Our Yellow House

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Chapter 43, 44, 45, and the epilogue are beta'd by HollettLA
Chapter 1

...I'm here without you, baby...

...I think about you, baby

And I dream about you all the time...

...I'm here without you, baby

But you're still with me in my dreams

And tonight, girl, it's only you and me...

~Here Without You by 3 Doors Down – chapter song.

July 1st

Edward Cullen.

I never thought Charlie Swan would end up being my best friend, but I stand corrected. Not only is he my best friend, he is also the one I can be myself with. The one who understands, the one who never pressures. Because he's the same. The two of us are the same. Broken. Muted.

Dead inside.

I even wear flannel nowadays.

You would laugh, and I would smile because I love the sound of your laughter.

Everyday is the same. I wake up, take a shower, sometimes I shave, sometimes I don't. I get dressed – jeans, a wife beater, and a flannel shirt
that I leave unbuttoned. Can't part with my well worn black All Stars, either.

I skip breakfast. If you can call it breakfast. I wake up around two PM, so perhaps I should call it... what do you call a meal around that hour? It can't be lunch, right? Too early for dinner.

Late lunch. Yeah.

I skip that, anyway.


*I always think of you when I play.*

Then around five in the afternoon, I head to work. I stop by RJ's on the way, because by that time I'm starving, and Rose and her brother James, they make the best burgers. Except for the pickles. I can't stand pickles but I can't bring myself to order a burger without them. Instead I throw them in the garbage.

*You always smiled when I gave you the pickles.*

RJ's is right next to my bar. The bar I took over when mom wanted to slow down. She loved that bar. Still does, and she isn't too old to work, but she craved better hours. Esme is not a night person anymore. I am, though. We run Twilight together, I suppose. I take care of the bar and she runs the office, takes care of the paperwork and all that shit. That's very fine by me. I love that bar. It was always my plan to work there and there's not a thing about it I don't like. It's small but big enough.
I'd say we're a small family working there. Mom is there during the day, and then at night, it's me and Alec tending the bar, and my cousin Tanya working as the waitress.

*You loved the bar, too. Remember, angel?*

I'm back home around three AM, and that's when I know for certain that Charlie joins me. Sometimes we're on my porch, sometimes we're on his porch.

Our houses are the same but don't look the same, standing next to each other. Two stories. Small front yards. But our house is yellow. It's a bit faded now. I need to repaint it. The shutters are white.

*You painted the door dark red, and I grinned because you got paint on your nose.*

I need to repaint the door, too. Need to find the exact same red, though. It must be that color. Must be. Would be wrong otherwise. She said it was the perfect color for our door. The door that opened up to our home. She said the same when we painted the house yellow. It was the perfect color because it was happy, and our yellow house would stand out amongst the white ones on our street.

Charlie's door is white. He also needs to repaint. Perhaps we should repaint some day.

On the other side of the road, right across from my house, Jasper and Alice live. Alice isn't a night person but Jasper is, and sometimes he joins me and Charlie on the porch for some jamming. And of course a few beers. He doesn't play the guitar, though. No, he plays the harmonica.

Then we just sit there for a few hours. We don't talk much. Only a little. We speak when necessary. That isn't often. Instead we enjoy the quiet, or the music, and the night. We all love the nights. Doesn't matter if it's
summer or winter, we still sit there. Doesn't get that cold here in New Orleans, anyway, in the winter. It's summer now, though. July. It's the 4th tomorrow.

*The smile you gave me when we watched the fireworks together*...

When the sky goes from black to red, we part ways and go to bed. I go to bed alone. Missing her. My Bella. My wife.

*Is our son alive?*

In bed I lie awake for an hour or so. I think about when the days were ours. We were so happy. Everything was perfect. The pregnancy was a surprise, a big surprise, but we were happy. So damn happy, and when she started to show, I was there all the time. I couldn't look away to save my life. I watched her and her belly, and we smiled whenever our eyes locked because while I watched her, she watched me. Always with that adoration.

*I miss you, baby.*

We had everything we wanted. I had the bar. Even then. And we had our house. The yellow house that stands out, I live there alone now. The house where we were going to raise our family. Together.

*Remember? We always said we wanted two children.*

Bella's dream was to either work in the bar with me, or work with children. Sometimes she said she wanted to do both, and I used to laugh and tap her on the nose and say, *"When are you going to sleep? Take care of kids during the day and then the grownups at the bar at night?"*

She gave me a scowl then, which morphed into a pout because she could never hold the scowl. In the end I thawed her up by kissing that spot. That special spot on her hipbone that made her sigh softly. That was my
favorite. That soft sigh in content, and I'd rest my head on her stomach as she threaded her fingers through my hair.

In our bed we could lie like that for hours, especially on weekends, and it always made me think very randomly, mostly about the two of us. She'd giggle, which made my head shake on her stomach, but it was because I sometimes voiced my thoughts without knowing it, and that always amused her.

I remember the day everything changed for me and Bella. It was the 4th of July and I had recently turned fourteen. She was still thirteen for a couple more months, and I had the biggest crush on her. It was puberty, there's no denying that. My best friend all of the sudden had boobs for crying out loud.

She was so pretty.

"Bella, where did you get that?" I hissed, pointing at the two bottles of beer in her hands.

*I had a pretty good guess because I knew damn well the kind of beer Charlie loved.*

"Schh," she giggled, taking my hand to lead the way to her backyard. "Don't worry, Edward, Dad won't notice."

*God, I hope not because it'll be my ass...*

*Charlie always liked me, I knew that, but if he caught us with his damn beer... well, I wasn't so sure he'd like me anymore.*

*As usual, we headed to her tree house, but it was different now. All I could see were her pouty lips, her boobs, and... I wanted to sniff her hair. Why did I want to sniff her hair?*
I already knew it smelled like cherries. I loved it. Just like I love Cherry Coke.

"Here," she said, handing me a beer as we sat down on the floor.

There was no furniture in the tree house. Just a few pillows on the floor and a few blankets.

"Have you ever had beer before, Bella?" I asked, eyeing the bottle skeptically before taking it from her.

"No, but there's a first for everything, right?" she replied, grinning adorably as she popped the cap of her own beer. "Um, have you, though? Had beer before, I mean."

"Once," I chuckled. "Alec gave me a sip a few weeks ago. It wasn't all that great."

"Alec's the new bartender, right?" she asked. "Tanya told me in school."

I smirked, not surprised, because my cousin had the biggest crush on Alec. She was fifteen and Alec was twenty-one! Tanya is crazy, I swear.

"Yes, he is. You should come down soon to visit. Mom misses you," I told her truthfully. Mom truly missed Bella if she didn't see her at least once a week, and in a way she always saw Bella as a daughter. Pretty much like I know Charlie saw me as a son of some sort.

Mom and Charlie had much in common, both being single parents with one child. Same went for me and Bella when it came to having stuff in common. Both of us had parents that had run off. We weren't sad about it, though. Renee doesn't deserve Bella, and Edward Sr. sure as hell doesn't deserve me. It's their loss.
"I will. I miss her, too." She smiled. "Now, let's drink some beer before the fireworks begin."

I laughed. "That sounds so weird, Bella! You're thirteen and talking about beer!"

She just rolled her eyes at me and punched me in the arm.

Then we drank beer. It was disgusting but we drank it all. We shuddered and grimaced but it didn't matter. We were being grownups.

Until her giggling started.

"Charlie's gonna kill me, Bella," I muttered, trying to keep my eyes focused. It was a bit hard.

At times I felt sorta cross eyed and Bella giggled more.

"And he's gonna ground you," I told her, pointing a finger at her.

"Maybe he will." She shrugged, still giggling. "But you'll come rescue me, won't you?"

I smirked and puffed out my chest. "Always."

"Naw, you're so cute, Edward!" she laughed... and blushed!

I knew my best friend and she only blushed when she was embarrassed.

"Why are you blushing?" I asked, grinning at her.

I sipped some beer while I waited for her answer. It didn't taste awful now. Huh.

"I'm not blushing," she lied, trying to cover her cheeks by letting her hair down.
Wait. "Did you just say I was cute?"

She did, didn't she?

"Guys aren't cute, Bella. Guys are hot or sexy or handsome. Never cute."

"You think guys are hot?" she teased.

I groaned and rolled my eyes at her. But I still smiled. I couldn't help it. She was just... yeah, she was cute. Very cute. And pretty. And hot. And gorgeous.

Mmm, beer.


"Depends." I smirked. "Are you tellin' the truth?"

"Maybe," she replied shyly, again trying to hide her blush. "Like you didn't know it already," she added in a huff.

Bella thinks I'm hot!

Yes!

I wanted to fist pump the air.

"Why are you lookin' so proud?" she asked then. "You look like you had no idea."

I shrugged.

I mean, I know there are a few girls in school who like me, but I never cared. No one could compare to Bella. I know I look sorta good, I suppose, but it only matters when Bella says it.
"I dunno," I said.

My beer is empty.

Just gone.

"Well, you are," she told me, smiling shyly. "And strong..."

My eyes bugged out. Did she just say that?

And why the hell is she watching my bicep?

Should I flex it?

I flexed it.

She bit down on her lip. Oh, God!

"Are you flirting with me?" I blurted out.

Ah, man! I did not just say that! Crap!

"Maybe I am," she whispered. "Do you want me to stop?"

Shit!

No!

"No," I said, shaking my head furiously.

We stared at each other. Not always in the eye, though, because I couldn't tears my eyes off her mouth. I wanted to kiss her. So badly.

But I don't know how. Never done that before... What if it's bad and she doesn't want me around anymore?

"Do you want to kiss me?"
My eyes snapped up again. Wide as hell. Could she read my freaking mind?!

Better well be honest.

"So much," I managed to say before gulping.

"Then kiss me. I want it, too," she breathed.

She barely got the words out before I attacked her.

It was mouth on mouth, tongues, teeth clashing. I was so terrible at it, and she wasn't much better but I loved it. I wanted it more and more.

"We need to practice," she giggled in between my sloppy kisses.

I chuckled but I couldn't stop kissing her. I loved her lips. "I'm up for that."

The fireworks started, and Bella and I watched it from the tree house, and we practiced kissing for hours.

After remembering... I eventually succumbed to a restless sleep.

Then I woke up around two PM the day after and my routine started over.

*O*O*O*

I sat on the edge of our bed. Rubbed my chest as I glanced over at the clock. Then I wish I never did. The clock doesn't just show the time, but the date, too.

4th of July.

I closed my eyes and let my head drop as I leaned forward on my knees.

Will I ever see you again, angel?
If there was one look I had perfected over the past few years, it was defeat. I knew that. I didn't care, though. Neither did Charlie, which was why we were so close nowadays. Both of us missing the same girl. Both of us wondering... wishing... afraid to hope. There was never any closure, but I'm not sure we want closure. No, I'm sure we don't. There's still that part that wonders, and that's the part that has me breathing. That's the part that makes sure I get out of bed each day.

One time. One single time, I've been asked if I shouldn't try to move on. If I shouldn't try to find happiness again.

It was Jasper who asked and he's never met Bella.

That question sent him to the hospital with a fractured jaw.

Everyone who knew Bella, everyone who was there when we grew up together knew that there would never be another for me. It's impossible. She's the only one I can see true beauty in. She's the only one I can love that way, she's the only one I can be with... in that way.

Jasper apologized when I told him that Bella was my Alice, because I knew the eyes he had for his wife. I knew every emotion that lied in the looks he sent her. The ones of complete devotion, adoration, and love.

I sighed to myself, glanced up, gave the bedroom a onceover. On the one hand it looks like she never left here. It's still the same. All white with a few colored knick-knacks. She loved it, I loved it. The wooden floor is painted in white. The walls, too. The drapes are white, the old wooden dressers that we found on a yard sale were also painted white. The full sized mirror has a white frame. The sheets are white. The headboard of our king sized bed is white. Also painted wood.
Then there are the stark contrasts. The cushions in deep burgundy and moss green. The lamp shade in dark plum. The scented candles on the dresser in gold and dark red. The plush rug on the floor in midnight blue.

_This was your favorite room. Mine, too._

She was quite the decorator. She loved making our home beautiful and I loved her taste. Still do. In a way she hasn't left.

Mrs. Cope, the old woman living across from Charlie, she cleans our houses once a week. She's the one making sure that Bella's work never goes to waste. Because I would let it deteriorate. In a way I don't, by paying Cope to do it, but I could never do it myself. I could never go over to the scented candles that haven't been lit in over three years and make sure there's no dust. I could never drag a rag or a dustpan over the black and white photos we have above our bed. The beautiful pictures of me and my wife on our wedding day. Twelve photos in black and white. White frames. Photos of us and our loved ones. Laughing, smiling. Kissing. Dancing.

_You're so heartbreakingly beautiful, angel._

Twelve photos staring back at me every day.

Our wedding was perfect for us. It was held in Charlie's backyard. There were twinkle lights in the trees. We danced under them. She gave me that secret smile as she gazed up on them, silently telling me that she was blissfully happy. That smile... she only ever gave me that smile.

We were only nineteen when we got married, on that hot day in August. We had a barbecue, and we drank, ate, and laughed for hours. Way into the summer night. There weren't many guests. Only the ones we considered family. Charlie, Mom, Tanya who was Bella's maid of honor, Tanya's Mom – Aunt Liz – Alec who was my best man, Bella's cousin
Emmett who flew down from Nebraska where the Swans came from before moving to New Orleans, Ben and Angela – two of our closest friends from school – and of course James, Rose, and their parents. They worked the grill, knowing how obsessed Bella and I were with their grub.

Then as Bella's eyes began to droop, I told her it was time to go home.

"What do you mean, Edward?" she chuckled confusingly. "We are home."

It was my turn to give her my secret smile.

Because no, we don't live with Charlie anymore. That was only temporary, only for a few months, because after graduating from high school, we wanted to live together as we planned our wedding.

I told her nothing as I grabbed her hand, and after a wink from Charlie, I took her to the house next door. The house I had bought for us. The house Charlie and I had worked on secretly over the summer.

Then as we stood in front of the house, I rested my chin on the top of her head, held out a key, and said, "Welcome home, angel."

After her initial shock had worn off, the questions came in a rapid speed.

How could we afford this?

How did this happen?

When did you buy it?

Is it really ours?

"Yes, it's really ours, angel," I chuckled, kissing her nose once. "I bought it the week before we graduated... the week before I proposed. And yes, we can afford it because Mom made me partner at the bar."
"Oh, my God!" she gasped. "She did?"

I nodded. Smiled smugly. "Yep, I'm officially ownin' a bar. Well, half of it," I snickered. "And don't worry, baby. I've done the math, and we can live well even as you head to college next week."

I got some good lovin' that night. Many times over.

Then when we woke up the morning after, she was bouncing in excitement as she exclaimed, "We have to paint our house yellow!"

Bella did go off to college. Everyday when she came home, she would tell me about classes and how she loved it. Majoring in early childhood education like she always wanted, and then if she didn't have too much school work, she'd come with me to the bar and work a shift alongside Tanya who I had hired when the old waitress quit.

I sighed. Dragged a hand over my face. Frowned.

She never graduated, though.

It wasn't the pregnancy that got in the way because she could go to school even then.

We had just found out that we were having a boy. A son. God, we were over the moon. Bella only had a few months left before graduating, and while she was in school, Charlie and I redid the room next to mine and Bella's into a nursery.

It was another surprise, and Bella didn't know. Well, she knew a little. I mean, it was our house, she was bound to know that one of the rooms were now off limits to her. But she wasn't allowed to enter. I locked it everyday.

You tried to hold your scowl but you never could.
Charlie and I were going to show her the room when it was ready. It was perfect. Held a baby blue crib that Charlie had built himself. A rocker and a changing table that I bought. A dresser that Charlie had bought. Baby blue walls with white stars here and there. White painted floor.

On the wall above his crib, his name was painted in dark blue.

Bella wanted him to be named after me, and it was an emotional day when she declared it.

_You smiled so smugly because you made me cry._

Edward Jr.

On the wall, it said _EJ_.

It's still there. In his room. A room I haven't dared to enter since that day.

Charlie and I sat on our porch, waiting for Bella to come home. We were celebrating a job well done with some beer and a few smokes. Tinkered a bit on our guitars, too.

_You never came home._

Hours later, the police knocked on our door.

I was already in tears.

The officer brought us down to the station and thanks to Charlie being a retired Chief, we were able to get answers before the questioning started.

We were shown into a small room with a TV, and what we saw on the footage... The footage from a surveillance camera at a gas station... What we saw was a man in a mask and black clothes, and he... he took her. She was only there because our rusty behemoth of a car – that we couldn't bring ourselves to part with – drank more gas than an airplane. But it was
our first car and we loved it. So, she was there, on her way home to me... and that man walked up. Pushed her into the car... and sped off with her in it.

That was the last I saw of my wife.

**Chapter 2**

...Lost in a sea of sadness

Blind in this place of darkness

If I fall, would you be there to raise me up

Or will I be the forgotten one...

~The Forgotten One by Time Of Grace – chapter song.

**July 4th**

I remember the way you watched me. Like I was the center of your universe. I watched you in the same way.

You never ceased to amaze me. I could watch you forever.

I found everything, every little thing about you, so fascinating. I told you this once, and you laughed. You laughed and told me you were glad that I found you so fascinating. It made me laugh, too, because I realized I made it sound like you were a circus act.

You weren't. But the fact remained, you were fascinating to watch. The way you would scrunch your nose when you considered something, when you tried to decide and make up your mind. The way you would tilt your head as you watched me from the doorway in the kitchen. The way your smile slowly crept into place when you had the best idea on something.
The way your eyes lit up when I told you I love you. The way you would watch your own fingers as they caressed my sides.

I remember it all.

Do you?

Do you remember it all, too?

Not a day- no, not an hour passes without me thinking of you. Maybe not even a minute. You're always there. One way or another.

Am I on your mind, too?

Do you remember this day? This day. 4th of July. We kissed for the first time all those years ago. I remember it. I will always remember it. A part of me was scared, scared that you wouldn't want to be my best friend afterward, but you calmed my fears. And we continued kissing.

We never stopped, did we?

Ever since that night in the tree house, we were still best friends but we kissed a lot. Everyday. I loved it.

We got good, baby. We got so good.

And we were so close. I remember our parents laughing at us, laughing like they knew something we didn't. We didn't at the time, anyway. But I think they knew we would end up together. Either loving each other the way we did, or do, or like siblings.

I never saw you as a sibling. I could laugh at that...if I remembered how it was to laugh. It's been a long time.

I can smile but only for one person.
God, it's been so long.

Will I ever get to see your face again? I pray that I will.

More than three years have passed.

Three years since I last saw your face. Since I heard the smile in your voice as we spoke on the phone.

Three years since I told you, "I'll be home soon, Edward."

Chapter 3

...Holy Jesus

What became of you?

All my life

I thought that you'd come through

Suicide don't mean much to me

Cause I'm not dead

I'm not dead

I'm not dead

I'm not dead

I'm alive...

~Guitar by Grayson Capps – chapter song.

July 4th

Edward Cullen.
Damn, 4th of July.

"Fuck this day," I muttered to myself, taking my regular seat on the porch swing. Guitar ready to be used.

With my feet kicked up on the table, I strummed on the guitar that Bella gave me one year. It was my birthday. I was turning twenty-one and we were going out. It was a Friday, I remember, and I was getting ready for the open mic night at a bar we went to sometimes. Marcus was a good friend of Mom's and he never checked us for ID's. He knew we were underage but still let us in. But that night, I wasn't. I was officially twenty-one. And I grabbed my old guitar as we left but Bella stopped me. Said, "You won't be needin' that."

"Baby, I'll need it if you want me to play you your song," I replied, smiling curiously at her.

She just pursed her lips and shook her head at me.

Her eyes were secretive and she knew I hated being left out. I tried to give her my best pout but she stood firm.

Only repeated, "You won't be needin' that."

When we arrived at the bar, there was a guitar case waiting for me, and inside... She was a beauty. I named her, even. Made Bella laugh like the angelic creature she is.

Angelic when you’re not my Jezebel, that is.

Named the beauty Sadie. It was the only name I had in my head and I knew why. Bella knew, too, and she blushed adorably.

"Hi! My name is Bella. What's your name?"
First day of kindergarten. She had just moved to New Orleans from some small town in Nebraska with her dad.

"Hello. I'm Edward Cullen," I mumbled.

"Okay. Wanna be my friend?"

I cracked a half smile at the memory. She was so fucking cute. Her hair was in a messy ponytail and she had peanut butter and jelly on her cheek.

"I dunno. I guess so?"

"Oh. You better come find me when you're sure then. I'm gonna play with Sadie now."

Then she ran off.

For some reason, I didn't like it when she ran away from me... so I followed her, sure that I wanted to be her friend. Very sure all of a sudden. Even if she was a girl and had cooties.

"I'm sure now, Bella. Who's Sadie?"

"My doll, silly. Her name is Sadie, and when I'm a big girl I want my baby to have that name."

"Eww, you want babies?"

She just nodded and smiled very widely, showing off her teeth... and the lacking of one.

I remember asking Mom as soon as I came home where Nebraska was. Just because I couldn't know enough about my new friend.

I'm born and raised in New Orleans but my mom and her big sister aren't. They came here from Chicago after running away from home, and that's
how Mom met my dad. Well, actually, Aunt Liz was already here when
Mom arrived, and it was because Liz lived here that mom settled on New
Orleans, too.

I digress.

Mom told me where Nebraska was and the next day I felt as if I knew
Bella a little better just because of it.

I sighed again, strumming the familiar tune I wrote for her all those years
ago.

All those years. Makes me feel so old.

I lit a smoke, took a deep drag and let the smoke dangle from my lips as I
continued playing.

After a while, I heard the telltale sound of Charlie's screen door fly open
and I knew he was joining me, and sure enough, he came. Trudged up the
few steps to our porch, carrying his own guitar.

"Mornin'," he said gruffly, sitting down in the rocking chair next to the
porch swing.

Charlie's a night person, too, just like me. Ever since he retired early, he's
turned on the hours.

I knew he missed his work. He was a good Chief of Police, but that ended
when he got shot in the knee.

Charlie aint a paper pusher and a job behind a desk wasn't for him, so he
retired instead. Now he spends his days fishing, doing some yard work,
and doing nothing with me.

Sometimes he comes down to the bar, though. I like those nights.
"Mornin'," I sighed, flicking some ash on the floorboards.

I need to repaint the floor, too. It's supposed to be white.


"You need to shave, son."

"So do you."

Subject closed.

Instead we played for a while, our minds anywhere but here. Though most likely at the same place... or with the same person. Like always. Especially on a day like this one. Perhaps not for Charlie, cause he doesn't know the significance about this day. Or maybe he does but keeps quiet. Maybe.

There are many of them. Significant days, that is. More than many now, during the summer.

_You were always so stubborn. Insisting on celebrating my birthday as big as possible._

This year, a few weeks ago, when I turned twenty-five, there was no celebration. Just like the previous years without her. Can't celebrate shit without her. Not when so much reminds me of her. Not since she played such a big part of... everything.

After my birthday, there's today when it comes to significant days. Then there's one of our anniversaries – the day I asked her to be my girlfriend. It was July 14th and we were fifteen.

It had been a year of kissing and staying close. A year of remaining best friends, but... fuck, I was so in love with her.
"Hey, Edward. She's upstairs," Charlie said, standing to the side to let me pass.

I was nervous.

But very determined.

Today is the day I confess my feelings. I have to. She's driving me insane with her... everything.

I knocked on her door before just entering, cause we had nothing to hide. There were no secrets. Well, expect for the part where I'm ridiculously in love with her.

"Hey, you," she purred, sitting on the windowpane.

Yes, she sure is a flirtatious gal. Thankfully she's only flirtatious with me. Otherwise I would've punched someone.

"Hey," I replied lamely, walking over to her.

This is where we usually kiss. But I couldn't. Too nervous.

"Can we talk?" I asked nervously as I fidgeted with my pocket knife.

A gift from Charlie. I loved it.

"Uh-oh, that doesn't sound good."

We both sat down on her bed, and I cursed myself because the bed wasn't the right place for this. The bed only made me hormonal and I don't know how many times I've jacked off after leaving Bella's bed. I mean, we often lay there together, but since... a while... a long while... I've had to take care of a problem when I return home.

"What's wrong, Edward?" she asked softly, placing her hand on my thigh.
I stared at it. It felt so good. I wanted more.

Time to fess up.

Shit, what if she hates me?

Ah, fuck it. Here we go.

"I wanna take you out, Bella," I said, still staring at her hand on my leg.

"Heh, okay? Why does that make you nervous?"

"No," I said, shaking my head. "I mean... I wanna take you out... on a date."

Silence.

After an eternity, I dared a look at her.

Imagine my damn surprise when I found her smirking at me!

I don't see how this is funny!

"Took you long enough!" she exclaimed then, and before I could do anything, she threw her arms around me... oh, and her lips... mmm, lips... on my neck.

"You have feelings for me?" she asked before she kissed me. Hard on the mouth.

I gasped, she took the opportunity to thrust her tongue into my mouth.

"Uh-huh," I managed to get out, even nodded for emphasis.

"Oh, God, I have feelings for you, too!" she squealed.
Yes, squealed. In my mouth. But I could hardly think about that because all of the sudden I fell back on her bed, and I had a gorgeous Bella on top of me.

On top of me.

She likes me, too.

Oh, God, we're on her bed.

My hands found her waist... but then... um, what if I want more? Boyfriends can grope, right?

Christ, I haven't asked her yet!

"Bella," I groaned. "I have to ask you somethin'."

She whimpered – a sound that went straight to my dick – so I pushed her off me before I embarrassed us both. Mostly me.

She just smiled widely, cocking an eyebrow, silently telling me to ask away.

Deep breath.

"Will um... ahem... will you be my uh, my girl?"

Smooth. Very smooth.

I got lucky in more ways than one. Not only did she say yes, but she attacked me with kisses again, and she let me grope her like the hormonal teenager I was.

Many nights of practice followed, and by the time we had gone on three dates, I got the balls to admit to her that I loved her.
She said it back with tears in her eyes, and I forgot all about groping her when I drowned in her eyes.

*I need to see them again, angel. Please let me see your eyes again.*

"My sister called earlier," Charlie announced quietly, bringing me back to reality.

"Alright?" I replied, tuning and retuning my Sadie.

"Told me that her kid was movin' here."

Huh.

"You mean Emmett?"

"Yep. Boy got himself a job as a police officer here."

How about that.

He was a couple of years older than me, and I knew he worked as a police officer in Nebraska. I also knew that though he didn't visit often, he did like it here, and he was very close with Charlie.

"He'll be shackin' up with me until he finds a place of his own."

I nodded in 'okay' and lit another smoke.

"He lookin' for a house?" I asked, exhaling smoke through my nose.

"Cause Jazz told me the Goffs are movin'."

"That quiet couple livin' next to Cope?"

"Yeah."

"Huh. Well, I'll let Em know then."

Quiet again.
For a while.

Then Charlie played the first chords to a song we sometimes played together, so I filed in.

Beautiful song but very somber.

Charlie cocked an eyebrow at me to which I rolled my eyes but complied... and sang.

_Brewton, Alabama at The Colonial Inn_
_Hot day, old orange juice and vodka on a night stand_
_There's a Chevy Nova with the seat burned out the back_
_From a Winston cigarette that was stumped into the window._

_Bobby Long was like Zorba the Greek_
_Sidetracked by the scent of a woman_
_Could've been an actor on the movie screen_
_Stayed in Alabama just a dreamer of dreams_

_It's a love song for Bobby Long_
_A love song for Bobby Long_

_But don't get me wrong, Bobby Long wasn't no good_
_He'd drag you down if he thought he could_
_Well, he would... drag you down_
_The road I ride will be the death of me_
_Won't you come along_
_The road I ride is gonna set me free_
_It's gonna take me home_

_It's a love song for Bobby Long_
_A love song for Bobby Long_
We continued strumming for a while. Sang a little, talked very little... smoked.

Then, after a while, Charlie sighed, gave a nod. And left.

I played for another hour and then it was time to get my ass to work.

*O*O*O*

"Hey, cuz," Tanya greeted me softly as I entered the bar.

