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Nebraska Hideout

~Based on the true events of what is today referred as the Fort Robinson tragedy~

~1~

September 28th 1878

"Morning, Copper." Nana May smiled from her spot at the stove. Edward sure wasn't a morning person. Not when he was a child, and not now that he was twenty-four. "Coffee?"

"Mornin'," Edward yawned, dropping a kiss on May's cheek as he passed her. "Coffee sounds good." He took his seat at the table. "Any word from Father?"

"Not yet, but I'm sure he'll be back soon."

It always worried Edward when Carlisle was at Fort Robinson. He would much rather take care of that business himself, but Carlisle insisted, stating that Edward was too easily riled up. That was nothing but the truth. Edward Cullen was a hotheaded man, and breeding horses for the army had left him in more than one argument with both his father and various lieutenants. He just couldn't help himself. After Edward's mother—that whore—had left the ranch when he was a toddler, Carlisle had received help from the very people they were supposed to hate. The Indians.

At the time, Carlisle had traded horses for spices and leather. It was just a small tribe of Lakotas, mostly women and children. They had lost many of their men in the wars. One woman had lost her husband and four sons, so when she heard little Edward crying on the porch as Carlisle traded with the new—and very young—chief, she had offered her aid.

Carlisle was in no position to decline. He was weary and worn out. There were only men working at the ranch, and none of them knew how to take care of children. So, Little Brown, the Lakota woman, helped with Edward, and Carlisle was eternally grateful. That was also the time he let go of all the distaste he had for the Indians. After all, he'd never had a valid reason for hating them. That was just how it was supposed to be, a circumstance he was sick and tired of.

Even when Edward's grandfather died twelve years ago and Nana May left Arkansas to join Carlisle and Edward in Nebraska, Little Brown kept visiting. She became a surrogate mother to Edward, and a very good friend to Carlisle.

"What are you thinking on?" May asked softly, placing Edward's breakfast in front of him. She ruffled his hair, and he welcomed the touch, though he would never admit to such a thing. If his men knew, he'd be the joke of the year. Then again, Nana May coddled *all* the men on the ranch.

Edward sighed quietly, eyes on the plate full of bacon and eggs. "Little Brown," he muttered. "It's been five weeks."

It never was more than two or three weeks in between visits. Now it had been more than a month, and everyone was worried. Had the army shipped them south?

Edward threw his fist down on the table at that thought.

"I *swear*, ever since the government got involved..." He shook his head in anger. "I haven't seen this much trouble since before we were accepted by the Union." He'd only been a boy when Nebraska became a state, but he still remembered. He remembered how more and more people moved here from the Southeast.

"Now, now, don't be a croaker," May chided, though her smile was soothing and motherly. "It's too early to speak politics. Wait 'til sunup, at least." She gave a little wink at that, trying to lighten the tension. Edward cracked a small smile, but he was still irritated and wound up. "Perhaps you ought to head to town for a little while?"

That was probably a good idea. It had been three or four months since he'd last ridden into town. He always assigned Emmett and Jasper when it was time to pick up supplies. Jasper had a girl there, and Emmett was a frequent visitor at Madam Rosalie's.

Edward swallowed his needs, suddenly focusing intently on his breakfast.

He had better things—more *important* things—to think about. Visiting whores sure wasn't important. Women—period—weren't important. He had too much to do out here at the ranch.

~oOo~

"Jasper!" Edward shouted. "We want them in the western paddock!" He gave his trusted mare a squeeze, at which the horse dutifully sped up. "Good girl, Koda," he muttered. It was Red Hawk—Little Brown's younger brother—who had named Edward's horse. In Dakota Sioux, it was the word for "friend", and when Edward got picked on for choosing a mare instead of a gelding, Koda was his friend. Now, fifteen years later, Koda was still one of the most important beings in Edward's life.

"Jasper!" he shouted again, this time closer. The twenty colts they were rounding up ran freely and noisily over the plains. It was a sight to behold. Finally, Jasper heard Edward and looked over his shoulder. "Western paddock! We have the fillies in the eastern near the stables!"

"Got it, boss!" Jasper yelled back, changing direction.

They were all friends on the Cullen Ranch. Bickering and smart digs were a part of life, but when they worked, Edward was in charge.

~oOo~

"Rats," Emmett cursed as he spilled some of May's rabbit stew onto his shirt. It happened frequently. After a morning of hard work, Emmett was often too eager to get food into him that a lot ended up elsewhere. May just smiled indulgently and kept serving the boys' lunch. "I think I spilled, May."

"No, really?" Edward drawled, rolling his eyes. They sat on the porch, and he tilted his chair back, putting up his feet on the thigh-high railing. The sun was out, and he wanted to soak up some rays before heading back out there. Next on his to-do list was definitely dealing with the two mares that had colic.

"I'll get you some more, boy," May told Emmett, patting his shoulder. As she passed Edward, she added, "You really ought to take tomorrow off,

Copper. Those eye-rolls are comin' far too often." She gave her grandson a pointed look, and Edward had the decency to look sheepish. He knew very well what she meant. After a few months on the ranch—without ever leaving—he was becoming too aggravated and sarcastic.

When Edward Cullen was unhappy, *everyone* was unhappy.

"You should come with us, Ed," Jasper commented before chugging down some milk. He sighed contently. "Tyler and I are headin' to town tomorrow mornin'."

Edward smirked. "Not Emmett? I'm shocked." There was the sarcasm again, and this time he noticed. *Damn*. He dragged a hand over his face and sighed heavily. They were right. He needed a day off. "Fine," he spat out. "I'll join ya."

~oOo~

September 29th 1878

The following day, Edward, Jasper, and Tyler arrived in town around noon. The sun was at its highest, but luckily the winds still offered needed relief.

"First drink's on me, boys," Jasper said, dismounting his horse. He grinned at Edward, who just looked like he was in pain. "Ah, c'mon, big bug. Lighten up."

Edward gave a grunt at that and secured Koda next to Jasper's gelding. "I need a dozen damn drinks if I'm gonna survive this day," he grumbled just as two ladies passed him. They blushed profusely at his language, and it sure wasn't proper, but Edward couldn't give two bits about it. He'd always had a foul mouth, something Nana May often complained about.

Upon entering the establishment, the three men removed their cowboy hats as they scouted a good place to sit. It was crowded here at James'

Doggery, even around noon. Alec James was funny and the liquor was cheap, but the main reason most men came here was because Madam Rosalie's was right upstairs.

"Well, well, if it ain't Edward Cullen."

Edward huffed a chuckle and approached the grinning Alec, who was—as always—standing behind the bar.

"Sure wasn't yesterday I saw you," he drawled, a toothpick dangling between his lips. "How's the ranch?"

"Same old. Always good," Edward replied, sliding onto a stool. "A regular." He gave the bottle rack a chin-nod. "Make it a double." Then he gave Jasper a smirk and a pat of his shoulder. "And this one's payin'."

"Three of 'em, Alec," Jasper added with a nod. "We're not leavin' until our boss here feels better."

Alec barked out a laugh, knowing all too well about Edward's temper. "I guess you're going upstairs later, then?" Ignoring Edward's glare, he continued. "You might be in luck. Rosie's new girl moved here a few weeks ago. She's starting today." He let out a low whistle. "What a pretty cherry. I hope I get my turn soon enough."

"Yeah, but didn't she move here with a child?" Tyler asked, remembering Mike telling him about "Izzy" and how fine she was. Apparently, she had a young'un with her.

"That'd be little Henry. Mrs. Brandon's gonna watch him when Izzy works." Alec nodded firmly. "Think there's a story behind that one, I do."

Edward didn't care. Everyone had a story, didn't they? How a whore ended up with a child didn't take a genius to figure out. Clearly, she hadn't been careful enough.

When the bar filled with catcalls, Edward automatically looked toward the staircase. There was only one reason for catcalling in here, and that reason was currently walking down the stairs in an uppity dress with a tight corset. She had to be the new one, Edward concluded, and Alec was right. She sure was a pretty cherry. She was both voluptuous and slight, with a slim waist, mighty fine hips, and soft-looking breasts that were all but spilling over the top of that corset of hers. He could already feel his desire grow at the sight. There was only one word he could think of, and it was a word that rarely entered his mind, no matter how foulmouthed he was.

Fuck.

~2~

He sighed and returned to his drink. He needed a few more before he propositioned *anyone*, regardless of who she was. Though, he couldn't deny that she was the one who he hoped he'd end up with.

Pushing those thoughts aside for now—which became even harder when more adventuresses joined them downstairs—Edward talked to Jasper about the latest developments regarding the Cheyenne. Since Jasper had a girl here in town, Edward knew that at least he would be up for a normal conversation.

"I heard somethin' about a breakout," Jasper said into his glass. "Two chiefs and nearly three hundred of the Northern Cheyenne."

"Blazes," Edward muttered, not surprised. Those reservations—agencies—were a pitiful attempt to create peace between natives and settlers. He'd try to break out, too, if it were him. "You heard who the chiefs were?"

Jasper smirked. "Dull Knife and Little Wolf."

"That'll give the army hell," Edward chuckled. He had heard tales of both chiefs. Red Hawk loved to tell stories, and Edward had always loved to listen. "I take it they're heading north, then?"

"Yep. I reckon your old man will have some news when he returns."

That was true. Carlisle would definitely know if something was going on, and if the men over there didn't talk, their orders would. That was how Carlisle and Edward found out about the Battle of Warbonnet Creek a few years ago; the army's order on Cullen-branded horses multiplied. Luckily, it was only as a precaution that the army had ordered more horses, and they hadn't seen much of a battle at all.

With a labored sigh, Edward sank down a little in his seat. He loathed that part of their job. Having the army as their biggest client sure provided them with money and possibilities, but he hated to contribute to the cause. It wasn't about keeping or making peace, damn it! Edward wasn't stupid. He knew very well that Fort Robinson would disrupt the little peace they had left here, rather than making it stronger.

In order to calm down, Edward drank more.

He also repeated Little Brown's words over and over in his head.

"Is for the best, child. No white man ever suspect Cullens to help us. Your reputation of helping army work in our favor."

It was the truth, though it didn't offer much comfort. Carlisle and Edward Cullen did what they could to help the Lakotas, who just wanted peace in the Wyoming Territory. At times, they had kept children and women hidden on their grounds. Thousands of the Lakota lived in what was today the state of Nebraska, but if you counted the entire Territory... Edward didn't even know those numbers. All he knew was that the army wanted them in reservations.

"To hell with the Agency," he spat out, raising his glass to his lips. The Red Cloud Agency had moved here—just a few miles away—last month, and this was what worried Edward. Had they relocated Little Brown's tribe there?

"Hey, Edward," Jasper said in a cautioning tone. "How 'bout a card game, yeah?"

For the sake of his own sanity, Edward agreed.

He needed to clear his damn head.

Just a few moments after the three men had found an empty table, several other men joined in. Trying to win money on card games was popular, and Edward was lucky in that department. It was often his winnings that paid for his time with a prostitute later.

"Hello, gentlemen."

Edward looked up from his cards as the warm voice registered, and he was suddenly facing a perfect set of-

"Oh, you're a new, aren't you, honey?" the woman cooed, not asking before sitting down sideways on Edward's lap. "My, you're a strong one."

Edward raised a brow, withholding the smirk, and tried to look her in the eye, as opposed to her breasts or dark red lips. *Pouty, luscious, soft.* Edward swallowed, willing his neglected cock to stay calm. *Scandalous woman*, he thought. *Scandalous and so...inviting.* There was no way he could resist this for long. He had also noticed the Southern twang in her voice. It was oddly endearing.

"I'm afraid you have it wrong," he told her, clearing his throat. "I've been here all my life. You, on the other hand..." He trailed off.

She smiled. "Well, I am mighty glad to meet you, handsome. And you're right. I *am* new here," she replied quietly, seductively. Her eyes were smiling, too, Edward decided. She hummed. "I'd love to put a name to your face."

This time, Edward did smirk. "Edward, ma'am. Edward Cullen." He could tell she was years younger than he was, but there were still manners there...somewhere...inside of him. Even if he was a simple man and even if she was a whore—a sure thing. "And you are?"

"You can call me Izzy," she whispered, leaning in to kiss his scruffy jaw. "And I hope you'll call me that upstairs soon."

Edward chuckled huskily—card game forgotten—and slid his hand up her leg, under the layers of her skirts, and didn't stop until he reached her naked thigh. "You'd have to be very good for me to do that."

It was a cocky statement, but true nonetheless. Edward wasn't exactly quiet in the throes of passion, but calling out a prostitute's name did little to help him reach that release. He paid for the pleasure. It was about him.

"Oh, I'm good," Izzy assured, kissing his neck. "In fact, why don't you ask me what I'm known as?"

Curious, he decided to humor her. "Tell me."

She chuckled softly into his ear. "Izzy Dollar."

Edward had heard many names, *creative* names. Prostitutes—especially those working in the same town as they were born—took on new names to spare their families from embarrassment. This one, though...this was new.

"Dollar?"

"Mmhmm," she responded, and Edward couldn't resist brushing his thumb over the inside of her smooth thigh. *Oh, have mercy on me, woman.* "It's what I charge for one hour, honey. I'm *that* good."

Edward's eyes widened momentarily. He was stunned. He managed to hide it before Izzy looked him in the eye, but his mind was still spinning as she studied him. A dollar was...*steep*. The other four girls working for Rosalie only charged sixty cents. He'd heard of women out West charging seventy-five, and that was madness! This woman didn't even have a reputation yet. Nobody could vouch for her skills.

Was he insane for even considering it?

Oh, yes. Very much so.

I've lost my damned mind!

"What do you say, Edward Cullen?" Izzy bit down on her lush bottom lip. Her eyes grew, showing innocence she didn't possess, and her long lashes fluttered once, twice. "Should we continue this upstairs?"

By now, Edward was hard and ready for her. His thoughts were randy and full of painful need. So, he found himself nodding.

"Lucky bastard!" Tyler howled as Izzy took the lead up the stairs, Edward's hand in hers.

"Oh, Mr. Crowley," Izzy laughed indulgently. "You're just missin' Chrissy. Don't you worry, honey. She'll be down directly."

