

My chest heaves.

And I watch him, submerged in his pleasure. Carefree, intense, soulful. Shoulders no longer carrying that regret. It's a good feeling, to know I helped with that. Just like he's saved me over and over, it's nice to be able to reciprocate. Because what it all comes down to is this—our little family, protecting it, loving the shit out of it. By all means.

"Bella, I can read you." With a heavy breath, he drops his weight on me, mouths so close that I feel them move as he speaks. "In that head of yours...you're having some cheesy chick moment."

I crack up, both amused and sentimental.

He smiles widely, lazily, and bites my chin. "I think there's cold pizza left from yesterday." Another nibble. "Wanna eat in bed?"

I nod, still peering up at him.

Yes. Time for cold pizza in bed with the hubby.

50.

EPOV

Epilogue

"Daddy," Emilia sings, her head blocking the flat screen. I move to the side, desperate to see the fucking game. I mean it's the Super Bowl. Daddy's busy. "Do you want me to love you more?"

"GET IT!" Cullen and Emmett shout at the TV.

"Pass the fucking ball!" Alec booms out.

"Quit dickin' around, you fools!" Dad hollers. "I got money on this game!"

"Honey, not now—" I lift the baby girl off me and watch as Lewis runs with the ball, then throws it back to Foles who's flanked by Brown. "COME ON!" I yell.

"D-Daddy." Emilia's lip trembles, big eyes welling up. "You're being all screamy."

Fuck. Stab me in the heart, will ya? "I'm sorry, baby." I give her a loud smooch on the forehead. "Daddy's just *really* into the game. Hey, why don't you get us some more chips, huh?"

Or maybe she can go play with her dog. Dandy, her little Yorkie, should be here somewhere. Fucking rat. Okay, it's cute, but...it's still a rat. However, it was the dog she picked, and we all know I'm whipped for my girls.

"Sweetheart, go help your cousin," Jasper tells Andrea. "You too, buddy." He gives Leo a smile.

"Here's some money." Dad waves three ten-dollar bills at the kids.

And money always cheers them up...

I shake my head, laughing under my breath.

"Mommy!" Emilia runs toward the kitchen. "Grampa gaved me money again!"

Andrea and Leo follow, also yelling about more money, leaving us men to watch the game—thank God. Make no mistake, I love having them all at my place, and being part of a big family again is a fucking blessing. But... Super Bowl, people. *Super Bowl*.

"Dad!" Alice shouts from the kitchen. "You can't give them money every time you want them to be quiet!"

"It's my right to spoil them!" Dad shoots back, grunting as he leans back in the chair. "Damn women just don't understand we wanna be left alone."

We toast to that.

"Okay, halftime." Cullen puffs out his cheeks and takes a big swig of his beer. "Fuck me, my heart is racing."

Hell yeah. It's a rush.

"I think they should cut down on the entertainment," I say, adjusting my junk. "Twelve minutes is fine, but half an hour?" I shake my head and

chug the rest of my beer. I'm here for the game, not some pop star who may or may not flash a tit or flip off the camera.

"Hear, hear." Alec nods.

"Is it safe to enter?!" Bella calls.

I chuckle and tell her to get her fine ass in here. She's a Masen; she knows how we get when it's an important game. My sister knows, too, and since Cullen, Jasper, Alec, and Emmett—not to mention Dad—are the same, Bella and Alice are teaching the other women to just stay back. So, they're in the kitchen with Esme, Jessica, and Rina—the woman Alec's dating. Seriously, our two-bedroom apartment is packed.

A few minutes later, the wife plops down in my lap with a new beer for me, earning herself a wet kiss and some ass-grabbing; Alice walks over to Jasper, Jessica aims for Emmett, Rina throws herself at Alec, and a fat—'scuse me; *pregnant*—Esme waddles over to Cullen.

"What's the score?" Bella asks me.

"I don't wanna talk about it," I grunt.

"That bad, huh?" Jessica smirks as Emmett pinches her thigh.

"It's only halftime," Alec grumbles. "We'll make it."

"C'mere, sugar." Dad holds out his arms for Emilia, and she fucking jumps. "*Oomph*. Good thing you're cute."

Rina turns to Alec. "Don't forget we gotta head up early tomorrow, baby."

Right. Alec's leaving Boston. After meeting Rina, a new nurse at Dad's retirement community, he's moving back to Philly.

In a couple days, we're all gonna meet up at their new house and help them unpack.

It's been a slow but steady restart. I may not be very close to my brother and sister, but there are no hard feelings. Though, it's actually mostly Alice. Alec's pretty cool; I've even tattooed him. He wanted our last name on his calf, so... But Bella and Alice are close. They're women—gossip and all that. They're also the ones who organize our family dinners and stuff. Jasper's cool, too. He fits in well with me and my buddies.

Most importantly, Dad and I have the relationship I've always wanted. No grudges. No regrets. We bicker a lot, but that's 'cause we're stubborn. Still, it's all good. Usually, Bella catches a ride with Esme to work on Saturdays, and then I drive out when she gets off. We have coffee and whatever with Dad. We talk.

And I'm happy that Emilia has two cousins. Andrea and Leo are nice kids, and while Andrea is a tough little shit, Leo's a sweetheart. I gotta say it feels good to be an uncle, too.

It's only been a year—little more than that—since Bella dropped the bomb about having contacted my father, but I think we've made good progress. We're all still pretty private people; busy with work and doing ourselves. But we get together for dinner every once in a while, and holidays mean even more now than they did before.

"If the Eagles win, I want their logo on my shoulder," Cullen tells me.

A grin takes over my face; I don't have the team logo inked, but I do have the fight song on my shoulder blade.

"Count me in," Emmett replies, tipping his beer bottle at that.

"Yeah, me also," Emilia says frankly with a hip-check.

Bella giggle-groans into my neck.

"Get over hea', you little ball-buster," I laugh. Squealing, she bounces over, and then I've got my two girls on my lap. "You're giving me grays, Emilia—you know that, right?" I tickle the baby girl and growl against her cheek. "Just like your mother."

"Damn right!" Bella high-fives Emilia.

"Halftime almost over!" Cullen bellows. "Third quarter!"

"Haul ass," Bella mutters wisely to the women. "See ya later." She gives me a hard and deep kiss, leaving other things a little hard. "Come with me, baby girl." She holds out a hand for Emilia; meanwhile, I'm trying to catch my fucking breath. Jesus. "We have a baby shower to plan."

"Oh yeah." Esme grins and waddles out, Cullen staring at her ass until she's outta sight.

"Fly, Eagles, fly..." Emmett places a hand on his heart. "On the road to victory."

"Fight, Eagles, fight," I fill in, holding up my bottle. "Score a touchdown..."

"One, two, three!" Alec and Cullen shout.

"Hit 'em low, hit 'em high!"

"And watch our Eagles fly!"

The End