I scowled at her. Hated the pity-looks. Hated the smiles of concern.

"Hey," I muttered, walking passed her towards the bar.

I knew Tanya was devastated, too. Even after more than three years. We all were. Neither one of us really moved on because there was no closure, like I mentioned. And Tanya and Bella were thick as thieves. Together with Angela. Yeah, they were all still missing their Bella, but still... I was the husband. The husband who received pity looks.

I looked down. At the wedding band. It always hurt to look at it. It was a feeling I loved. Yes, I loved the hurt. It made me feel something at least.

I knew she would say yes when I proposed. I wasn't cocky or anything, it's just that we were so compatible. We were one person, and the way we could read each other...

Which was why I bought three rings at once. Her engagement ring – white gold with a heart-shaped, solitaire diamond – and our wedding bands – plain, white gold. Beautiful. Perfect.

She did say yes. Cried out a yes was more like it, and I can't deny that I got a bit emotional, too.
Then, on August 13th, just a few months after I proposed, we got married, and she became Bella Cullen.

"How are ya, Ed?" I heard Alec asked.

I shrugged, joined him behind the bar... changed into the black t-shirt with the Twilight-logo on it. "Same old, same old. You?" I asked, walking over to grab a new rag to throw over my shoulder.

I gave Tanya a nod to go ahead and light up the 'open' sign, and I had already passed a few regulars on the way over. It wouldn't be long until they entered.

"All good," Alec replied. "Esme's comin' in later, by the way."

"How come?" I asked as I wiped the bar.

"Because it's the 4th."

*I'm very aware, Alec.*

"The place will be packed," he finished, and I nodded cause he was probably right.

I hadn't even thought of that.

In my periphery I watched Alec down a shot of Jack. He did that every Saturday, and every Saturday, I watched him down it, wishing I could do the same. If only for one night.

No. Never again. No.

I'm by no means an alcoholic, but the six month bender I went on after we found out that the police had nothing to go on when it came to Bella's case sure could've turned me into one. It took Charlie, Ben, and Alec to straighten my ass out. One of them stayed with me, made sure I didn't
drink, made sure I ate, made sure I got my health back... The three of them shaped me in a way. Alec who is a muscleman, a very inked and pierced one, took me running every fucking day. He helped me get my frustration out. Boxing and running. Got the toxins out of my system.

I got ink. Bella's name on one bicep, EJ's on the other bicep.

Ben got me talking again. Not that he's a shrink or anything but he was always on the sensitive side, and he made sure I didn't keep shit bottle up. He forced me to talk. He was relentless and in the end, I sorta talked. For a while anyway. Got the worst out, I suppose.

Charlie kept me grounded. Made sure I didn't thrash the house or closed myself in again. He got me to play again. Told me that if I didn't pick up Sadie, I might as well throw it away. He reminded me of not dishonoring his daughter.

Today I don't have the three of them hovering. I don't run every day, I don't take vitamins or talk shit out. But a few good things have lingered, though. I don't drink anything stronger than beer. I play the music I always played. I meet up with Alec every Sunday for two hours of boxing, and I eat two meals everyday.

Sometimes I even drink orange juice.

Far from optimal, and I don't talk much either, but it's enough to keep me afloat. But on the other side, I don't have much to talk about. I'm sorta empty.

Like I said, I'm no alcoholic, and it is my God's honest truth when I say I don't crave the alcohol for its taste or anything, and my cravings aren't bad. But I do wish for that numbing feeling every once in a while. It's not hard to resist, which is why I do resist it, but I still wish for it. At least sometimes.
"Four on the tap, three Walkers," Tanya half-shouted over the music.

I nodded and got to it.

The bar was packed, the music was loud, and the patrons were getting hammered. Good for the register.

As I filled glass after glass with beer, I looked up, surveyed the place.

The bar was full, the five booths were full, the five bar tables were crowded. Yeah, it was a good night for drinking, I suppose. Celebrating 4th and all that.

"Give table four a Tanya-special," I told her, feeling my temper flare as three men were being rowdy with my mom.

"My pleasure." She grinned wickedly, taking the tray of alcohol.

You don't want a Tanya-special. It involves threats to your valuables, and you'll get a taste of her manicured claws.

Sure, my mom can handle her own – very well even – but she's a tiny piece of lady, and then there's that; she's a lady. You don't disrespect women.

My mom was only seventeen when she had me, and my dad left a year later, which left Esme alone with a baby, and a bar that didn't give her shit at the time. Ed Sr. owned the bar originally but gave up when he couldn't get the bills paid, and Mom changed that, renamed the place, redecorated, and started from scratch. So, yeah, my forty-two year old mother can definitely handle her own, but I'm still her overprotective son. Enough said.

A few minutes later, Mom strolled up with an empty tray.
"Thanks, kiddo," she sighed, giving me a smile, referring to Tanya's 'work.' "Okay," she continued, wiping her forehead a bit. "Four Buds, two doubles of Jack, and one GT."

"Yes, ma'am," I replied, giving her a wink.

"Alec, could ya please change the music?" Mom hollered over said music.

"Aint nothin' wrong with Social Distortion," Alec drawled, smiling lazily at Mom.

I agreed. But don't disobey Esme Cullen. Nothing good will come of it, and Alec knows it... so he changed the music.

Into country.

Not bad at all. I like the country as long as there's some rock to it, and Grayson Capps is one of my favorites.

After fixing Mom's order, I placed the shit on her tray and she took off, and I headed for the two very drunken women at the end of the bar that were waiting for me.

"What can I get you ladies?" I asked.

"How about a little bit of you on the tap?" lady one slurred.

"How about not?" I replied dryly. "I can get y'all new Margaritas instead."

"Fine." Lady two sulked. "You married, handsome?"

"Sure am," I answered with a nod, ignoring the pain in my chest.

"Well, aint that a shame," lady one sighed, handing me a bill for the drink I wanted to throw in her fucking face.

"No, it's really not," was my standard reply.
I gave Alec a pointed look to deal with those two from here on out.

He gladly obliged.

Tanya gave me a scowl.

I didn't care.

Alec and Tanya had been dancing around on their 'casual' relationship for years, both of them wasting time, both of them being stubborn, neither of them admitting that they want more. Pussies, both of 'em.

I smirked then, as I spotted Jazz and Alice at the other end of the bar. Those two were easy to take care of, so I headed over, feeling a bit better.

"Happy 4th of July," Alice chirped, leaning over the bar to kiss my cheek.

I liked her. She knew all about the significant days I had with my wife but she didn't tip-toe around me. She didn't treat me like a child, and she said things straight out.

"Right back atcha." I winked. "What can I get y'all?"

"A Heineken and a Cosmo," she said... you know, with that everlasting smile of hers.

"Yes, ma'am," I chuckled.

Alice and Jazz were each others opposites. He's an old sergeant. Left when one of his missions failed, leaving him the only survivor. He's thirty-five and very quiet. Alice on the other hand, well, she's the chirpy preschool teacher, and ten years younger than Jazz. But for some reason they fit perfectly. They're married but without children, something I believe will change soon.
I shook my head to clear the images I knew were coming and focused on the Cosmo instead.

They came anyway, though. The thoughts. The thoughts about my son.

Fuck…

Is he alive, angel? Did you give birth? Are you alive? Is he starting preschool somewhere this fall?

The night continued.

**Chapter 4**

...*When all we wanted was love*

*We got cut up and burned...*

*...And all we need now is love*

*We've been through enough...*

~*Light In Your Eyes by Flyleaf – chapter song.*

**July 7th**

**Bella Cullen.**

You'd love him so much. You'd be his hero.

He's three years old today, Edward.

He's perfection. He's the only one I smile for. The only one that keeps me breathing.

Our little EJ.
He has your eyes. You should see them, they're beautiful. And you'd be happy to hear that he has my hair. You never liked your own. I loved yours, though. You know that.

He has your personality, too. God, he's so smart, baby.

In a way I don't like that, because he knows something is wrong. He's so good at reading me. Too good. He wonders everyday why Mommy doesn't leave the house. He asks often why Garrett doesn't like Mommy, and why Garrett's the only one to take him to daycare.

What am I supposed to tell our boy? Am I supposed to tell him that I'm not here willingly? Been there done that. In a way.

I've told him all about you, of course. He's still too young to understand much of it, but he does know his daddy's name is Edward. Just like him. And he stares at the small photo of you I have.

Remember the one, hubs? The photo of you in my locket?

I remember when you gave it to me, and the beautiful necklace that goes with it.

I still have it, and I show it to EJ every night.

He often asks about the guitar in that photo, and he giggled when I told him that you named the guitar Sadie.

I've told him stories about New Orleans, about our yellow house, and EJ wants to visit so badly. More than most kids want to visit Disneyland.

Instead we're stuck in some town in Washington.

Forks.

EJ tells me it rains a lot here.
I wouldn't know. I'm not allowed to leave the house, and the blinds are always drawn. But I do hear it sometimes. Mostly at night.

That's when I'm awake. Perhaps like you, baby? Are you still a night person? You always were.

Same here, anyway.

I'm not allowed to see EJ until he gets back from daycare – apart from waking him up in the morning – so I make sure I'm awake every hour I do get to see him. Even if he's asleep, I watch him. Make sure he's okay. For the most of it, he is. But he's still wondering about a lot of things.

I'm wondering, too.

I'm wondering why Garrett insists EJ even goes to daycare, and even summer daycare. Why can't he stay with me where I know he's safe? Or maybe he's safer in daycare, now that I think about it. Perhaps it's good for him.

He's starting preschool after the summer, Edward. Can you believe it? He's growing up.

I'm wondering why Garrett took me. He doesn't like me. Doesn't talk to me. Barely speaks to EJ, for which I'm glad, but I just don't see reason.

Over the years I've learned a bit about him, and what I know still isn't much. I know he's in his forties. I know he used to be married to a woman named Kate, but I suppose they're not anymore seeing as I haven't met her. But he still wears the ring.

Sometimes he calls me Irina. I don't know why.

He doesn't work, and I have no idea where he gets money from.
He's a very odd man. Frightening and threatening, but he's never done anything to us... well, that's not exactly true, now is it? But what I mean is; he's never laid a hand on me or EJ. That's not to say I'm not completely fucked up because I am.

Things many take for granted, I don't have.

I haven't met a single person in three years. Except for EJ and Garrett. Not since the day I gave birth. It was a gruesome day and Garrett had kidnapped a nurse from where we were in Phoenix. I don't know what happened with her after EJ's birth.

I'm afraid to even think about it.

He's keeping me locked up in the house, and he never leaves unless it's to pick up EJ.

Food gets delivered to the doorstep. Bills are paid online, I suppose.

The house is always silent.

And when Garrett does venture outside the house, he locks me inside the basement where EJ and I sleep at night.

I've tried talking to Garrett, to plead with him. I've cried, I've thrashed, I've screamed. Nothing gets to him.

But I don't think I'm me to him. I think he sees me as someone else.

I don't know.

Escaping is not possible, believe me, I've tried to find a way.

He's not stable, that's for sure, and I'm terrified everyday that I'll never see EJ again.
I play nice because... the fact remains; Garrett is not all there.

His days are the same. Each and every day.

He wakes up, cleans his gun, eats breakfast, and then he takes EJ to daycare.

When he returns, he stares at the TV while cleaning his gun again. The TV isn't on. He stares at it anyway. Shut off.

I've tried talking to him but it's like he's not there.

But he still is because his reflexes are out of this world. They terrify me.

I'm walking on eggshells.

If I do anything wrong, anything out of character, his eyes snap to mine so fast it's scary. And his glare is... it sends shivers down my spine every time.

I think he has history in the army. It's his personality. His OCD. His posture. His clothes. Always the same cargo pants and white t-shirt.

And I've seen the fake papers. The passports and ID's. I saw them once when I was cleaning.

That earned me a glare and a pointed finger towards the basement.

There is one thing I've learned, though, and that's the telltale signs of him getting ready to leave.

Over the past three years and five months, we've moved five times, and he's pacing more when it's time to move. Talks to himself. He's paranoid.

I think we're moving soon.

I love you, Edward. So much. You have my heart.
Have you moved on?

**Chapter 5**

...*I barely made it through today*

*Still empty inside...*

...*If only I could breathe you in...*

~Breathe You In by Stabbing Westward – chapter song.

**July 7th**

**Edward Cullen.**

July 7th.

It was Bella's due date.

Today I don't wanna get out of bed.

Charlie knows of course, which is why I can hear him knocking on the door downstairs.

After putting on my jeans, I dragged my ass downstairs, rubbing my chest as I opened the door. Squinted through my lashes, cause the sun was out, and... I was fucking tired. I just wanna stay in bed.

"You're not stayin' inside today," he said flatly. "And I've talked to Esme and Alec. You're not workin' tonight."

I wanted to whine, but I knew better. It was just to accept the facts; Charlie isn't one to give in.

"Alright," I replied, gruffly in my morning voice.
Charlie nodded, backed away slightly from the doorway. "I've been invited over at Jazz and Alice for dinner. You'll be sufferin' with me, cause you're invited, too."

I groaned. Grimaced a bit, too.

Charlie chuckled. Only a little. The man enjoyed my discomfort, and distaste for social gatherings. He didn't like them either, so I knew he'd get a kick out of having me there.

"What time?" I grumbled, passing him to step out for a smoke.

The sunbeams hitting my chest felt good.

"Well, the two should be back from church in a couple of hours. They're helpin' with the bake sale for Sunday," he sighed, taking his seat in the rocker. "I'll head over to help Jazz with the grill later."

Bake sale. Church folks. Raising money to the children's hospital. Yeah, Alice and Jazz are good people.

I nodded once in acknowledgement and leaned back, soaked up some sun as I inhaled deeply from my smoke. I enjoyed the heat this-... huh.

"What time is it?" I asked, cause it felt very early for me.

"Noon," he replied, smirking a bit.

I scowled. Closed my eyes and focused on my cigarette calming me instead.

We were quiet for a while and like always, my mind wandered. It was nothing new. I was used to it. I loved it even. Memories were what I had left.

"Do you think I will be a good mom?"
Stupid question. I shot her a look that told her how ridiculous she was before resuming nuzzling her baby bump. It was very small but it worked as the biggest magnet for me. I could barely imagine how drawn I would be when it grows.

"Mommy's being stupid, little nugget," I whispered, pressing my lips against her exposed skin.

Closing my eyes, I continued to nuzzle and kiss as Bella dragged her fingers through my hair, adding pressure to massage my scalp. I swear I purred like a cat at one point.

"You're going to be an amazing dad," she murmured softly.

I smiled against her skin, hoping to God she's right.

I wasn't nervous yet, though I knew that would come sooner or later. I was more anxious for the little one to arrive. I already loved him or her so completely.

I was nothing like my own father, and I knew I would never do anything stupid... of that magnitude, anyway. I'm human, I will probably fuck up many times, but practice makes perfect. Bella and I are proof of that.

"Do you think it's a boy or a girl?" I murmured, placing a kiss under her belly button.

"Yes, one or the other," she chuckled.

I laughed through my nose, shook my head in amusement.

"Mommy's very funny," I deadpanned.

We were quiet for a while, both of us enjoying our afternoon in bed. The sun filtered through the blinds, making the room perfectly lit for our lazy Sunday. Perfection is what I would call it. But how could it not be? I
mean, I have my wife, my pregnant wife, in bed with me. Naked and all cuddly. Plus, she's working her magic in my hair.

"I think it's a boy," she said quietly then.

"Oh, yeah?" I smiled against her skin. "Not a Sadie then?"

"Are you a boy?" I asked the belly, making Bella giggle adorably. "Are you really a boy, little nugget? Or are you a Sadie."

"You think it's a girl?" she asked softly, and I smiled up at her, contemplating.

What did I think?

I had no idea but it didn't matter. If this wasn't our little Sadie, then maybe Sadie would be the next one. None of it mattered. As long as he or she was healthy.

And didn't get my hair.

"I don't know," I said thoughtfully. "We have to come up with a boy's name, though."

Bella cocked an eyebrow. "Not a girl's name?"

I shook my head at her, because no, I wasn't budging.

Bella was afraid that I agreed on Sadie just because she'd loved that name ever since she named her doll that, but it wasn't true. I had fallen for that name, too.

"Sadie Marie Cullen if it's a girl," I murmured, brushing my fingers over her abdomen. "And if it's a boy... 'Something' Anthony Cullen... or Charles maybe? Whatever."
To this, Bella laughed. Loudly. "Something Cullen?"

Yeah, she's full of fun today.

"You better watch it, Tiny," I growled playfully, crawling over her, ready to pounce.

Edward Anthony Cullen Jr.

Sounds fancy, doesn't it?

I guess it's supposed to be Edward III, but... no. No way.

Are you out there, EJ?

"I think I'll head down to the station," Charlie mumbled, no doubt thinking about today's date, too.

I nodded mutely, wishing I could go with him for once but I never could. Ever since they declared every clue as useless, only leading to dead ends, I haven't been able to stomach a visit. The case was still open but no one worked actively on it. Only Charlie when he went down there. He did so a few times every month just to make sure, just to go through possibilities, and every time he comes back home, a bit worse off than before.

Everyone thinks Bella is... gone.

Deep breath.

No, she can't be.

*O*O*O*

"Will you be comin' to church on Sunday?" Alice asked.

We were sitting in their backyard. Well, Alice and I were sitting, and Charlie and Jazz were working the grill.
I had just suffered through half an hour of making salad with Alice and now I needed to enjoy my beer. So, I tipped it back, sipped it slowly, all while cursing vegetables. Who needs 'em, anyway?

"We'll see," I muttered, picking at the label of my bottle.

"That's a no in Edward-land," she sighed.

I shrugged 'cause she was most likely right.

"How's your new job?" I asked, changing the subject.

She'd gotten a new job right before summer started, and I know she was a bit sad about walking into a class of children only to release them for the summer a few weeks later, but in true Alice-fashion, she had solved it by volunteering at the community center where many of the children spent their days during the summer when their parents were working.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "I love it! I just wish it wasn't so far away. I mean, I have to drive two hours every day to get back and forth, but I think it'll be worth it. The kids are so damn cute!"

"That's great," I replied lamely, not knowing what else to say.

There were a few things about Alice that reminded me of Bella and one of these things was definitely their shared love for children. The way Bella would light up whenever children were mentioned...

I sighed. Sipped some beer.

"You've met all the kids in your class then?" Charlie asked as he sat down across from us, nursing his own beer.

I think Charlie needed a bit more of Alice than I did. Alice was a ray of sunshine in Charlie's life, and though he easily got fed up with gatherings
and such, I know he could listen to Alice forever. No doubt thinking about how she resembled Bella, too.

Equally tiny, equally quirky and happy. Alice is just a bit more colorful.

*You'd rather eat dust than wear heels, though.*

I cracked a small smile, remembering my wife's way to dress. I loved it. She was quirky. Jean skirts or shorts, often one of my t-shirts that she tied at the hip, and her collection of chucks was impressive. Still is, I suppose. They're all still in our closet. She loved them, expect for when it was her time of the month.

She wore combat boots then. Jazz would be impressed.

Oh, and she had a love for knee socks. So did I. I found it sexy when she wore those.

*So, so sexy.*

I sighed again, and focused on Alice who was talking about... something.

"...absolutely, and I'm glad it's not a huge class. I only have nine little ones, although there will soon be a tenth."

"Oh, and I love that it's fairly divided between boys and girls," she went on. "So far, I have five girls and four boys, but the new one moving here in August is a boy and I just can't wait for school to start again in September."

I tuned out again, lit a smoke, leaned back and closed my eyes.

"That's not fair, Bella!" I laughed.

"Who said anything about fair?" she retorted with a mischievous grin. "Me, T, and Angela against you, Ben, and Eric."
I narrowed my eyes at her. She was up to something, and I knew my girl. At fifteen, soon sixteen, she was almost as rowdy as boys – meaning; she had a wicked, wicked mind.

Refilling my two water guns, I glanced over my shoulder and saw Charlie, mom and Aunt Liz approach.

"That's good," Charlie grinned, gesturing at us six kids. All of us holding two water guns each. "It's been a dry summer. The lawn needs watering," he chuckled.

"Yeah, that's what we're here for," Ben snickered, lying obviously.

We were not really here to tend to Charlie's yellowing lawn.

No, we're here, taking advantage of the fact that mom, Aunt Liz, and Charlie are going over to the Newtons, and they'll be gone all night long. We all know what this means.

No parents.

"Oh, I'm sure, kid," Charlie laughed. "It has nothin' to do with Angela then?"

I looked over to where Bella, Angela, and Tanya were huddled. Angela hadn't heard Charlie, but Ben sure had, and he was blushing like a girl.

"Charlie, stop embarrassin' the boy," mom scolded playfully, smacking him in the chest as she made her way over to me. "I can trust you, kiddo, right? You'll make sure the house is still here when Charlie returns tomorrow."

"Yes, ma'am," I grinned, saluting her with my gun in hand.

"And Tanya, honey?" Aunt Liz called. "You'll behave, yes?"
My cousin was as bad as Bella, and I knew the sweet ass smile she gave her mom was just so damn fake. "Oh, I'll be the best, mama. I promise."

Mom and Aunt Liz cocked their eyebrows at us while Charlie started laughing.

"Just make sure my house is still standin' when I return, alright?" he laughed. "And Edward, you take care of my girl."

"He will," Bella said before I could.

Again I narrowed my eyes at her. Them eyes were full of mischief.

"Humph," was Charlie's grunted reply.

The folks left then.

"Alright! Rose and Jamie will be here in an hour," Tanya said as soon as the parents were out of sight. "But we're already perfectly divided. Three girls, three guys. Let's get started!"

Before we could say anything, Ben, Eric, and I stood there, gaping like fish, watching the three girls remove their tank tops and shorts.

They… they… oh, God… bikinis… barely there… Mmm, Bella.

"Something wrong, baby?" Bella asked innocently, sauntering her way over to me… wearing that skimpy thing in dark blue.

She was oh so hot. Slightly tanned. Supple body. And I'm sorry but holy crap! Her boobs are bigger, I swear.

I mean, I'm a gentleman and yes, I've obviously seen my girl's luscious boobs. Felt them, kissed them, sucked on them… But they have grown since last time, I fucking swear. But like I said, I'm a gentleman, and we
don't exactly spend every waken hour naked, although now I'm thinking that's a shame.

"I'm up here, Edward," she giggled, snapping her fingers in my face.

I snapped out of it.

"You little minx!" I hissed quietly. "You had this planned? Seriously, Bella, I'm renaming you to Jezebel!"

"Mmm, but I'm your Jezebel," she purred, placing a hand on my heaving chest.

My Jezebel.

My girl. All mine.

"Damn straight," I mumbled before dipping down to kiss her.

Best not to think further on that memory.

Since Alice and Charlie were still talking about her job, I walked over to Jasper instead.

"Need some help, man?" I asked, feeling my stomach rumble at the sight of the steaks.

Jazz was much like me, often in deep thought, so it took a while before he noticed I was there, and he didn't answer.

I didn't ask again either. Just watched him flip the burgers and the steaks.

I didn't know a lot about his past, he rarely spoke of it, and the little I knew was mostly what Alice had told us.
I knew there was no guilt buried in Jazz, and that was good, I guess. Instead there was a big load of anger and regret, which isn't good. But perhaps it's better than guilt. I'd think so... I think.

I knew the failed mission wasn't his fault. Alice had told me that. The basics of his story were that one of his men had snapped in the middle of a mission. The man's wife had left him of some shit like that, and he had completely lost it. It had caused them everything and their cover had been blown, leaving them defenseless in the middle of hostile territory.

In the end, Jazz was the only one walking away. All his men were killed, apart from the man responsible. They had never found him and was only reported missing in action, though he was presumed dead.

And as Jazz walked away, he left Sergeant Whitlock behind, including his medals, and became Jazz.

His posture gives him away. It's easy to see his past just by looking at him – the way he stands rigid with his hands clasped behind him – but other than that, you wouldn't know. Dressed in cargo shorts and t-shirts, he looks casual. The man even wears flip-flops.

"I suppose that oughta do it," Jazz announced quietly then. "Food's ready."

Dinner was good and quiet, expect for Alice. She did the talking, but I think we have a good balance. She talks and the men don't mind listening, as long as we don't have to talk much.

*O*O*O*

It felt odd not going to work that night, and I was left restless after dinner. Restless isn't good for me. My mind wanders to places I don't like to visit, and after the memory I thought of this afternoon at Jazz's house, I know what's next.
I'm a man and my body has needs of course, but that doesn't mean I enjoy it much. Especially not afterwards, and I knew the second I stepped into the shower that my night would be painful.

My sex life with Bella was out of this world for me, and I was a lucky bastard to have such a kinky girl, but there was much more to it than that. There was a connection between us that never faded, and it was so strong. So fucking powerful.

We were each others first. Everything, we experienced together. Always together. It mattered so much, and that intense connection regardless. It didn't matter if it was a quick fuck or hours of slow, passionate love-making. The spark was always present.

The feeling of 'this is home,' or 'everything in the world is right.'

Thinking about this, fantasizing... taking care of business... alone, it always broke me a little, because I would remember that intensity, that goddamn spark, and it left me empty afterwards. Like slicing up the wounds all over again.

But my body was already reacting, and as the hot water washed over me, I was hard. Aching, leaking, desperate.

For her.

*I glared at her as I adjusted myself in my basketball shorts.*

*She just laughed and turned away from me to refill that damn water gun again.*

*After Rose and James had arrived, we had continued our war in Charlie's backyard, and I shit, the girls killed us. But in our defense, it was their fault. They were all running around in their skimpy bikinis, and man, Bella was having fun giving me blue balls.*
She was so fucking hot.

We had talked about sex before but we weren’t quite ready yet. Not even me to be honest. I was too nervous. But that didn’t mean I wasn’t ready for more. More than dry humping, insane make up sessions, and petting.

All that did now was riling me up, leaving me desperate for her.

My latest fantasy was to taste her. God, I wanted it so much.

So, seeing my wet dream... well, all wet. It was a bit hard. Pun intended.

"I think it’s about time we play by their rules, guys," James said as he unabashedly eye-fucked my cousin.

I didn't care much, but damn, did he have to be so obvious?

"What do you mean?" Ben asked, keeping his eyes on Angela.

James smirked, said nothing, but... actions speak louder than words, right? Cause he took his t-shirt off.

We all followed suit and by the time the girls had refilled their guns, they spun around to see us all without shirts.

My Jezebel blushed and dropped her jaw.

Game on, baby.

"What's wrong, Bella?" I asked innocently, quoting her from before, as I approached her slowly. I smirked as her eyes roamed over my bare chest. "I'm up here," I continued, snapping my fingers, and damn, I was enjoying playing by her rules. It was fun to throw her previous words right back at her.
Bella dropped her gun on the grass then, and looked up at me with dark eyes.

Fuck.

With her eyes locked with mine, she said loud enough for everyone to hear, "Game over."

Then she grabbed my hand and my tiny girl showed how freakishly strong she was when she dragged me inside.

Not that I put up much of a fight. At all.

I laughed as she pushed me inside her room, shutting the door closed behind us. "You look like you're on a mission, baby."

"I am."

It came out almost as a moan, and all humor was gone.

Fuck!

Something inside me snapped, and I grabbed her roughly and pushed her down on her tiny bed before I covered her body with mine.

"You're so sexy, Bella," I groaned before kissing her hard.

Hands roamed, eagerly and impatiently. Moans and groans. Bodies moving together perfectly, seeking friction and relief.

"I want more, Edward," she whimpered in my mouth.

I suppressed a growl, thrust my tongue into her mouth, and ripped off her wet bikini top.

Then I sat up, between her legs, and slid her bottom down, too, unable to wait or ask for any kind of 'go ahead.' But as I watched her body, saw her
signs, I knew she wanted this. I knew she wanted us to move to the next step.

I had no idea where my boldness came from, but it was there nonetheless, and I covered her naked body with mine again, and whispered in her ear.

"I need to taste you, baby." I sucked on her earlobe, fighting a smile when she moaned and writhed under me, but... fuck, that smile was the last thing on my mind when she pushed down my basketball shorts.