A few seconds later, the noises from downstairs were silenced when Izzy closed the door behind her. Room Four was sparsely decorated. Just a large bed, a green velvet futon, a mirror, a dresser, and some shelves filled with candles. Red walls.

"Have a seat on the bed."

But Edward had other plans. He was no longer tongue-tied, and in these situations, he preferred to be in charge. No one bossed him around.

From his pocket, he pulled out the exact amount he needed. Then he placed the money on the dresser before he stalked toward Izzy, slowly, like a predator. Her eyes widened before she understood his game. In her profession, it was all about reading your customer. You simply had to know, which Izzy did.

"Turn around," Edward said when he reached her. It was a quiet demand, one he'd always used when being with a whore. Intercourse in a bed was for marriage, in his opinion. "Hands on the wall." She obeyed and looked over her shoulder as he took off his gun holster and undid his trousers. He wasn't interested in getting naked. He wanted his damn release, and that was all.

Standing thick and hard, he bunched up Izzy's skirts, telling her to hold them up. She did—with one hand, using the other one to support herself on the wall—and then he positioned himself at her hot entrance. In once swift thrust, he was sheathed inside of her.

"*Fuck,*" he swore under his breath. He had to close his eyes for a second. The pleasure was just too great. Still, he wanted more. More. More. More. He set a fast pace, driving into her, not caring whether or not she was fully prepared for him. Soon enough, she was. She was slick and hot, tight and soft. He honestly couldn't understand how she could feel so good. Granted, it had been months since he'd been inside a woman, but...

"Oh, good *God,*" he breathed out.

With a whimper, Izzy broke her own silence, and she wasn't sure what Edward preferred yet. Did he want her to be loud? Did he want her to

moan out naughty words? Did he want praises on his size? Or did he want her to stay quiet? She wasn't sure but, luckily for her, Edward gave her the answer. It wasn't a verbal one, but when she accidentally whimpered again, Edward moaned and sped up. In the reflection of the mirror next to them, Izzy could see all of him. It was a full-length mirror, and she watched greedily how his thick cock thrust into her.

She moaned at the sight.

Slowly, as he felt eyes on him, he turned to the mirror.

Their eyes locked.

His were hooded and filled with desire, as were hers. She was also biting down on her lip to prevent her wanton cries, which Edward admitted to himself he didn't want. He wanted her to make noises; he wanted to know them, to hear them, to fucking *feel* them.

"Stop doing that," he gritted out through clenched teeth. Instead of clarifying, he moved one hand from her hips, up her body, pausing to touch the swell of her cleavage—he groaned at the feeling of her soft breasts, big and delectable—then proceeded to release her bottom lip from her teeth.

His hand stayed on her throat, gripping it loosely and carefully, but hard enough for him to feel as she swallowed. When she moaned, he felt it. When she cried out, he shivered and slammed into her with even more force. He was beginning to sound like a possessed savage, but he couldn't help it. Everything was out of control. He cursed again. It wouldn't be long now. Letting his head tilt back, he lost himself in the pleasure of Izzy's pussy. He could smell them both. It nearly drove him insane. A dollar or not, he would visit this woman again. He already knew that with certainty.

"Oh, Izzy, I'm...I'm..."

Then he was coming. Still thrusting lazily, he rode out his incredible climax.

When he finally stilled, his breaths came out in labored puffs against Izzy's shoulder.

He was spent.

A glance at the little clock on the dresser told Izzy that there were still forty minutes left. So, she did what most girls in her profession *didn't* do. She ushered her customer over to the futon. Then she kneeled in front of him, knowing that his exhaustion would soon morph into more need. This was just one of the reasons she was the best. She didn't stop taking care of her men in between rounds.

"Wh-what are you d-doing?" Edward stuttered uncharacteristically. No one had ever done...*that*. He knew *of* it but had never experienced it. So, he watched, wide-eyed, as Izzy leaned over him and licked the length of his softened cock. It gave a small twitch in response, and Izzy smiled before doing it again. "Goodness gracious," he breathed out. He leaned back against the velvet, fully prepared to pay whatever he had in his trousers for her to keep doing that forever. Oh, it felt so good! And the sight of her, taking him in her *mouth*...

"You like this, handsome?" she whispered, plump lips brushing against the tip.

"Don't stop," he moaned, instinctively threading his fingers through her curly hair. Soft, he noted. "Oh, hell. Don't ever stop." And with a humming sound, she sucked all of him in. Edward knew that if he died now, he'd die a happy man.

Soon, he was hard as steel again. His hips bucked out of reflex, effectively pushing himself deeper—down her throat—but before he could apologize,

Izzy moaned around him. At that, he felt his balls tighten. How he could already be close, he had no idea!

"My, oh *my*, someone's insatiable," Izzy chuckled in her rich voice as she looked up at him. "Do you want me to continue, or do you want me to take you inside of me again?"

It was a difficult decision to make. Her hot and wet mouth was damn near mind-blowing, but then there was the tightness and slick feeling of being inside of her...

"Stand by the wall again," he told her, almost not recognizing his own voice.

He made a movement to stand up, but Izzy halted him by crawling onto his lap. "Not so fast, my good sir. Let me take care of you properly." With that said, she sank down on his hard shaft, leaving Edward too stunned to speak for a while.

It was good, because it gave Izzy the time to get rid of the corset that was now beginning to hurt. First the corset, then the skirts were pulled over her head, and her skimpy undergarments followed. This left her completely exposed to Edward.

"Izzy, you..." He stopped there, unable to find words good enough for her beauty. All he knew was that she was far too beautiful to sell herself. Her skin was as smooth as a milkmaid's. No scars, no blemishes.

This time, Izzy controlled the movements. She rode him, took him deeply, and Edward watched. Watched, touched, squeezed, fondled, and kissed. Not her mouth—*never* her mouth—but her chest, neck, collarbones, shoulders, throat, breasts. Oh, those breasts...

When he later spilled his seed inside of her, he felt like everything left him. It was damn euphoric, and he could no longer feel any tension in his shoulders, back, and neck. He was mush.

There were no cocky remarks or smart digs coming from his mouth as he redressed.

Izzy, on the other hand... "*That's* why I charge a dollar." She winked.

All Edward could offer was a nod and a hum.

At the door, there were no tender kisses or sweet words.

But as Edward put on his cowboy hat, he did say, "I'll be back, Miss Izzy. Mark my words. I'll be back."

~3~

"Feelin' better?" Jasper asked, trying to hold in the laughter as Edward joined him and Tyler again. Hell, he could see the change in his boss already!

Edward *did* feel better. No sarcasm, no eye-rolling, no snapping, no teeth-grinding... Nothing. Just the truth. "A *lot* better," he replied with a wide grin. "Now, let's head on over to the lumberyard before we return home. Emmett can pick up the order next week when we've fixed the wheel on the Conestoga wagon."

Tyler, who had enjoyed an hour with Chrissy, was also relaxed and sated.

But, unbeknownst to Edward and Tyler, Jasper was the happiest of them all. Because while his two friends had been otherwise engaged, he'd finally asked Mr. Brandon—the local blacksmith—for Alice's hand in marriage.

He'd said yes.

~oOo~

That night, when a few of the ranch workers were settling down on the porch for some supper, Carlisle finally returned.

Edward took a drag from his smoke, immediately noticing the distress in his father's eyes. All conversation ceased. Nana May stopped mid-serving.

"What's wrong, son?" May asked in concern.

Carlisle took off his hat, swallowing hard as he averted his eyes for just a second. "We best prepare for hard times, boys," he said then found Edward's eyes. "Little Brown and Red Hawk have been shipped off, and that ain't the worst of it." Just like that, Edward's day was properly ruined. "You all heard about Dull Knife and Little Wolf?" The men nodded. "They successfully crossed Kansas. And on their way to Montana, we know many will cross here."

The men's faces turned grim. Edward just wanted to disarm the entire unit of soldiers over at Fort Robinson and send them packing!

"Lieutenant Smith will be here tomorrow for fifty-"

"To *hell* with that!" Edward shouted angrily, cutting his father off. He stood up from his seat, glaring, seething, hating. "You can't be *serious*, Father!"

Though Edward inherited his temper from Carlisle, the older Cullen stood calm and collected. He knew how hard this was for Edward, but it was for the best.

"Son, the soldiers will get their horses with or without us," Carlisle reasoned, quietly but firmly. "But if we break our contract with the army, we won't be able to help those tribes that will pass here soon. You know this." Edward knew. He just hated helping the army, especially when the

horses would be used in the battles to take down the natives. "As long as we keep up our charade, we can help those who rightfully deserve it."

Slumping down in his seat again, Edward rolled another smoke to calm himself down. It was going to be hard, but his father was right. It was only a matter of time before Dull Knife would pass through this territory, and if Edward and the others at the ranch were going to help, they certainly didn't need the army snooping around, acting suspicious of them.

With a tired nod, Edward surrendered to his father's will, and then they started planning for a harsh winter.

~oOo~

January 3rd 1879

The snow fell heavily over the ranch on the morning of January 3rd. The men were pacing quietly, waiting for Carlisle and Emmett to return from Fort Robinson. It was still going to be a while before they did, but it was hard to find focus on a day like this. The winter had been harsh, indeed. After the US Army had managed to disarm hundreds of the Cheyenne, they had brought them to Fort Robinson—those who'd survived. They lived in barracks, like animals, and Carlisle hadn't managed to help many. During one of the battles, he had taken his son and a few others, and together they had been able to usher twelve women and children to safety. They were currently all living at the ranch in secret. Though confined in the cottages near the barn, they were at least properly fed and taken care of. They had heat, fresh water, and plenty of room to stretch out. That couldn't be said for those imprisoned at Fort Robinson.

Today, they were going to find out whether or not Dull Knife and his band could continue to Pine Ridge, or if they had to be shipped back south. Carlisle and Emmett weren't allowed to attend the council, of course, but they were going to be nearby, waiting for the answer.

"Eat, child. You must be strong."

Edward smiled a small smile at the warm and motherly voice, turning around to see Little Brown at the stove with Nana May. Apart from taking in the twelve Cheyenne, Edward and his father had thankfully managed to save Little Brown's tribe, too. It was a mere coincidence that, during a delivery of geldings to a cattle roundup five hours southeast from here, Edward had spotted a sign that told him exactly where they were. All he'd known before was that Little Brown had been taken to a camp, but he didn't know which one. That sign, though—telling him that he was near Camp Robinson—made him curious, and he rode onto the grounds, soon encountering a small unit of soldiers who didn't mind letting their mouths run. Edward found out that this was where Little Brown, Red Hawk, and the others were. He also noticed that the security was far from tight.

A few days later, Edward, Carlisle, Jasper, and Tyler snuck in after darkness to bring Little Brown and the rest of the small tribe home.

"She's right, Copper," May said pointedly. "You need to eat more. Only God knows what today will bring."

Dutifully, Edward sat down. Tyler, Mike, Eric, and Royce followed. Many of them were now living in the main house while their cottages housed the Cheyenne people.

"All right, let's be quick, fellas," Royce said, digging into his meal. Edward was thankful for the man. Now when they had so, so much to do, Royce was in charge of the grounds' safety. He was loyal, and he always had three ranchers circling the premises on horseback. Day or night, three men were out there, making sure no soldiers were nearby. Royce also had a couple dogs who obeyed his every command.

"We need to go buy food soon," Little Brown said quietly, frowning.

"Plenty of meat and beans and canned goods, but no coffee, flour, or sugar. No butter."

Edward nodded in acknowledgement, thanking heavens for the money they had. Providing so many with food and shelter sure was costly, but dealing with the army left them with enough money to cope well.

"What was wrong with the butter churn?" he asked, remembering that May had said something about that. If they needed to go into town, he might as well get that fixed, too.

"The plunger," May replied. "I can show you later."

Returning to his meal, Edward began making a mental list of things they needed.

They didn't head into town often at all anymore, and it had been three months now since Edward had been there. He was dying for another visit with Miss Izzy and was thoroughly disappointed that he hadn't been able to go sooner. All he knew came from what his men told him after supply runs, which wasn't a lot. He knew that she had fractured her leg after a bad fall, and he knew that everything had gone well and she was now back to normal again, working for Madam Rosalie.

It was what it was. His dreams often starred Miss Izzy, but in real life... They simply didn't have the time to go now with everybody working extra hard to keep the grounds safe.

After a hasty wedding back in early October, Alice now lived with Jasper in their cottage, and she was definitely a help, but it wasn't quite enough.

Feeding the fifteen who lived and worked at the ranch, the twelve of the Northern Cheyenne, and Little Brown's tribe of seven took time, money, and energy.

The door opened, breaking Edward out of his thoughts, and Red Hawk entered with a small smile on his face. He was the only one who could communicate with the Cheyenne, and that was because one young man amongst the twelve knew Dakota Sioux, which Red Hawk also knew. He'd learned from his late father's involvement in the Sioux wars.

"I gave extra blankets," he said in his thick accent. "We go find more firewood today—the storm not take us."

Edward looked out the window, wondering how long it would take them to go into town. The usual three-hour ride was challenging as it was. The added snow and icy winds would do nothing in their favor, but it had to be done.

Unfortunately, he had too much on his plate today, so he'd have to go tomorrow instead.

~oOo~

January 4th 1879

In the middle of the night, Edward could hear a ruckus coming from downstairs, so he quickly pulled on his trousers and changed from his nightshirt to the thin cotton shirt he wore under his flannels every day. The gun holster and his pistol followed.

When he came down the stairs, however, he heard the voice of his father. He had finally returned.

"Pop," Edward said quietly, alerting the man to his presence. A head snapped up and a sheepish smile spread on Carlisle's lips. "You're home."

Carlisle cleared his throat and shut the pantry door. "Yes. I hope I didn't wake you, son. I was just tryin' to find some food."

Edward shrugged, not bothered. He just wanted to know about the council. "How did it go?"

No verbal reply was needed. Edward could see the answer on Carlisle's face, and it wasn't what they had hoped for.

"Captain Wessells refused," he clarified grimly, sitting down at the kitchen table. "Dull Knife must return to the South."

"They'll never agree to that," Edward replied flatly, also taking a seat at the table. "What we've heard of the reservations down there..." He shook his head, disgust clear in his features. "They'll starve, Pop. It's death or death. Here they will freeze to death, and down there..."

"Down there they have no food," Carlisle finished quietly.

The two men grew silent as they mulled over the recent events. That Dull Knife and Little Wolf had surrendered in October had only proved to harm them further. They thought they were doing what was best for their people, which would've been true if the US Army could just quit horsing around. Instead of sending them on their way to the Pine Ridge reservation—where they *wanted* to be—they were going to be forced to relocate back to the South where the conditions were horrible. Dull Knife had put too much faith in the army, that much was clear. He thought their wish would be granted, but he couldn't have been more wrong.

"I suggest we stock up, son," Carlisle sighed. "We'll go into town tomorrow and buy everything we need." He was afraid that Dull Knife was going to do something drastic, such as attempting a breakout. If that happened, things could get ugly around their grounds, which he told Edward. "We don't know when we'll get another chance to get supplies," he added.

For the next few hours, the two Cullen men sat at the kitchen table and wrote lists upon lists of things they needed.

~4~

January 4th 1879

The last person Edward thought he'd see when he entered Mike's parents' general store was Miss Izzy, but there she was. He wasn't really sure why he was surprised, though, since she did live here. She wasn't alone, either. There was a little boy—around three years old, he reckoned—running happily between the shelves of goods.

"Henry, please calm yourself!" Miss Izzy chided, shooting an apologetic glance at Mrs. Newton, who stood behind the counter. The old biddy was usually very curt, but she just responded with a soft smile. "Come on now, sweetheart. Mama's done here."

"But, Mama, I wants honey almonds!" the little boy complained. "You say I could have some!"

Edward stifled a chuckle, remaining where he stood by the door. The kid definitely looked like Miss Izzy: brown hair, brown eyes, heart-shaped face, and the same dimpled smile.

"Well, I sure wasn't lyin' to you, sugar," Miss Izzy cooed. "But Mrs. Newton's got them almonds over here." She tapped two fingers on the countertop, and the boy looked up as Mrs. Newton took brought down the glass jar of honey almonds from the shelf behind her.

"Oh, Mr. Cullen!" Mrs. Newton exclaimed, clutching her chest as if she had the vapors. "I didn't hear the bell!" Miss Izzy and the boy turned at the same time, and Edward smiled politely at all of them as he approached. "Long time, no see," Mrs. Newton added. "How are you today?"

"Just fine; thank you, ma'am," he replied, touching the brim of his hat with a little dip at his Miss Izzy. She was even more beautiful than he remembered. She looked...very healthy. Her dress wasn't as grand or fancy, and she wore less makeup. She was mighty, mighty fine in Edward's eyes. "And you, Mrs. Newton?" He faced the biddy again.

"Very well, thank you," the older woman replied. "Now, Isabella, let me help you. I'm sure you have more important things to do with your day."

Isabella?

Edward raised a brow but said nothing, instead opting to look on in silence as Mrs. Newton rang up *Isabella's* purchases. Isabella. Isabella. Isabella. Well, it was certainly less *promiscuous*—if you will—than Izzy Dollar. It was even...beautiful. Yes, he rather liked her real name, if that was what it was.

Then, when it was Edward's turn, he hurriedly gave Mrs. Newton his list. He was a man; he had no idea where each item could be found. No, it was much better that Mrs. Newton dealt with it. Plus, this gave Edward the opportunity to talk to Miss Izzy- *Isabella*.

"I'll be done in half an hour, Mr. Cullen!" the woman called as Edward darted out in the cold again. "Don't you be tardy now!"

He had to run for a bit before he caught up with Isabella, and it was the boy who noticed him first. He alerted his mother by giving her skirts a tug.

"Mama," the boy whispered as Isabella spun around to face Edward. "Who is that?"

"No one, sugar," she replied dismissively. Unbeknownst to Edward, she was trying to calm herself down. She was afraid the new rumor had reached him, and though it was only a matter of "when", she needed more time. Much more time. "What can I do for you, Mr. Cullen?"

Edward was surprised, if not a little wounded, by her cold demeanor.

"Um..." He struggled to find something to say. "I wanted to know how you were?" That wasn't supposed to come out as a question, but Edward was suddenly feeling uncertain and insecure. "Oh, aren't you going to introduce me?"

Isabella or Izzy, whatever she preferred, arched brow at him. "Certainly," she told him in a sweet voice. Only her eyes betrayed the sweetness—another thing that left Edward confused. "Mr. Cullen, this is my son, Henry." With a gentle smile at her son, she introduced Henry to Edward Cullen—a man who lived outside of town. "Would that be all, sir?" she finished.

No, definitely not!

"You look great!" he blurted out. Oh, if only someone could strike him now and be done with it. He felt like a damn fool! "What I mean is... Oh, blazes," he cursed in a mutter, closing his eyes. Two seconds. That was the time he allowed himself to gather his wits. Then he opened his eyes. "When can I see you again?"

Isabella's eyes flashed with anger, and she couldn't *believe* the nerve of this man. How *dare* he proposition her in front of her son? What she did outside of work was only her business. She wasn't living a secret or anything remotely close to that, but to have customers approach her on the street when she was with her little boy was outrageous!

"Is everythin' all right, dear?"

Edward and Isabella whipped their heads in the direction of the voice that belonged to Mr. Brandon—Alice's father and the town's blacksmith. Edward recalled Jasper telling him that Isabella lived above the Brandon's.

So, he assumed they were close. Oh, and wasn't Mrs. Brandon watching the child when Miss Izzy worked? He couldn't quite remember.

"Actually, Gus, would you mind takin' Henry inside for a bit?" Isabella asked. "I'll be in directly."

Mr. Brandon eyed Edward warily, not certain, but after reminding himself that the Cullens were good and honest men—on whose ranch his daughter now lived with Jasper—he took little Henry and walked him inside the house.

Once the two were left alone on the snowy street corner, Isabella ushered Edward into the nearest alley. The two houses on either side of them thankfully provided some shelter from the harsh winds.

"Listen here, honey, and you listen good," Isabella said, pointing a finger at Edward, whose eyebrows rose. "There's no need for you to butter me up with questions about how I am and how great I look before you ask me to leave town." Edward was more than a little confused and gestured to interrupt her, but Isabella was only getting started. "Believe you me, this was the last thing I needed in my life, but it is what it is. So..." She took a deep breath, feeling the wintry air settle in her lungs. "Please give me until spring before I move." Her eyes softened, silently begging him to allow her to stay. No one could force her to leave, of course, but over the past few months, she'd heard plenty about the Cullens. They were very respected and highly spoken of. She could so easily be pushed away from their little community.

"I..." Edward was at a loss for words. "I'm afraid I don't know what you're saying, Miss Izzy." He really had no idea. "Why on earth would I want you to *leave*?"

Isabella frowned. This wasn't what happened last time. Granted, Henry's father was engaged when he frequently visited her back home in Atlanta,

and it was mostly the dear fiancée who had not-so-gently shunned Isabella from the town. She had settled in a nearby community at first, opting to wait until Henry was born before she moved again. After that, she had lived in several towns in Georgia and Virginia, finally deciding to head west. That was how she ended up in Nebraska, and she rather liked it here. But now she was with child again, and she was waiting for Edward to ask her to leave. So, why didn't he?

Then it hit her. Perhaps he only suspected or feared it was his bastard growing in her. That made perfect sense. Had it not been for Isabella's accident—where she fell down the damn stairs at Rosalie's—she wouldn't know who the father was, either! Alas, she had been on bed rest for six whole weeks before she could return to work and, by then, she was already getting sick in the mornings.

"Oh, damn it all to hell," she muttered, oblivious to Edward's look of surprise. He'd never heard a woman swear. Not even a prostitute. He had to admit it was rather...sexy...however inappropriate it was.

He shook his head, clearing it of unbidden thoughts. "If you could just explain, Miss Izzy—"

"It's Isabella," she sighed heavily. She looked up at him, squinting due to the snow that fell. "I apologize. I jumped the gun. It looks as if you don't know yet." Her brows furrowed a little. "I thought for sure the rumor had reached you by now. Sorry." Then a mirthless little laugh followed. "How arrogant of me to assume."

By now, Edward was growing frustrated and annoyed.

Luckily, Isabella noticed and laid it all out. "I'm pregnant, Edward." She wasn't one to beat around the bush. "Now, don't you worry," she rushed to comfort him upon seeing Edward's eyes widening, "I'll be out of your hair as soon as possible. I know very well you don't want a bastard—"

Edward let out a weird noise, almost a strangled grunt, and put his hands up to stop her. "Slow down there, will you?" He swallowed hard and ripped off his leather gloves to pinch the bridge of his nose. The first question was obvious. "How can you *possibly* know it's mine?" It came out harsher than he expected, but this was almost too much! He was suddenly angry and feeling far too vulnerable. Partly because his own mother had been a whore, and his father had *foolishly* fallen in love with her. Carlisle had taken Esmeralda in—he had married her, even—only to have her abandon him when Edward was two years old. And...partly because he had no desire to think of all the men Isabella had been with before and after him. Well, after. He remembered that he was her first here in Nebraska, but... who knew-

"I fractured my leg," Isabella explained quietly, cutting off Edward's internal rant. "I hadn't worked in several weeks before Henry and I arrived here. You were my first customer, and I didn't take on another that day. I fell down the stairs the very next mornin'." She licked her lips, swallowing hard as tears burned in the corners of her eyes. She refused to let them fall. "And I was on bed rest for six weeks after."

When her so-called friends from back home in Georgia ended up pregnant, they had choices. They could have a secret abortion, they could give the child away for adoption, or they could keep the bastards. Isabella belonged to the group that kept the child. Foolish, maybe, but she couldn't help falling for the little ones. Times would get harder than they already were, and soon she'd be single-handedly supporting two children, but there was no other option for *her*. And, clearly, she was too damned fertile for her own good. She had tried douching, she had tried the rhythm method, and she had tried the blasted sponge. Nothing worked, because here she was, about six months away from becoming a mother again, and she was only twenty years old.

When she had fallen pregnant with Henry, she wasn't even seventeen yet. She had been so very terrified, especially after Henry's father's uppity fiancée found out. But she'd been left with little choice. She left, and she managed. This time, she was more experienced, and Isabella considered herself a strong woman. She could do this.

Heaving a sigh, Edward broke their silence. The wind nearly drowned out his labored breath, but Isabella still heard him.

"So...it's mine?" he muttered, kicking some snow off his boots. He was conflicted. There was so much wrong in this situation. They weren't married, they weren't in love, they weren't even courting! Nana May was going to have a conniption fit when she found out. Edward was sure of it. That men went to the bawdy houses and parlors...it was common knowledge, but it was never discussed, for God's sake.

"Yes," Isabella confirmed quietly.

Then, the other part of Edward...the part of him that felt a little thrill... He was going to become a father. There was going to be a little child with his name. Another generation of Cullens. Edward was still young at twenty-four, but the idea of having a family had never been at the forefront of his mind. His father needed him on the ranch, and he loved it there. It was where he grew up. He had no desire to start something new. Carlisle was still young, having fathered Edward at the age of seventeen, and was nowhere near retirement. The ranch was Carlisle's pride and joy. He'd built his own business from scratch, starting when he arrived in Nebraska as a fifteen-year-old wrangler.

"Will you let me stay 'til spring?" Isabella asked in a small voice.

Edward's head snapped up, and his temper flared. The mere thought of her leaving town with *his* child made him ball his hands into tight fists. How she could possibly think he wanted her to leave was sickening. Was

that what had happened with the boy's father? Had he pushed them away? On second thought, how could she know who Henry's father was? Did she make it a habit to fracture her limbs in between customers? Or had she perhaps been married? Was she a widow, forced into prostitution to get by?

He shook his head and scoffed. "You're not going anywhere, Isabella. Well, you are. But you're goin' to the ranch with me." He wasn't asking her. He was telling. No mother of his child was going to whore around while pregnant. "My father and I will be in town for a few more hours. I suggest you get to it."

"What?" Isabella gasped, horrified and, to be honest, completely baffled. Firstly, he wasn't going to force her to leave? Secondly, he wanted her to move out to his ranch? "I don't understand-"

"I said you're comin' with me," he snapped. "I ain't no monster, Isabella. Bastard or no bastard, that child is *mine*. You'll be living at the ranch. End of discussion." There was no way he was going to propose marriage, but he couldn't bear the thought of having Isabella here in town, especially now with the rough times heading their way. "Now, get packing!"

"No!" Isabella said sharply, stomping her foot. "You have no *right*, Mr. Cullen! First of all, I have my *son* here-"

Edward barked out a humorless laugh. How cruel did she think he was? "You're obviously bringing Henry with you!"

Oh. That rendered her speechless for a second, but who could blame her? She'd never heard of a man taking in another man's bastard child. *All right, enough of this!* Isabella still couldn't just up and leave now that Edward wasn't pushing her away. The Brandons, Isabella, and the Newtons were together protecting a small tribe of Lakotas—who had escaped from the Red Cloud Agency—in their lofts, and she needed to stay

right here. When she wasn't working, she and Mrs. Brandon cooked and provided for them. No way; she couldn't leave them behind.

"*Secondly*," she gritted out. "I have obligations *here*."

"And *what*..." Edward blew out a heavy breath, reeling in his anger. "...would *those* be?"

Isabella couldn't tell him that. The Cullens sold horses to the US Army. For all she knew, Edward would turn them all in at Fort Robinson.

Realizing that she wasn't going to give him a response, Edward turned on his heel and stormed toward the Brandons' house across the street. If Isabella wouldn't pack, he was going to do it for her! He just wanted to take care of her, for heaven's sake!