"Jezebel," I whispered under my breath.

"I go first," she said breathlessly, pushing me back so that I was on my back. "I've been thinkin' about this for a long time."

I stared at her wide eyed, pretty sure I gulped, too, but seeing her between my legs, watching my dick was fucking hot. Sin. My Bella.

Propping myself up on my elbows, I fought the urge to close my eyes as she grabbed my cock, and stroked me from base to tip.

"Christ, Bella," I moaned, knowing for certain that my girl gave the best hand jobs on earth. I swear.

With eyes wider than before, I swallowed hard and watched how she lowered her head... more... closer... yes...

"Oh, fuck!" I gasped, fistig the covers to restrain myself from doing something. I didn't know what, but oh, God, I just... ungh... watching her... Shit, her mouth is on me. Her mouth is on me! So hot, so damn wet!

Her hair fell in her face and that was just unacceptable, so I tucked in behind her ear before my hand decided to thread its way into her hair, and I didn't know why, but there was an urge.
"Yesss, baby," I hissed as she added pressure. "Oh, God, so fucking hot... ungh... shit..."

My breathing became shallow, my body was tensing, and I knew all the damn signs. I wouldn't last. Fuck.

Harder then. Shit. And deeper. Oh, holy hell! Teeth! Yes!

"Holy fuck, Bella... baby, baby, you need to... ungh... stop..."

She didn't stop!

"Bella!"

Did she stop?

No, she sucked me harder!

My sanity flew out the window when she cupped my balls, and I came hard. I came so fucking hard, and I was all over the place. Couldn't breathe, couldn't move, but my mind was frantic. My mind was on what my girl had just done. Or what I had done.

I came in her mouth!

With a smug smirk, Bella released my cock and crawled over me, not stopping until we were face to face.

I was rendered speechless, still breathing hard as hell.

I couldn't believe how much I could love this girl. Obviously not because I'd just received my first blowjob, but for everything she is. The smile, her eyes, her touch, the words.

"Can I kiss you?" she asked softly.

I frowned in confusion. "Why... why would you... even ask?"
"Um... I don't know. Because I just swallowed-?"

I cut her off by kissing her hard.

"I love you so much, Bella," I mumbled against her lips. "Never ask if you can kiss me again, okay?"

"Okay," she whimpered as I nibbled on her bottom lip. "I love you, Edward."

I was desperate to feel her closer. "Love you more, sweetheart."

Then I felt her wet pussy against my thigh, and it turned me into some animal.

With a growl, I flipped us over. "My turn, Jezebel."

I stood in the shower. My forehead pressed against the tile. My eyes shut tightly. My breathing labored.

My heart hurting.

Christ, the pain...

Whimpers escaped my mouth as I toweled myself dry. It was better than the ugly sobs that used to rip their way through my body, but that only meant I was getting better at holding myself together, because the pain sure as shit hadn't subsided.

As usual, I went to bed alone.

Buried my face in Bella's pillow.

It didn't smell like her. Hadn't for years.

Please come home to me, angel...
Chapter 6

...Please come and take me out of here...

~Take Me Out Of Here by Out Of Sight – chapter song.

July 14th

Bella Cullen.

I miss you.

I miss you.

I miss you.

I can't say it enough, Edward. I just... miss you. So much.

Today's been a hard day, more so than the rest.

I woke up, took one glance at the calendar on the wall, and wished I never did.

Today, this day, ten years ago, you asked me to be your girl.

I'm still yours, hubs.

Are you mine?

Ten years.

Everything feels hopeless. It's just so wrong. It feels like it's getting worse and worse and everytime something bad happens, I ask myself, 'How can it get worse?' But then it does. Someway, somehow, things can still get worse, and I don't know how much more I can take.

Edward, Dad, Esme, Tanya, Rose, Jamie, Alec, Liz... I miss you all. I love you. I love you so much it hurts. It always hurts.
God, the pain...

I was right, by the way.

We're moving, and Garrett's already told me that we were moving south but he wouldn't specify.

Only that we're moving south and that we're leaving once EJ’s better, which should be within the next few days.

EJ got the flu and all I wanted was to take him to the doctor like a good mom. I want to comfort him, smile at him and give him a treat for being so good, and maybe cook something special that would ease his tummy.

But I'm refused.

Garrett took him to the doctor. He won't let me be a good mom to our boy, Edward, and I'm so angry. I'm so fucking upset about all this, and it's all just shit. Just shit. I grit my teeth and keep quiet instead, because I can't let this affect EJ more than it already does.

My tears are of hopelessness, frustration, sadness, and anger. It's a dangerous combination because I find myself fantasizing about picking up a knife. Perhaps sneak into Garrett's bedroom, and-

I stop there because nothing is possible.

During the day, when EJ’s at summer daycare, I'm allowed to wander the house, but Garrett senses me all the time. A part of him is fucking insane, and I swear he belongs in the psyche ward, but then there's the other part of him. The part that is so sharp. He sees it all, feels, and hears everything.
The windows are barred and the door is locked from the inside. He has the only key, and the house is in the middle of the goddamn forest from what EJ tells me.

I've tried talking to EJ of course. I've tried to find out about... anything, something. But I still don't know enough.

All I know is that Garrett is EJ's 'legal guardian' on paper. Garrett told me that, though. Not EJ.

Oh, and that apparently our son has a 'condition,' Edward. Can you fucking believe it? Garrett has told the teachers that EJ doesn't know the difference between reality and imaginary, and of course I confronted Garrett.

I didn't understand because EJ just said that Ms. Mallory had told him to not play pretend so much.

The freak actually smiled as he said, "Well, we can't have the teachers think the kid's mom is locked up in a basement somewhere, now can we?"

He wouldn't say anything else after that, and when I asked EJ what he used to play, he just told me that he pretended he lived with Mommy, Daddy, and Sadie... in our yellow house.

What should I do, baby?

I need you.

I need us.

How should I fight? How can I do better?

I need to live because what would happen to EJ if I gave up?

Great, now I'm crying again.
I'm just... at a loss.

I don't want to feed my son milk and cereal when he's sick. I don't want him to eat pizza or steak.

No, I want to make him Esme's soup. Because that's what I remember her giving me when I was sick. Sometimes you came over with it. Remember? I remember. And I wanna be able to make that soup for EJ. But I can't.

Garrett is strict about the food, which I don't understand because pizza and other take-out is fucking fine, but chicken soup isn't?

That's Garrett, though. He's all about routine and everyday is the same. Breakfast is milk and cereal, lunch is leftovers, and dinner is take out or mac and cheese.

I hate it.

I fucking hate it!

I just... want to be a good mom. I want to see the pictures EJ draw in class, I want to help him, I want to drive him to friends' houses, I want to cook nice dinners for him, I want to give him birthday presents, I want to celebrate him, I want to take pictures of him.

God, Edward, I don't have a single photo of our son.

I'm sorry.

I'm so sorry.

I love you.

Chapter 7

~Mermaid by Grayson Capps – chapter song.
August 13th

Edward Cullen.

I stare at it. The bottle of Jack.

I bought it. I want it.

Now I'm sitting in our living room, another room that Bella decorated, and I'm staring at the bottle.

A part of me wonders why I sat down in the living room. I rarely sit here. It's full of memories. Much like our bedroom but the living room is different. The memories are of laughter and long nights. Pictures everywhere.

You loved taking pictures, angel.

The room is square, the ceiling is high. The walls are dark red, the ceiling is glossy white, as is the wooden floor. The drapes by the two windows are white, and on the wall between the two windows, we have the flat screen Emmett gave us when he visited once.

"You can't watch a good game on that tiny pocket sized TV you have," he'd said.

Our couch is big, plush, and black.

The thick rug is also black.

The coffee table is white, matching the glossy floor.

The bottle of Jack is there. Right there. Within reach.

I remember staring at my wife like she'd grown an extra head when she brought home the supplies to decorate our living room.
The paint she used on the ceiling and on the floor is supposed to be used on boats.

I'm not kidding. My wife bought top-coat used for boats, but what shouldn't have surprised me was the result. It's of course perfect, not to mention cool. It really is a cool living room and we've had many nights of fun in here.

The pictures will tell you that and there are many of them.

In black and white, our dark red walls are filled with pictures taken from parties, barbeques, even movie nights.

I sighed. My eyes found the bottle again.

*You should be here, baby. I need you. It's our wedding anniversary.*

Yeah. August 13th.

And I'm here alone. Without her.

I've dreaded this day. Just like I've dreaded the past ones she's missed.

For the past few weeks, I've buried my ass in work, even helped mom with paper work at the bar. All to make the days go faster.

July 14th was awful. I didn't leave the bed.

With another heavy sigh, I pulled out the pack of smokes and my lighter.

I opened the Jack. Swallowed hard as I smelled it.

Didn't drink it. Yet.

I'm using the little cap as an ashtray, though, cause I'm too lazy to go get one in the kitchen.
I lit the smoke. Took a deep drag.

*I know, you'd be fuming if you knew I smoked indoors. Sorry.*

I don't smoke indoors normally, though.

Bella didn't smoke. Not really, anyway. Only sometimes when we were drinking. She tried to get me to quit or at least cut down.

*I promised you I'd quit the day EJ was born.*

Leaning forward, I brought the bottle to my nose again, and I sniffed the amber liquid.

I remember the burn.

"*Enough is enough, Edward. For fuck's sake, have you looked in the mirror lately?*" Alec bellowed, glaring at me.

*I shrugged and downed another shot.*

*Standing in the doorway to the kitchen, Alec could look intimidating with his inked arms crossed over his chest, but I didn't give a flying fuck. No, instead I turned my back at him, poured another shot and looked out the kitchen window.*

*It was a clear view of our little front yard, and I saw both Charlie and Ben out there.*

*Fuckers.*

*"It's been six months, Edward. We're done. This ends now."*

*I frowned in confusion.*

*Six months?*
Is he fucking retarded?

"It's been ten mo-onths," I slurred. "Shhs'been gone for t-ten months... not six."

The glass was too fucking small so I threw it in the sink and chugged from the bottle instead.

Much better.

"I know, man... I know," he sighed. "I'm not talkin' about Bella, though. I'm talkin' about you. You've been drunk for the past six months, and your family's had enough."

Four months. That's how long the police searched. Four months.

Then they gave up. Nothing to go on.

Charlie and I couldn't do it alone. We tried but we couldn't.

I failed her.

I'm so sorry, baby. So fucking sorry.

My head snapped up as Alec snatched the bottle from my hand.

"Gimme that!" I snapped.

"No," was his simple reply as he poured down the contents in the sink.

My liquid.

I'll buy more.

"Esme's worried sick about you," he muttered.

Something inside me snapped, and my haze cleared. Fury took over instead.
"I don't give a flying fuck, Alec!" I shouted. "You don't think I haven't noticed the goddamn pity-looks? I'm so fucking sick of it! Instead of feeling sorry for me, why don't people help me find her?"

"We've all tried, Edward!"

"THAT'S NOT ENOUGH!" I roared. "She's still not here, is she? NOTHING will be enough until she's found!"

I was panting. Chest heaving. Fists clenched tightly.

"There's nothing more you can do for her, Edward," he replied calmly, quietly, sadly. "You haven't slept properly in ten months. You don't eat, you don't take care of yourself." He sighed, shaking his head. "You're killing yourself."

I barked out a humorless laugh, 'cause who gives a shit?

I'm dead without her anyway.

"Bella wouldn't want you to-"

I didn't let him finish. In two strides, I was in front of him, and my fist connected with his jaw. Hard.

I'd already punched the police officer who gave me the news about ending the active search. My fist could take down a few more. Not a problem.

"You do NOT speak of my wife," I gritted out through clenched teeth. "You have no fucking idea what she would want me to say or do."

Alec glared at me as he rubbed his jaw.

I felt nothing in my fist that was still clenched, clenched so tightly it was shaking.
It felt good almost.

"I'm not givin' in here, Ed. Your bender is over," he said, still rubbing and flexing his jaw.

"Perhaps people shouldn't focus on me," I replied dryly. "Perhaps people should focus on finding Bella."

This time it was Alec who snapped. "Focus on finding Bella? Isn't that what we've all been doin' for the past ten months?

"For fuck's sake, Edward! You've... We've done it all! Interviews, TV, radio, newspapers, flyers..." He shook his head. "We've all been out there searching. And don't think Charlie hasn't noticed you sneaking off in the middle of the fucking night to search more than you were really capable of."

I shrugged in 'whatever.' Of course I've been out there. I've been all over the state putting up flyers.

"I'm just saying this one more time," he continued, pointing a finger at me. "This isn't over, but your bender is. You can still search or whatever, but from today; there will be structure in your fucking life because you're not killing yourself by doing this. You're killing Esme, Liz, and Tanya, too."

Charlie and Ben appeared in the doorway then.

I laughed.

I really fucking laughed.

They stood there, flanking Alec. It was ridiculous. Why care about me having a drink every now and then? Why not care about my angel?

My angel.
My laugh got stuck in my throat.


Our son.

The next thing I new was me sinking down on my knees, and then I lost it. I lost it all, and sobs ripped through me. The pain was excruciating, it stabbed me.

Bella.

Bella.

Bella.

My breakdown was total.

I cleared my throat and dragged my hands over my face. Unsurprisingly there was moisture.

How much can I take? How much of this pain until I lose it completely?

Is she...

I let out a shaky breath.

Is she... Is she dead?

My eyes prickled. My fingers twitched. I leaned forward again, towards the bottle.

"You're not gonna drink that, man."

The voice didn't startle me.

It was calm, sorta quiet.
It was Jasper.

Looking over my shoulder, I saw him there. Leaning against the wall with his ankles crossed. He was calm, confident.

"No, I suppose I'm not," I mumbled.

With another sigh, I rubbed my face, got some clarity, and stood up.

"What brings you by, Jazz?" I asked quietly, motioning for us to head outside.

As soon as the screen door was pushed open, I brought out another smoke, lit it and took a drag before sitting down in my regular seat on the porch swing.

I kicked up my feet on the low table. It's dark green. Bella painted it.

You loved dragging me along when there was a yard sale, and you always found things that you made prettier.

I loved coming with her to those.

"Charlie called me," Jazz drawled, sitting down in the rocker. "He told me what today was, but he's down at the station, so he asked me to stop by."

I chuckled a little. Humorlessly. And exhaled some smoke.

"Babysittin'," I huffed quietly, taking another drag of my smoke.

Jazz cocked an eyebrow. "Well, the shoe fits."

I rolled my eyes but said nothing.

Silence.
After a few minutes, Jasper headed inside and returned with Sadie. Handed her to me, sat back down, and brought out his harmonica from his pocket.

"I heard you last night," he sighed, giving me a pointed look. "I heard you've been playin' somethin' new."

Instead of answering him, I strummed the chords to the new song I've played around with.

I rarely wrote anymore but this one came easily to me.

"Yeah, that one," he nodded, leaned back in the rocker. "You got lyrics?"

"Yeah," I muttered, mirroring him and got comfortable.

My head rested against the house wall, my feet kicked up, eyes closed, fingers on the guitar, playing.

"I'll file in."

I sighed. Never loved singing as much as playing but... whatever.

So, I played, Jasper backed me up, and I sang.

For her.

You got the magic of a mermaid, you swim without drown

I need you now more than ever, my ship is going down

The devil he stole my soul, too much idle time

I'm crawling just like a snake, the devil he owns my mind

He's driving me straight to hell

I was wise when I was with you, I died with you a million deaths
And everytime I was born again but the last time you took my breath

Left me never to breathe again, never to breathe again

Give me life, give me hope, give me strength to hold on

Give me life, give me hope, give me strength to hold on

I need one more day to rise above this jail

I need one more day to rise above this jail

The walls are wet and cold, inside this bottomless hole

Fingernails slip on the slime, it's harder and harder to climb

We sinkin' deeper, deeper into hell

Give me life, give me hope, give me strength to hold on

Give me life, give me hope, give me strength to hold on

I need one more day to rise above this jail

I need one more day to rise above this hell

I didn't open my eyes, 'cause I knew the look he'd give me.

Not pity. Jazz never gave me pity looks.

He gave me a frown. Always the same frown, like he was trying to figure me out.

So... I kept my eyes closed.

And we played for a while.

Smoked.
I tried not to think about the bottle inside. There. On the table in the living room.

It worked somewhat after a while.

"Ali wants you to visit her school for her 'Back to school' project."

I huffed quietly through my nose.

Took a drag. Played some more.

Alice had asked me before, and I always said no. I suppose she thought my answer would be different if she sent Jazz.

"I'll be there, too," he continued. "It's just three days. Two hours a day."

Three days of playing kids' songs? No, thank you.

"Three?" I grumbled, keeping my eyes closed but I raised an eyebrow in question. "Alice said two."

"The school year starts in September, but she wanted us to visit the community center where most of the kids in her class go."

For his wife, Jazz can talk.

"Many words comin' from you today," I joked.

Joke without humor, can you do that?

Apparently.

"The first day is in two weeks, and then we have two more days when school starts. Tuesday and Wednesday, I think she said," he replied, ignoring my comment.

"Have fun," I said dryly, opening my eyes to light a new smoke.
"Charlie thought it was a good idea, too."

Frustration. Christ.

"You're comin', Cullen."

"No, I aint," I gritted out.

*O*O*O*

Two weeks later, Jazz and I sat, surrounded by little ones, playing children songs.

I didn't sing. I played guitar but kept my mouth shut as I cursed Alice in my head.

Jasper did the singing when he didn't play, but otherwise it was Alice and a few other teachers who sang with the kids.

They were everywhere. Happy, toothy grins. Hand clapping. Song requests. Squeals, giggling, and laughing. Bouncing around.

I found myself counting the minutes until I could drive back home.

I rarely drove cause our house was close to the bar, but we drove today since Alice's worked an hour away from home. I was glad, though, cause Jazz will wait for Alice, which means I can drive home alone. Without Jazz and Ms. Chirpy.

*I don't like Volvo very much, angel, but I was told it's safe for children.*

Perhaps it was pathetic of me to buy a car with EJ in mind.

Or maybe not.

Whatever.
The police found our truck three days after Bella was taken from me, but I couldn't drive it anymore. It was impossible for me to even go near it, so once the police were done with it, I took my anger out on it before telling Charlie to take it to the junk yard.

A few days after, it was gone.

What felt like hours later, I could finally drive home, but not until I promised that I would show up on September 7th for the first of two music-days Alice had prepared for her new class. Obviously I promised because there would be hell to be paid if I didn't. That was just Alice. She gets her way.

I said goodbye.

The little ones waved frantically and said goodbye to Guitar Man.

It hurt to watch them. The grins. The fucking joy.

*I hope their parents know how lucky they are.*

*O*O*O*

*I smiled as I felt her fingers in my hair. Her mouth on my neck.*

*She was sitting on the porch swing, and I sat on the floor, between her legs.*

*The table was pushed aside.*

*I was playing for her and EJ, and my head was resting on her tiny baby bump.*

*EJ.*

*We're having a son.*
We found out last week.

I smiled again, played for them both. Just light tinkering.

The sun was setting. It was warm out. Late summer. The smell of barbecues, freshly cut grass, and water from the sprinklers. It smelled like summer.

Our street was quiet yet lively at the same time.

It wasn't full of children but all neighbors were kinda close, and many came together for barbecues at night, after work.

I loved this.

This was home, sitting on the porch with my wife, playing, making small talk. Touching every once in a while.

Warmth.

Home.

"I wanna redo the kitchen before EJ gets here," Bella murmured then, her mouth still on my neck. "Tanya told me about this new store. We went there. I'll take a few shifts, cause I there's this fridge in that store that I saw..."

I chuckled. "Baby, you can't handle school, redecorating the kitchen, taking shifts at the bar, and making sure you and nugget is fine all at the same time."

"I can to," she argued.

I felt her body shake as she giggled silently.
"When does the semester start?" I asked. "And you don't have to take any shifts. We're fine, angel, you know that. Buy the damn fridge," I laughed softly.

Two weeks later, our kitchen resembled a 50's diner. It kept her occupied while Charlie and I got started on the nursery.

It was no surprise when the kitchen was done and I loved it. She was always good at working her magic, and damn, I was glad she skipped the neon signs and the jukebox. But the rest was 50's style. The checkered floor in black and white, the red glossy fridge and freezer. You know the ones? Those rounded ones from the 50's? Yeah, those ones.

Light blue walls, glossy red cupboards. Again, she had bought top-coat used on boats. It made me laugh back then. She was so freaking cute, always in smiles when she came home from her budget shopping, because I knew that was part of the fun for her – to find the cheapest and most unique items that she could fix up.

"Painting another boat, angel?" I grinned as she came through the door. Tanya and Angela in tow. "You know we have more of that glossy stuff left from when you fixed the living room, right?"

"That was white, baby," she winked. "This," she said, holding up the big bucket, "is red. Blood red."

She licked her lips.

I willed my dick to stay the fuck down.

"Sounds... sexy," I replied, noticing the huskiness in my voice.

She reached me then, smiled and stood on her tip-toes, and I smiled, too, as I dipped down.

Swiping my tongue over her bottom lip, I elicited a small moan from her-

"AHEM!"

Damn.

Reluctantly, I broke the kiss, took the bucket of paint from Bella, and looked up to see my cousin and Angela in the doorway.

"Ladies," I nodded in greeting... before hauling ass.

Okay, maybe not hauling ass, but I headed for the kitchen to put the paint there. I guess Bella had invited the girls over to work in the kitchen while I was at the bar tonight.

"You're not workin' tonight, T?" I asked as they entered the kitchen.

"No, Aunt Esme's takin' my shift," she grinned. "We're havin' a girls' night tonight."

"Don't get my girl drunk," I threatened playfully. "She's in charge of a very important person."

"Like I'd drink!" Bella laughed, rubbing her belly. "But never mind that, baby. Why do you have blue paint on your shirt?"

Crap.

I looked down on my black t-shirt, and sure enough, there was blue paint.

Double crap.

"I dunno," I lied, shrugging.

There was no way I was going to tell her about EJ's room.
"Uh-huh, sure," she replied, rolling her eyes at me. But the smile was still there, though. She never could hold a scowl. "It actually looks a little like the paint I'm using for the walls. We got it cheaper by the way! Yeah, cause Tanya used her... uh, assets."

I didn't know if I wanted to smile at her exuberance or if I wanted to hurl at the thought of my cousin's... assets.

A little bit of both perhaps, so I think I grimaced.

"As long as you don't do anythin' stupid to get a discount," I told her.

"Why do you think I sent Tanya to do it?" she giggled.

"Yeah, since I'm the only one single..." T trailed off, sighing a little as she gave Angela and Bella pointed looks.

"Single," I huffed. "You're still playin' around with both James and Alec, aren't ya?"

That earned me a smack in the back of my head.

"That fuckin' hurt!" I snapped, glaring at Tanya.

She just shrugged before unpacking some of the shit they'd bought.

Women.

**September 7th**

Ugh.

"There you are!"

Jazz and I spun around in the empty hallway.
"Good morning, Chirpy," I muttered, giving her some weird wave as I held up my guitar case.

I was not a morning person, and right now, all I wanted was to go back home, get back to bed, and... forget. Like always.

"Hey, doll," Jasper drawled, walking towards his wife.

She was standing in the doorway to her classroom, and I could hear the kids inside. Happy sounds.

"They're excited," Alice beamed, grabbing Jasper's hand. "They remember you from two weeks ago, of course, and they can't wait. And hopefully, my new boy will like it. He's a bit shy, but he only arrived yesterday. Everything is new..."

I tuned out her rambling.

How she can be this happy at ten in the morning is beyond me. Even worse is it that she's been happy since 6 am. Yeah, I know. But that's her.

Jasper and I were ushered into Alice's classroom, and the cheers grew louder as Alice reintroduced us – as Guitar Man and Harmonica, which made the little ones laugh of course. And there is no denying that Alice is perfect for her job. Making the kids smile is her forte, for sure. Not to mention she makes learning fun for three- and four year olds.

"Kidding aside," Alice laughed softly, facing the group of children. "Those of you who were with us at Leah's Center, you all remember Edward and Jasper, don't you?"

A choir of 'yes' was squealed and cheered, and it actually made me smile a little.
They were too many to count, so I gathered that it wasn't just her class, remembering her telling me that she had nine or ten kids in her class. And as the door opened behind me and another teacher stepped in, I understood that it was two classes.

"Good! Well, they're back with us today to play some more songs for you!"

Alice was as cheery as the children, I swear.

More squeals. A few requests already, too.

*Sorry, kiddo, I have no idea who Dora the Explorer is.*

"Any questions?" Alice asked the kids as Jazz and I set up.

Not much to set up of course. We just sat down in two chairs in front of Alice's desk, facing the room, and I tuned my guitar while Jazz tested his harmonica.

"Yes, Miss Alice," mumbled a quiet voice. "I got a question."

Alice hushed everyone, most likely to hear the boy better, and Jazz and I just waited.

Jazz liked this, he enjoyed making children smile. Always stating that children are simple creatures. They don't lie, they don't mess up, and they wear their feelings on display. Easy to read, easy to please, easy to smile for.

I suppose that's right.

I'm just not in a place to think about that. All I want is to go home.

*Damn, I need a smoke.*
"Ask away, Elijah," Alice said softly.

"Um... is this pretend?"

"Pretend? I'm afraid I don't understand, honey," Alice replied, still very softly, and I wondered if maybe it was the new kid in her class.

For some reason, I stopped fiddling with my guitar, and looked up.

My eyes narrowed. Zeroed in on a boy, standing up in the back.

The boy mumbled shyly again, almost as if he was afraid. "If is' pretend... Then tha's Sadie."

He was pointing at my guitar.

"S'there a yellow house for Sadie also?"

I paled.

Stopped breathing.

Chapter 8

...Forgive me my weakness, but I don't know why

Without you, it's hard to survive...

~Everytime We Touch (Ballad version) by Escada – chapter song.

September 6th

Bella Cullen.

I'm crying. All the time, as soon as EJ's not close, I cry.

We're not in Washington anymore.
I don't know where we are now, though. I lost track. The only thing I know is that we aren't in Washington anymore.

It smells like the south. Does that even make sense? I'm sure it doesn't, but it does smell like the south. Or that's what my mind wants perhaps. Is that it? Am I losing my mind?

It wouldn't surprise me because these past few weeks have been insane.

It's taken us three weeks almost to get to where we are now. Three weeks in a car where I'm blindfolded, three weeks where I'm only allowed to hold my own son once we're checked into a motel. And we arrived at motels in the middle of the night of course. Never staying long. Sometimes a few days, sometimes just over night.

We arrived a few days ago and EJ's already been enrolled. I can't believe he's starting preschool today. Preschool. God. I've missed so much. I've been here but... in a way I haven't.

This was the first time we moved where Garrett changed something in his routine.

This time he included my son. Our son, Edward. Oh, God, he cried so hard. I did, too.

I was forced to sit in a chair, bound and gagged, in the new kitchen, and listen to Garrett as he lectured EJ. Threatened him, is more like it. And I couldn't do anything about it.

*Your new name is Elijah.*

*Repeat it.*

*Your mommy is Irina.*

*Repeat it.*
Your daddy's dead. Gone.

Repeat it!

I'm your uncle.

Repeat it.

Your mommy Irina is sick.

Repeat it.

You live with Uncle Garrett.

Repeat it.

Nothing outside of this house is real. It's all pretend.

Repeat it.

Only listen to Uncle Garrett.

Repeat it.

You're not allowed to draw that fucking house in yellow again.

Repeat it!

Your last name is Smith.

Repeat it.

What's your name?

Answer me!

Fucking answer me!

EJ sobbed out Elijah.
I will never forget the images of his fear, hubs. I will never be able to get those images out. God, he was so scared. Trembling, shaking, cringing, crying, gasping for air, wetting himself.

Our three year old boy repeated everything Garrett told him. We sat there for hours, Edward. Hours, and I had to witness our boy repeat it all.

I broke when EJ promised Garrett all those awful things. I broke for our son.

I...and...Christ, there wasn't a thing I could do for him. I sat there. Useless.

So useless.

*O*O*O*

EJ was crying when Garrett came home with him after preschool.

His first day, and I wasn't allowed to ask what they'd done. Nothing. And we don't have a basement to hide in, so I can't ask him tonight.

We're in an apartment this time. A small one. Only two rooms, a kitchen, and a bathroom, and Garrett removed the door to our room. The room where EJ and I sleep – the bedroom. Garrett sleeps in the living room, on the couch... next to his gun. The cleanest gun in the world, I swear.

I hate it.

I hate him.

I hate the apartment.

I hate the words he shoved down my son's throat.

I hate the promises he forced EJ to make.
So much hate.

Hate thrives in this apartment. And it shouldn't have surprised me when things, once again, got worse. After all, it happens too often in my life. Always for the worse. But this shitty little place is a jail cell. All grey, concrete, shady, ugly, in such a bad shape. Dirty and without windows.

Two windows but Garrett covered them. So...no windows. No light.

So dark.

So much hate.

I'm tired, baby. So fucking exhausted.

I feel... I literally feel the hope seep out of me. I didn't know I even had hope until I felt it leave me, but apparently I had it. Or something. But this... this place. It's Godforsaken.

Bitter.

Empty.

Dark.

And this is where I have to pretend that things will be okay. This is where I have to smile for our son, baby. This is where I have to come to terms with the fact that our boy doesn't smile genuinely anymore. It's so small. And fading. His eyes aren't happy. He knows. He knows something is so wrong with this. With our life.

Only a few days into our new routine and I can already see the spirit leaving EJ.

I want to tell him that all the things Garrett told him is bullshit, but I can't. I can't set EJ straight anymore because Garrett's always within earshot.
Something's different here. With Garrett, I mean.

He's more on edge, and he's bought a new laptop. It's always with him, the laptop. Right next to him on the couch if he's cleaning his gun, or on his lap if he's using it. And then he brings it with him if he leaves.

Will I never get a moment alone with my boy again?

Will he now always bring EJ with him?

Will I never find out where we are?

Garrett told me I'm not allowed to ask 'Elijah' where we are or how he spends his day.

I want Garrett to die more than ever.

So much hate.

It's ugly.

I feel darker. Like my insides are tainted with the hate.

Would you love me this way, hubs?

I cry again. Harder this time. More. Sobbing.

EJ's devastated.

I have to hold it together.

*O*O*O*

You're in my arms. It's dark, and we're on our bed. But I can still see you, though. Not too dark.

It's small. I love it. It brings you closer to me. I can feel your heartbeat.
You sleep in his underwear because it's hot, and I love rubbing your little tummy because it's the only way to hear your giggles.

I need them.

But it has to be skin on skin. You're not ticklish if there's fabric in the way.

You're so sleepy and cuddly. I want to ask you how your first day of preschool was.

I smell your hair and drag my fingers through it.

I loved doing that on your daddy.

You're his little nugget.

You'd love him.

"I love you, sweetie," I whisper in your hair. "Daddy loves you, too."

You look up at me with your big eyes. Big beautiful green eyes, and they're full of questions. Confusion.

I'm so sorry, baby. I'm sorry this is your life.

"Daddy?" you wonder very quietly. And you're frowning.

You're too young to frown. You shouldn't have worries.

I nod and place a finger on my lips, motioning for you to be quiet.

You understand because you're Edward's son. Always smart.

"It's not pretend," I breathe out, hoping I'm quiet enough. But I need you to know. I'm desperate for you to believe me.

Your eyes glisten and soon you cry.
I hold you tightly.

"Irina, you two shut the fuck up!"

When you're asleep, EJ, I cry, too.

How can things get worse?

**Chapter 9**

~Better Days by Goo Goo Dolls – chapter song.

**September 7th**

**Edward Cullen.**

I could feel Alice and Jasper's eyes on me, but all I saw was that boy.

I sat frozen.

That boy.

That boy.

That boy with dark brown hair.

My heart was pounding, desperately wanting, but my mind was trying to shut me down, because this... this was impossible. This *is* impossible.

Was I breathing?

No.

Couldn't.

Can't.

I don't... I don't understand. Any of this. I just don't understand.
I think there was a gasp coming from Alice but I wasn't sure. What I was sure of, though, was that the kids disappeared soon after. All of them except for that boy. He stayed. Alice and Jasper stayed. The other teacher was gone. With the children probably, and I was sorta gone, too.

I just stared. Unable to understand a thing, or even get a grasp on anything.

*Help me, angel. Please. I think I'm losing it.*

"Edward?"

That was Alice.

"Edward, calm down."

Also Alice. Soft voice. Concerned.

And... calm down?

I realized then that I was hyperventilating. Clenching and unclenching every muscle in my body.

"Edward, please calm down. You're scaring E... E... Elijah?"

My eyes snapped to hers in a rapid speed.

Elijah?

No.

No.

No?

My eyes found the kid again.

Oh, God.
Is this it? Have I lost my mind?

"Who are you?" I heard myself ask.

My voice was distant, cold, curt.

Alice was next the boy then, crouching down, holding him, and he started crying.

It pissed me off.

My heart pounded and hurt.

"I'm... I'm Lijah, I w-repeat it. Lijah, Lijah," the boy sobbed.

I didn't understand shit and I was fucking livid. Livid at the three year old kid for fucking my shit up. And I was standing up now. Sadie went to the floor with a hollow bang. Jasper was next to me in an instant. Hand on my shoulder. He was mumbling to me. Or it sounded like mumbling. My ears rang.

"M'sorry!" the kid cried out, still in Alice's arms. "Not gonna play pretend again, pwromise!"

Oh, God.

I rubbed my chest. Right over my heart. Fuck, the pain. Breathing was hard.

"Wait!" I snapped, because Alice was looking at the door.

She was thinking about leaving with the kid. I just knew by the way she held him. Him. That kid. Protecting him, shielding him.

From me?
The room started spinning and I bent over, rested my hands on my thighs, tried to breathe.

Breathe.

Elijah.

Breathe.

Not Elijah.

Breathe.

I'm losing my goddamn mind.

Breathe.

So much pain.

Breathe.

"Charlie's on his way," I heard Jazz say.

_Help me, angel. I don't understand._

The boy was still crying. It hurt me. Everything just fucking hurt. And I was dizzy.

I was sitting down. On the chair. Don't ask me how I got there. Maybe Jasper.

Alice stood up with... with... him. Looked at the door again. Contemplated.

No.

"Don't even think about it," I rasped. "Don't... Don't..."

_Don't leave. Me. Don't leave me._
By some miracle, I managed to calm down after a few minutes, and my instincts kicked in. The instincts that told me to find my wife. If it was possible to find her, then I will. Oh, God is there a chance? Is she alive?

My calm was gone. As soon as I grasped it, it was gone.

Fuck.

"Here," Jasper said, giving me a bottle of water.

I gulped it down before pulling out my smokes.

No one said a word as I lit a cigarette in the middle of a classroom. A classroom for three year olds. A classroom for children. A classroom where a little kid still was.

I was out of it. Nowhere near rational, and my fingers shook as I took a deep drag. Exhale. Another drag. I spun around, unable to face the kid who was still fucking crying. My eyes shut tightly as I pinched the bridge of my nose. Deep drag. Exhale. Breaths came easier but my mind was fucked up. So fucked up. The pain in my chest hadn't subsided. The dizziness had. That was good, I suppose. Deep drag. Exhale. I heard a window crack open. Then another and another. Probably Jazz.

Then I had Jazz standing in front of me and I noticed a difference as he grasped my shoulders and made me look at him. He was a couple of inches shorter than me but the eyes he had made him look like the tallest man on earth. They were commanding. Unyielding. This was him being a sergeant.

"Get it together," he said, calmly yet firmly. "Get it together for Bella. For your wife and son."

My wife and son.
My knees nearly buckled. I felt so fucking weak. But I managed to stay standing.

"Breathe."

I rubbed my eyes with my thumb and forefinger, tried to obey but it wasn't easy.

Breathe.

For Bella and... and...

Breathe.

For Bella and... E...

Breathe!

For Bella and EJ.

"It's him, Edward."

My head snapped up, my eyes opened. I glared at him. "You can't know that!"

The kid started crying again, louder. It made my skin crawl.

"Shut him the fuck up!" I snapped over my shoulder.

But as soon as the words had left me, it felt like I'd been kicked in the gut.

I just snapped at a three year old kid. Made him cry. Sob.

"Stay here, I just..." I mumbled, trailing off before I left the classroom.
I paced the hallway outside the classroom for a long time, and the idea was to calm down, gather my thoughts, prepare myself... but it didn't work. All I could think was 'is that my son'?

Brown hair.

That didn't give me much to go on. Even if it was Bella's color.

How could Jazz be so fucking sure?

That's when I heard the kid cry out for his mommy.

My blood boiled as I ripped the door open again, and entered the classroom.

Find Bella. Find Bella. Find Bella.

I was calm but not in a good way. It felt eerie. My insides were raging while my exterior was calm.

"Feelin' better?" Jasper asked, frowning, studying me.


Jasper nodded firmly, first at me, and then in the direction of Alice and E-... and the kid.

They were sitting in the corner and Alice was talking quietly with him as they played with LEGO.

The crying had stopped but he still looked upset.

"Let's have a seat in the back," Jazz said. "Listen to them. Do not interfere. I won't hesitate to stop you."
I didn't understand shit but complied and followed Jazz to the back, to the other end of the back, and we sat down by the wall where we could hear them but still be out of the way, I guess.

"Alice is trying to get him to talk before the police show up," Jasper whispered.

"P-police?" I stuttered, feeling my blood freeze.

"Not yet, but we have to call them ASAP. I'll call them in five minutes."

I understood. I think. Maybe. No, not really.

"I love to play pretend, too," I heard Alice murmur softly then, and she had my immediate attention.

She wasn't looking at the kid. She kept her eyes on the LEGO.

"And since I'm a girl, I always play pretend with my dolls," she continued, still quietly and softly. "My dolls live in a pink house."

My face fell as I remembered the kid mentioning a yellow house. And Sadie.

How could he know?

Alice and... the kid... they played in silence for a while.

. 

. 

. 

"S'bad to play pretend. But I like it. S'a secret."

I sucked in a shaky breath.
Who would say that to a kid?

"You play pretend in secret?" Alice asked. "That's sounds like fun. What do you play?"

She's good. There's no denying that.

The boy looked straight at me then, and it felt like all air was punched out of me.

My eyes widened.

No. Yes. I can't be. It is.

For the first time, I was close enough to see his face properly.

There was so much Bella in him. So much that my heart broke. For the first time in over three years, I saw pieces, parts, of my angel, right there in that boy. The button nose, the cheeks, the mouth.


Bella's hair.

"You're smaller in the locket."

My forehead creased. I didn't understand a thing.

"What locket, honey?" Alice asked softly.

The k- he... him... he shrugged and went back to playing. "Picture in Mommy's locket. S'not pretend."

Mommy's locket.

Locket.

Locket.
I didn't breathe.

"Is Edward in Mommy's locket?" Alice asked, making sure to sound light and casual.

I was anything but light and casual, and I felt Jasper's hand on my shoulder.

"Mhmm, and Sadie."

Angel, baby, I love you.

A strangled cry filled the room and then everything went black.

*O*O*O*

"He's comin' around, Charlie."

Jasper.

"Should I go get... **him**?"

Jasper again.

"I'm not sure. What do you think, Alice?"

Charlie.

"Not yet."

Alice.

Where- what-... how?

My eyes fluttered open. It was a bit blurry but after a while, my eyes zeroed in on... my surroundings.

I was in a hospital room.
The fuck?

Blue walls, three chairs, my bed, a door. Small TV attached to the wall.

Charlie was closest. Red brimmed eyes. Fuck. I remember. I remember everything. The kid. Oh, shit!

Shooting up in a sitting position, I noticed that I was still in my own clothes. No tubes or any shit like that, and that was good, I think, but... what happened?

"You okay, son?" Charlie asked.


"The doc is on his way," Jazz told me.

"I'm..." fine? Okay? Terrific? No. None of that. "What happened? I mean... I remember, but..."

Alice understood. Not sure I understood because everything was jumbled but she understood. That's good. "You passed out, and we called 911. They took you here, and Dr. Masen told us you had a panic attack."

Sure. Whatever.

"How much time," I mumbled, looking around as if I didn't already know the kid wasn't here.

"It's 8 pm," Charlie said. "They had to sedate you, cause you woke up once and started thrashin'."

Good God.

Wait. 8 pm?
"The-... him. Where is he?" I stammered, feeling my breaths becoming shallow again.

Alice actually smiled a little. "He's in the cafeteria with Esme. He's undergone a physical, and he hasn't been harmed. Well, that's what the doctors said. There are no physical wounds, scars..."

Mom.

And... he's here?

But... fuck! I need some goddamn clarity!

"Take it easy, man," Jazz said. "I'll explain everythin', okay?"

I took a deep breath and nodded.

"Before the ambulance arrived, I called the police," he said, starting off easy. Slowly. Kinda quietly. "I went with the ambulance, and... you. And Ali stayed behind with E-..." he took a deep breath, then looked straight at me. "Ali stayed behind with EJ."

EJ.

EJ.

My... my son?

"It's him, Edward," Charlie croaked.

My vision blurred. Was it really him?

"The police showed up," Alice said softly, taking over from Jasper. "I stayed with EJ the entire time, and we were told to wait. Wait to see if... well, according to the school, it's EJ's uncle that picks him up... and drops him off."
I stopped breathing again.

_Bella. Bella. Oh, God... Please. Come back to me, angel._

"He never showed," she sighed heavily, sadly. "I told the police about you, and Charlie showed up shortly after."

"They wouldn't release the boy in my care," Charlie grumbled, rolling his eyes, too. "I called the station on fourth, and they are on the case now, but it didn't matter if I was their old Chief. They still wouldn't release EJ to me."

It was too much and not enough at the same time.

"Yeah, but you know why, Charlie," Alice told him quietly. "They need to follow protocol, and does it really matter? He's here now."

"Could you please just-...!" I groaned, pulling at my hair.

But shit, I needed answers!

"Mr. Cullen," said a voice, and I looked in the direction of the door as I man, a doctor walked in. "I'm glad to see you're up."

"Not now, doc," I said firmly. "I really need this," I added, gesturing for anyone of the three to fill me in. "Give me my damn answers before I lose my fucking mind."

Thankfully, Jazz started talking. "A police officer has been assigned to stay with EJ at all times, and thanks to Charlie's connection with the station, we were able to allow EJ and the officer over here. And like Alice mentioned, whoever that was supposed to pick EJ up, never did. The police are on it and it's a priority case again."
"What's next?" I asked, not missing a beat because I've been through this before. "What are they doing now? There must be records, people must have seen this... uncle..."

"Questioning of the faculty," Alice nodded. "I've already been questioned because I'm EJ's teacher. I'm going over to the station tomorrow at 7:30 am to give my statement."

"Why not now?" I asked, feeling my temper flare.

"Like I said, they've already asked me what they needed immediately, but I'm going over there tomorrow for a longer questioning. It's not up to me, Edward. It was their call, and they're obviously prioritizing finding Garrett now."

"Garrett?"

"Garrett Smith," she nodded. "That's the name in the records, and EJ was enrolled as Elijah Smith."

"I... I still don't understand," I sighed, frustrated as hell. "What are they doing to find this fucker then!"

"They're going through the school's security cameras in hope of seeing the man there," Charlie said. "They're taking brief statements, only focusing on Garrett's appearance. If anyone's seen him, seen a vehicle, or if they've seen him interact with anyone."

"And?" I hedged.

"So far, nothing," Alice mumbled. "He was wearing a hoodie and sunglasses the three times I've met him. Our hope now is Mrs. Newton. She was the one meeting with Garrett yesterday when the last papers were signed."
"Who's in charge of the investigation?" I questioned. "I wanna meet him. I need to know everythin'."

"Edward, it's only been eight hours since Jazz alerted the authorities," Charlie replied, trying to reason with me. "It's gonna be a while before answers come in."

"Yeah? Three more years, perhaps?" I snapped.

I couldn't fucking believe any of this.

Nothing.

Nothing made sense.

I needed a goddamn smoke to calm my fucking nerves down.

Patting my pockets, I felt the pack of smokes but someone clearing their throat made me look up.

"Edward," Charlie said, giving me a pointed look.

Right. We're in a hospital. I bet they frown upon smoking in a hospital bed.

Instead I sighed, ran a hand through my hair, groaned, rubbed my face.

"Don't you wanna see your son?" Alice asked quietly.

"No," I said, shaking my head. "If I see him, he'll just disappear again. None of this will be real."

I'm still not convinced that it is real.

Is my son downstairs in the cafeteria right now? With my mom?

"We don't even know that it's him," I added.
Nothing was proven. I could be delusional. Maybe my mind was playing tricks on me when I saw his hair, his nose, his mouth... his eyes.

"Actually," the doc said, reminding us of his presence. "It's most likely your son, Mr. Cullen. While you were out, we took a blood sample," he paused to look at his chart. "Your wife was still listed as your emergency contact so your mother gave us the 'okay' to test your blood.

"And we had permission from Officer Black to test little EJ after he had been checked for injuries."

I held my breath.

"The blood work just came back and your blood types match. The DNA will take days but..." he trailed off.

My mind was still in denial.

I couldn't... I just couldn't believe any of this.

Three years. Three years of... nothing. And now he might be here? Just a few stories below us? Or wherever we are.

No.

Too much to process.

There was a flurry of activity around me then, and I picked up some of it. Mostly it was Charlie and Alice asking the doc a bunch of stuff. Stuff life birth certificate for E... for him, for... for EJ... oh, God.

I rubbed my eyes.

My son?

My little boy?
My nugget?

He's three years old now.

So many questions.

My head snapped up.

"Have you asked E-..." I took a deep breath. Couldn't stomach to say it. Not yet. "Have you questioned the... him... the boy."

I didn't ask anyone in particular.

Alice answered, "They're bringing down a specialist for EJ tomorrow morning. Someone who will ask him questions about what he could know."

Shit!

"Why is everything happening tomorrow?" I shouted.

High priority my fucking ass!

"They've tried, but...He doesn't know anything about where they live, Edward," Alice told me calmly. "He's three years old, very closed in, and fragile. He shuts down so easily."

"Has he said anything?" I asked pleadingly. I just needed something to go on.

Anything!

"Only about playing pretend," she said, and again it was sadness in her voice. "He's completely broken, Edward..." she shook her head, and my heart clenched when her eyes welled up. "He needs comfort and stability because right now he's all alone."
Fucking hell, the *pain*!

*O*O*O*

A couple of hours later, I was still a mess, but I had at least calmed down a little, and I was able to... I knew... I mean, that kid... he... I let myself believe that he... he's most likely...

Mine.

My son.

I was also able to gather my wits, so I ordered Charlie to go to the station because he was the only one I trusted with this, and I wanted him to overlook *everything*.

Jazz and Alice headed home to get some sleep, and then we would meet up at Charlie's old station tomorrow morning.

I wasn't sure I liked the fact that they were in charge of finding Bella because they didn't do a good job the last time.

*O*O*O*

I was discharged but they let me stay in the room. It will be mine for the next few days until all the bloodwork is done because so far, they haven't found him in any database. They don't know if he has a birth certificate, they don't know anything. Nothing to go on, no one to ask.

There was no way I could go home while *he* was here with mom, and according to Dr. Masen, Officer Black will stay here with the kid until they get answers. And if they stay, I stay.

It took seven cigarettes for me to calm down before I entered the hospital cafeteria, and once I reached the nearly empty lounge, I stayed in the wide doorway.
In the corner, over there, far away, they sat.

A police officer sat at the table next to them. Them. Mom and him.

I couldn't see clearly but the table was littered with stuff. Colorful stuff. And snacks.

Absentmindedly I rubbed the ink I had done in my son's honor.

*Is this him, baby?*

Slowly and quietly, I made my way over. Not quite there yet, but a few step in their direction. To see more. To see clearly.

He was coloring. There were crayons and coloring books, and he had his face downcast as he colored.

The police officer saw me then, gave me a slow nod. I had no idea what that fucking nod was about but at least he didn't stop me from approaching.

Mom was next. Her head snapped up, eyes welled up instantly, and the expression she gave me was one of confirmation. Confirmation to me. For me. Because I could see so clearly in my mom that this kid was him. Him as in her grandson. Him as in... my son.

"Have a seat, kiddo," she whispered to me as I reached the table. "EJ and I are drawing pictures."

The boy didn't look up.

With a shaky breath, I sat down across the table, so I had mom and him on the other side, and God, he's so close. Right here. A few feet away.

"EJ, sweetie?" mom said softly, brushing her knuckles over his cheeks. She was touching him. My hand twitched. "Can you look up for me?"
He didn't.

For some reason, I was fine with that for now. I was fine with just watching him and my eyes never left him. Three years and now he's sitting right in front of me. He's sitting there, coloring in some Disney coloring book. He sips soda, too.

*Oh.*

Cherry Coke. He's sipping Cherry Coke.

My eyes watered and mom grasped my hand on the table, gave it a squeeze.

He's my son.

"EJ," I breathed out.

**Chapter 10**

...*Has no one told you she's not breathing?*

*Hello, I'm your mind, giving you someone to talk to…*

...*Soon I know I'll wake from this dream…*

...*Suddenly I know I'm not sleeping*

*Hello, I'm still here…*

~*Hello by Evanescence – chapter song.*

**September 7th**

**Bella Cullen.**

Something is wrong.
I'm pacing.

Garrett and EJ are late. Where are they?

Where are they?

They should be here. It's almost dinner time.

I scream.

I try the lock on the door. Again. Even though I see the thick chains, the several locks. I try. I try!

I bang the walls, hoping neighbors will hear me.

They don't. They never do.

I scream again.

Nothing.

Time passes and I'm crying. Sobbing. Pulling at my hair.

I fall to my knees and then I hear rustling. The telltale rustling of EJ coming home.

Locks are unlocked.

Finally.

Please.

The door opens but it's just Garrett, the sick fuck.

"Where's EJ?" I ask. "Where is he? What have you done?"

"What have I done, you ask?" he fumes and close the door again. "You and I need to have a talk, Irina."
He finishes locking the door and then glares at me.

"Go to the fucking kitchen!"

He's scaring the shit out of me. Where's my son?

He strides toward me and I hurry into the kitchen where I sit down by the old table.

I chew on my lip, willing my tears to stay back.

"Please," I whimper. "Where's my son?"

He barks out a laugh as he sits down across from me. "For more than three years I've protected you from Kate and this is how you repay me? By asking about that fucking kid? You ungrateful little bitch."

I gasp and cover my mouth.

Kate? His ex-wife?

"I need to know, Irina," he mutters. "Who's that kid's dad? Who did you betray me with?"

You're sick.

Delusional.

"I'm Bella," I tell him. Again. "Bella Cullen."

I've told him so many times and sometimes he acknowledges me. Sometimes he calls me by my real name and sometimes he uses Irina.

He blinks slowly, eyebrows furrowing.

"I know." He shrugs.

He terrifies me.
I try again. "Where's EJ?"

He looks confused before answering. "Oh, he's gone. The police took him."

"What," breathe out, feeling my eyes well up. "Wh-what did you just say?"

My hand covers my mouth again as Garrett sneers at me.

"I was going to pick your bastard child up when I saw the cops there. You didn't honestly believe I stuck around, did ya?"

My son.

No.

"No, no, no, please, Garrett," I cry, shaking my head. No, this isn't real. It's a dream.

He leaves me there. I cry, wail and sob. Have I lost my son?

No, it's impossible.

The police took him? I don't understand that.

Any of it. I don't understand any of it.

It's a dream.

I'm dreaming and when I wake up, EJ will be here with me.

I chant the words, hoping they are true.

"Irina, you're not dreamin'," he sighs heavily.

I didn't even hear him reentering the fucking kitchen.

"And you look like a fucking mess," he adds, sitting down again. "Truth be told, Irina, I'm sick of this."
I look at him, blink away tears, and look at him.

"When I picked you up all those years ago, I expected you to be happy," he says, and this is the first time he really speaks to me. Must be a part of the dream. "And then when I find out that you're fucking pregnant... Christ, I should've just killed you. Or better yet, I should've let Kate have you."

"You Denali sisters were always so full of fire," he fucking chuckles. "And you both betrayed me. First Kate with that fucking Peter. He was in my goddamn unit, did you know that, Irina?" He shakes his head and brings out his gun. He just holds it. I gape at him. You're so fucking sick. "And then you betray me when I was going to save you from your sister. Yeah, ungrateful bitches, both of you."

He glares at me now. "Tell me the name of your kid's father."

Something inside me snap and I scream at him. "I've told you a thousand times, you sick son of a bitch, it's Edward Cullen!"

My chest is heaving. Tears are streaming down my face.

I wanna wake up.

In the chair, I rock myself back and forth. I need to wake up. I want my son. Edward's nugget. I need our boy, hubs. Where is he? Please, help me. I need to wake up from this.

"Well, Edward Cullen can kiss his life goodbye then."

My head snap up. "What!" I gasp.

He's smiling. Please die. "Seriously, Irina, don't you understand that I'm doing this for you? Don't you get it?"

I really don't.
"Do you?"

"I still haven't found Kate, but don't worry. I will find her and deal with her just as I dealt with Peter and the rest of my unit. And then I'll deal with your kid's father."

Edward.

No, Edward.

Oh, God.

I cry out.

There's too much pain.

I can't handle this anymore. I need to wake up. EJ needs to be here.

Please.

Please.

Please.

"Nothing will be in our way, Irina. And now that the kid is gone, there's one thing less in our way."

No.

No.

I close my eyes.

No.

Please.

I'm breaking.
I hear his laugh then and I want to kill him.

"Oh, and Bella? We're moving. Right now. Just get your shit together."

Chapter 11

~Everybody Hurts by R.E.M – chapter song.

September 7th

Edward Cullen.

Cherry Coke. He's sipping Cherry Coke.

My eyes watered and mom grasped my hand on the table, gave it a squeeze.

He's my son.

"EJ," I breathed out.

"Not Lijah," he muttered, still keeping his eyes on the picture he was drawing. "Mommy say i's not pretend. EJ, not Lijah."

I sucked in another shaky breath.

His mommy. My Bella.

I quickly looked over at mom, and noticed that she was writing on a napkin. I tried to see what it was but it was too small, but soon she handed it to me, and I read the scribbling.

He's confirmed that his mommy's name is Bella, but he shuts down if we ask about her.

Bella. It's Bella. My Bella.
"Is there anything I can get you, sweetie?" mom asked him. "Are you hungry maybe?"

This time, he looked up, at mom and oh, God, it's Bella. I'm not imagining this. It's her. In him. Bella's all over his features.

"I don't 'member the name," he mumbled. "I'm sorry, I don't 'member the name."

"Oh, don't worry, sweetie," mom rushed to assure. "Do you mean chocolate?"

"Yea," he replied, cracking a small smile.

I was confused. What three year old boy doesn't know what chocolate is?

Then it hit me. Hard.

I don't know what kind of shit he's been through.

Has he been harmed?

But... he's been in school. Shouldn't he know what chocolate is then? I mean, he's... been around people.

"Well, you can have more chocolate after you have some real food. How about that, sweetie?"

The corners of my mouth twitched. She was reasoning with my son. He was here, alive, so that she could do that.

"How about a hot dog?" she continued.

He looked up at her again, and my eyes watered all over as I watched him scrunch his nose. Just like Bella used to do.

"Wha's a hot dog?"
Oh.

What the hell?

Mom didn't bat an eyelash, though, and continued as if his question was normal. "Why don't I just buy you one, I'm sure you're going to like it," she said lightly, smiling at him. "Do you wanna come with me? Or stay here and color?"

My fingers twitched again.

Please stay.

"I wanna color," he said quietly.

Thank you.

"Alright, I'll be right over there," mom replied, pointing towards the food cart. "And I'll be back right away. Do you like ketchup?"

"Yes."

With a nod, mom left, but not before giving me a reassuring smile.

A smile that said 'you can do this.'

Can I?

My eyes went back to him.

He was staring at me.

Every muscle in my body tensed.

"Are you still mad at me?"