"By *God*," Edward muttered, unaware of Isabella trying to catch up. "She's got to be the most *stubborn*..." He stomped up the wooden steps, snow swirling in his wake. "...beautiful..." Ripping the door open, he entered without further ado. He kicked off his boots, took off his hat, and shrugged out of his coat. "...*infuriating*..." Taking a wild guess, he marched up the stairs, ignoring Mr. Brandon's calls from the sitting room. Edward was literally trespassing, and even though he'd known Alice since he was two shits high, he doubted this was proper. Not that he cared at this moment. "...*bratty* little..." With a grunt, he kicked open a door. "...woman." That wasn't the right one. He closed it again, barely aware of the heels clicking up the stairs. All he needed to do was find Isabella and Henry's room. Another door was kicked open, but something made him stop abruptly. It was definitely Isabella's room, though that wasn't his reason for halting. It was a certain smell.

Leather, spices, something *earthy* and so *fresh*...

As both Mr. Brandon and Isabella reached the landing on the second floor, Edward's perceptiveness made him look up at the hatch that led to the loft.

If there was one thing Edward knew, it was Little Brown's scent as she engulfed him in a motherly hug.

"Edward, no," Isabella whispered pleadingly as he reached for the handle. He was tall enough, and with a simple twist and tug, the hatch opened. The scent that was already invading his senses grew stronger, and he knew exactly what he would find. "*Please*, Edward..."

Unfolding the ladder, he took four steps before stopping. He was right. Huddled up there, with blankets and a small fire, sat four Indians. Three women and one little girl. Lakotas, he soon learned.

It took him five minutes to understand just what had happened. Red Hawk and Little Brown had taught him few words of their language, but it was enough. One of the women told him, very timidly, that they had managed to escape from the agency. The Brandons and Isabella were taking care of them until their men came for them. Edward didn't have the stomach to tell them that they'd have to wait a very long time for those men. The soldiers were upping their game, tightening their security. Finding an escape wouldn't be easy.

When Edward returned to the second floor, Isabella was immediately clutching his shirt, tears welling up in her brown eyes.

"Please," she whimpered. "Don't turn them in. They've done nothin' wrong." She was ready to beg on her knees. "I'll do anythin'!" she cried. "Just don't turn them in!"

With his brows knitted together, Edward looked deep into Isabella's eyes. He saw more than he'd ever seen. He saw raw strength, compassion, love,

and loyalty. He saw that it was going to take a lot of effort in order to not repeat his father's mistake of falling in love with a prostitute. Like father, like son. Edward now found himself in the exact same position as Carlisle once had, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

"I'm not going to turn them in," he replied quietly, softly, as he wrapped his arms around Isabella's waist. "We're takin' them with us." Isabella froze in his arms, but Edward was quick to reassure her. "We're doin' the same at the ranch, darlin'," he whispered in her hair. "We have both Lakota and Cheyenne on our grounds. They're safer there."

~5~

It took time and several hours of planning—they even fetched Emmett and Jasper—but late in the wintry night, Edward and Carlisle took the lead and brought them all to the ranch three hours away. In two covered wagons, they drove nine Lakotas toward safety. The Brandons and the Newtons were grateful and would of course keep the Cullens' secret. Isabella and Henry sat at the front with Edward, huddled in blankets and coats, silently watching as Edward controlled the reins. Well, Henry was asleep, but Isabella watched.

It was serene and peaceful.

Just the sounds of creaking wood pressing forward in the snow...the occasional nickering from the horses.

"Koda doesn't like this," Edward muttered, cracking a small smile as he gave Isabella a sideways glance. It was true—Koda was born to run, not to pull a damned wagon—but Edward only spoke up to break the silence. Even to him, the silence had been comfortable, but so much had happened and changed today that he felt the need to talk for some reason.

"Koda?" Isabella inquired softly.

Edward nodded once, eyes on his mare. "The black one. Her name's Koda."

"Oh."

"Yeah..."

They both let out nervous, and maybe a little awkward, chuckles.

This was all so new. Isabella had been so set in her ways, never once thinking that Edward would want to be a part of the baby's life... And Edward, he was...well, he was afraid, truth be told. He was scared to follow in his father's footsteps. No matter how vicious Esmeralda had been in abandoning Carlisle and little Edward, Carlisle had still loved the woman deeply. Now, Edward feared that Isabella was going to get sick and tired of the ranch life and leave once the child was born. Then again, perhaps she wouldn't. Edward snuck another glance at Isabella and the boy sleeping in her arms. It was very clear that she loved her son, and after the things he'd witnessed today...

Yeah, maybe Isabella's different.

In another attempt to strike up conversation, Edward asked about Henry's father. "Do you know who he is?" he asked bluntly, knowing that there was no way to phrase that question politely.

"Um, yes," she replied, huffing a small chuckle. She wasn't offended, which Edward noticed, so he encouraged her to continue. "It was back in Atlanta." She smiled ruefully at the memory of man in question. "John Henry was deathly afraid of diseases, especially consumption, since his mother had died from it. So, he paid me to be with only him for a long while." She shrugged and smiled awkwardly. "There was no question."

Edward cleared his throat, willing his temper not to get the best of him. He wanted to know—he was curious—but he was more sure than ever that her old ways were part of the past now. He refused to have her returning to that profession.

"John Henry," he said quietly, keeping his eyes forward. "You gave your son his father's name?"

"To remind myself of the only good thing the man ever gave me," she said softly, pressing a gentle kiss on Henry's forehead. He was slightly cold, so she pulled the blankets higher and hugged her son a little harder. "He had a fiancée, which I sure didn't know at the time," she muttered. She wondered if it would have made a difference if she had known. It probably wouldn't. Men took what they wanted, and Isabella needed the money. "She found out," she continued, "and I was forced to leave town." With a dismissive wave, she added, "It was for the best."

She didn't want to talk about this, but if she was going to become a permanent fixture in Edward Cullen's life, she figured it was best to get it out of the way.

"Last name?" he asked next.

"Holliday."

"Hmm. Isabella Holliday."

"Oh! No, John Henry's last name was Holliday, though most people just called him 'Doc'—he's a dentist, you see—and—" She stopped there. She was rambling, and Edward wore an amused expression because of it. She flushed, and it wasn't from the cold. *Deep breaths.* "My name is Isabella Swan." She smiled shyly. "And this is my little Henry Swan."

Edward's smile was gentle. "And now we've been properly introduced." He finished with a wink, effectively lightening the tension. Isabella smiled gratefully. "Properly introduced and a baby already on the way."

She cracked up at that, smacking a hand over her mouth to muffle the sounds.

Maybe things aren't so bad, after all.

The thought belonged to them both.

~oOo~

The ranch was quiet when the two wagons pulled in to the yard, still a few hours before dawn. Royce's dogs let out a few barks, but soon they silenced again. The snow covered the roofs like a thick blanket, and the moon provided enough light for Isabella to see how beautiful it was. *Her new home.* She had no idea how temporary this was. Would Edward want her to leave once the child was born? Perhaps he wanted her nearby with the baby, but not too close? She didn't know, but she would stay as long as he allowed it. Never in her life had she been presented with something this wonderful. To some, it was too simple. To her, it was a dream. Tomorrow, she wouldn't have to sell herself.

"Edward," Carlisle said as his son helped Isabella and Henry off the wagon. "I'll wake up Red Hawk, and we'll deal with this. You take care of Isabella."

"Yes, sir," Edward replied dutifully, showing the way inside the main house. He knew he had his father's support. He'd seen it in town when he told Carlisle about Isabella's condition. There was devotion and understanding in Carlisle's eyes. Edward didn't dismiss the rueful smile that stretched over his father's lips, though, because that was also very

there. But instead of chastising his son for something Edward had no control over, Carlisle simply hoped Isabella was different from his Esme.

Once they were inside, Edward had no choice but to guide Isabella and Henry to his room on the second floor. Everyone was bunking together, and it was going to be even more crowded with the new additional nine, eleven counting Isabella and Henry.

Edward's room wasn't big. There was a bed, a closet, a small dresser that worked as a nightstand, and a rocking chair. So, he was a little curious about Isabella's expression, because if he wasn't completely mistaken, he could've sworn he saw contentment.

"Uh..." He cleared his throat. "The wash closet's across the hall." He pointed a thumb over his shoulder, but Isabella's eyes were still on the room before her. "Tomorrow, I'll bring down my old bed for Henry. It's in the attic." He sent a silent thanks to Nana May who never threw things away unless damaged beyond repair. The bed Edward had used as a little boy would suit Henry just fine. "Um, I know it's not much-"

"It's perfect, Edward," Isabella whispered, turning around. The smile she had for the sleeping child in her arms didn't fade when she faced Edward. "Truly. It's perfect." Her eyes smiled again. Edward liked that. "And where are you going to sleep?"

She was teasing him. Of course they would share the bed.

"There," Edward replied casually, giving the rocking chair a nod. They'd have to fix something else tomorrow, but for tonight...

"Wait, what?" Isabella frowned, wondering if he was serious. He was. "Oh, Edward," she chided softly, walking over to the bed. "I am *not* a proper lady. You know this." She winked at him before putting Henry down on the soft mattress. "I don't see why we can't share. It might get a little

crowded tonight, with all three of us, but once Henry has his own bed..." She trailed off, shrugging a little.

Speaking of proper, there was *nothing* proper going on inside Edward's head. Did she mean they could sleep together each night, or...sleep-*sleep*? Wait, which one was which? Oh, blazes. He was losing it for sure now.

Swallowing thickly, he tried to speak, but nothing came out. It had been three months now since he'd been inside a woman—and it was Isabella, no less. He had to think about mucking the stalls in order to calm down. In the end, he settled for a simple nod.

Whatever she wishes.

That made him wonder if she'd charge, and he cringed a little at the idea, hoping she wouldn't. That would surely cause an uncomfortable situation. But...he didn't want her to think she owed him anything, either.

That night, the three of them fell asleep in the same bed. Henry was curled up against his mother, who had her back against the wall, and Edward took the space on the other side of Henry.

"Thank you for everything, Edward," Isabella had whispered before she closed her eyes.

He watched her for a little while. She was so very beautiful. Peaceful.

~6~

January 5th 1879

The next morning, Edward looked on a little amused as Henry, lively and cheery even before dawn, was his mother's little shadow. While Edward's task was to bring in firewood from the shed, which was located next to the barn, Isabella took it upon herself to bring in milk for the morning.

Before Isabella's parents had died in a fever that raged through Atlanta when she was almost sixteen, she was well accustomed to farming. She was born on a farm, after all. And it was with a fond smile playing on her lips that she retrieved a bucket and a little stool before sitting down next to one of the four milk cows.

With his arms full of firewood, Edward lingered by the opening to the barn and listened to little Henry's cute babbling about cows. He had to stifle a chuckle when Isabella patiently tried to explain where the milk came from. Because while Isabella was used to farming, Henry certainly wasn't.

The morning was crisp and peaceful, something Edward knew would end as soon as Nana May woke up. Well, at least the peaceful part would cease. He knew very well that his grandmother was protective of her son and grandson, and Edward guessed it was going to take some time for May to trust Isabella. That was all Esmeralda's fault, but there was nothing to do about it now. Edward would make sure to make things clear; Isabella was to be treated with respect. He hoped, though, that Little Brown would be there to support him.

"Come on, sugar," Edward heard Isabella say from inside the barn. "We're all done here."

To the sounds of Henry's giggling, Edward walked briskly inside the main house, firewood heavy in his arms.

When he'd woken up from a fitful sleep earlier, Isabella had roused, too. He definitely hadn't told Isabella to fetch milk for them, but she wouldn't listen to him. Now that she was here, she wanted to pull her weight. And so they had parted ways to get dressed before making their way outside together.

Uncharacteristically, Edward was happy this morning. He was usually so grumpy and tired, but something had changed overnight. *Something*. He

scoffed quietly to himself as he banked the fire in the kitchen. It wasn't something. It was *someone*. The woman he'd slept next to, the woman who had caused his fitfulness by visiting him in his dreams. Those dreams were improper, to say the least, regardless of Isabella's self-proclamation about not being proper at all. Because the past didn't matter to Edward anymore. To him, she was a lady now, and he didn't exactly know how to act around her. Especially not considering the heated encounter they shared a few months prior. Those were the images that danced before Edward's eyes in his sleep. Thrusting, hands roaming, slickness, skin on skin, fast, deep, hard, eruption.

Only, in his dreams, their moments of passion were even fierier. Edward wasn't taking a whore from behind; he was pushing in and out of the woman he was becoming enamored of. He was kissing her, nipping at her skin, kneading and fondling her flesh, making her moan out in ecstasy.

He shook his head, clearing it, and sighed as he stood up, eyes on the fire. He had a lot to do today, but he knew that his thoughts would involve Isabella a great deal. The lines were blurry, and he needed to find stable ground for himself, because as it was now, he was at sea as to where they stood. She was a lady, a guest, but she was also the mother of his unborn child. Not to mention that they would be sleeping in the same bed. It was very confusing to him. Being brought up at a ranch with mostly men didn't really make him very well-mannered. His nana had tried, of course, but then he'd seen how the men around him acted, and he'd taken after them, especially his father.

They were casual and laid back at the Cullen Ranch. There were no ranks, not really. Of course, Carlisle and Edward were the bosses, but no one walked around and called anyone sir or miss in place of their Christian names. Not even May, whom everyone referred to as Nana May.

Speaking of...

"Good morning, Copper," Nana May said from behind him, sounding surprised. Of course she was; she was used to Edward trudging downstairs a good hour or so after she had woken. But now he was here. In the kitchen. Not alone, either, which May noticed just then. "Oh!" she exclaimed as Edward turned around. His grandmother was watching Isabella and Henry, who were both by the stove.

"Nana, this is Isabella and her son Henry," Edward introduced, taking a few steps toward the woman of his fantasies. "They're going to live here with us now. Isabella and the Newtons and the Brandons were hiding natives in town. Father and I offered to help."

Isabella shot Edward a coy smile, a little amused by his words. He obviously wanted his grandmother to see Isabella in a different light—not the same way others viewed her.

"And, Isabella, this is my Nana May," Edward finished quietly. "She runs the household."

The two women greeted each other politely while Henry clung to his mother's skirts, and Edward could see that Nana May had questions, which she would hound him for answers to soon enough.

He didn't look forward to that.