Oh, God.
He thinks I'm mad at him. Because I acted like the biggest piece of shit to him.

"No," I choked out, shaking my head. I cleared my throat. More than once. "I wasn't mad at you," I breathed out. "I'm... I'm so sorry."

He nodded once before returning his attention to his coloring book, and I exhaled a little in relief. I think.

My vision was blurry and I had to blink tears away. My hands shook.

EJ.

My son.

He's here.

EJ. EJ. EJ.

"Mommy say you love me," he mumbled quietly as he picked up a green crayon.

Everything hurt. Tears spilled over.

If I love him?

He's my everything.

Will Bella ever be a part of my everything again?

"She also say you my daddy."

Please, angel, I don't know what to do here.

"I am," I whispered thickly, not trusting my voice for shit. But it felt good to say it. It felt true. Real. "B-... Bella wanted you to have my name," I croaked, feeling my throat close up.
"I know," he replied, and this time he looked up at me.

And smiled.

Crookedly.

He has my smile.

"Edward, Edward Junior," he giggled, pointing at me before pointing at himself.

My chest ached, filled with warmth.

My son.

I smiled back. Through my tears.

EJ.

He's beautiful, angel.

My smile faltered, and I couldn't stop the next questions from escaping my mouth. "Is Bella okay? Do you know where she is?"

I closed my eyes as EJ shut down and went back to coloring again.

I'm sorry.

So sorry.

"Here you go, EJ," I heard mom say.

By the look of her teary eyes, I knew she had been listening and that she was interfering now. Probably best. I'm bound to fuck this up.

"Don't look like a dog," EJ said, staring at the food in confusion.
"No, it doesn't, does it?" mom laughed softly. "I don't know why they call it a hot dog, but I think you're going to like it."

Mom sat down and pushed a plate with a burger towards me.

And a can of Cherry Coke.

"You need to eat, kiddo," she told me pointedly. "You both do."

EJ seemed to like his hot dog.

I couldn't eat but I did feel a bit lightheaded so I opened my soda.

"We should head back to your room soon, sweetie," mom told him. I smiled because he was devouring that hot dog. "You need to get some sleep and it's the middle of the night."

EJ just nodded before he took another bite of the hot dog.

I chugged some Coke, and winked instinctively when EJ sipped his own Coke.

He smiled a little again.

"You and your Cherry Coke, Edward," Bella giggled.

I shrugged before I smashed the can between my hands.

All to impress my girl.

"I love cherries," I winked at her. "Cherry Coke, your cherry-smelling hair... Cherry-popping..." I trailed off, waggling my eyebrows at her.

That earned me a smack in the chest, but hey, she was still giggling.

I couldn't help it.
I'm a guy for Christ's sake, there is no way I'm ever gonna forget last night when we made love for the first time.

I sighed and fixed my eyes on EJ again.

He looks so much like you, angel. He's perfect.

"I want Mommy now," EJ said. "We always sleep same bed. S'Garrett comin' to get me soon?"

I choked. Eyes widened.

"Oh, sweetie," mom sighed sadly. "We're going to do everythin' we can to have your mommy back soon."

EJ didn't like that answer.

I didn't like that answer.

EJ started crying and I broke all over again.

*O*O*O*

It took forever to get him to fall asleep, but he's asleep now.

He's in a hospital bed and I'm sitting in the chair next to the bed, leaning forward to be closer to him, and my fingers are ghosting over his arm. Touching lightly.

It's the first time I've ever had the chance to touch my own boy. And tears are still streaming down my face because this is so big for me. I think I'm going to have a heart attack the first time I hug him.

I already feel the urge.

I wanna hold him in my arms but I'm so fucking scared.
"You should get some sleep, kiddo," I heard mom whisper.

She's in the chair next to mine, apparently not sleeping.

I shook my head, unable to speak, and kept watching my son in his – luckily – restful sleep.

Mom had spent the past couple of hours telling me about what I'd missed today, and it was everything and nothing at the same time.

She told me that EJ would be released in my care once the DNA-results had come back, and then we'd get started on a birth certificate.

*How do we do that when we don't even know his birthday, baby?*

Hopefully EJ can answer a few of our questions tomorrow.

I spoke briefly with Officer Black, too, but he didn't have much information to give me yet. Everything was still so new. All I knew was that they were trying to find any footage of Garrett. The school had been closed off for the forensics, teachers were being questioned, and school records were being searched through.

The media's been alerted, too, but so far they're keeping names and photos secret. The only priority right now is that son of a bitch, Garrett. And hopefully we'll have a photo of him to show the public.

I don't know half of it yet. I heard mentioning of hotlines, search parties, the FBI, interviews, and statements, but that all starts tomorrow. Thankfully, Charlie's keeping track on things.

I will, too.

I just need this night with my son.

"I don't know how to be a dad," I whispered.
I don't think I said it to anyone. I don't think I expected an answer, but it came regardless... from mom.

"Yeah, you do," she murmured, and I felt her hand on my lower back, doing that scratchy thing along my spine she used to do when I was little. "To this boy you know, kiddo. I can already see it."

My forehead landed gently on EJ's hand.

I was so fucking tired. After these past years... I'm just drained, exhausted.

I wanted my life back, and it hurt to think that she might be close. She might be alive and so close to me.

"Daddy?" I heard EJ mumble, and my head snapped up so fast I thought it would fall off.

Christ, he called me Daddy, and he looked at me, almost frowning, and I automatically squeezed his hand a little.

"Yeah, EJ?" I whispered, feeling my throat close up again.

"You're not pretend," he mumbled sleepily, and then he closed his eyes again. "Mommy's right. S'not pretend."

My own eyes welled up. Again.

You need to be here, too, angel. Please. You're both supposed to be here.

I understood what mom meant. Sorta. To this kid, much came automatically. I acknowledged the need to keep my son safe. He was already my priority, but there was still a part of me, and I already resented that part. But that part wanted to shake the answers out of him. I needed them so fucking desperately, and that was the part I was goddamn terrified of. That was the part that didn't deserve to be EJ's dad.
September 8th

When EJ woke up this morning, it took him a solid hour to stop crying for Bella. A solid hour of heartbreaking angst that I was too goddamn familiar with.

I knew I was the last resort for him, but when Bella wasn't there to comfort him, he clung to me. His arms were around my neck in a death grip, and he hasn't let go since. Neither have I.

I'm carrying my son, holding him to my body. It's surreal. Unbelievable. And just the thought of letting go... that hurts too much. I can't let go. Mom's already tried. But I can't. I'm too fucking terrified that none of this is real, and getting used to this is going to take a long time. Problem is that our damn bonding-time will be full of shit. Full of interruptions.

I can't just take him home.

The last place I want to be in right now is in a doctor's office.

I want to take my son home. I want to show him our house. I want... so much. I want Bella to be there waiting for us. But she won't be, she's not there, and it's so frustrating. It's painful and conflicting. The sides are pulling at me. The one side that wants to start being a good dad, the part that wants to shield EJ from all the fucking probing.

And then the other side. The side that aches to find my wife. The side that is obviously dominant but it's still... ah, Christ, I'm not making sense even to myself.

"Daddy," he whimpered against my neck.

I shivered.
It had been like this since this morning, since early this morning, and I've had to reassure him that I'm real. It's so fucking painful.

"I'm here, nugget," I murmured against his temple, and immediately I wanted to smack myself on the forehead for triggering his next set of tears, because we had come to the conclusion that Bella had told him about my nickname for him. It was another thing that had come automatically for me, and apparently EJ knew about the name. It made me even more desperate to find out what else he knew.

The doctor was still speaking but I was glad that mom was sitting right next to me. She paid attention so I could comfort EJ. Obviously I have listened, too, and it wasn't until EJ's final check-up was over that I could relax slightly. Perhaps that was bad of me but once they declared him physically okay, I tuned out and let mom take over.

I just needed to know that he was unharmed... physically. Which he is. Because that he's messed up internally is pretty fucking clear and my anger has already reared its ugly head. But I can't help it. I'm goddamn furious when I think of that bastard hurting my son... and wife.

*O*O*O*

Please, baby, be okay...

I already knew that the information I had heard yesterday about... everything... was most likely jumbled and incorrect, and that proved to be true when Officer Black escorted us all to the station on fourth – a station I hadn't visited in three years.

When we arrived, Charlie greeted us and told us that the FBI was on the case now, and that the media would be involved fully today. Agent Eleazar Denali was leading the case, and I was going to meet him as soon as he
was done questioning the woman who'd been there when Garrett signed the papers for EJ at the school.

Our hope was that she had seen more of his features than Alice had.

During all this, I still had EJ in my arms, and I could feel that he was fucking terrified. His grip on my neck had only tightened, and I feared that something was going to set him off at any second because I knew very well that I wasn't a constant to him yet. He still needed reassurance that I even existed, so of course he's scared, which again pisses me off, and I can't fucking wait to get the son of a bitch that put my world through living hell.

"Mr. Cullen?"

I spun around, came face to face with a proper looking man, and yeah, he looked like one of them agents.

"Yes," I nodded.

"Special Agent Eleazar Denali," he introduced himself. "But call me Denali."

I shook his hand. "Edward, please."

"Alright. Nice to meet you, Edward, though I wish we met under better circumstances," he replied, letting go of my hand as he eyed EJ who still had his face buried in the crook of my neck. "Why don't you follow me. I'm sure you have questions."

_A few._

Charlie and mom followed automatically and when Denali cocked an eyebrow in question, he was met with cocked eyebrows right back, and then we were all led into a small room at the back of the station.
Officer Black was there, too, of course.

Someone brought in extra chairs for mom and Charlie, and then we all sat down by the table in the middle of the room.

"Okay, this is what we've done so far," Denali said, opening a file that was loaded with documents, reports. "The school premises are being monitored 24/7, and we've gone through all footage we've had our hands on. So far nothing, but we have higher hopes this time around because we have-" he paused and flipped through some papers, "-this time we have Edward Junior here, and we're going national with his photo in a few hours."

I knew this was coming but that didn't make things less painful.

But at the same time, he said 'hope,' and I'm desperate for it.

"Since the boy's started preschool, we have hopes that he might have attended daycare or something similar someplace else, and hopefully, someone will recognize him."

I nodded, tried to keep my calm, but it wasn't until I breathed EJ in that I relaxed a little. It wasn't a scent I loved. It was hospital smell, but he's here. My son is here. Alive. One more to go and then I can be alive, too.

"We have also ordered for your bloodwork to go through us, which means it will be done faster," Denali continued. "That should give us a positive answer by the end of this day."

I swallowed hard, drew a ragged breath.

By the end of this day.

Tonight I will have my confirmation.

Christ.
"Next up is you, Edward. We need to get your statement," he said, and then waving dismissively. "It's just protocol. We need to ask you what happened yesterday just so that we have it on record."

"Now comes the hard part, Edward," he said, giving me his full attention as he put the file down. "Through Mrs. Whitlock's statement, we understand that your son has most likely been fed with tales about what's real and not, and we need him," he gave EJ a pointed look, leaving his name out, most likely to keep EJ from paying attention. "We need him in an environment that is undoubtedly real to him."

I frowned in confusion but Denali clarified.

"At this point, you might be a figment of his imagination. To him, that is," he said, and as painful it was, I knew what he was talking about. All the times I've had to assure him I was here, and not pretend...

"This mean... we need to question your son without you being present."

My body went rigid.

Mom's hand was suddenly on my shoulder.

Denali went on. "From what we've gathered from both Mr. and Mrs. Whitlock, your son seems to be at least a little comfortable in school. So, we will have to go back there, and Mrs. Whitlock will be present when Dr. McKenna tries to find out what your son might know."

Denali then explained to us how the questioning would work, who would be there, and all the why's and if's. And what it came down to was that Alice's classroom would be the location, and a specialist named Rachel McKenna would take care of the questioning as Alice stayed for support. Everything will be recorded, and though I won't be allowed to be there, I will be able to hear the conversation from right outside.
There will also be a sketcher along with a profiler, all to get an idea of what kind of asshole this Garrett Smith might be.

Garrett Smith.

No, it's not his real name. At least not all of it.

And the address in the school records led to a fucking PO box, rented with fake identification.

*Dead ends are already killing me, angel. Please give me strength.*

*O*O*O*

It's hard to breathe, and I'm pacing, pulling at my hair.

It's laughable how I thought leaving my statement about yesterday's events was hard. That was a fucking walk in the park compared to this. They haven't even started with my nugget yet, and I'm already losing it.

Right now, my son is in that classroom. Alice's classroom.

I'm not there with him. I'm in the classroom next door.

Alice is with him. A mindfucker named Rachel McKenna is, too. And three men in uniform are, as well as two others.

"Edward," I heard Charlie say.

Turning around, I saw him holding out a pair of headphones.

I swallowed hard and took them, putting them on before I moved closer to the recording equipment. Like that would bring me closer to him or even let me see him...

Mirroring Charlie's stance, I stood with my arms folded over my chest, brow furrowed.
And I was biting the fucking nail on my thumb.

Nervous habits were resurfacing after three years of nothing.

The headphones crackled then and I knew they were beginning.

"EJ?" I heard Alice say softly. "Do you mind if my friend Rachel asks you a few questions? You can still play of course."

It frustrated me to no end. I couldn't see anything. I couldn't read his expressions and that's what I wanted to do. I needed to judge his wariness for some reason. Was he uncomfortable? Was he okay with this? Was he playing?

"Thank you, EJ. That's very nice of you," the doc said then, so I figured he had nodded or something. "Could you tell me your name for starters?"

A tap on my shoulder made me turn, and my eyes widened when Denali stood there with a small laptop.

It had video feed.

"Thank you," I breathed out as he positioned it next to the sound equipment, and Charlie, mom, and I stepped closer.

I finally saw him.

Playing with LEGO, much like he did... Christ, was that only yesterday?

Focusing intently on the small screen, I saw my nugget scrunched his nose, like he was thinking hard on something. I wanted smile as much as I wanted to cry.

It was still Bella I saw. She did that. She scrunched her nose like that. But... why would he have to think so hard about his name? Didn't he know it?
"I have more than one," he mumbled then before returning his attention to the LEGO trucks. "Mommy say I'm Edward Anthony Cullen Junior."

My eyes closed, welling up in a rapid speed.

"Mommy say I'm also Charles. I don' member where the name goes. I'm sorry I don' member."

Charlie choked up.

"Don’t apologize, honey," Alice murmured, and I opened my eyes to see her caress his cheek. "It's okay. It's not easy to remember so many names but you're doing awesome, little dude."

I choked up, too, but cracked a small smile through my tears as Alice's words made my boy relax and smile.

"Absolutely, you're doing great," the doc agreed. I wished I could see her face, her expressions, but she had her back to me. "Do you have more names? You're also EJ, yes?"

Her voice was soft. Not as soft as Alice's, and I was still wary, but it's no news that I have trust issues.

"EJ for Edward Junior." EJ nodded once. "And... and... Lijah... but tha's not a mommy-name. Tha's a Ga- Uncle Garrett-name."

I held my breath.

"Is a daddy-name also," EJ mumbled then, and his posture changed. He became smaller and focused intently on the little trucks for a while.

"You need to relax, kiddo," mom whispered next to me.

Right. Easy. Just relax.
I took a deep breath but kept biting my damn nail.

"What's a daddy-name?" the doc asked.

EJ shrugged. "Mommy gave it but Daddy say it. S'Daddy name for me. Mommy say so."

Nugget.

"You mean 'nugget'?" Alice offered, having heard me say it already. "That's a cool nickname."

Thank you, Alice, I breathed out.

I was happy to have her there. I didn't want EJ to be uncomfortable around me, and I was afraid that I was going to slip more than once when it came to that name. It had come so naturally for me. More than three years of thinking about EJ and nugget... obviously it will be hard to just stop, but if someone else says it, too, maybe it will work. Maybe. I don't know. I hope so.

I will just have to work on it – try to not say it.

"But Mommy s'not here," EJ sighed quietly, dipping his chin. "S'it okay Daddy say it?"

Christ.

"Of course, little guy," doc assured. "Or don't you like it?"

"S'just..." He shrugged a little again. Looked down. "Mommy say I can only talk names with Mommy. Nobody else. Not wiv Uncle Garrett. He gets mad wiv the mommy-names and daddy-names."

My hands balled into fists.
"Uncle Garrett say i's just pretend-names but Mommy say i's not pretend."

If I ever get my hands on that son of a bitch, he's dead.

My attention went back to the screen when the doc whispered something to Alice, to which she nodded.

"EJ, are you and Mommy ever alone without U-... without Uncle Garrett?" Alice asked then. "Or is he always there?"

Again I held my breath, and my insides churned when EJ's shoulders sagged and he started crying.

"M-Mommy in the basement old h-house," he sobbed. "Say she- she's okay, but tha's pretend! Mommy not okay! She pretend i's okay!"

Oh, God.

"That's enough," I croaked, pulling at my hair. "Give him a break," I wheezed out, letting my hair go only to rub my palm over my heart. Goddamn, the pain. "I need him."

*Christ, angel, I'm falling apart...*

Is Bella not... How bad-... How broken is my angel?

How broken is my son?

**Chapter 12**

...I don't know where I'm at...

...I'm tired of waiting...

...I know I'm gonna fall down...
...It's coming down, down, down...

...I'm missing way too much...

...So why do I try?

...I know I'm gonna fall down...

~Down by Jason Walker – chapter song.

September 10th

Bella Cullen.

I can't breathe.

He's not here with me. It's not a dream and it hurts. Oh, God, it hurts.

I thought I knew heartbreak.

I did. Being away from the love of my life, my husband, my Edward... I am broken, and have been for years, but...

I'm shattered now.

Every breath is ragged. Everytime I inhale, it feels like I get stabbed.

I pity myself. I don't deserve this.

It's been days and I realize that EJ was the one I fought for. It makes me wonder when I gave up on fighting for myself.

You would be so pissed, Edward. So pissed that I gave up.

I'm sorry.

So sorry, hubs.
But...I don't know what I can do. I'm so fucking lost.

I can't escape. I've tried. Over the years, I have tried. I can't alert anyone on the outside. I've tried that, too, but Garrett sees it all. He rummaged through EJ's backpack for school. He shoved lies down EJ's throat to make him an unbelievable source.

And now that I don't have EJ to protect?

I still can't do anything.

I don't know where I am.

I can't see anything. I'm blindfolded. I've been blindfolded since we left the apartment.

I remember when Garrett dragged me out, and once again it smelled like the south. Were we in the south? Are we still?

I don't know. I don't know anything.

So, I cry. I cry and pity myself.

I feel so fucking weak.

Useless.

Right now I'm in a car. Lying down in the backseat. Bound, gagged and blindfolded.

I'm numb.

On the outside I'm numb, my body's limp. On the inside, though... That's the problem because I can feel myself go numb there, too. Soon I won't care even a little. Soon the pain in my chest will be gone, and I won't
care. Soon my breaths will be even and calm. Not ragged. No stabbing. Soon.

That will be the end, won't it?

When I go numb, that's the end, right? That means I let Garrett win?

I close my eyes, annoyed with the fabric against my eyes, but it doesn't matter. I'm done trying. No use.

I can practically hear you in my mind. It makes me cry again.

I'm so sorry for giving up, baby.

You would scream at me. You would shake me roughly, demand that I get up. Demand that I don't quit.

"Cullens don't quit," you've said many times. But those were happy times. You've said that with a smile, or a wink, and it's about sports. Or funny games in our backyard.

You'd puff out your chest, give me your crooked smile, and point at yourself as you say, "Cullens don't quit." Then you'd kiss me, and say, "You're a Cullen, too, angel."

But it's different now, Edward. I can't... I just can't...

I see you and EJ before my eyes. I want to smile but I can't.

So fucking hopeless.

I remember, of course. I remember that Garrett told me the police have EJ. Is that true?

Does that mean he could be found by you or maybe Dad?

Does that mean they have pictures of him all over TV to find his parents?
I cry again.

He must be so scared. My sweet boy. Our son, Edward.

God, please. I beg you.

I beg... you. Please.

I try to think rationally. I try to picture EJ with the police, and a big part of me is relieved. A big part of me knows that EJ is aware of himself. I've told him much. He knows his full name, he knows his parents' names.

He'll be scared. I know he is scared, but... maybe... just maybe you will find him.

Christ, it hurts.

*O*O*O*

"You cry too much, Irina," he laughs at me.

I can't see you of course. I'm still blindfolded in the back of the car, but I hear him. I hate him.

My body aches. My neck is sore. Not that I care much.

"I'm gonna tell you what I told my father-in-law. Don't cry over a dead girl. I told him over the phone, you know. Right before I went for Peter. Ha! Sergeant Whitlock tried to stop me. The fucker even shot me in the shoulder. Bullet went straight through, though. Fucker."

He's so twisted.

I don't gasp or cry at this. Over the past few days I've heard so much shit come out of his mouth. Nothing surprises me anymore. He's insane. Delusional. A fucking nutcase.
"Yeah, he was crying like a fucking girl when I called him to find out if it was true," he chuckles.

I don't understand. I don't care.

"But you're not dead anymore, Irina, are ya? I brought you back."

I close my eyes again.

"We just have to make sure your sister doesn't find you again."

*I love you, EJ. Mommy loves you so much. Please be strong.*

"Still can't find Kate, but don't worry, Irina. I'll find her. I thought she'd be back home but she wasn't."

I'm tired, Edward. My husband. I love you so much.

You're my soulmate. My best friend.

I miss your smile.

I miss being your angel, your wife, your Jezebel. Your Bella. Your Bella Cullen.

I used to be so strong.

I'm a sad creature now.

"I mean, Kate is to blame here. She betrayed me first. How she has the nerve to be mad at me for finding comfort in you is beyond me. Fucking bitch."

Die. Please die.
"But then... Christ, I bring you back and it turns out you've betrayed me, too." He's getting upset. "And I'm gonna find that fucker you slept with. I'm gonna find the shithead that knocked you up."

I shake my head. Please let this be a dream. Please.

I know it's not, though.

I hate him. Die.

"Revenge is sweet, Irina. I remember when Kate called me... or left me that message. I was on an assignment, and she told me she had killed you. She also told me that she had fucked Peter. Safe to say, I blew that fucker up as soon as I had listened to the message and my father-in-law had confirmed it. Sweet."

Die.

Die.

Die.

Die.

Die.

Die.

*O*O*O*

I'm in a house, I think. Maybe it's an apartment. No stairs, though. Ground floor.

I hear him cleaning his fucking gun nearby.

I'm glad I don't EJ near any of that anymore.

My hands are bound but not behind my back anymore. In front of me instead, so I can grasp the bottle of water.
The skin on my wrists and ankles is chafed. It burns whenever I twist and turn.

I'm shaking. So fucking cold.

I made the mistake of asking for a shower earlier.

He poured a bucket of cold water over me.

The water felt like knives slicing through me. I choked.

My sweats and t-shirt cling to my skin, and it's so fucking frigid.

He laughs at me. "Stop with the teeth-clattering, Bella. We're in Tennessee. It's sunny here!"

Sometimes I'm Bella.

And I guess I just found out where we are.

What good will it do me?

"The bunker's almost ready. A few more days and then it'll keep you safe while I hunt that Edward down."

I let out a blood curdling scream.

Chapter 13

~Chapter song: Riverside by Agnes Obel

A broken man's life today...

He wakes up, sometimes with a smile on his face.

Then as the seconds tick, everything dawns on him, and he remembers. He remembers what he doesn't have anymore. He remembers his daughters, his wife, and how good it always felt to come home each day.
Nothing's left.

His house is empty and the echo of laughter is gone.

His wife left, and with her went the last warmth. He understands. She couldn't deal with the memories, and since he drowned himself in work, he never blamed her for leaving. In a way, he left, too. He's still there, but not quite.

After his shower, he passes the wall of photos. The photos of his daughters, himself, his wife.

It's always with confliction he watched the photos of his eldest daughter.

He can't stop loving her, but he can't forgive either.

She was always fire. Like a shock running through your system. Some loved her, some loved to hate her. A very opinionated girl. Thought she knew best. Smart and gifted... but reckless.

Once upon a time, he admired his daughter's fire. It was her strength. She fought and got what she wanted. But in the end, what she wanted was what killed the family. His family.

He remembers it so clearly.

So vividly.

"I can't help it, dad!" she shouted over the phone. "Being married to a man in the army aint a fucking walk in the park!"

He had tried to reason with her. He tried to tell her that they could solve it, as long as she ended that... that... other relationship. Infidelity was unforgivable.

Never in a million years would he do that to his wife.
And now... now Kate was having an affair.

Her husband was a good man. Came from a good family.

A bit odd at times but over all, a good man.

"That doesn't make sense, Katie," he tried again to reason with her. "You say this... this Peter is in the army, too!"

"Oh... I thought you were talking about Luke. Yeah, Peter's in the army, but he's just casual," she replied flippantly.

It angered him. A marriage was supposed to be sacred.

"Garrett deserves better, Katie," he sighed, feeling the tug in his heart. He couldn't believe his own daughter would do this. "If you and Garrett are having problems then I suggest you talk to him."

Kate never talked to Garrett about it, though.

She kept pretending.

Until one day, several months later. She came home while Garrett was on an assignment.

Livid and enraged, she headed straight for her little sister's room.

Irina was the quiet daughter. Home from college. She was earth whereas Kate was fire.

He can still remember the screaming.

"You fucking whore! You slept with my goddamn husband, you little bitch!"
"You don't have a fucking idea, do you? Garrett came to me in tears, asking if you were having an affair with Luke! Luke, as in Garrett's best friend!"

"And that gives you the permission to screw my husband?"

"It didn't start that way."

"Doesn't fucking matter, Rina! Fuck, I could just snap you like a twig! You're supposed to be my sister!"

He felt helpless. He wanted to help his daughters, but they stopped talking. Ignoring him, and each other.

Days passed and Kate was livid. It didn't subside. Not even a little. Instead her rage grew and grew.

One day she snapped.

She went too far.

She destroyed it all.

She was drunk, not to mention high on drugs.

And armed with her husband's Glock.

After another fight with her sister, Kate shot Irina in the head.

Carmen was screaming and sobbing, pulling at her hair as she entered Irina's room, only to find her little girl lying there in a pool of blood, and her sister towering over her, swaying slightly, slurring, waving the Glock around.
And he saw the same thing as he froze in the doorway. His family, all gathered in Irina's room. His wife shattered, his Kate... somewhat there... but not Irina. His little Irina was dead.

In shock, he stood there. Stood there and watched as Kate brought out her cell phone and called Garrett, leaving him a message about divorce, about Irina and how she was now dead, and lastly something about being with Peter.

Minutes had passed before he snapped out of his haze, and then... then his heart broke when he had to use his professional training to disarm his own daughter.

A couple of days later, he and his Carmen were thrown into a whirlwind of pain.

Their Kate was taken into custody.

Their Irina was still... gone... forever.

And Garrett and his unit had finally been located somewhere in the Middle East. They were going to bring the entire unit back, but Garrett ended up listening to his messages before, and he listened to Kate's message. Garrett listened to it.

Then Garrett called him and asked if it was true.

It was.

Garrett snapped. Laughed and said something about not crying over a dead girl, and then he hung up the phone.

In the middle of planning his little Irina's funeral, the news about Garrett's unit reached him. He could barely believe it. He could barely believe that
his son-in-law would kill them. All of them except for their superior apparently.

Garrett blew their cover. They died. Fire and pain. Death.

It was without sorrow he admitted that he was glad Garrett was gone. Missing in action. Presumed dead.

Good riddance.

But it wasn't just Garrett that was gone.

His Carmen closed herself in.

His Irina was dead.

His Kate was sentenced to life.

He himself was gone, too.

He worked and worked and worked.

For the past few years, the bureau has been his life.

Four years has passed since that day.

He can barely recognize himself nowadays.


He is perfect for his job because nothing distracts him.

He was debriefed late last night. A new case. A kidnapping. He takes it seriously.

He will solve it.
His job is everything.

He will not fail.

He starts today.

With emphasis on Special Agent, he is Special Agent Eleazar Denali.

\textbf{Chapter 14}

...\textit{You’re not alone}...

...\textit{There is more to this, I know}...

...\textit{You’ll live to tell}...