"I see you've already started on breakfast," May noted, eyeing the ingredients Isabella had located while Edward added wood to the fire. In fact, she just needed to add a little salt before the dough for the bread was finished. She had also located the coffee beans and bacon. All she needed now was a quick trip to collect some eggs.

Edward was surprised. He had only paid a little attention to the fire, had he not? A minute or so? But that wasn't the truth. He had been lost in thought for quite a while, but he didn't know that. Someone who had was

Isabella, and she hoped he wasn't regretting the decision to bring her and her son to the ranch.

"I hope you don't mind," Isabella said.

Nana May shook her head and donned her apron. "Oh, no. We can work together and get to know each other." The last few words left her mouth as her eyes were glued to Edward. Then she looked back to Isabella with a pleasant smile. "Everyone should be up soon, so let's hurry. I think we're going to need another loaf of bread, too."

~oOo~

After breakfast and more introductions, Nana May halted Edward in his attempt to walk out. Alice and all the men smirked as they slipped through the door, including Carlisle and, in the end, it was only a grinning Little Brown, a stern-looking Nana May, and a nervous Edward left in the kitchen.

With a longing glance, Edward watched Isabella and Henry walk out, too, after fetching their overcoats upstairs. Over breakfast, Little Brown, Alice, and Isabella had spoken quite a bit, and Isabella had offered her assistance to mend clothes in one of the cottages with the two other women.

"Before I go with Isabella and Alice, I listen," Little Brown said and plopped down in a chair. She was still grinning.

Edward shuffled by the door, uncomfortable and ready to bolt, but Nana May would have none of it. "Sit down, child," she told him as she took a seat herself. "Now, mind tellin' me why Isabella and her son are sharing your room? And don't you tell me it's because it's crowded."

Edward grudgingly sat down at the table again, puffing out his cheeks as he thought about what to tell Nana May. Because he couldn't very well tell her the truth, could he?

"I think Isabella is Edward's sweetheart," Little Brown said firmly, causing Edward to actually blush. It sounded so innocent the way Little Brown said it, and he knew so well that wasn't the case. "She already with child, too."

At that, Edward's jaw dropped, and Nana May gasped and clutched her chest.

The man in the room began to stutter. "I-I...that isn't really—what I mean is..."

"That Isabella is with child," Little Brown finished. She even nodded for emphasis, and she looked very excited. The latter baffled Edward, but he decided to count his blessings. He had suspected from the beginning that he'd have Little Brown's support because she was an excellent judge of character and surely she'd see that Isabella was a good woman, but he had not counted on actual happiness. Not this soon.

"But you're not married, Copper," Nana May cried out. "How long have you even known this girl? She looks so young—and to already have a son who is three years old?" Her eyes narrowed. "Where is the boy's father? Answer me that."

Edward ignored his reddened cheeks and put up his hands to cut May off; it was time for him to man up and lay down the rules. "She is...*special* to me, Nana. And she will be treated with respect. Yes, she's carrying my child, and I think I will leave it at that."

How Edward and Isabella met wasn't a romantic fairytale, and telling May the truth wasn't proper, Edward decided.

Unfortunately, May had already figured it out. She clutched her chest again and looked as if she was about to faint. "Oh, my..." She fanned herself, and Little Brown offered her a glass of water from the pitcher left over from breakfast. "Edward, is she...oh, my. She's one of those women from Madam Rosalie's, isn't she?"

Edward said nothing, but he was growing irritated. If Nana May uttered one word about Isabella's profession, he knew he'd slam down his fist on the table and forbid such talk. This was now Isabella's home, and that was that. Now, he adored his grandmother, but she could be quite the hypocrite. After all, it had been her idea that he go into town to "let go of his frustrations". May knew exactly what that entailed, only it wasn't spoken of.

"Oh, Edward," May muttered, taking a sip from her water. "I told you to relax, not come home with a pregnant bride."

"Enough," was Edward's simple reply. "That's my one and only warning."

The two Cullens stared at each other for quite a while.

Edward won when May finally mumbled, "Well, she does seem to be a good mother to Henry."

With that, Edward nodded firmly, donned his hat, and took his leave.

Little Brown patted May's hand. "It will be well. I know. Isabella nice girl. She work hard and help. She no Esmeralda."

~oOo~

Nana May did lighten up after a couple of days. She noticed how compassionate and sweet Isabella was. Behind the hardships, behind the "improper past", and underneath the mask of a prostitute was a confident woman, a strong soul, and a fierce mother. May witnessed it all.

Very bluntly, Isabella had told May about her parents falling ill and dying, leaving a sixteen-year-old girl behind with no means to get by. Their farm was confiscated because Isabella's father was deeply in debt. And with no relatives, Isabella had no choice. She struggled for a while, offering her services as a seamstress and a maid, but without luck. So, in the end, she had entered a bawdy house in Atlanta and found work as a prostitute.

"Ma'am, I am not ashamed of my past—I can't be. I did what I had to do to survive, and it did bring me my son," Isabella had said, finishing her story. Unbeknownst to her, Edward had been standing in the doorway, listening, feeling a pang of sorrow for his darling's less than easy upbringing. It wasn't pity he felt. Just sorrow and adoration. Adoration for how strong Isabella was.

Nana May had apologized for her behavior and embraced Isabella, a sight that brought a tender smile on Edward's lips.

So, with that little hurdle out of the way, the main focus landed on the natives, whom they all worked to take care of. It also kept them busy, for which Edward was thankful. Because it was too easy to be consumed by thoughts of the beautiful brunette he shared a bed with each night.

He wanted her so badly. At night, it felt like his body literally gravitated toward her, especially now that Henry had his own bed in their room. In fact, the past two mornings, Edward had woken up with his arm wrapped around Isabella. He worked hard to keep his mind focused on his tasks, but it was becoming more and more difficult the more he saw Isabella—the more he learned about her.

On January 9th, Edward's wanting heart was, for once, easily ignored, though.

Because that was the day hell broke loose.

January 9th 1879

"Mama. Mistuh Ed-ard."

Edward smiled sleepily at the soft voice that called out to them behind his back, but he kept his eyes closed and snuggled closer to the warm body he was embracing so tightly. One hand was resting comfortably on Isabella's still-flat stomach.

"Hmm, we should probably get up," Isabella mumbled against Edward's chest.

"Not yet, darling," Edward yawned.

He wished they were naked, as opposed to wearing their nightshirts. Alas, you couldn't have everything in life.

"Mama, Mistuh Edwww-rd."

The two adults, still half-asleep and not fully aware of how wrapped around each other they were, chuckled sleepily at Henry's attempts to say Edward's name.

"Mmm," Isabella hummed softly as Edward kissed the spot where shoulder met neck. She could feel his chest rumbling with a deep breath. In return, she hitched her leg over Edward's hip to get closer. It seemed like that was all she wanted—to get closer to the handsome man she'd come to like so much. He was so dangerously handsome that she found herself needing to catch her breath sometimes.

"Mama! Edawrd!"

Isabella and Edward finally opened their eyes and noticed immediately that while dreaming about each other, they had moved closer and closer to one another.

"Good mornin'," Isabella whispered with a soft smile.

She's not moving away.

It made Edward relax, and he grinned in return. "Mornin'." He didn't dare to press his luck by perhaps kissing her cheek, but he sure wanted to. The grin on Edward's face widened when he felt a small hand on his back. Henry had obviously tiptoed out of his own bed and was now impatiently waiting for attention. "Come here, little pup." Twisting his body, Edward scooped up Henry in his arms and laid him down between himself and Isabella. Yesterday, Henry had joined Edward on a short ride over the snow-covered plains, and since then he had followed Edward around like a little puppy, hence the new nickname. Edward found that he enjoyed the boy's company immensely. Having Henry sit in front of him in the saddle had been great fun, because the little boy seemed to thrive on the ranch, asking so many questions about the horses and other animals.

Henry gave Edward a toothy smile and sat up. "Can I ride Kodey today also, Mistuh Eward?"

"Koda," Edward corrected with a chuckle. "You have to ask Mama about that. And," he poked Henry's tummy, which earned him a giggle, "you could just call me Ed, son. That'd be easier."

"Mistuh Ed," Henry said, nodding.

But Edward wasn't satisfied. He tapped the boy's little button nose and added, "No Mister, pup. Just Ed will be fine."

Isabella watched the sweet exchange with teary eyes and with hope making her heart swell.

~oOo~

"You sure it's okay?" Edward asked, placing his cowboy hat on his head.

It was just after breakfast, and Edward was standing on the porch with Isabella and Henry.

"He loved it yesterday," Isabella said as she made sure Henry was bundled up properly. "And I trust you." She smiled. "Just be home for supper. I left biscuits, a few eggs, and some dried meat in the bag for you. Oh, and milk for Henry."

Edward smiled, too, and touched Isabella's rosy cheek.

He loved having Isabella here, calling his home her own home. It was nothing he'd ever dreamed of wanting before, but the thought of having a family now...yeah, things were changing.

"I just..." Isabella chuckled nervously, ducking her head a little. "I hope you don't think he's too much trouble. Yesterday, you were only out for a little while; today it's all day."

"I *want* to bring him," Edward responded, grinning down at Henry. "He's mighty fun."

And so Edward ended up bringing Henry with him to feed the fillies. They rode in comfortable silence—Edward, Henry, Jasper, and Emmett. It was still early in the morning, and with the snow blanketing the ground, they couldn't ride too fast. So, Edward wasn't surprised when the soft movements of Koda eventually lulled Henry to sleep.

"Alice is pregnant, too," Jasper mentioned after a while. "She told me yesterday."

Edward looked over at him, smiling widely. "Congrats are in order, then."

"Congratulations," Emmett concurred. "We'll have this ranch full of young'uns in no time."

The three men shared a quiet laugh at that before letting silence take over again. Edward and Jasper were thinking about a bright future, though Edward was more nervous than Jasper was. Jasper had done things in the right order; he'd courted Alice, married her, moved her out here to the ranch and into their own cottage, and now they were expecting their first child. Edward, on the other hand...

He sighed.

Falling in love with Isabella wasn't the plan, but he knew it was happening. And at the same time he was falling for his little pup, too. He found it rewarding to teach Henry about horses, Edward's passion in life. He could see an older Henry in the future, choosing his own horse, teaching his little brother or sister what he knew, joining the men on round-ups and such. Maybe he would become a wrangler, like Carlisle once was, or maybe he would stay here. Or maybe he would choose something else entirely. Regardless, Edward wanted to be a part of it. He just hoped Isabella wanted the same.

On the horse to Edward's right, Emmett was thinking about his own future, and he already knew—with some sorrow in his heart—that a wife and children were not in his cards. Because there was only one woman for him, and that was Madam Rosalie. She captivated him with her body, quick wit, and big blue eyes. Those eyes were full of both vulnerability and ice, something her past had seen to. It was also a past which Rosalie had told Emmett about.

At twenty-nine, Rosalie was a few years older than Emmett, and she had experienced hell before she came to Nebraska four years ago. She'd had a husband and a daughter, both of whom had perished in a fire in Boston, where they'd lived. The fire itself had not harmed Rosalie, but a beam had

fallen over her, which had caused her to miscarry the second child she was carrying. It also left her barren.

Therefore, she had told Emmett to seek love elsewhere. In truth, she was devastatingly in love with Emmett and he was the only customer she saw, but she refused to burden him with her life and what she could not give him. But in Emmett's eyes, she was just pigheaded and masochistic.

He loved her and wanted her to be his wife, with or without children in the future.

"Edward!"

All three men were brought out of their internal musings by the voice of Red Hawk. As they looked straight ahead, they could see both Red Hawk and Royce riding toward them, snow swirling wildly in their wake.

The first thing Edward noticed as the two men came closer and closer was the rifle Royce held steadily in his hand.

Instinctively, Edward grabbed for his own rifle that was strapped to his saddle bag, and then he tightened his hold on the sleeping Henry.

"What's the matter?" Edward demanded.

Royce spoke up first. "We were patrolling the woods behind the paddocks, and we saw several Indians running toward us. All on foot. I think they're fleeing, and they should reach us within the hour."

"How many?" Edward bit out, a bit harsher than intended, but he couldn't help it. Actually, nor did he care. "Are they armed?"

Red Hawk shook his head. "No. I think they from Fort Robinson. I'm sure they is Cheyenne. This also the direction to Pine Ridge—maybe it is Dull Knife."

"Damn it," Edward cursed under his breath. "All right, if it's Dull Knife, he might have women and young'uns seeking shelter. Escaping in this weather..." He shook his head, thinking about how Carlisle and he had already feared this. "Jasper and Emmett, you two go on with our chores. The fillies need to be fed. But hurry back. Royce, you come with me. Red Hawk, you are the only one who can approach them without the risk of being fired at—even if you said they're unarmed. You also know their language."

Red Hawk nodded and took off in the same direction he came from, Jasper and Emmett headed off, too, and Edward and Royce set off toward the ranch. Now they needed to work quickly and warn everybody. Protection came first, strategies next.

"How many did you see?" Edward asked again, since he didn't get the answer last time he asked. They were both pushing their trusted horses to the limits in the deep snow, and Edward gave his Koda a quick pat in gratitude. He guessed it wouldn't take long before Henry woke up now, but he doubted Henry would show anything but utter joy at the fast pace.

"Thirty or forty before we left. There are probably more, though."

"Blazes," Edward spat.

~oOo~

When Edward—with a giggling Henry in his arms—and Royce dismounted their horses on the courtyard, right in front of the main house, it was snowing heavily and the winds were unforgiving.

"Take the horses to the stable!" Edward shouted over the noise of the harsh winds. It was officially a blizzard, and he was glad there were no people out in the courtyard. At Edward's command, Royce nodded and

took Koda's reins. "Find my father afterward and tell him to come quickly!"

With that said, Edward rushed inside, glad that everything seemed to be a game to Henry.

"Oh, dear!" Nana May exclaimed as Edward barged in. Glancing over at Little Brown and Isabella, who were sitting in two rockers by the fire, she also said, "Stoke the fire—we need heat."

Edward looked like a snowman with a cowboy hat, and Isabella left the fire for Little Brown to handle. Because right now she felt the strong need to make sure her favorite men got their heat up.