...\textit{There is more to know}...

...\textit{You’re not alone}...

\textit{~You’re Not Alone (Piano version) by Saosin – chapter song.}

\textbf{September 8th}

\textbf{Edward Cullen.}


\textit{Christ, baby, I'm falling apart}...

\textit{Is Bella not... How bad-... How broken is my angel?}

\textit{How broken is my son?}

\textit{*O*O*O*}
As soon as I had EJ in my arms, I could breathe. Not properly because too much was wrong with all this, but I could breathe enough. Enough for now.

We were alone. Sitting on the floor in the classroom with all the sound equipment. My back against the teacher's desk.

"Not pretend, not pretend," he whimpered against my neck, shaking his head like he was trying to convince himself. "Mommy's right. Not pretend."

I held him tightly, resting my forehead against his little shoulder, and breathed him in. "I promise, nu-... I promise, EJ... I'm here," I whispered. "I'm here, I promise. I'm here."

I wanted so desperately tell him that everything Bella says is the truth but I couldn't. I can't. Because we don't know if she's told him things for protection. We don't know anything.

"Do you believe me, buddy?" I asked quietly, making him face me by cradling his tear strained face. "Do you believe me when I say that I'm here?"

Automatically I brushed my thumb over the small 'v' in between his brows.

*You're too young to look so troubled, nugget.*

His eyes—... the expression he gave me—... he looked so helpless and confused.

"I'm real, EJ," I told him, quietly but firmly. "I promise you that I'm real. You're my little nugget."
It was intentional. I needed for him to know the real me, and the real me calls him nugget. Call it a juvenile nickname or whatever but it was what I called him when Bella carried him, and it's all I have. It was all I had. The name stays as long as it doesn't hurt him.

"I'm your daddy," I whispered, not trusting my voice as my eyes welled up. "I promise that I'm here. It's not pretend, and I know that m-... I know that Mommy wouldn't be upset if I called you nugget."

*Please, angel...*

"Okay," he mumbled quietly, and I leaned my forehead against his.

"You're not pretend?"

"No," I murmured thickly, shaking my head slightly. "I'm real, and I'm not leaving you. I... I..." I swallowed hard, looked him in the eye. I needed to say this. "I love you, EJ... So much."

With a small nod, he hugged me again, and fuck... it felt so goddamn good.

"I's not pretend," he breathed out.

"It's not pretend," I vowed.

*O*O*O*

A while later, after we had had some food, I forced myself to let EJ go again as we needed to proceed with the... what do you call it? Questioning? That sounds horrible when it concerns a three year old.

Regardless, EJ was back with Alice, this time sitting on her lap, on the floor, and they were playing with a few action figures.

But when I looked closer, I noticed that they were Turtles.
I'll ask mom later if she still has my old Turtles.

I stood in between Charlie and mom, all of us wearing headphones, all of us watching the little screen, and all of us tensing, trying to prepare ourselves.

"You did so good, kiddo," mom murmured then as we watched the doc enter Alice's classroom. "I wanted to tell you earlier at lunch but I you were so focused on watching EJ."

My brow furrowed as I glanced down at mom.

Watching EJ?

"You didn't realize that you never took your eyes off of him during lunch?" She smiled and hugged my bicep.

I just shrugged. Three years without seeing him, without knowing that he's alive. Obviously I'm soaking everything up.

"Anyways," she chuckled a little. "I was talkin' about you and EJ in the classroom before we left for lunch," she clarified. "I stood in the doorway, kiddo..." she trailed off as her eyes filled with tears, and I hugged her to me. "It's gonna be a bumpy road, baby, but I know that you'll be the best daddy to him."

I said nothing. I was too emotional to get a fuckin' word out. Instead I just held her. It was all I could do.

Charlie nudging my arm with his elbow alerted me that EJ had left Alice's lap, and seemed more relaxed now.

This seemed to be the doc's cue.
"That's a cool toy you're playing with, EJ," she commented. "Which one's your favorite?" she asked, pointing at the different Turtles. "My son's favorite is Michelangelo."

"This one," EJ replied, holding one of them up. "Wrafael."

I wanted to smile.

Couldn't.

"That's awesome," doc said. "Do you have other favorite toys?"

"Jus' LEGO." EJ shrugged.

I was relieved when I noticed how the doc didn't pressure him. She paused at times and let him play. I suppose she knew what she was doing.

"Do you have a favorite color?"

Again, EJ shrugged. "I dunno."

.

.

"What color is it on the walls in your room at home?"

I tensed.

EJ frowned as he kept playing. "Mommy and I live in the basement in the old house. S'not a room. S'a basement."

My eyes closed. I gritted my teeth.

Basement? They lived in a basement?
"And what about the new house?" doc asked way too casually for my liking, though I understood that she was trying to downplay the whole thing. Alice on the other hand was having a hard time to act indifferent, and I noticed how she turned her head at times to wipe her eyes.

"Grey," I heard EJ mumble then. "Like rocks. Is a big house wiv many homes. Not like old house in the woods."

This seemed to set off the agents next to us and I saw how they started whispering back and forth while they compared notes.

I couldn't tense further. My body was already rigid.

"You lived in the woods? Can you tell me about it?"

"I didn' like it. Gots to stay quiet a lot and I didn' like Miss. Lauren."

My breathing hitched and once again the agents seemed to work faster, speaking in hushed voices, gesturing and pointing, dialing numbers...

"Who's Miss. Lauren?" doc asked softly.

On a good day, I would've smiled when I saw EJ's scowl.

"He looks like you, kiddo," mom breathed.

No. Well, yes. Right now. But otherwise he's all Bella. He just got my scowl.

It's not a good day, though. So, I'm still holding my breath, still trying to hold myself together.

"She was there on push play."

I frowned in confusion, and I wasn't the only one.

"Push play? What's that, honey?" Alice asked quietly.
"Many boys and girls play there." EJ shrugged. "Can I play wiv LEGO now, Miss. Alice?"

"Of course, little dude." Alice grinned at him. I thanked her for the effort she put in this. "Why don’t you tell us more about push play and I get the LEGO for you, okay?"


I choked up. Again.

Oh, God, no...

Mom gasped.

Charlie snarled.

"I like push play lots cause we were outside. Don’t like inside. Outside is better," EJ continued, and I held mom tighter as we listened to him. "I told Mommy lots about outside cause she smiled better then. She wants outside also but she’s only inside."

Nausea.

"Fuckin' hell," I wheezed out, releasing mom to bend over and place my hands on my thighs. Deep breaths, deep breaths. How much was my angel suffering? Deep breaths. Always inside? Did that mean she was locked up?

Probably, a small voice answered in my head, and it made sense. She was fucking kidnapped for Christ's sake. But God... three years...

Shit.

Deep breaths.
"Can you tell me about where you lived, EJ? You mentioned the woods? Was uh... push play also in the woods?"

"Um... no. Push play was in push. Lots of water."

The hell?

I was dizzy as hell but managed to stand up straighter so I could watch the screen again.

Please... please, baby...

"Sir, I found something!" someone behind us called, and we spun around fast as hell.

It was an agent, sitting by a laptop, also wearing the same kind of headset that I was wearing.

Denali rushed over and the other agent started showing things on the laptop but I couldn't see shit from where I stood.

"La Push Play Care is a daycare in La Push, Washington," I heard the agent say then, and that sounded right, right?

Washington?

Push play. La Push Play Care.

They lived in Washington?

"It's a wooded area," Denali commented with his eyes glued the screen.
"It would explain EJ's words about living in the woods."

My breathing picked up.
"Alright, good job," Denali said, clapping the agent on the shoulders as he straightened from his crouch. "Call the bureau in Seattle, and fax them the photo of EJ. I want agents out there right away."

In my near panic-state, I did a double-take at the mentioning of photo, but before I could ask, mom explained.

"When you gave your statement earlier, they took photos of EJ for the media. I was there with him the entire time, and he took it well."

I didn't know how to react, so I just nodded dumbly.

*O*O*O*

He's my son.

I already knew but I have it on paper now.

I found out an hour ago, and half an hour ago, EJ was signed over to me.

Signed over. He's in my care. He's mine.

EJ's questioning had lasted the entire day. With many breaks of course, and the doc made sure never to pressure. The snacks and soda sure helped, too, and my son's got a bit of a sweet tooth.

"Angel, have you seen the Cheetos?" I called.

Seriously, we bought them yesterday! Where the hell are they?

"Bella!" I called again, rummaging through another cabinet.

I found nothing. Stupid, stupid. I need 'em, damnit. I got the munchies.

What about the damn Oreos? They're missing, too!
"The fuck?" I grumbled, opening the fridge to see if we had something tasty in there.

There was plenty. Ribs, leftovers, cold-cuts, dressings, butter, beer, Cherry Coke, water, Mountain Dew, milk, cheese, ham, fuckin' salami, veggies, fruit... yadi, yadi...

Nothing sugary.

"What's the ruckus about, hubs?" I heard Bella mumble behind me.

I closed the fridge door and looked over my shoulder to see my very sleepy wife.

"Have you seen the Cheetos or the Oreos?" I asked, walking over to her.

She'd been a little sick over the past couple of days, and I hoped I hadn't woken her up.

I honestly thought she was awake, cause it was three in the afternoon.

"Oh, uhm... yea uh... dad stopped by," she mumbled, very fidgety all of the sudden. "He just took it all, ya know."

I smirked.

"Angel, you never could lie for shit."

Her head snapped up and she tried to give me the scowl.

But she could never hold it.

Then she sighed. "Baby, I don't know what came over me," she whined, resting her face against my chest. "I just ate and ate and ate... it was sooo good."
I laughed down my nose and wrapped my arms around her waist. "That had to be some hell of a candy-bender you went on, Mrs. Cullen," I teased, and then I thought about it some more and started laughing incredulously when I remembered that there was more. "Christ, does that involve cookie dough, too? And the frosting you bought for Alec's cake?"

That earned me a smack in the chest.

"Well, well, well," I snickered with my mouth against the top of her head. "And you're always accusing me of eating too much sugar, angel. But here you are, competing against the likes of me."

"Wow, you're just so freakin' funny today, aren't ya?" she grumbled. "I'd play nice if I were you, baby, cause I totally have me a secret stash."

I gasped and released her. "You're hiding sweets from me? Your husband?"

I glared at her playfully and muttered, "Can't believe it, angel. Here I was, thinking that my wife loved me. I suppose I was wrong, huh? Damn. Just damn."

And this is of course where everything goes to hell for me.

How the hell am I ever gonna be able to hold an argument when Bella uses her... assets... against me? Cause that's what she's doin right fucking now. Pressing her tits together, making them look even more delectable than they already are.

So, I'm sorta staring.

They look bigger. Actually... they do. Huh. A lot bigger.

"If you forgive me, I'll give you some sugar," she purred then.

All previous thoughts – gone. Just whoosh, gone.
"Jezebel," I whispered, pulling her to me before I dipped down and kissed her hard. "My Jezebel," I groaned against her lips, and when she moaned in my mouth, I pushed my tongue into hers.

Two days later, we found out about Bella's pregnancy.

"Pregnant with you, nugget," I whispered, placing my hand over EJ's tiny one.

He was so fucking cute when he was sleeping. Peaceful and carefree. Like he's supposed to be always.

I was happy that today hadn't been too hard on him of course. The doc told us that many had taken it a lot worse, but EJ didn't have much against answering questions. If there was a question he didn't like, he went back to play for a while and the doc treaded around the issue, in the end getting the answers by asking around the main question.

I was on edge, we all were, and what we found out, though it wasn't much, was horrible.

We found out that Bella and EJ lived in a basement.

We found out that Garrett is armed and apparently cleans his gun often.

That had me fuming. In front of my son, he cleans a fucking gun?

It was all too much. To hear all those things coming from my three year old boy... no words can describe the pain you feel. It slices through you. Stabs you in the damn chest. Makes your insides churn.

This is how I felt when EJ in his own words answered the doc's questions, and that was just it. His words. His innocent words. He's lived through so much shit, and he's just three years old. It's been his life since birth.
I've never pitied myself over the past years. I truly haven't. For which I'm glad, cause what I've lived through is nothing. Nothing compared to what EJ's lived through, not to mention my wife.

And it's not over.

Tomorrow we're going back, and it's time for the doc to ask nugget about how Garrett treated him and Bella.

Will I even survive hearing about it?

It's quite fucking obvious that Bella's stronger than me. She's living it. I will hear about it, and I fear for my sanity.

I sighed and rubbed my face.

I was so fucking exhausted, but I couldn't sleep.

A part of me wish we were home and not here in EJ's hospital room, but then there's the part dreading, because tomorrow we're actually going home. Since EJ is in my care now, I can take him home.

They let us stay here tonight because it was late, and we were already here for the DNA results to return.

But yeah... tomorrow I'm taking EJ home. Home to our house.

I've talked to the doc about it, told her about the yellow house, and how EJ knew about it. I needed to know if it would upset him, trigger something maybe. But she didn't know. She just offered to come with us, to be there when EJ enters the house. So, that's what we're gonna do, I think. I'm glad mom and Charlie will be there, too. I would never be able to do this alone. I'm constantly afraid that I'll upset him.

I'm waiting for it to happen.
The door opened then, and I looked up to see Charlie.

We were waiting for any news about Seattle, or... La Push, but so far nothing. Same went for the media. They were all over it now, fucking vultures, but it hadn't paid off yet. They tell me to be patient. They tell me it's only been a few hours.

I wanna tell them to go fuck themselves, cause it's been more than a few hours.

It's been more than three years.

"Anything?" I asked quietly, careful not to wake EJ up.

He shook his head, walking over to the bed. "Not yet," he sighed, watching EJ. "They've talked to that Lauren woman from EJ's daycare, and they've gone through the records, but... every fuckin' word is bullshit. All fake names. They have one address and they're on their way to check it out now."

My knee was bouncing. Fury. Sadness. Pain. Fuck it all.

I needed a goddamn smoke.

I haven't smoked since... I don't know. This morning?

I can't. I refuse to have EJ near that shit, and I refuse to let go of him, so it's sorta a done deal.

But I need one. Badly.

"Spoke to Emmett," Charlie said then. Quietly. Still watching my son. "He arrived this mornin', so he's stayin' at my house."

I nodded, not really having anything to say.
All that felt like another life time.

Everyone was informed, and mom called Aunt Liz, Alec, and Tan every now and then to keep them updated, but I didn't care. They didn't really exist at the moment. Nothing did. Except for EJ and finding my angel. Same went for Charlie. I know only EJ and finding his baby girl is on his mind right now.

"We'll find her, son."

My eyes stung.

My throat closed up.

I said nothing. Couldn't.

But I saw her. Everytime I closed my eyes, I saw my angel.

I saw her quirkiness, her beaming smile, her flirty nature, her love for mischief, her teasing, her happiness... I saw it all as soon as I closed my eyes.

"And what are you up to, baby?" I chuckled as Bella removed my sunglasses.

"I'm taking pictures." She grinned, holding the camera up. "I need to see your eyes. Cause they're sorta gorgeous, ya know."

"Oh, yeah?" I grinned too, giving her a wink. "Nothing compared to yours, though. I swear by it."

We were sitting in Charlie's backyard, and it was another barbecue. The sun was out, the beer was chilled, the snacks were fucking delicious, and laughter filled the air. Not to mention the godly smell of James' burgers.
Rose is stuck in traffic on her way out here, and I know she'll be tired as hell when she arrives, so I'm kinda soaking up the peace while it lasts.

Rose and James recently took over their parents' burger dive, and just renamed it to RJ's. We were there for the opening of course, cause let's face it; they have the best burgers.

"You want yours without them pickles, Cullen?" James called over his shoulder.

I sent Bella another wink as I replied to him. "Nah, I want pickles."

Bella beamed and flicked off a few more pictures before she sat down on my lap. "Givin' me those pickles, perhaps?" she asked, smiling coyly as she placed my sunglasses on the top of my head.

"Who else am I gonna give them, angel?" I asked, tightening my hold on her. "They're disgustin' and you love them, so I say we have a pretty good deal when I give them to you."

"Mmhmm, I love your pickle," she whispered in my ear.

I couldn't help it. I fucking laughed.

"I'm sorry, angel, but I don't know if I should be offended by that statement!"

"Eh." She shrugged. "I can rename it if you like. But I don't see what's so wrong with pickle."

She pretended to think hard about it, and I watched in amusement, knowing that my quirky girl had a wicked imagination.

"Anything but pickle, please," I chuckled, shaking my head at her.
"What, you're saying that there's no pickle out there, nine inches long? Or is it the color? Or the texture? What's wrong with pickle, really?"

She was fucking serious, too.

"You're too cute for words," I told her, nuzzling my nose with hers. "And thank you for the nine-inch compliment, by the way."

It made me wanna measure it.

I realized I had spoken out loud when Bella replied, "I already did."

"You did what?" I choked out.

Shouldn't that be something I'm aware of?

"You were sleepin' and I didn't wanna wake ya." And again she shrugged. Like it was no big thing about her measuring my dick while I was sleeping.

Well, apparently it is a big thing.

"Nine inches, huh?" I smirked, feeling goddamn proud.

"Yep," she chirped, popping the 'p.' "And Pickle it is."

I groaned. Closed my eyes, too.

Pickle?

 Fucking pickle?

"What would you do I named your breasts after somethin' very weird?" I asked, narrowing my eyes at her.

"Pickles aren't weird," she said in her are-you-insane voice. "They're delicious," she corrected me... as she licked her lips.

Alright. Pickle it is.
Ah, shit.

I just lost my argument.

Too bad she's fucking gorgeous, cause I can't even pretend to be upset, especially now when the sun is in her hair, her summer-freckles are on her nose, and her smile is blinding.

"I love you," I murmured, giving her an Eskimo kiss. "So much. You know that, right?"

Mmm, and then her hands were in my hair.


I smiled into the kiss she gave me, closed my eyes.

"You're my Bella."

"Always."

"Always," I agreed.

I woke up with a start, realizing that mom was shaking me.

Fuck, I didn't even know I had fallen asleep.

Immediately my eyes went for EJ, and I breathed out in relief when I saw him, still asleep on the bed.

"What time is it?" I groaned quietly, feeling the kinks in my neck and back as I stretched my arms above my head.

"It's only five in the mornin', but kiddo... they have a lead."

Chapter 15
"What are you up to, hubs?" I ask.

You're chuckling over the phone, and I hear Dad in the background.

I'm curious. Okay, I'm more than curious.

"You'll find out when you get home, angel," you snicker.

You're practically giddy, and I wonder if it has to do with the 'secret' room next to our bedroom. I know it's for EJ of course, but I'm sooo curious. Dying to know, to see it.

"Where are you by the way?" you ask. "Your classes are over, right?"

I smile and make the last turn for the gas station. "I'm about to fill up the Beast," I chuckle. "He's getting thirsty."

You laugh. "Are we weird for talkin' about our truck like it's a damn person?"

"Nah," I say, unable to contain my grin. "It's called quirky, remember?"

You stop laughing but I can almost hear your smile. "I love quirky."

You're making me swoon.

You have no idea how much I love you.

"That's good," I muse, killing the engine. "Otherwise you wouldn't be with me."
I hear Dad in the background then, shuffling and chuckling, and if I strain my ears I think I can hear quiet strumming.

"Are you on the porch?" I ask, stepping out of the car.

"How'd you know? Are you close?"

I picture you looking around and I can't help but laugh. "No, but I hear the guitars. You and Dad playin'?"

"Maybe," you reply slowly. As if you don't know if you want me to know that Dad's there. "You should just come home and find out. Cause I sorta miss you, you know."

I sigh, feeling my heart clench. After all these years you still make me feel like a school girl with the biggest crush.

"I miss you, too," I murmur, watching the meter as the Beast gets his fill of gas. "Cause I sorta love you, you know," I add, mimicking you.

"Love you more, angel," you murmur back, and I hear you play the first chords of my lullaby in the background. "So, I'll see you soon?"

"Yes." I smile hugely. "I'll see you soon, Edward."

After disconnecting the call, I toss it in through the open window.

"You drink too much, Beast," I mutter, tapping the hood before I make my way inside.

'Cause I gotta pay for the damn gas.

Damned Beast.

Too bad we sorta love the noisy truck.

Once I'd paid for the gas, I head outside again...
My hand pauses on the handle of the truck-door.

I hear something. Rustling.

Behind me.

Then a whisper. "I'm so glad you've returned."

I shudder and gasp in fright but before I can turn around, a hand opens the door to the truck, and I'm pushed inside.

I scream in shock.

With wide eyes I see... "Who are you?" I cry out shakily.

He removes his mask and smiles.

Fear rips through me, down my spine.

I don't know him, I don't know who the fuck he is!

"Oh, look at that, baby," he croons. "You left the keys in the ignition. And now we're off."

He doesn't waste time.

A few seconds pass and I'm still in shock but I manage to understand that everything is wrong all of the sudden. This isn't right. I'm supposed to go home. But I'm not. I'm not even driving my own truck. Some stranger is.

"WHO ARE YOU?" I scream, and then I lunge at him. "WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING? GET OUT OF MY CAR!"

I remember Dad and Edward teaching me some self-defense and I use all I know. I put all my strength into the punches I deliver on his fucking face and body.
He laughs and fights me off easily. I'm terrified.

"I figured you'd be upset with me," he chuckles. "I came as soon as I could, though, and as soon as I saw you on campus, I made our plans. I followed you here."

I can't breathe.

Who are you?

What the fuck is he talking about?

I don't understand.

Edward.

Oh, God, Edward...and EJ!

I clutch my stomach.

"I'm not who you think I am!" I cry. "Please just let me out!"

"Can't do that, sweetheart. I've finally found you. You're back. I'm not letting you go. I need to protect you from Kate."

"No, no, no!" I sob. "You h-have it all w-wrong! I don't know any Kate!"

"SHUT UP!" you shout then...

...and before I can react, he pushes a needle into my thigh.

A syringe.

I start hyperventilating.

Edward.

A breath.
Edward.

A breath.

Edward.

A breath.

Edward.

I black out.

I wake up with a start, panting and shaking.

It's not often I dream about the last conversation with Edward, but I can't say I'm all that surprised this time.

I've been trying to gather my thoughts over the past couple of days. I've tried to think, to find out, to understand. I've tried before. I've never succeeded with anything. No luck. But I'm trying again. Trying to understand why I'm here, who I am to that son of a bitch.

It's all I can do to pass time.

I'm in the bunker now.

It's a basement. But it's a bunker. Garrett worked on it. Concrete everywhere. A small bed. Or pallet. A toilet in the corner. It's dark. It reeks. The air is stale. No breeze. The only oxygen comes from the small hatch in the metal door. The hatch where he brings me food.

It's a cell.

A cell without any light.

I'm left with my thoughts.
I can't kill myself.

I'm too afraid.

Besides, there's nothing I can kill myself with.

And...I can't.

Edward and EJ are out there somewhere.

I cry.

*O*O*O*

I'm trying to remember.

I know where we've been but I don't know why.

Was there a reason?

Phoenix was first.

Garrett kept me there until EJ was born.

I remember a few words he spat at me during that time.

-What the fuck! You're pregnant?

-Who did you betray me with?

-Fucking hell, Irina! First your sister and now you? Denali-whores!

That was the first time he called me Irina.

During our time in Phoenix, he rarely spoke to me, and I was kept locked up in the barred bedroom.

I always screamed. Thrashed. Tried to get out.
It never worked.

I remember a change in Phoenix, and it happened when he realized I was pregnant.

He stopped calling me baby. He stopped talking softly.

He became a robot.

I tried to rile him up when I was at an ultimate low.

It didn't work.

He didn't hit me and he didn't falter.

There was a path and he stayed on it.

He glared often, and his movements were sudden, which kept me on my toes. Walking on eggshells.

There were outbursts.

He could scream.

Sometimes I screamed back.

But all he did was gripping my arm and push me inside my room.

In Phoenix I was almost always locked up.

In Phoenix, I was scared most of all. Scared for EJ, my unborn son.

I was desperate.

Nothing worked.

When EJ was born...
I shudder, thinking about the nurse or... midwife or whatever she was. I don't know what happened to her.

I fear...

I push that thought away.

When EJ was born, Garrett moved us to Hamilton, Montana.

We stayed there for a year.

That year destroyed me.

One year.

Three hundred and sixty-five days.

Garrett spoke to me once.

One time in a year.

He said, "I thought she'd be here. We spent our honeymoon here. I need to find her, make sure she can't hurt you."


Nothing worked.

He just locked me up again.

Alone in a small room with my newborn son.

I talked to Garrett, told him what I needed. He never replied, but the stuff I needed for EJ appeared. Food, diapers, clothes, vitamins, you name it.

I tried. Often. I tried to make him understand that he had the wrong woman. I told him who I was. I told him where I'm from.
He never replied.

He was a wall.

That year killed me.

Then one day, he unlocked the door and said we were moving to Maine.

I still don't know where in Maine we were, or if we were really there, because Hamilton was the last place he told me about. After that, he mentioned the state, and that was that.

Maine killed me in another way.

One day when I woke up, EJ wasn't next to me.

I couldn't breathe.

Locked up in a tiny basement, I couldn't do anything.

I screamed until my voice couldn't carry. I shook. I hyperventilated. I broke down.

Hours later, Garrett returned with EJ and told me my son was in daycare now.

Every morning after that, I feared the day Garrett wouldn't pick him up.

We left Maine after a few months, though, and I hoped I would be able to keep EJ with me. But that didn't happen, and when we arrived in Utah, EJ was once again put in daycare. Don't ask me why. I asked Garrett and he never answered. He never answered anything.

Garrett started talking to me. Only sometimes. A couple of times a week, maybe. But he kept me locked up.
We stayed there for several months, and the next time we moved, it was to Washington. Forks to be exact.

I had a friend.

EJ was talking nowadays and he was my friend.

I had someone to talk to.

It was everything to me.

I wish I could repay him. I wish I was allowed to be the mother I wanted to be. I wish I could've been the mother he deserved.

Before we left Utah, Garrett told me, "She went to college here. Ha! Why am I telling you this? You know this already."

Everytime he spoke to me, I died.

Every place he brought me to, kept a piece of me when we left.

When Garrett took me from New Orleans, I lost my love. My Edward, my husband... my home, my family.

When we left Phoenix, I lost my bravery. I didn't dare much after that. I tried, but in fear for EJ, I didn't try as much or as often.

When we left Montana, I lost my spirit. I hadn't spoken to anybody but myself or EJ for a year.

When we left Maine, I lost my strength. The fear of losing EJ had me in a death grip.

When we left Utah, I lost hope. Nothing ever worked.

In Forks, I lived for EJ.
Faith… everything was lost. Everything but my son.

Until we left the last place. Were we in the south?

I don't know but that place kept my son.

What's left?

My will.

But it's too weak.

I'm too weak.

I've tried.

Nothing works.

*O*O*O*

"Irina!"

I sigh.

I'm sitting on the pallet. The pallet that's attached to the wall.

The hatch opens, and soon food comes flying in. Dropped on the floor.

Food and bottles of water.

I frown.

That's too much. Too much food. Too much water.

The opened hatch doesn't provide much light, but I hear the thuds.

Bottles and boxes dropped. It's too much for one meal.

"I'll be back in two days."
My breathing picks up and I'm out of the bed in an instant.

"Where are you going?" I ask, chewing on my lip.

Don't say it. Don't say it. Don't say it. Please don't say it.

"I've found that Cullen guy," he replies gruffly.

My stomach drops.

"I told you, Irina. Once that Edward... and once Kate are out of the picture, you'll see that you and I will want each other again. But we can't have them taint us."

"No... no, no, no," I breathe out shakily, stepping closer to the door. "Garrett, no... don't do this, please!" My eyes well up as I reach the door. And I see his menacing eyes. I want him dead. "Don't do this, Garrett! Don't... don't go after him..."

Oh, God.

No.

No.

This can't happen.

"I know I've taken a long time to find Kate, but I will. In the meantime, I'll just deal with Cullen."

"DON'T!" I shout. My blood boils. "I'll do anything, Garrett! Just don't! Don't go near him! PLEASE!"

He laughs.