"Mama!" Henry squealed. "Kodey—Koda roded so fast!"

Being the mother that Isabella was, she immediately began to fuss over her son, removing blankets, boots, and jacket. Meanwhile, she spoke to Edward. "Are you well? Did something happen? Are you cold?" Reaching up, she placed her palm softly to Edward's forehead as soon as he had taken off his hat. "Come on; let's get you settled by the fire. Nana May? Could you prepare some coffee? And warm milk for Henry?"

"Already working on it, dear," Nana May said quickly, and she worked just as quickly.

So far, Edward hadn't gotten a word in, but he finally saw his opening and addressed Isabella. "Don't worry, darling. We're fine. I need to find my father, though—have you seen him?"

"He's tending to the foals with Eric and Tyler," she replied, ushering him to one of the rockers by the fire. "Sit down, please."

Edward did as he was told but grabbed Isabella's wrist to halt her. He was quite humbled to be fussed over, but it was unnecessary. "Isabella, take a

breath. We're fine, I promise. Just look at Henry. Doesn't he look okay to you?"

Taking a deep breath, Isabella looked down at her three year old who had skipped over to where Edward was sitting. They were both grinning as Henry climbed up onto Edward's lap. That made Isabella relax, finally, and while she sure couldn't grin or burst out in a damn song, she could at least muster a smile.

The smile was replaced with worry again as soon as Edward had relayed what was going on.

He thanked Nana May for the cup of coffee and went on to explain. "We will offer as many as possible shelter and food, even if it means making room in the attic or even the barn." He paused to take a sip. It wouldn't be long until he'd have to venture outside again, so he needed the warmth. "Little Brown, maybe you should share rooms with Nana May?"

Isabella gave Edward a look of surprise, wondering why on God's green earth Little Brown would bunk with Nana May when she usually shared a bed with Carlisle. But one look from Nana May told Isabella to keep this to herself.

Oh, goodness, Edward doesn't know, Isabella realized, quite amused by this.

"We'll work somethin' out, Copper," Nana May assured him.

"Good." Edward chugged down the rest of his coffee, ready to go out again. There was much to be done, and he was wasting the day away here. "I hope to be back by supper." He reached for his boots and hoped the few minutes they'd spent near the fire was enough to warm them.

"Wait!" Isabella exclaimed and rushed over to a basket by the stairs. When she returned to Edward, she held a pair of socks in her hand. "I, uh,

I made you these." She blushed slightly and kneeled before Edward, where he was still seated in the rocker. "They will keep you warm." She didn't notice Edward's stunned expression as she pulled off his old socks and replaced them with the new ones. "There. That oughta do it." She smiled shyly and stood up.

"Um. Thank...thank you," Edward replied in a daze.

They way to a man's heart: good food and warm socks.

Nana May and Little Brown watched the two sweethearts with contented smiles on their faces.

A moment later, Isabella and Edward stood by the door as he pulled on his jacket and coat.

"Be careful," Isabella pleaded softly.

Edward smiled and, unable to help himself, he dipped down and placed a lingering kiss on Isabella's cheek, almost at the corner of her mouth.

"Always, darling."

~8~

In a blizzard that made everything a hundred times harder, Edward, Carlisle, Royce, Tyler, and Eric pushed forward. They were trying to find Red Hawk, but the snow made it very difficult. It fell so thickly that the riders' range wasn't as wide as they wanted, and the storming winds forced the men to shout loudly in order to allow their voices to carry.

They'd been at it for hours, and it was getting dark.

"Damn it all!" Royce barked out as he and his horse nearly disappeared in a snow-covered pit. "Come on!" The horse whinnied.

After a few minutes, hard work paid off and they continued forward.

"Over there!" Eric shouted. "The edge of the woods!"

Finally, they had found Red Hawk. But he wasn't alone. Four women and three young boys stood huddled near a tree, too, and Edward cursed when he saw how little they wore. They'd be dead before morning had they continued.

Not many words were exchanged; they all knew what to do. Edward pulled two children up onto his horse and grabbed for a blanket in his saddle bag, while Carlisle helped a woman climb up on his horse. Red Hawk took another woman and her child, and Eric and Royce helped with the rest. Then they all made their way through the blizzard and toward the ranch.

~oOo~

Isabella had just given herself and Henry a quick sponge bath and had barely slipped into a cotton dress when she heard muffled voices coming from downstairs. It was way past Henry's bedtime, but he had pleaded and begged for his mama to let him stay up 'til Edward came home. So, Isabella had relented, though only for a little while. Once she was done with her own dress, she pulled on Henry's nightgown and ushered him into their bedroom, glad that he didn't seem to hear Edward and Carlisle downstairs. As much as she wanted to see the grin Henry wore for Edward, it really was terribly late. Plus, when her son yawned for the fourth time, she knew it was time for him to sleep.

Before she helped Henry up in his bed, they said their prayers together, Henry mimicking his mother's words as best he could. Then Isabella tucked her son into bed and pulled the blankets up to his chin. She walked over to the fire and tossed some more firewood on it; it was going to be another cold night.

"Mama loves you, sugar," she said softly, pressing a tender kiss to Henry's forehead. "Sweet dreams."

"Night, Mama."

By the time Isabella had snuffed out the candle on the nightstand, taken a shawl to wrap around her shoulders, and left the room, Henry was already asleep.

She smiled to herself, content as never before, and made her way downstairs. Since was ready for bed, her hair was out of its usual braid or bun, and she was a little surprised to see that her hair reached her lower spine. When she lived in town, she'd curled her hair frequently, something she loathed, so it wasn't often she saw the actual length of it.

Reaching the last step, she tightened the shawl around her and entered the kitchen, where she saw Nana May, Carlisle, and Edward sitting at the table. But then she noticed how positively chilled to the bones the men looked, and so she joined Nana May who was fluttering around by the stove.

"I thought you'd have gone to bed by now," Edward said, in a way of greeting, perhaps. Isabella shook her head no, resisting the urge to walk over to him and feel his forehead or something. His voice had been both soft and gruff—how that was possible, she didn't know—but it worried her. Truth be told, the prayer she said every night was usually for Henry's benefit; she didn't want her son to be as doubtful as she was of God's existence. In fact, it shamed her to question Him but, nevertheless, she didn't stop praying, and Edward was now always in them. Tonight, she'd send an extra prayer for his health. The mere thought of him even catching a cold made her forehead crease in concern. She couldn't help it.

"Sit by the fire instead," she told Edward and Carlisle, pointing a finger at the two rockers near the corner. Turning back to the stove, she noticed

that all the trays of biscuits were gone, so she assumed Little Brown had brought them to the cottages. Nana May's rabbit stew was also gone. As were the eggs and the vegetable soup. Hmm. She thought the stew was going to be enough.

Noticing Isabella's expression, Nana May said, "We've got more company. The men just arrived with four women and three children."

"Oh, poor souls." Isabella's heart ached for the natives. "Escapees from Fort Robinson?" The elder women nodded solemnly as she poured coffee into two tin mugs. "I guess we'll have a busy day tomorrow." All day, the women had mended clothes and cooked. If even more people were coming... She sighed. It was hard work, but she wouldn't trade it for anything. This was what she wanted to do, because it felt right. It *was* right.

"That we will, dear," May sighed with a rueful smile. "Now, take these to the men," she handed Isabella the mugs of coffee, "and I'll fix them somethin' to eat. They're not going out again tonight, thank goodness."

~oOo~

Some time later, Edward and Isabella retreated upstairs. It had been a gruesome day, and after listening to each other's retellings of what the day had brought, they were all but dead on their feet.

"I'm just going to wash up a little," Edward said, stifling a yawn.

Isabella nodded but didn't say a word. Instead she watched as he disappeared out of the room, and then her imagination took over. She envisioned him splashing water on his handsome face, and maybe a few droplets of water would trickle down his muscular chest...

"Oh my," she breathed out, lost in those thoughts.

After hearing about what Edward had done today, how he and the other men had saved several people, she was even more in awe of him. So much that it was morphing into something stronger. Something... something...

Need.

She needed more. Of him. Of them. Together. Without clothes.

Heavens.

She remembered when she was pregnant with Henry; there was a particular time when she almost enjoyed her profession. Now it was like the same need rushed through her, demanding to be satisfied. And it didn't help that Edward Cullen was so mouthwateringly attractive. Even his heart was like a magnet to her.

Under a lust-filled spell, she removed her dress and undergarments before she snuck under the blankets.

There would be no nightgown tonight.

Tonight, she just wanted to show Edward how much she needed him, how much she cared for him, and how thankful she was for him.

What if he rejects me?

She shook that thought away. What man did ever refuse?

Her guess was that her feelings ran a lot deeper than Edward's feelings, but that didn't mean they couldn't enjoy each other's bodies, right?

~oOo~

When Edward returned from the wash closet, Isabella was already in bed.

Henry was snoring softly in his own bed, and once Edward had stoked the fire a little, walked behind the screen to change into his nightshirt, he was more than ready to go to sleep, too.

"Tired?" Isabella asked softly when Edward lifted the covers.

He blinked.

Only a candle lit up the room, so it was quite dark, but surely he wasn't so tired that he was imagining things, was he? Because right now, he was positive he could see a stunningly beautiful woman in his bed. And she was completely naked.

"Um..." Edward swallowed. His eyes never strayed from her full breasts. Then they did. They strayed to her pussy. "Uh..."

His body responded accordingly, but his mind was having trouble keeping up.

"Edward," Isabella whispered and rose on up her knees. She placed a hand on his stomach. "I want you. Please."

Edward shuddered violently and hoped to God he wasn't dreaming.

With lust-filled eyes, he watched as Isabella slid her other hand up his thigh, under his shirt, and over his hip. After imagining her hands on him for months now—since their first, and so far only encounter—he was rendered stupid when she actually did touch him.

In the meantime, as Isabella let her hands roam, she never looked away from his eyes.

"Can we take this off?" she asked quietly, tugging on Edward's nightshirt.

She knew he was hard. So hard. And she was wet. Truly and *fucking* soaked.

"Isabella," he breathed out, and then finally, he snapped into action. He pulled off his clothes quickly and decided to go all in, no questions asked. So, with the fabric shed, he gave Henry one quick glance to make sure he was asleep, and then he joined Isabella on the bed. There was no waiting, no pausing, no asking. He did something he'd wanted to do for a while now.

He cupped her face and kissed her on the lips.

It wasn't sweet, it wasn't tender, it wasn't gentle. It was quite rough, actually. In his defense, though, Isabella was too beautiful and tempting. Months of pent-up need...weeks of wishing...days of longing for more...it all fueled the passionate kiss. Both kneeling on the bed before each other, both naked, they kissed hungrily and maybe a little too eagerly. Neither was experienced when it came to kissing, but they wanted this so badly. Edward had made it a rule to not kiss the three prostitutes he'd been with before, and Isabella rarely kissed, seeing as it wasn't anything customers cared for.

"Edward," she whimpered, so needy, so ready. Her hands ended up in his hair, tugging him closer, and she arched her back for the same reason. God, she just needed.

Edward needed, too, and he finally allowed his hands to touch what he'd dreamed about. He palmed her luscious breasts, groaning at the heaviness of them, all while he continued to kiss her. Their tongues tasted, their teeth nipped, their mouths sucked.

When Edward's hard cock brushed against Isabella's stomach, they moaned in pleasure and their hands grew greedier. They were on fire. They didn't think. They just...did. Perhaps that was why they didn't really notice that they'd ended up in a tangled mess on the bed until several moments later. Edward hovered over her, pressing his body to hers, and kissed his way down to her breasts.

"Oh, darling," he whispered huskily and wrapped his lips around a dusky pink nipple. He cupped the underside of her breast and sucked hard on her nipple, and he couldn't stop from moaning at the taste of her. *Oh, have mercy on me, woman.* His cock throbbed against her thigh, at which he added pressure to it. With a slight motion, he pushed his hardness closer to where he wanted to plunge into her.

"Edward," Isabella mewled. "I...I...God, all of you. I need all of you."

That was all it took.

Edward dropped a last kiss on her breasts for now, and then he grabbed his erection and positioned himself at her heated entrance. Noses touching, foreheads too, he rasped out, "You certain?" And she nodded quickly, furiously, with desperation flashing in her gorgeous eyes.

With one swift push of his hips, he was buried deep inside of her.

Isabella whimpered against his mouth, lips just barely touching. "Yes, yes, yes..."

"Goodness gracious," he groaned as shivers ripped through his body. Was it really this good the last time? He wasn't sure but, either way, his fantasies didn't hold a candle to the real thing. While he didn't take her forcefully or roughly—as he would've back at Madam Rosalie's—he did take her in earnest. Eyes locked. Deep strokes. And he registered all the new things about this. The fact that they were in a bed—a first for Edward—the fact that they were face-to-face, the fact that they were kissing...it made it so much better, sweeter, more consuming...

Their bodies moved together sensually; he thrust, she arched her back, they exchanged hot breaths, they touched, he moaned her name, she whined his.

"More, Edward," she begged.

He gave her more.

The candlelight cast shadows over them, but instead of taking away their sight, their senses were heightened. He saw how their skin broke out in goose flesh, how it grew damp with perspiration, and how her fingernails dug into his biceps as he moved above her.

"I want you," he admitted breathlessly, pulling out of her until only the tip was inside of her. "This." He slammed in. They started panting. "You. Us."

Isabella threw her head back against the pillow and cried out in a ragged whisper. "Yes! Anything, Edward."

"*Everything*," he gritted out, pushing in once more.

She nodded and kissed him. "Everything," she gasped. "God, I want it, too, Edward."

He exhaled sharply, a tingling sensation creeping down his spine.

Her inner muscles contracted around his erection, causing his abs and back muscles to tense. He filled her over and over again. A bead of sweat trickled down his temple. Time was running out. He was going to explode. But before that...

"I want—I want to make you feel good." He swallowed hard, finding it hard to keep a steady pace. "Please, darling..." Admittedly, he knew little to nothing about making it pleasurable for women. It was nothing he'd done before, but he knew *of* it. Men talked, especially when drunk, and Edward had heard of a climax that existed for women, too.

This was the woman who carried his child. She looked like an angel. She moved like sin. He wanted it all. He also wanted to *give* her it all.

Isabella let out a shaky breath. "Here." With trembling fingers, she brought his hand down her body and toward her slickness. Upon contact, they both moaned. "Oh, so good," she whimpered. She guided him, keeping her fingers pressed to his, as they circled and rubbed and teased and made her explode.

It came without warning.

All but arching off the bed, her mouth opened in a silent scream as her climax washed over her.

From watching her, Edward was pushed off the edge, and he came hard and fast, spilling into her with a last thrust. His eyes were squeezed shut. His cock pulsed inside of her, streams of seed leaving his body. As did tension and frustration. It all pretty much rolled off him in waves, in the end leaving him in a puddle of mush. Suddenly, his muscles could barely support him.

"Damn," he panted, collapsing next to her. "You took it all out of me, Isabella."

Isabella giggled happily as Edward pulled her body closer to his; she was so blissed out, and it wasn't just from making love. It was from their declarations. A huge weight lifted off her shoulders, and she finally let herself dream of a future on the Cullen Ranch. She would be by Edward's side.

"I like that sound," Edward whispered and kissed her nose. He smiled tenderly at the evident happiness on her face. "So beautiful, darling."

Isabella's smile was rather shy, and she could've sworn her heart skipped a beat.

Instead of saying anything, she kissed him sweetly and snuggled closer into his embrace, where she felt safe and protected.

January 10th 1879

They searched the woods. They struggled through snow storms. They won some. They lost a lot. Edward cursed over the winds as he found another Cheyenne man who had died in the cold. One hundred and fifty was the number of Cheyennes who had escaped Fort Robinson. And now they—Edward and the other men from the ranch—were fighting against time to make a difference. They were also on the lookout for US soldiers. If the army knew that the Cullens were helping and hiding the natives, they'd *all* be arrested. They'd probably end up dead by hanging, too.

"Quiet!" Mike screamed. He thought he'd heard a plea for help. He listened. Sitting on his horse in the middle of the woods, he listened. And then he heard it again. It was quiet, and it wasn't in English, but he heard the call. "Over there!"

At the same time, Eric and Royce found two children near a tree. They were ice cold, only wearing simple shifts, but they hadn't left this earth just yet. Royce was going to make sure it didn't happen so soon, either. "We need help over here!" he yelled.

It was chaos.

It was a battlefield.

"Soldiers incoming!" Jasper shouted.

So, all the men hurried. Edward pulled a child up from the ground and mounted Koda in a swift movement. Royce took the other child, and Mike helped the woman he'd found.

In the deep snow, the thick forest, they rode their horses toward the ranch. It was never-ending, it seemed. All morning, they'd gone back and

forth between the woods and the homestead, trying to save as many Indians as possible. So far, another eleven had found shelter on the Cullen Ranch.

Carlisle was currently at Fort Robinson, lying his ass off. They needed Captain Wessells to believe that the Cullens were on the army's side, so he was there to "offer his assistance". It was all so political. Carlisle even invited Captain Wessells and a few of the lieutenants home for supper. He told them they were more than welcome, and that he'd keep an eye out for "godforsaken savages".

With the army trusting them, the men on the Cullen Ranch could breathe easier. Because if Captain Wessells at Fort Robinson *didn't* trust them, perhaps he would search the ranch for escapees. And then he'd find almost forty natives hiding in the cottages, in the barn, and even in the main house.

"Fuck!" Mike spat, riding alongside Edward. The woman in Mike's arms was convulsing and crying out, and Mike had just noticed the very large bump on her stomach. "We need to go faster!"

The Cheyenne woman was in labor.

It was hard for Edward to comprehend how everything had gone from heaven to hell so quickly. Just this morning he had woken up, satisfied and happy, with Isabella in his arms. After their first round of lovemaking last night, they'd roused a couple more times during the night, needing each other again. But all too suddenly, the outside world intruded.

Emmett and Royce had barged into the house an hour or so before sunup and yelled that the grounds were full of battles. Soldiers and Indians fought in the woods behind the paddocks, gunshots ringing out, war cries making hearts hurt.

Back at the ranch, Isabella and the other women were busy, too. Alice was creating quilts out of clothes that were beyond repair, Little Brown was making home remedies, Isabella and Nana May were cooking, and two other Lakota women from Little Brown's tribe were mending clothes.

Meanwhile, Red Hawk and an additional five ranchers were guarding the cottages.

"We're almost out of flour," Isabella said tiredly, wiping her hands on her apron. She'd spent all morning making biscuits and soup for the new arrivals, who were all chilled to the bone. "We need more potatoes, too." There was a garden at the ranch, of course, and it usually provided everyone with vegetables, berries, and potatoes all year 'round, but with so many hiding out at the grounds, supplies were quickly running out.

Nana May nodded. "I heard Copper sayin' somethin' about going into town."

"Good-" Isabella's sigh of relief was abruptly cut off when Edward and Mike stormed into the house. "Oh, my God!" She ran toward Mike who was carrying a heavily pregnant woman. As much as she wanted to smother her Edward in kisses and make sure he was all right, she knew for sure the woman was far from all right. She had to come first. "Lay her down in Carlisle's study," she directed, feeling the poor woman's forehead. Fever, for sure. "I'll be in directly." More orders were given out, and soon Isabella found herself in Carlisle's study, which was conveniently right next to the kitchen, with Alice and Little Brown.

"Is she gonna be okay?" Edward asked from the doorway. He removed his hat and glanced around apprehensively. Since Isabella was with child, too, he didn't want to think about the fears that came with childbirth.

Alice and Little Brown fussed over the pregnant woman, making it as comfortable and clean as possible on the floor. There were plenty of pillows and blankets strewn about, too.

"Get me the water basin," Alice said to...someone. Little Brown, probably, but Isabella wasn't sure because she focused on Edward for a moment.

"We will do our best," she promised and squeezed his hand. She wasn't sure where Edward stood on public displays of affection, so that was all she dared. But Edward would have none of that. He pulled his woman close and hugged her tightly, ignoring his wet overcoat; he just needed to feel her for a second or two.

Isabella didn't care about getting wet, either.

"We have to go out again," Edward mumbled into her hair. He breathed in deeply through his nose, wishing he could stay just where he was. Forever sounded mighty good.

"Be safe," Isabella whispered and tightened her hold. "And please," she took a step back to address Mike, as well, "take some food on your way out. There are biscuits on the counter—oh! There's some steak left from yesterday—and gravy—"

Edward cut her off with a sound kiss on her lips. "Don't worry, darling. We'll eat. Now, where's Henry?" He hadn't seen him around, and he usually clung to Isabella's skirts.

"He's upstairs with Kimimela," Isabella said. "She made him a few blocks to play with." She smiled sweetly. Kimimela was one of the Lakota girls who Isabella and the Brandons had kept safe in town, and the girl was quite fond of little Henry.

"He needs toys," Edward noted. It wasn't a priority with everything going on around him, but he made a mental list, nonetheless. He wanted his little pup to be happy.

"Don't you worry about that, honey," Isabella said dismissively. "Now, go on out of here, but don't forget to eat and to be careful. You got that rifle of yours?" Edward nodded. "Good. Don't be afraid to use it."

Edward was amused by his woman's boldness. She was so blunt and amazing.

"Two soldiers coming!" someone shouted from the kitchen.

"Damn," Isabella cursed under her breath. She looked over her shoulder and saw how much pain the woman was in. Keeping her quiet wasn't going to be easy.

"I'll try to distract 'em," Edward said. With a final kiss, he and Mike walked away.

~oOo~

Luckily, it only took a few minutes for Edward and Mike to get the soldiers to leave. They were here to inform Edward that Carlisle would be bringing Captain Wessells home for supper, and that was what made Edward stay indoors. He still sent out Mike and the others once more, but he needed to remain behind to make sure everything went smoothly.

"I need to take this out to Red Hawk," Nana May sighed, holding a basket of food. "I'll be back in a moment, Copper. Just relax and eat."

She left.

Edward sat in the kitchen, eyes on his tin mug which held his coffee, but his focus was on the women in his father's study. He could hear the

screaming, the wails, the moans, and Isabella's and Little Brown's words of encouragement.

Edward was terrified. Never in his life had he heard anyone give birth.

Horses didn't count.

Isabella was terrified, too...when she saw the amount of blood gushing out of the Cheyenne woman.

"Little Brown," she breathed out, eyes wide. She had delivered three babies before, back in Georgia, and this wasn't supposed to happen. Not *that* much blood.

Little Brown didn't respond, but you could still see the answer written all over her face.

It wasn't good.

"You're doin' so well," Alice choked out as she wiped sweat from the woman's forehead. They knew she probably didn't understand them, but they kept going.

"You can do this!" Isabella said from where she was kneeling between the woman's legs. "You keep pushin', honey!"

But nothing worked. The woman pushed and pushed, but the baby wouldn't budge.

Alice and Isabella thought of the babies they carried in their wombs.

"Breathe!" Alice pleaded, though her plea went unheard. The woman's breaths came irregularly; they were ragged and so very forced. "Don't give up!"

One breath, two, one...

Isabella blinked back tears. *Come on, don't give up!*

"She with the spirits now," Little Brown said softly.

"Oh," Isabella whimpered.

Alice stifled a sob and ran out of the house.

~10~

Edward had been writing a list of things they needed to buy in town when Alice stormed out of the house, tears streaming down her face. It made him jump into action, but before he reached his father's study, Isabella pushed past him and followed quickly in Alice's direction.

At the same time, Nana May returned.

"Isabella!" Edward shouted after her as he struggled to put on his boots. Isabella was only wearing a simple shawl over her dress, which meant she had no business being out in the blizzard. "Isabella, wait!"

"Oh my, what's wrong?" May asked, one hand on her chest.

Edward shook his head. "I don't know, but I intend to find out." And then he ran out, too. "Isabella!"

He ran across the courtyard, seemingly sure of his direction, but he wasn't. He couldn't see her *anywhere*, and the falling snow didn't make it easier.

"Here in the barn, boss!" he heard one of the ranchers—Samuel—holler. Edward spun around and strode toward him. "I just saw her run in." He held the door open for Edward. "We're cleanin' it out—the newest arrivals are in Jasper's cottage havin' dinner."

"Thanks." Edward nodded and entered the barn. It was instantly quiet—well, quieter than outside. "Isabella?" He looked around, so far only spotting the cows and the pigs. But he knew she was close, though, because just then he could hear her crying. It made Edward's chest constrict in a painful way. Almost like someone twisted his heart around.

At last, he found her in the loft.

His Isabella sat in a corner, hugging her body and weeping.

Slowly, not wanting to startle her, he walked over to her and squatted down in front of her.

"I'm sorry," she cried. "I'm—I'm not weak, I p-promise, but...she—she died, Edward. She died. They both died."

"Oh, darling," he murmured and hugged her body to him. He had guessed, of course, that it hadn't gone well in Carlisle's study. It was heartbreaking and, unfortunately, too common. "There was nothing you could've done, though." He gently cupped her face and made her look up at him. His forehead creased in concern as he saw the sorrow in her eyes. He only wanted her to be joyful. "You did your best," he whispered.

Isabella's face crumbled again. "I'm scared," she admitted in a whimper. "I know I've gone through childbirth before, but..."

"Don't say it," he pleaded quickly. The last thing he wanted to hear right now was that Isabella saw herself in the Cheyenne woman's situation. "It's not the same thing," he went on. "That woman was sick. She was at wits end and terrified. God knows how long she'd been in the blizzard before we found her."

Isabella nodded. It was true; that woman *was* sick, but it still didn't erase her worries. Women died all the time giving birth, and now it was worse. Because now she had people she cared for. She was all alone before

Henry, but now there was both Henry, Edward, and all the others she'd come to adore.

"Come on; let's get back to the house," he said soothingly, standing up. Truth was, he was panicking on the inside. His greatest fears used to include Koda dying or his father or Nana May falling ill. Now it was much worse. The thought of losing Isabella or the baby... "You will be fine," he forced out in a strained voice. Gone was the calm exterior. Both now standing up, he kissed her hard. "You will be fine," he repeated, mostly to himself. He kissed her even harder, swiftly slipping his tongue into her mouth. His hands were rough and greedy, and he didn't even ask if he could touch her.

Not that it mattered, because Isabella was just as frantic. In fact, when Edward tried to take a step back to reevaluate, she was quick to pull him close again, and that was all it took for Edward to move forward. With a throaty moan against her neck, he pressed her up against the wooden wall and ravished his darling.

"Please," she begged wantonly. That was what she was: a wanton. And around Edward Cullen, she'd never deny it. She had already told him plain and simple that she was no lady. "Now, Edward. Right here."

"*Fuck*," he swore. His cock throbbed in his trousers as he deftly pushed up Isabella's skirts. "Oh, yeah." He slid down her undergarments while she unhooked his suspenders and unbuttoned his trousers.

When nothing was in the way, Isabella hitched both legs around Edward's hips, and he held her up before slamming his cock deep inside of her.

"Yes!" Isabella cried out.

"Jesus Christ," Edward groaned. Engulfed by her so tightly, so hotly, he set a fast pace that mirrored the pace of his thoughts. Fears, nerves,

feelings...it was all so jumbled inside of him, and for the first time in his life, he was actually scared of what was to come. He also felt guilty because, over the past few days, he had often thought about the child Isabella carried and how happy it made him. He wanted it all with her.

A family.

Marriage.

"We'll be fine, my darlin'," he whispered against her lips. They were both out of breath, muscles contracting, sweat beading on their skin, and insides coiling, readying for eruption. He licked Isabella's bottom lip and slid into her again with a quick thrust. Hips meeting hips. "We're startin' our own family."

Isabella whimpered and kissed him harder. "I want it. All of it. With—with you. Oh, God." She fluttered around him, feeling the fire ignite in her gut. "Edward, I...oh, oh..."

"Yes," he grunted, slipping his right hand between their bodies. It took some effort to get under her skirts, but in the end his fingers found that little spot which seemed to make her moan and cry out in ecstasy.