I scream and bang the door.
He laughs harder and closes the hatch.

My breathing comes in gasps.

"Please!" I rasp. "I'll do... fuck..." I clutch my chest. "Anything..."

No.

This can't happen.

Edward.

I hear him locking the metal door.

Edward.

Another lock. Click.

Edward.

Another lock. Click.

Edward.

Another lock. Click.

Edward.

I hear the rustling of a chain.

Edward.

Another lock. Click.

It echoes.

Click, click, click, click.

So many locks.
I stagger backward.

Pitch black. Concrete.

I sink to my knees.

My life.

What happened to my life?

Every breath hurts.

He's going to deal with Edward?

Deal with him.

Pain.

Deal with him.

I can't... I...

Everything... Christ, the pain.

Chapter 16

...Oceans apart

Day after day

And I slowly go insane...

~Right Here Waiting by Richard Marx – chapter song.

September 9th

Edward Cullen.

Lead. A lead.
I don't wanna hear that word again unless it's something good.

The lead?

They found the house where Garrett kept Bella and EJ locked up.

It was burnt to the ground.

Gone.

Just debris. Fucking charcoal.

Except for the... the... Except for the basement where Bella and EJ were locked up.

They're still working on getting a picture of Garrett. Hopefully it won't be long because apparently they lived in Washington for a while, and the teachers at nugget's daycare saw a lot more than Alice ever did.

Once they have a sketch done, it goes on national TV.

I'm trying not to think about it.

I'm so fucking spent.

I know I can't give up and I don't want to either. I have two angels to fight for... I'm just very tired. Wired, drained, exhausted.

Over thinking.

Everything is analyzed in my shitty head. I calculate it all. I try to soak everything up. I try to be one step ahead even when I know that's impossible. I don't... shit. Nothing makes sense. It's all jumbled. Rambling. Words. Are they significant or insignificant? Will my son break down today or tomorrow? Did that agent ask that for a special reason? Did that other agent have an ulterior motive? Is Bella alive? Will EJ hate me when I tell
him he has to go back and talk to the doc? Why aren't the hotlines ringing off the fucking hook? Why has only fourteen people responded to EJ's picture on TV? Why did it all lead to nowhere? Why are they not flying every fucking employee at La Push Play Care down here to New Orleans so I can talk to them? What did that eyebrow raise mean? Why did that agent look away when I asked that other fucker about the search parties? How's the fucking canine search going?

I analyze it all, and it fucking hurts.

I'm paranoid.

On edge.

And right now... right now I have to wake up my son.

It's time for his session with the doc.

*O*O*O*

"Can you tell me again, nugget?" I murmured, our foreheads touching.

He's about to enter Alice's classroom, and I'm freaking out.

"You're real," he mumbled, playing with my hair. "You're Daddy."

"And you're my...?" I trailed off.

He cracked a small smile. It was everything to me.

"Nugget," he whispered.

My smile grew and I gave him an Eskimo kiss. "That's right. Promise you believe Daddy?"

He blinked slowly, stopped playing with my hair, and placed his tiny hands on my cheeks.
"Say it again?" he whimpered.

Fuck.

One step forward, two steps back.

"I'm real, EJ," told him, cursing my eyes as they watered again. "M-... Mommy told you I was real. She told you I was your Daddy, and she told you that you were my nugget. It's all true, buddy."

He nodded minutely, not releasing my face, but he did this a lot. It was like he needed skin on skin contact to make sure I was really there, and it fucking killed me. The pain I saw in his eyes was unbearable.

"I love you, nugget," I murmured, kissing his forehead. "I'm not leaving you. I'm here."

Would it be this way everyday?

For how long?

Would we always have to start over?

Granted, I know it will take time. Weeks, months, years. But I need to know that he will recover... some day. I need it so fucking desperately.

"Daddy," he said, this time touching my nose.

"My nugget," I replied, nuzzling our noses together with his finger still in between. "I promise."

He nodded again.

"You're my daddy."

"I'm your daddy."
Another nod.

"You're real, Daddy."

My eyes closed as a tear spilled over.

The pain was excruciating, having to hear your son convince himself that what he saw, touched, was real.

"I'm real," I whispered thickly.

*O*O*O*

"I'm so happy you could come back to play with me today, EJ," the doc said, as I fidgeted with my headphones.

He was drowning in my black hoodie, completely drowning, but when I told him he could have it, maybe just to keep near him while I was in the other room, he insisted on actually wearing it. The rolled up sleeves still ended where his hands poked out, and they had already knocked his blocks aside several times, but he didn't take it off. He just rebuilt whatever the fabric knocked down.

"Is that Daddy's sweater you're wearing?" the doc asked softly.

"Yes," EJ mumbled. "He's real. Daddy will be here soon. He's not cold in his t-shirt. He say so."

Christ.

Mom rested her head on my bicep, and I just... steeled myself.

"That's cool. So, what's the color of Daddy's t-shirt?" the doc asked.

"Black."

"What's the color on Mommy's clothes?"
Deep breaths.

EJ paused and fuck, I choked up when I saw him pull at his hair.

Mom noticed, of course. So, did Charlie.

How much of this actually comes genetically?

You always slapped my hands away when I pulled at my hair, angel.

"Different," EJ replied then. "Soft pants wiv pockets. And t-shirt."

"Your mommy always had soft pants with pockets?"

I knew what this was about of course, and I knew that the doc was treading the waters lightly in her attempts. But it still hurt. It still pained me that we had to find out through my three year old son how my angel is treated, not to mention how he was treated himself. How was my son treated? Was he treated differently that Bella? Worse? Better? Did they get enough to eat?

From EJ's doctor visits we know that EJ's hasn't been harmed physically, at least not in the past few months. And he isn't malnourished, but... what about the years prior?

"Yes." He nodded as he started rebuilding his blocks. "I snuck her apple pieces in her pockets sometime."

Deep breaths.

I pressed a knuckle against my mouth.

"You gave her apples? That's very nice of you, honey," Alice commented before her voice broke.
"She smiley-cry when I give her apple piece," EJ said. "Mommy say tha's a best smile. So happy wiv tears."

Charlie and I both drew ragged breaths.

Did that mean... I don't... Christ, is he saying that Bella cried happy tears because EJ fed her?

Oh, God... Oh, God.

"What's your favorite meal, EJ?" the doc asked. "Breakfast, lunch, dinner, or snack time maybe?"

EJ thought about it, rested his elbows on his knees, and hands on his forehead. He looked too grown up. I hated it. Fucking hated it. He's been through too much. Way too much.

"Mommy and I don't like Uncle Garrett's breakie. Always same cereal and milk, and dinner always same from outside. Uncle Garrett bring me wiv him to outside-place and buy dinner. Buy it outside and we eat it home."

"Takeout?" mom asked quietly.

I didn't know so I just shrugged, but I had to say I felt relieved when he included Bella. That has to mean she was fed, right?

"Lunch is best," EJ announced quietly then. "Don't like Uncle Garrett's lunch but Mrs. Sue give me fruit and toast. Much better."

Sue Clearwater. I knew of her from the list Denali had show us – the list of employees at the daycare. She was apparently the owner of Push Play.

"What's Garrett's lunch?"

EJ scowled. "Mushy soup. Hates it. He say it make you strong in army."
That last word made everyone react, including me, and I noticed the profilers taking interest as they spoke quietly amongst themselves.

Glancing over my shoulder, I noticed Denali frowning deeply, but before my paranoid mind started working again, I turned back to the screen.

"Did Mommy and Garrett ever fight?"

I held my breath.

EJ focused on my shirt, picked lint off it, frowned.

Please.

Please.

Please.

"Breathe, kiddo."

Right. Breathe.

Deep breaths.

"I don't like it when Uncle Garrett gwrips Mommy's arm to the basement," he whimpered then.

I broke.

No.

No.

I pulled at my hair.

"Don't like it when he yell at her."

Pain.
"Don't like it when he punish. Punish he say no food. No food for Mommy when he angry on her."

"Fuck," I ground out, pulling harder at my hair.

I realized then that I was on my way in to EJ because Charlie grabbed my arm. "We need to know, son," he gritted out, eyes full of unshed tears. "We need to know."

I squeezed my eyes shut.

"EJ, this is going to be a tough question, but I need to know, okay?" the doc said gently, preparing him, us... fuck. "Did Garrett and Mommy ever fight with their hands or legs?"

My stomach dropped.

I couldn't fucking breathe.

"Only yelling and angry eyes," nugget mumbled. "No food punish."

"Oh, thank God," I croaked.

Tears flowed.

It stung.

I gulped air into my lungs, noticing Charlie doing the same.

There was no knowing for certain that my angel hasn't been abused, but the doc told us earlier that children don't lie like this. Something would set him off in his fragile state, he wouldn't be able to lie if I had been beaten... shit.

Still, we have no idea how she was treated while EJ was in La Push.

Deep breaths.
Tell me you're alive, baby... please, I fucking need you...

*O*O*O*

Four hours later, EJ had answered more of the doc's question. Questions about EJ and Bella's everyday life. Questions about food and water. Questions about bathing and showering. Questions about play-time and toys. Questions about TV, hobbies, and favorite pastimes.

There were none.

EJ kept to himself at daycare, shying away thanks to that son of a bitch's words about shutting up. My nugget has never watched a movie, never watched TV.

He wasn't allowed to draw pictures after daycare.

Denali had told me about La Push Play Care and how it was an outside daycare. They were always outside, learning about the nature, and they were encouraged to know about the forests, crafting, and the legends that belonged to a tribe – the Quileutes. There were Chiefs coming to tell old stories, tell the little ones about their history.

I liked the idea. It's healthy, and for EJ who was forced to be inside all days, daycare outside sounds perfect for him. I'm glad he had that. I really am. But... Christ, there are so many things we take for granted that he's never heard of.

The reason he loves Turtles and LEGO is because that's the only thing he know. His only friend Max from a small town called Forks, he let EJ borrow a few of his Turtles sometimes when they played. This is why my nugget headed straight for the Turtles in Alice's toy-corner.

Standing there with headphones, unable to do anything really, it's indescribably painful to hear about the things my son speaks casually
about. Because it was all he knew. He doesn't know about games and toys, he doesn't know...

He just doesn't know.

Nothing could stop me from falling apart when EJ asked Alice what a birthday party was.

He doesn't know about Christmas.

He's never received a gift.

And I know this is killing Bella. I know this is tearing her apart. Not to be allowed to celebrate your son's birthday...

I wasn't able to. Bella was denied.

My angel's been refused celebrating our son.

Celebrations were always a big thing for her. Taking pictures, making a cake, buying gifts...

*O*O*O*

"You really like chocolate, huh?" Alice said, smiling as she ruffled EJ's hair a little. "Good thing I have lots and lots," she added with a wink.

EJ’s smile was small but genuine. He really liked chocolate.

We're back after another snack time break, and we have two more hours before this day is over. Two more hours before I take my son home for the first time.

The doc came into view and I adjusted the headphones, preparing myself for even more.

Even more pain.
I sighed in resignation as EJ scooted closer to Alice when the doc sat down.

I frowned as he burrowed himself into my hoodie.

*I'm here, nugget. I'm real. Say the word and I'll be there.*

Thankfully, Alice noticed and started playing with him.

.

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"Can you tell me a little about Max, EJ?" the doc asked gently.

Alice handed him a small bag of M&M's and a juice box, which seemed to cushion the blow. It was obvious that he didn't like talking about much that involved others.

"*We play sometime,*" he mumbled quietly, keeping his eyes focused on the toys before him, but the little bag of chocolates was in his hand in a death grip. Almost as if was afraid it would disappear. Or that... someone would take it from him. *"Not lots cause he like to play wiv many boys and girls."

"And you didn't want to play with so many?"

"*No. Uncle Garrett don't like that. Better alone."

Jesus motherfucking Christ.

.

.

"*What about Mommy? Does she have any friends?*"
I breathed in deeply through my nose, exhaling shakily.

"Yes. One."

"Who?"

.

.

.

"Me."

My eyes closed.

The word echoed in my head.

Me, me, me, me...

My angel's only friend was her son, and now she doesn't have him.

She's alone with that sick bastard.

Alone.

All alone.

Oh, God.

Angel, please fight... We will find you... Please fight. Don't give up, baby, please.

We have to find her. We have to find my wife. Shit. My chest... fuck.

"She only played with you?"
"Yes. Uncle Garrett don't like other people. Mommy only gots me. She wanted to see the woods and the flowers but he say no and I say I can make her picture wiv flowers but he say no again."

"Jesus-" I choked out.

"I can't believe this," Charlie croaked.

The burn. Deep breaths. Rubbed my chest, right above my heart.

*Please, baby, don't give up...*

Tears flowed freely again. Down my cheeks, my neck. Christ, how much is she suffering?

The doc signaled for a break, and I rushed into the room, not stopping until I had EJ in my arms.

*O*O*O*

Last hour.

My hands are shaking.

EJ's tired but the doc said that he'd been exceptionally good with answering questions today, and there were a few more questions she wanted him to answer before we call it a day.

Denali and the profilers agreed.

Fuck all of them.

But I'm doing this for Charlie right this second because I know the question she's going to ask. Well, one of them. I'm pretty sure I don't want the answer.
Right now, the subject is their move from Washington to New Orleans.

EJ's told us that it took a long time. 'Many, many days in a car,' he'd said. He also told us he didn't like it because Mommy was crying a lot.

And this is why I know I don't want the answer to doc's next question.

I ignored the glare I received from a few agents and lit a fucking smoke.

Charlie followed suit.

His fingers shook.

Headphones were adjusted.

Then came the question.

"EJ, could you tell me why she was crying?" she asked.

Deep drag. Exhale.

EJ didn't like the question. He frowned.

Fuck.

Fuck.

..

"Cause she couldn't see or talk wiv me," he muttered, looking down at his hands. "I don't like it when Mommy is in back of the car. Mommy all alone there and it's dark and I can't talk wiv her so I'm alone also."

"For fuck's sake!" I snapped, almost knocking the motherfucking laptop to the ground.
The back of the car? The trunk?

I... I... fuck.

"Breathe, Edward."

I can't.

I placed my hands on my thighs again.

Shit.

Took a drag but ended up choking.

Then I heard my son cry out.

"Don't like it when Un- Uncle G-Garrett put tape on-on m-Mommy's mouth!"

No.

"Don't like it when she pretend-smile! D-don't I-like when I... I can't be her fwriend!"

No.

Please, no!

Please, angel!

A broken sob ripped through my body, and I felt my knees cave.

It was enough.

Stop it, please.

My knees hit the floor.
"Al-ways base-m-ment or b-back of the car!"

Please... I can't...

Angel.

No air.

"B-be quiet or no f-food-punish! I'm s-sorry I cr-cry!"

"EJ, honey, it's okay... It's okay... we're done, sweetie..."

"I'm Lijah, I pwromise... I say again... I wrepeat it, Un-Uncle Garrett!"

Please stop.

Please stop.

"D-Daddy! Daddy!"

Oh, God.

"No, no! I want Daddy! Nooo! Mommy!"

"I'll take you to Daddy, EJ... Please, honey, I'll take you to him."

My chest heaved, craving air.

Gulping.

I heard him screaming for me.

I'm here, nugget... I love you... I'm real... I'm here.

I tried to get up. I felt hands on my arms.

Fuck...

'Breathe, hubs. You need to breathe...'
Hubs. Soft voice.

Bella.

"Breathe, kiddo... please... he needs you."

You called me hubs sometimes, angel...

"That's it... breathe through your nose... You can do this, son."

Heaving breaths.

It hurt.

They hurt.

"D-Daddy sad?"

Oh, Christ.

I felt his hands on my face.

"You're real, Daddy. S'not pretend. I'm EJ, Mommy say so."

I breathed. Felt him.

Deep breaths.

His forehead touched mine, and I felt my entire body relax.

Without even thinking about it, I pulled him to me, held him closely, breathed him in. I opened my eyes, closed them again. Just held him. He held me, too.

Sitting on the floor, EJ was the one helping me back to reality. I was the one supposed to help him, but in the end he helped me.
"I'm here, baby," I breathed out shakily, rocking us slowly back and forth on the floor. "I'm here... I'm sorry I scared you."

"You're real."

"I'm real," I whispered thickly, shivering when he played with the hair in the back of my neck. "We're both real. You're my nugget, right?"

"Yea. S'not pretend."

Threading my fingers through his hair, I made him face me, and I closed in until our foreheads were once again touching. It turned out he wasn't the only one needing close contact. I needed it, too. More than I ever thought possible.

I needed him.

I vowed to myself right then and there that I would get my shit together. I couldn't afford hurting my nugget. He's my priority. I can break down later when no one's there.

But now. Now I wanna take my son home.

"I'm taking you home now, nugget. Your real home."

He didn't understand.

Brushing the last of his tears away, I clarified quietly.

"Our yellow house."

Chapter 17

...My love for you is real...

...My love for you is strong...
EJ was asleep in my arms as Charlie parked outside the house.

Since it was rather late, the doc told us that she was spending the night in a motel nearby but Charlie offered her to stay in his guestroom. That way, I could call them both as soon as we need her. Mom's staying in our guestroom.

_Ours. Yours and mine, angel._

With EJ's face buried in the crook of my neck, I exited the car, immediately recognizing the gasps coming from Charlie's porch.

Mom had already warned me.

Glancing over at Charlie's house, I saw Tanya and Aunt Liz holding each other as they cried. They stayed away and for that I was thankful. The day had already been too long. I just wanted to get EJ inside. Inside... in mine and Bella's house where he belongs.

I sent a tired two-finger wave in Liz and Tan's direction, feeling myself get emotional all over again, and this was why I needed to bring EJ home. Aunt Liz and Tanya were as devastated by all this as they could possibly be, and I was grateful that they gave me space, but I still knew how much it killed them to stay away. It was just too hard for me to deal with them right now.
"We'll see you in the morning, son," Charlie said, squeezing my shoulder gently before he did the same with EJ. "Jazz, Em, and I will keep track on the police and the media."

Automatically, I glanced over my shoulder, across the street, where Jazz and Alice stood there on their own porch. Then back at Charlie's porch, where I noticed that Emmett had joined Tanya and Aunt Liz.

We both nodded in greeting, and then I headed inside, not bothering to look further down the street.

I already knew what was there.

On both ends of the street we now had police cruisers and agents, keeping the local media at bay, not to mention other... threats.

"Do you wanna put EJ in his own room, kiddo?" mom asked, unlocking the door to the house.

I shook my head. "No. I need him closer."

Not a fucking chance that I could sleep in separate rooms.

"Besides," I added, entering the house. "I want him awake the first time he sees it."

The smell of our home enveloped me, and as I simultaneously breathed in my son... it felt like I could breathe for the first time in over three years. Not perfectly but... one piece less was missing for me to be whole.

I need that.

I **miss** that.

To be whole.
"Why don't you take a shower, baby," mom said, watching me in concern.

"You're baby-ing me, mom," I sighed, heading for the kitchen.

I could've headed straight for the stairs. I could've put EJ to bed before I made myself the sandwich I desperately wanted but that's the thing. It's a lie, because I can't. I can't put my son to bed – upstairs – and then go back downstairs. The distance is too great.

"I'm gonna baby you for a while now, kiddo," mom murmured, stepping into the kitchen behind me. "Let me mother my son. I need it, and you need help."

I knew she was right of course.

"Now," she said, standing in front of me. "Give me my grandson, so you can take a shower. I won't set him down, I won't leave the house. In fact, I won't even leave the kitchen, cause you're hungry, yes?"

I paused.

Again, I knew she was right.

I sighed.

I steeled myself.

Just a quick shower. I'll be right back. I breathed EJ in, pressed my face gently against his hair, and breathed him in. Closed my eyes, let his scent fill my lungs. Just a quick shower. Maybe a smoke. I'll be right back.

"Get me immediately if he wakes up," I mumbled, pushing down the feeling of panic as mom took him. Christ. Deep breaths. "I'll be uh... I'll be right back."
I hesitated, watching mom pull out some ingredients from the fridge while EJ slept in her arms. I'll be right back.

Just a quick shower.

Right.

"I'll be here, kiddo." She nodded, smiling all motherly.

Okay.

With a nod, meant for myself, I headed for the stairs.

Ran was more like it.

"No runnin' in the house, kids!" Charlie hollered.

Bella and I slowed down, grinning at each other, and I knew I was blushing.

"Sorry, Charlie," I called back as Bella called out, "Sorry, dad."

As we headed for her room, I heard Charlie muttering in the kitchen, "You saw each other two hours ago. Where's the fire?"

Bella must have heard him, too, cause she giggled, and... oh, she was blushing, too!

Was she also thinking about kissing?

I prayed she was.

Just thinking about our first kiss – the kiss we shared in her tree house last night... yeah, I wanted to kiss her again. Over and over again.

"What'cha thinking about, Edward?" she asked as we entered her room. "You uh... never mind."
My mouth was dry and I cursed myself for sitting down on her bed.

Bella ducked her head, heading for her CD-player. It was brand new, a gift from Aunt Liz.

She'd given me one, too.

CD's are awesome.

My hands were clammy.

Wait, did Bella say something?

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing," she mumbled, waving me off as she picked some music.

She was lying, and I didn't like it when she hid things from me. It made me worried, so I walked over to her, gripped her shoulders and made her face me.

A smile tugged in the corners of my mouth, and it was hard to not fist-pump the air for finally being taller than my Bella. I mean, taller than my friend. My friend. My friend, Bella.

Jeesh.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I uh..." She didn't continue, instead she just refused to look me in the eye.

Nerves hit me and I was suddenly afraid that I had done something to upset her.

Had I done something wrong?
But before I could panic further, Bella raised her head, and blurted out, "I wanna kiss you again."

Relief flooded my senses... before I attacked her again.

I couldn't help it.

I hadn't stopped thinking about our hours of kissing last night, and I was glad she hadn't either.

"Don't ask me again," I mumbled against her pouty lips. "Just kiss me. Never ask."

"Okay," she mumbled back, tangling her hands in my hair. "Same goes for you."

I smiled, or grinned, into the kiss.

"Maybe we just shouldn't stop kissing," I suggested, nibbling on her bottom lip as my hands found her waist.

"Sounds good," she breathed, deepening our kiss. "Never stop."

I stood under the spray, leaning my forehead against the tile.

The hot water did its job, and I felt some tension leave me. Leave my back and neck.

It wasn't enough. It never was.

Will I ever get to kiss you again?

"We weren't supposed to stop, angel," I breathed thickly, unsurprised when I tasted salt on the tip of my tongue.

Tears came too often.
"We weren't supposed to stop..."

I squeezed my eyes shut, seeing Bella's face in front of me.

The water didn't bring the comfort she did, no matter how hot the water was, Bella was always warmer.

I swallowed the lump in my throat.

"Christ, Bella, I miss you... so much... Please..."

*O*O*O*

Dressed in a black wife beater and a pair of grey sweats, drawn to my calves, I trudged down the stairs as I let the towel hang over my shoulders.

*The third step still creaks, baby...*

That was always my fall when I got the munchies in the middle of the night.

That damn step gave me away, and Bella often caught me red handed, usually with a bag of Cheetos.

It was instant the way a knot loosened around my heart as I entered the kitchen.

Mom sat by the counter, EJ still in her arms, as she flipped mindlessly through some magazine.

"Hey," I said lamely, walking over to them. "Did he wake up?"

Mom smiled softly and shook her head, but her smile faltered when she saw my face.
I played it off.

I didn't want her comments, and I knew she didn't think I was still breaking down everytime I took a fucking shower.

After grabbing a Cherry Coke from the fridge, I sat down next to them, smiling a little as mom handed EJ over to me again without a word.

"Thank you for stockin' the fridge," I mumbled, nodding in thanks as she pushed a plate with two sandwiches towards me.

"Thank Lizzy and Tanya tomorrow." She winked. "Lizzie even attached one of them kiddie-sized toilet seats to the toilet in your bedroom."

Christ, they thought of that?

Shit. Toilet seats. I'm gonna need to do a shitload of research.

"You fink he'sh ready to meet everyone?" I asked quietly.

Mom rolled her eyes at me, most likely because I had my mouth full of food but whatever.

"I don't think you're askin' the right question, kiddo." She smiled ruefully. "Are you ready?"

I shrugged a little, sipped my Coke, cause I wasn't sure if I was ready.

All instincts told me to hide him, not to mention myself. I wanted to lock myself in with him.

Obviously I knew this was the opposite of good but that didn't remove my wish to do so anyways.

I was gonna have a lengthy talk about all that shit tomorrow with the doc because I wanted my son better. I need him to recover from all this, and I
wanna start as soon as possible. Slowly but surely, I wanna make him better. He deserves the best, and I will try my hardest to give him everything.

"I suppose I just have to deal with it," I sighed.

"We'll start slow," she said softly, smiling at my sleeping EJ. "I can go out and buy something sugary in the mornin', and then we could just have some coffee on the porch or something in the afternoon. Lizzie and Tanya don't have to stay long."

I nodded once, knowing it was right.

"Make sure that damn doc's there, too," I grumbled. "And Charlie."

"Yes, sir," she chuckled quietly, mock-saluting me.

I rolled my eyes but was unable to hide the small smile.

It felt good to feel half complete for once.

Once I had finished my food, mom smiled knowingly and took EJ for me again, and I headed out on the porch for a quick smoke.

I wasn't surprised to see Charlie, Jazz, and Emmett on his porch. They were most likely catching up.

Perhaps I'd join them one day soon.

Not now, though, and as I took a last drag, I cracked another smile at the thought of spending the night with my son. For the first time ever, I was going to have my son here. With me. In our house.

Tomorrow will be long.
Thankfully, EJ only has one or two sessions left before his 'questioning' is over, and then maybe we can start with his healing process, but I'm still happy that none of this is tomorrow. He needs a day off for crying out loud. Hell, *I* need a day off from that wrecking pain.

No, tomorrow will be long because I'm meeting with both Denali and the doc. Denali cause he's gonna fill me in on that the profilers have so far, and then of course how the investigation's going. And the doc cause I need to know how to act around my son. I need to know how to *be* around him, how to react if something triggers him... or some shit like that. I mean, it's bound to happen, right?

But now... now, I'm gonna go to bed. And I'm having my son right next to me.

*O*O*O*

That night, I slept. I slept better than I ever had before. Well, better that I have in the past three years at least. As usual, I slept on my wife's side of the bed, but my side wasn't empty for once. No, I had nugget there.

He slept on my side of the bed.

He was there.

He was *there*.

Sleeping peacefully in the pajamas Aunt Liz and Tanya had bought him.

My son.

I could breathe.

I could sleep.

*O*O*O*
"Daddy."

.

.

"Daddy."

.

.

"Wake up, Daddy."

I was already awake.

I had been for a while.

He nudged me and came closer.

Felt indescribably good.

"I think you awake, Daddy. You smile there."

I smiled wider, feeling his fingers on my mouth.

"Daddy's asleep," I said in my morning-voice.

Then there was the sound of nugget's giggle.

I could still breathe.

"Then I'ma wake you, Daddy. Mommy also talk-sleep."

My smile faltered.

My breathing hitched harshly once, logging in my throat.

It stabbed at me.
Keep strong, keep strong, I chanted to myself. I have a son now. First priority. Keep strong.

"Okay, Daddy's up," I sighed quietly, rubbing my face.

The room was brighter, felt brighter, and as I looked beside me, the reason smiled at me.

His hair was all over the place, his smile was existent, his green eyes were curious, and his light blue pajamas were bunched up, showing his little tummy.

He's my life.

"Good mornin', little nugget," I murmured, tapping him on the nose once. "Did you sleep okay?"

He nodded and almost bounced over to me, not stopping until he was sitting on my stomach.

I fucking smiled.

Just the feeling of smiling... Christ, there's not much that can describe how amazing it felt. Feels. How amazing it feels. To have your son close to you, the first thing when you wake up in the morning.

"Mommy also have soft pants wiv pockets," he commented, pointing at my grey sweats.

Again, my smile fell, and I remembered him telling the doc about Bella's clothes.

Did that mean... Did that mean she's wearing sweats? Soft pants with pockets? Sweats?