As soon as Isabella's climax started rushing through her, Edward let go completely and spilled into her with a couple of lazy thrusts.

They panted heavily, foreheads dropped on each other's shoulders.

"We'll be fine," Isabella breathed out shakily.

Edward nodded and dropped a soft, lingering kiss in the crook of her neck.

~oOo~

Over the next couple of weeks, everyone on the Cullen Ranch worked hard to make sure everyone were taken care of.

The men pretended to help the army; they shared lies and profanities about the Indians who had escaped Fort Robinson. They provided several units with soup and cornbread—made by the women, of course. They searched the woods, alongside soldiers, and cursed Dull Knife to the point where Edward and his men wanted to vomit. They even invited a few captains and lieutenants over to the ranch for dinner at a few occasions. But it all worked. During those dinners—however miserable they were for the ranchers—the army never suspected a thing. Captain Wessells didn't know that while he feasted on Nana May's famous chicken stew, Little Brown was in the next room. He didn't know that Little Brown had made the cornbread he so happily devoured.

The forty-something natives were eternally grateful for all the help, and it looked like the darkest of times had passed. The harsh weather eased up, thankfully, and the soldiers didn't come around as often as the ranchers had originally thought. They trusted the Cullens enough to inform them if there were any *savages* around.

It was with great sorrow that the Cullens had to bury five Cheyennes, two of them children, but they had to remind themselves that they'd saved many more. Granted, it wasn't easy to always remain positive, especially not when the army had managed to recapture or kill the rest of the one hundred and fifty, but...no, they had to look on the bright side.

Everyone took joy in seeing the children being well enough to be outside and play in the courtyard. Isabella and Edward, in particular, liked to bundle up and go outside to share some coffee and pie after supper while the children played a little before bedtime. The pie was something Isabella made sure to save for Edward, otherwise it'd be gone by the time he came home each night.

Home.

Isabella felt so at home here. She had fallen completely in love with this place.

She had fallen completely in love with Edward, too.

He always surprised her. While he was all man in his rugged ways, he was still sweet. Just a few days ago, for instance, he had sent for more supplies in town, and later that night, he had surprised her with a small box of chocolate—a real treat. And Henry had received a paper cone with Mrs. Newton's honey coated almonds. They were his favorite.

Isabella tightened the blanket around her, a soft sigh slipping through her lips. She was lost in thought, though she kept her eyes on Henry who was playing with two kittens on the porch. It hadn't snowed in a few days, so the porch had remained clear of snow. Now it was possible to sit outside for a few moments and not get dreadfully soaked to the bone.

She chuckled quietly at her son as he struggled to keep the kittens on the quilt. They wanted to wander off, but Henry pulled them back.

"You look happy," a voice murmured behind her.

She smiled to herself, soon feeling Edward's arms wrapped around her. His hands settled on her stomach. It wasn't detectable with her clothes on, but there was a small bump on her belly now. Which Edward loved to kiss and touch when they were naked in bed.

"I *am* happy," she said softly and turned in his embrace. She smiled up at him. "You look happy, too."

They still feared anything that could go wrong, but they couldn't live like that. Something could go wrong at any second; there was no controlling that. What you could control, however, was how you lived the life you'd been given.

"I am," he whispered and kissed her nose. "Know what else?"

She shook her head no, a look of curiosity on her face.

He sighed contentedly and held her a bit tighter. His gaze was soft, tender. "I love you."

Isabella's heart swelled to the point where she thought it was going to explode. Her eyes welled up, too. She couldn't help it.

"I love you, too, Edward. So much."

He grinned, more than a little relieved. Nana May had already given him the ring Edward's grandfather had given her when they were wed, but a marriage certainly didn't mean you were in love. So, he was mighty glad to hear that she loved him as he loved her.

~oOo~

February 28th 1879

According to the US Army, the men and women Isabella currently had her eyes on were dead. That wasn't true. They were here, saying goodbye to Carlisle and Edward out in the courtyard. After scouting the woods and listening to the army's reports, it was now safer to travel. So, the last band of Cheyenne was now thanking the Cullen men for everything.

Isabella watched from the kitchen window as an older man embraced Edward, eyes full of unshed tears... Edward didn't need to know the old man's language to understand—to see—how utterly thankful the Cheyenne man was.

"You should tell Edward," Isabella told Little Brown, who stood by the stove behind Isabella. She continued, still watching the courtyard. "You and Carlisle love each other." She chuckled when she heard Little Brown

dropping a pan or something on the floor. "Edward will be happy for you." Did they really think they were subtle? Maybe Edward and the other men had no idea, but Nana May, Alice, and Isabella sure knew. It was evident as soon as Carlisle looked at Little Brown...or when Little Brown served Carlisle his supper. Their gazes were as loving and sweet as the ones Edward and Isabella exchanged. Same went for Jasper and Alice.

Last night, Emmett had declared that he was going into town tomorrow, and he wasn't returning without Rosalie. There was also going to be a ring on her "damned finger". Emmett's words. So, maybe Isabella was a little high on love at the moment, and now she wanted to help Carlisle and Little Brown. They deserved it, after all. Everyone on the Cullen Ranch deserved their happy ending. Even Mike had fallen head over heels in love with a lovely Lakota woman, and the two were expected to be wed this spring.

"I knew you'd be good for us out here," Little Brown muttered. "Now you pushing me to Carlisle."

Isabella laughed softly and glanced at Little Brown over her shoulder. "Didn't you and Nana May push me and Edward together?" Okay, maybe that was a stretch. Isabella and Edward had managed just fine without meddling. But May and Little Brown hadn't exactly hid their encouraging looks when Isabella and Edward were still feeling each other out.

"Just *little* nudge."

Isabella winked. "And I'm thankful for it. Now it's my turn to help. I suggest you march out there to Carlisle and kiss him silly."

The two women giggled.

"You and Edward—so perfect for each other," Little Brown huffed. "Both rogues. So bold."

Isabella shrugged a little at that.

~oOo~

"It feels weird," Isabella mumbled when they had settled into bed that night. Even in the darkness, she knew Edward was still awake. Henry snored softly in his bed, but she could feel Edward's eyes on her.

"What feels weird?"

"It's only Little Brown and her tribe left," she whispered. "It's so quiet here now."

Edward smiled to himself. Had Isabella seen the smile, she would've seen sadness for those who lost their lives, bitterness for the army's cruelty, and hope for the ones who were now on their way north.

"I like the quiet, though," Isabella continued softly. "It's just different."

"It is," Edward agreed, sighing quietly.

He was nervous.

After supper—which had been odd with Little Brown and Carlisle looking so uncomfortable for some reason—Nana May had told him that tonight was perfect. *Perfect*. Edward knew what his meddlesome grandmother had meant, of course. It wasn't like he could forget that there was a gold ring in his pocket.

Edward didn't know anything about romancing, so he figured it was best to just get it over with. This was what he wanted; why not just get it done?

He took a deep breath and propped himself up on his elbow. "Darling?"

"Hmm?"

"I-I...uh." *Spit it out!* Another deep breath. "We ought to get married!" he blurted out.

Then he squeezed his eyes shut and flopped back against the mattress again.

Stupid!

"What?" Isabella squeaked in the darkness.

Suddenly, Edward wondered if it was a good thing or a bad thing that he'd snuffed out the candle already. He wanted to see her, but if there was a proverbial "no" written on Isabella's forehead, he'd much prefer not to see that.

He swallowed. Or gulped. "I want us to marry—I mean..."

He exhaled.

"Will you be my wife, Ms. Swan?" he whispered.

The silly man had no reason to be nervous, of course. Isabella launched herself at him like the improper woman she was.

"Yes!" she said between kisses to his face. "I'll be your wife, Mr. Cullen. Just don't you be expectin' me to be all ladylike."

After a little moment, Edward finally gathered his wits and returned each kiss with fervor.

And he wanted his Isabella just as she was. Her blunt ways were one of the many reasons he loved her.

"I love you," he whispered huskily, hovering above her.

Was the world suddenly a better place? No. Was there no longer injustice? Of course there was, but that "yes", and this very kiss, held promise of a future where they would face everything together.

"I love you, too."

This was their beginning. In the midst of tragedy and struggles, Edward and Isabella fought for the same cause and eventually found each other.

Edward wondered if this would end up in the history books one day. If it did, it would say that the US Army intercepted all of the Cheyenne and forced the survivors to retreat south again. Nobody would know the truth. No one would know that thanks to the men and women at the Cullen Ranch, several of the Cheyenne and Lakota were able to continue north of here, to Pine Ridge and beyond. But Edward and Isabella would do their best.

They would tell their children and grandchildren their version.

~Epilogue~

June 20th 1889

The Cullen Ranch looked quite different now, ten years later. A couple of cottages had gotten second stories added, another barn had been raised, a third chicken coup had been built, and several logs created a circle in the middle of the courtyard for their campfires.

There was also a new house on the grounds, a little smaller than the main homestead, and it was where Carlisle and Little Brown lived. Nana May had a room there, too, though she mostly stayed with Edward and Isabella. They needed her.

Carlisle had handed over the ranch to Edward last year, including the big house. But the house was far from empty, and Edward smiled just

thinking about it. He sat on the porch swing, rolling himself a smoke, and guessed that his wife would join him in a few minutes. She just had to put Sarah and Adam to bed first. Those two rascals loathed the word bedtime. Sarah was the youngest at five, and Adam came next at the age of seven.

Edward and Isabella had five children, all of them sharing the same personality, it seemed. While Jasper and Alice's six young'uns were all different in appearance and personalities, Isabella and Edward had created an even mix. They were loud, playful, happy, loving...and cranky at bedtime.

Henry was the only one who stood out a little. He was still Edward's puppy, and the bond between the two was fierce. Henry looked up to the man who had been his father for the past ten years, and he prided himself in calling Edward his pop. And it was odd because this was why Henry stood out a little in their family: he wasn't like Isabella at all. He only took after Edward—when it came to how he behaved and thought. Plus, they both loved working with horses.

Just the other day, Henry was in the stables feeding ole' Koda and the other retired horses, and Edward asked him what he would choose for himself—a mare or a gelding. Henry responded that he didn't know yet, but he sure wouldn't pick a gelding just because they were better in general. Mares were often more loyal and stubborn, good qualities in the wild west. Edward grinned at the memory.

And that was how Isabella found her husband on the porch: grinning like a boy.

"How much have you been drinkin', honey?" she teased, making her presence known. Edward chuckled and patted his knee, at which Isabella's smile broadened. Sitting down on her husband's lap, she let the day settle and the to-do lists fade away for a moment. "Did you have a good birthday?" she asked, touching his scruffy cheek softly.

Today was Edward's thirty-fifth birthday, and the day had been louder than normal. After chores and work, everyone had gathered in the courtyard to grill steaks, vegetables, and potatoes over the fire. Pie, sweets, and coffee had followed...and hard liquor for the men. Normally, birthdays were pretty small affairs, celebrated only within the closest family, but Edward's birthday was often used as a last hurrah before the summer journeys. The men would be gone for days at a time while they rode out to cattle ranchers on their drives and sold horses.

"It was perfect," Edward murmured, slipping his hand under Isabella's nightgown. He caressed her calf, thinking about his day. "That honey pie Tildy makes...now, that sure is somethin'." Matilda was Edward and Isabella's eldest daughter, and she was her father's "little darling". Because when she smiled, she looked exactly like her mother. At the age of nine—almost ten—she had Edward wrapped around her pinky. As he thought of the new kerchief and pair of socks Christopher—their eight-year-old son—had given him, he caressed a little higher on Isabella's leg.

Isabella hummed, agreeing with Edward's statement about the honey pie Tildy had made him as a gift.

Matilda loved the kitchen.

Isabella had already given Edward a new set of boots and a new saddle, all of which she'd bought in town, but there was one more gift she wanted to give her dear husband. See, while in town, she had found a book with patterns and instructions on how to make European clothes. How a book like that found itself in Nebraska, she had no idea. But she knew Edward was going to appreciate the undergarments she had made out of lace. They were impractical, but provocative.

Alice, Rosalie, and Isabella shared the book, and they counted on extra happy husbands in the near future.

Life was very good at the ranch.

Granted, there had been hard times over the years. The miscarriage Isabella'd had between Matilda and Christopher shook them up a bit, though they were soon back in good spirits. The baby Isabella gave birth to three years ago, who was stillborn, was another matter. It took a long and dreary fall for the family to recover. Still to this day, Isabella felt a pang of sadness for the loss of what would've been another daughter.

Edward named the little angel Marie before they buried her.

Since then, Isabella hadn't gotten pregnant again, but they decided to view it as a positive thing. Alice was currently pregnant with her seventh little one, and each birth had been more difficult than the last. This way, Edward didn't have to worry about losing the most precious woman in his life in childbirth. Because he knew that the few streaks of grey he had at his temples came from pacing in the hallway when Isabella gave birth to their children.

With one arm, Edward hugged his wife so tightly, the other arm sliding farther up under her gown. It was almost time for bed—and bed her he would—but he wanted to sit here for another moment or two.

"Want me to light it up for you, my love?" Isabella asked and pointed at the rolled-up smoke.

Edward grinned and handed it to her. He didn't really know why he loved seeing Isabella so...er, well, for lack of a better word: unladylike. To him, she was still a lady, of course, but by general standards...she was so bold and carefree. Straight to the point and without shame. She could ride a horse with best rancher; she could out-curse him, too.

She's perfection.

He watched as she lit up the smoke, taking a puff from it herself before she passed it on to Edward.

"I love you, darling," he sighed contentedly and brought the smoke to his lips. "You're perfect for me, you know that?"

"I love you, too, my silly husband," Isabella giggled and slapped his chest playfully. "You don't ever have to butter me up. You have me."

Edward shrugged a little. "Nevertheless."

A comfortable silence fell over them and they sat together for a while, lost in thought.

Until Edward reached something odd on Isabella's upper thigh.

"What's this?" he asked, confused.

Isabella winked and gave him a cheeky smile. "Come upstairs and find out."

Then she took off.

Edward was hot on her heels.

It was a fucking perfect birthday, indeed.

The End