I made a mental note to talk to the doc later.
"Wha's that, Daddy?" he asked then, pointing at my bicep, the one with his name tattooed on it. "Did you color on your arm?"

I smiled again. It was all about him.

"Magic color." I winked. "It won't go off."

"But... what if you don' want it no more?" he asked, scooting closer so his fingers could reach it. "It's pretty."

"Thanks," I chuckled quietly. "And... I will always want it there."

"It's a word," he said thoughtfully, and I looked down as his finger traced the 'E' in EJ. "Little word but big."

Yes, the tattoo was big. But the word... the name... wasn't.

The name also represents the best thing I've ever helped create.

"It's your name, nugget," I murmured, looking up at his face.

I cracked another smile as EJ's eyes grew big, and his mouth popped open in a small 'o.'

I didn't know how he would react if I told him about Bella's name on my other bicep, so I kept quiet about that one and decided to get some giggles out of my son. I missed them and it was my goal and job to make them come often.

"Are you ticklish, buddy?" I smirked a little, wrapping my fingers around his calves.

"No!" he gasped, eyes wider than saucers, mouth twitching, and hands covering his tummy. "No, I'm not, Daddy."

Wow, he's as bad at lying as you, angel. I thought that was impossible.
"Liar," I whispered, feeling my mouth curve upwards into a grin. "I don't think I believe you, little man."

Then it all happened fast.

"Oof!" Yeah, that came from me.

EJ's foot. In my fucking face.

I had myself to blame.

Let's just say that my son has good reflexes.

It hurt but I... Christ, I laughed.

I started laughing.

And I don't know if it was my stomach vibrating with laughter than made EJ file in with a giggle-fit, but soon he was on the same page, and we were both wrestling on the bed. I was wrestling with my son and we were laughing. No, it didn't surprise me when my eyes welled up but I pushed it back, even if it was tears of fucking relief.

I could still breathe.

I had my son.

We woke up together. I have him with me.

He's giggling and laughing because I'm wrestling with him and making funny noises.

It was overwhelming.

Suddenly life felt worth living again. Living for real.

We're going to find you, angel, so help me God, we're going to find you.
I felt stronger.

Minutes later, we were both on our backs, lying next to each other, panting from our wrestling, and I stared up at the ceiling, thinking how fucking wonderful it felt. Half of me was complete, and I was filled with... *something*... something so strong. Powerful. I recognized it. I used to be defined by it, but I lost it after the police gave up on finding my wife. But now I could feel it, making its way into my body again.

Determination.

Not just for myself but for my son, too.

We were two people in need of Bella.

"Daddy?"

I turned my head to face him. "Yeah?"

I smiled a little as he scrunched his nose.

"Where are we?"

My smile grew.

"We're home, nugget."

I was nervous as shit, there's no denying that, but as soon as his face showed wonder and excitement, my heart took a proverbial chill pill.

"Home?" he asked. "In... in the yellow house?"

I nodded and propped myself up on my elbow. "Yep. It's our home. Yours, too, buddy."

"Can I see it?"
I chuckled and ruffled his hair. "Of course. I'll show you, but how about we get ready for today first. You need to go to the bathroom, yea?"

By the way he was squirming, I'd say he really needed to go.

"Come on, nugget," I said, getting out of the bed. "And then we'll get some breakfast, okay?"

His bathroom routine was one of the first things I'd learned. Well, mom found out first, but she told me once I'd gotten around to actually acknowledging the truth. The truth about him being mine, and since then there's not a thing I won't do. He's mine to take care of, and I have a shitload of time to catch up on.

EJ doesn't ask to go to the bathroom.

I don't know why.

But he doesn't, and it's not just the bathroom or other basic needs. He can ask Alice if he can play with LEGO instead of Turtles or things like that, but he never asks for such a simple thing as food, soda, water... whatever.

I have a feeling that's something Bella has the answer to.

It's a pain I'm pushing back right now.

I will make this work. I will fight for this.

My family will be whole one day.

After taking my hand, I led him into the bathroom, and then I turned around... but didn't leave. It was unacceptable for him to go to the bathroom alone, and that I can understand. It doesn't take a genius to understand that that son of a bitch has made my son scared to be alone.
So, I stand with my back to him as he goes to the bathroom, and I'm not allowed to turn until he flushes the toilet.

"All good?" I asked once he flushed.

"Yea," he mumbled, and I lifted him up to reach the sink.

I made a mental note to buy some fucking thing he could stand on to reach better.

There must be a shitload of stuff we need.

Clothes, toiletries, kids food, like... I don't know, funny cereals? And toys. I wanna give my son toys. Movies. I want him to experience all that other boys in his age takes for granted.

When he sees our flat screen downstairs, I don't want him to think it's off limits.

I'm aware of habits. Garrett denied EJ to watch TV, and obviously this is something EJ lives by. It's natural to him. He's not allowed to watch TV and that's that. To me, that's bullshit. It will be my pleasure to give my boy what he deserves.

It will be a long process, I'm not stupid. Breaking habits can take years.

But I'm up for it.

Once we left the bathroom, I saw mom in the doorway to the bedroom.

"Mornin'," I said.

I tensed.

Her eyes were red. From crying.

"What's wrong?" I asked, picking EJ up to position him on my hip.
Deep breaths.

"Oh, nothing," she assured but her eyes welled up again. "I promise, kiddo... It's just you two," she whispered thickly.

She smiled through her tears and motioned for the bed.

I understood.

She'd obviously peeked through the open door when EJ and I were... wrestling.

I relaxed and sorta... smiled. A little. Sheepishly even.

"I came in to ask if you wanted some help," she said then, wiping her eyes.

I made a bubble face, thinking about it.

Leave EJ with mom and go to the bathroom or skip going to the bathroom.

The painful truth was that it was a struggle. A real one.

Evidently mom felt my struggle and made the decision for me.

"EJ, sweetie, why don’t I help you get dressed while Daddy goes to the bathroom?"

That's when I noticed the bag on the floor. Aunt Liz and Tanya must have thought things through.

"You will be back, Daddy?" EJ asked, tightening his hold on my neck.

"Always," I promised, pushing down the panic again. For such a small thing as going to the bathroom. Shit. Yeah, this will take a long time to
get over. "Go with..." I trailed off, realizing that EJ had no idea who mom really was to us.

Walking over to the bed, I sat down on the edge of Bella's side, and kept EJ on my lap.

"Did you know that she's my mom?" I asked carefully. I knew he didn't, but I needed to start the conversation somehow. "Like your mommy is... your mommy, Esme is my mommy."

Shit, am I doing this right?

"Daddy's mommy?" he asked, scrunching his face together a little.

"Exactly." I nodded. "Esme is Daddy's mommy. And that means she's your..." I looked over at mom... who was silently crying. Again. And I mouthed, 'what the fuck do you wanna be called?'

Yeah, I wasn't really elegant or polite about it... shit... I'm sorry, but I'm new at this. I'm nervous as hell. Scared shitless that I'm gonna suck at this daddy-thing.

However, mom fucking laughed through her tears and croaked out 'nana.'

Alrighty.

"She's your nana," I told nugget.

Ten minutes of further explanations later, I darted to the bathroom while mom dressed EJ, and damn, I really needed to take a piss.

_Sweet relief..._

*O*O*O*

"You're bein' weird," I whispered to mom as we headed downstairs.
I had already made the decision to save EJ's room for last.

I wanted it to be a surprise. I also want it filled with toys before.

Mom didn't answer until we reached the kitchen. "I'm sorry," she chuckled... yes, while crying. I don't know what's up with her. "It's just good to have my son back."

I frowned in confusion as I sat EJ down by the table, and he busied himself immediately with the coloring book and the crayons. Yes, my aunt and cousin had thought of it all.

Mom elaborated while taking out sandwich stuff. "I've missed my foulmouthed son, kiddo. You have to understand that all I've seen and heard for the past three and a half years is shruggin', frownin', cockin' eyebrows, and one-liners."

I took it all in.

Sitting down next to EJ at the table, I took it all in.

"When I heard you two laugh earlier..." she trailed off. Eyes welling up again. I started to understand. "And then when you asked what I wanted to be called..." she shook her head. "It's just good to see you expressive again, baby. I've missed it. Your outbursts, your expressions, your curses... everythin'. I've missed it all."

I watched my son.

It was all clear. When I lost my wife and my son... In a way, mom lost her son.

"I'm sorry," I sighed quietly, not really knowing what else to say.

"Don't apologize, Edward," she told me. "I'm just glad to have you back."
We closed the subject for now.

Instead we focused on EJ. We ate breakfast and I grinned when I noticed that EJ most definitely took after his father when it came to food.

The two of us devoured the sandwiches mom made us, and she loved feeding him... or us. Yeah, I understood her more and more. I was returning to life, and I could feel more. Urges, feelings, expressions... they were resurfacing. My appetite. My fucking taste buds.

"Can we see the yellow house now, Daddy?" EJ asked after finishing his glass of chocolate milk.

I winked and wiped away his milk mustache. "We're in the yellow house, baby."

"S'not yellow here," was his reply.

I chuckled. He was so fucking cute. "You're right, nugget. How about we go outside, and I'll show ya?"

"Okay," he said, nodding furiously.

My heart did some weird flipity-flop thing as he smiled my smile, and held his arms out for me.

My son.

EJ Cullen.

I picked him up without hesitation, once again settling him on my hip, and then I glanced over at mom. "You comin'?"

"Mhmmm." She nodded.

Yeah, she was crying again.
I passed her, dropped a kiss on the top of her head, and left her in the kitchen, thinking maybe she wanted a minute alone before joining us.

"Shoes, Daddy!" EJ whisper-yelled as I reached for the screen-door.
"Don't you want shoes?"

I snickered at looked down at my bare feet. "Nah, it's okay, bud," I said, bumping my forehead gently against his', but don't hold it against me, cause it makes my son giggle. "Do you want your shoes?" But as soon as I asked, I regretted it. Just the thought of letting him go outside made my insides churn.

"No, you carry me, Daddy."

"Oh, thank God," I whispered under my breath, feeling my body relax again.

Shit. Deep breaths.

Then I stepped out on the porch, feeling the heat from the floorboards under my feet. The sun was out. It was still summer in New Orleans and for once, I appreciated the scenery I grew up with... or in.

One quick glance in the direction of Charlie's house told me that they were probably still asleep, but I did however see the cars with tinted windows down the street.

"I's yellow, Daddy!" EJ gasped, eyes trained on the house wall.

My eyes closed. I smiled contently. I nuzzled his soft cheek.

Home.

"It is, yeah," I murmured, kissing his cheek before I stepped out further, and I continued. Down the three porch steps and out to our little front yard.
It wasn't big at all, and it was completely open but now... now I could see myself building a fence. A white picket one. For EJ's sake.

I could see a future.

*You belong in our future, angel. You have to be in it.*

With my feet on the soft grass, I turned around, both of us facing our house.

"Whaddya think, nugget?" I asked.

He stared at it, eyes taking it all in, and it was wonder... and awe... I saw in his eyes.

I could imagine children visiting Disney World and wear my son's expression. But this was what he wore for our home. A home he'd only hear Bella talk about.

"Mommy say i's real," he whispered, eyes wide and still fixed solely on the house, and again I felt his hand in my hair, making sure maybe.

"It's real, EJ," I murmured. "So am I. This is all real."

"Promise?"

"I promise," I said, burying my nose in his hair. "I'm your daddy, and you are...?"

.

.

"Daddy's nugget."

Thank you.
"Exactly. And our yellow house is real."

He pursed his lips, thinking about it perhaps, the need to make him realize... to make him understand... to make him see... The need was great.

"Look at me, EJ," I said. He did... with a frown, and damn, he was chewing on his lip. Clearing my head from images of Bella doing the same, I continued quietly but firmly. "Tell me your real name, nugget."

Thankfully, this came without doubt.

"Edward Anthony Cullen Junior."

"Perfect," I said. "And touch your nose."

I chuckled when he... well, he looked at me like I was insane.

So, I took his little hand, pressed his finger against his nose. "Can you feel your nose, nugget?"

He nodded, still staring at me like I was an idiot.

I moved his hand to his hair next. "Can you feel you hair?" Again he nodded, and I continued, moving his hand to his stomach. "Feel your tummy?" Another nod. "It means you're real, EJ. You can feel that your nose is there when you touch it." Then I moved his hand to my nose, and I made a funny face to see him smile. It was a small victory everytime. "And you can feel Daddy's nose, right?"

"Yea," he giggled.

Warmth. All over.
"And Daddy's hair?" I asked, moving his hand to my clusterfuck. He giggled again... and nodded. I moved his hand to my stomach. "And Daddy's tummy?"

"Yes, Daddy!" he laughed. He fucking laughed. Christ, I'm alive.

"That means I'm real, too." I grinned, again bumping our foreheads together. "Do you believe me, EJ?"

"Yes." He nodded, placing his hands on my cheeks. "You're real."

"Good," I replied, and then I headed back to the porch, not stopping until I was close enough to touch the house wall. "Now... touch the wall."

He hesitated for a second, so I placed my own hand on the wall, and soon he followed, placing his little hand right next to mine. On the yellow painted wood.

"You feel that, buddy?" I asked quietly, swallowing hard as the emotions assaulted me. I tried to ignore it but it was impossible. This wasn't just important for EJ. It was important to me, too. I needed to see this for myself. I needed to see him here. Here at home. In our home.

"I's real," he whispered. "Yellow house is real. Mommy's right, Daddy. Yellow house is real. S'not pretend, i's real."

I nodded, unable to speak.

*O*O*O*

EJ and I spent the next couple of hours in our home.

I showed him every surface of the house... except for his room. I couldn't just yet. I needed to prepare myself because the truth remains; I haven't
opened that door in over three years. And I'm not strong enough to do it just yet.

Every once in a while, I took EJ outside, and we repeated our little routine.

It's real.

I'm real.

You're real.

Our yellow house is real.

Chapter 18

~My Next Breath by Hawk Nelson – chapter song.

September 10th

Edward Cullen.

In this second, Aunt Liz and Tanya are two of my favorite people in the world.

They bought baby monitors.

That's why I'm sitting on the porch without EJ.

He's upstairs, napping with mom.

I'm chain smoking my ass off.

So is Charlie who's sitting in the rocker.

My knee's bouncing and my eyes are glued to the baby monitor.

We're waiting for Denali to arrive.
"Beer?" he asked.

I nodded and breathed out, not realizing I'd been holding my breath in the first place.

As I lit up a smoke, I tilted my head back against the house wall, thinking about how this day would drastically change. Ever since I had woken up this morning, I had been filled with a sense of calm... contentment... and it was all EJ of course. I have my son – half my heart. But I'm not stupid. I know it's been a bubble. To have him here, close to me, with me... in our home... It's everything to me, but it's bubble waiting to explode in my face.

I have a long road ahead of me and I have a feeling the second Denali arrives, I will have my contentment ripped away from me.

EJ may still be here, the baby monitor proves it to me, but with Denali comes reality.

Reality. The part where my angel is being held against her will. Away from her son, her husband, her father, friends and other family. That's the reality, and I have to find myself in it. I have to. In order to fight, I need to face reality, I need to pay attention and I need to deal with it. For the sake of my family's future, I have to stay strong but it's goddamn hard. It's so hard because sometimes it would be so easy to give up.

There's hatred in my body for even thinking about it, but it's a habit. A habit I've lived with since my life was taken from me. The defeat.

Yes, it would be easy to surrender.

But I won't.

Giving up would kill me.
"Here," I heard Charlie say, and there was a beer in my face.

"Deep in thought?" he asked as I took the bottle from him.

I shrugged.

We drank and smoked in silence.

Thinking about... yeah, you know. All this.

Also about what Charlie had told me about of course – about the media and the lack of leads, about the search parties, about the progress in Washington... He's filled me in.

It's no secret that I've focused on EJ more than the investigation. I wouldn't have done it if I didn't know Charlie but I do know him, and he's the only one as eager as I am. His love for his daughter is the only one rivaling with my love for my angel.

Frowning, I gave that a thought.

I conceded immediately.

A few days with my son, and I realize that there is nothing that can compare. Nothing can rival with the love for your child. Not even the love you have for your soulmate. It's how it's supposed to be. And thinking about that makes me realize just how fucking broken Charlie must be. Christ, it's his daughter. His only child. My chest hurt just thinking about losing EJ again. Fuck.

"How did you cope, Charlie?" I asked hoarsely, a little in disbelief, but it was all dawning on me. "How are you coping?"

Over the years, we've been there for each other. Nothing's been one-way. We've... coped... together, but I've never fully- no, that's not true. I've thought I've understood. I thought I knew what he was going through but
I never did. That's clear now. When I have my son. Finally, when I have my nugget.

Charlie shrugged and tipped his bottle back, closing the subject.

Right.

It's his daughter. The answer is simple. He's not coping.

With another smoke, I leaned forward on my knees, staring off into nothing and just... let the war inside me settle.

I almost snorted.

It won't settle.

Not until I have my wife back, not until EJ has his mommy back, and not until Charlie has his daughter back.

"Denali's here," Charlie grumbled quietly, nodding towards the street.

My pulse quickened as I watched the agent walk up the short pathway... up the porch steps...

"Charlie, Edward." He nodded in greeting.

He looked haggard. Older than his years. I hadn't noticed it earlier, but I remember now that there's something about him... something that's missing.

"Have a seat," I said, nodding at the chair across from me, on the other side of the coffee table. "Anythin' I can get you? Coffee, beer, water...?"

"No, thanks, I'm good," he sighed, sitting down. "I'm just gonna dive into it, alright?"
Charlie and I nodded, and I knew I was thankful for just getting down to it. No need or use for stalling.

"My team in Seattle is almost done with the sketching," he sighed, pulling up a file from his briefcase. "Since little EJ couldn't give us much about Garrett's appearance, which is understandable, I called in four sketch artists to be there for each statement."

I nodded again, taking the information in, and I remember there was hope when doc asked nugget about Garrett's looks. But there wasn't much to go on. No marks that stood out, nothing out of the ordinary. EJ had pointed out in picture books that the agents had provided with, pointed out haircuts, eyes, noses, body... Yeah, the books basically showed body parts such as noses, eyes, arms, legs, mouths... all animated, and the doc asked EJ if he could point out what reminded him of Garrett.

Grey blue eyes.

Dull brown hair, cropped short.

Straight nose.

Thin mouth.

Average height and weight.

Apparentely always wearing the same sort of pants – described as khakis according to the doc. And lastly, a t-shirt.

Not much to go on.

"Eleven witness statements, including employees at Push Play and a few parents," Denali continued. "That's forty-four sketches. This will hopefully give us a good picture of Garrett."

I scratched my eyebrow.
"You want EJ to check those sketches, right?" I asked quietly... already knowing the answer.

I hated having to use my son for this but it was still for the best, I knew that, but that didn't erase the fact that my nugget was the tool, the key, to get Garrett's picture out there.

My instincts told me to shield him, to protect him from all this, but that would obviously be opposite of helpful.

"Yes," he replied, nodding once. "I'm afraid we need him."

I knew that.

Sighing, I leaned back in my seat.

"You had a meetin' with the profilers today?" Charlie asked, clearly wanting to know more on that.

"Yeah, we've gone over the footage and the audio on EJ's sessions several times, and we have a better image of how Garrett functions but we still need more answers." The last words came with a pointed look in my direction. Translation; he needs EJ to answer them. "What we all agree on is that Garrett has brains," Denali continued. "Not to mention knowledge. From all the fake documents we have found, and the location of the house in Washington, we know that he's thorough in his... work. Which leads us to believe he has experience with law enforcements or the armed forces."

Charlie and I exchanged one glance that said it all.

This aint good.

"EJ mentioned the army?" I rather asked than stated.

"Yes, and that's what we're leaning towards." Denali nodded. "It's a big search but hopefully EJ will help us narrow it down, and then we have
more to go on. The only problem is that we can't know if Garrett's his real name, and we have no last name to go on. Considering all the fake documents, Garrett Smith is most likely not his name."

I felt useless.

My son was the key to everything and there was nothing I could do to protect him from this. This was something he would have to go through.

"Doc said EJ already had two more sessions," I sighed. "Does whatever you need go on top of that?"

"I've spoken with Dr. McKenna, and I've handed her the list of questions we're adding," he told us. "But I don't think it will go over two sessions."

I breathed out in relief.

Two more sessions and then he's done.

"Okay." I nodded, lighting up yet another smoke. "When do we get started?"

"Tomorrow morning at ten am. Then the last session the day after when I return from the press conference. Should be around three pm."

*O*O*O*

I stood in the doorway to my bedroom, watching mom and EJ nap. Mom was awake but had her back to me. I would've thought she was asleep if she didn't caress nugget's cheek.

After Denali had left, Charlie and I talked a little about the investigation, but he noticed that I couldn't sit still. He saw how I bounced my knee, how my fingers tapped my leg... how my eyes traveled to the baby monitor.
"Be with your son," he'd said, cracking a wistful smile, and then he left.

Next up is doc. I need to talk to her. I need to know... everything. Everything about... everything. No, that aint possible but fuck, I need advice. Guidance. Answers.

Help.

*O*O*O*

When the doc arrived, we sat on the porch. I was chain smoking... again. And when she started sprouting off words that were too long and impossible to understand, I told the woman to dumb it down. I just wanted some damn advice without bringing out a fucking dictionary.

So... she finally started speaking English after a while.

"He's a very strong boy," she told me, sipping her fancy coffee that she had brought.

It was one of those with names that never ended. Woman-coffee, Charlie and I call it, cause Bella had one of those favorites and I liked to laugh at it. My wife's Saturday-craving was a vanilla coffee with extra foam and cinnamon.

Disgusting shit.

Coffee's supposed to be black.

And the doc... well, she's a prissy one.

I sat in jeans, a beater, and a flannel shirt unbuttoned.

The doc sat in her stiff suit. New Orleans. Summer. It can't be comfortable, and then the damn coffee that reeks of Italian names. You know the ones. I can picture her going into a Starbucks and order a
Mocha loca poka non fat, extra foam with syrup and au deluxe of what-the-fuck-ever. No, I don't really know what I'm talking about.

I sighed.

Lit a smoke.

Took deep breaths.

I know my son is strong...

"But he's also very dependent," doc continued. "More so than other children his age, and he needs to be told the truth because I'm afraid he won't be able to understand otherwise."

"What do you mean?" I asked confusingly.

"Right now I believe you're the only one he can trust," she said. "And even that's hard for him. He needs constant reminding of what's real and not, but you are his support and comfort when his mother isn't here. What you say is what he wants to believe, but he's lived so long with what Garrett has told him.

"It will be a long road for him to find true safety. Starting with reality, and pretend as he calls it. Such a simple thing as telling him about Santa and the Easter Bunny would probably confuse him very much."

I nodded thoughtfully, took a drag... exhaled through my nose... and rubbed the back of my neck.

Okay, so... I mean, what? I won't tell nugget about Santa then. But that could go on forever. There's tales and fiction in real life. Movies. Comic books. TV-shows. Games. That's all about pretend.
"EJ needs a foundation," she told me. "Something that is without a doubt real to him, and I'd say your home will be that place of comfort. The place he can trust to be there."

"Alright," I replied slowly, taking everything in. "In other words, what's told to him, he will think is real?"

"Pretty much." She nodded, a bit sadly. "Take Santa for instance. Many parents tell their children about him. That's normal for so many, but with EJ, I'm afraid he would take it to another level. He would believe you. If you told him Santa was real, he would believe it because what you say is the truth, or it will be the truth once he's gained full trust in you, which he will.

"So, when the day comes and his friends at school or kindergarten start figuring out Santa's not real, you might be facing a hard time with EJ."

Okay, I guess I could see that happening.

"So, I won't tell him about Santa. He's not real," I said. "What about movies, cartoons, and toys... Will he think they're... real or something?"

"Not necessarily," she said, smiling a little. "He's aware of toys and knows how to 'play.' He knows the Turtles he played with aren't real. And if I were you I'd introduce him slowly to other stuff. Don't bring him into a toy store because that could very well be overwhelming to him.

"You have to think about the fact that EJ probably didn't have much, and he didn't seem to have toys of his own. So, introduce him slowly, and start with things he can touch. Wait with movies and TV. At least for a while, because it may be confusing for him to see life in the TV. And once you start bringing the TV into his life, make sure it's cartoons or animated movies. All to make it easier for him to see the difference between real and pretend."
I took a drag of my cigarette, leaned forward on my knees, and thought about earlier today when nugget touched my nose, our house... it was real because he could touch it. That must mean I did something good, right?

"So, there needs to be a distinct line between what's real and not," I concluded, dragging a hand through my hair. "Starting off with toys... smaller once that he can hold... right?"

"Exactly," she nodded. "Nothing bigger than him," she chuckled a little. "Nothing overwhelming. Dolls or... action figures... More LEGO perhaps. Things he's familiar with. And just remember that what you say will be taken seriously."

Again, I nodded. It was a shitload to take in.

"And there's more, Edward," she said. "EJ's very fragile and he doesn't want to part with you, which is also understandable. But this means that if you tell him you won't leave him, he will take it very literally. To you it means you won't leave him to be alone for good, you just won't leave him. But to him it will mean... at all. If you tell him you won't leave him, he will believe it and think you will always be there. In every waken moment you will be there with him."

Right. Of course.

Shit.

"I assume you know EJ will need therapy, yes?"

"Yeah," I replied.

That much I knew.
"Good. Well, I'll be happy to give you my recommendations for a good therapist for him. One that can be there for both of you, because you may not see it, Edward but you will need to see one, too," she said pointedly.

A part of me resented that.

Sure, I needed help, but... a therapist? For me?

Fuck.

Ignoring that for now, I fired off the next question. "So, what do I do next? I mean, where do I go from here?"

"As soon as his sessions are over," she said, and then pausing... as if formulating her words. "I'd say give him a couple of days to rest, to be with you and your close ones... and then you should start the process of helping him recover. And by that I mean, you need a therapist. But even now, right after I leave, there are things you can start with."

I nodded for her to continue.

"To make things easier for EJ, I would start with routines. For instance, play-time. A time of the day where you play with toys or something like that. And then specific meal-times. Bath time... and bed-routine. Settle him into your life, basically."

"I have some papers," she said then, digging in her briefcase. "They will be a good start. Just read them and embrace what you feel is good for your son, but don't do it by yourself. Include your family because they are all involved in this."

I took the folder with papers she handed me, and I listened as she continued.
"What we've found out from EJ is that he most likely lived on a schedule with Garrett, too. Especially when it came to meals."

I nodded in understanding, remembering nugget telling us about the same meals they were given.

"I would encourage you to continue with routines but that you add things to it. Obviously you don't want him to eat the same breakfast every morning, and he really shouldn't. But you can create a routine anyway. For instance, if breakfast is served around nine am or something like that, you can make a routine out of making breakfast together. He can choose to eat what he wants... with limits of course," she smiled, "but the routine can be you and him eating breakfast together at a certain time. But you can still eat different things, so to speak."

"I understand," I said. "Certain things will be set in stone, and then there will be options within that."

"Exactly."

Okay, I can do that.

I will uh... I will write a list. Sounds easy enough. I'll write a list with things to fill our day, and he will get used to our routine. Yeah, I can do that.

"Can I ask what your plans are regarding work and preschool?" she asked.

My answer came easy. "I don't want him in preschool right now and I'm not working for a while."

Three years of not doing much has obviously saved me money, so it's not like I need it right now, and mom will understand. As for EJ, I'm not stupid. I know... in the future, he will return. But not now. Definitely not
while the investigation is running, and definitely not until he's ready. I will probably never be ready but... I'm not thinking about that now.

Then there was the bitter voice in my head telling me that the investigation could drag out for years. It's not like it hasn't happened before.

Another pain I pushed down.

"Taking a few months off is absolutely not wrong," she assured. "But I want you to know that you will most definitely have to deal with separation issues later, Edward. Protect him and make him feel at home, but don't shield him from the outside world completely."

Can I tell her to fuck off now?

"I'm not saying that you have to leave him," she added. "But don't close yourselves in. Involve family. Let EJ get to know his grandparents and other family. He's already been so shielded in his life."

Noted.

I *am* aware of course, and I won't close him in. I won't.

"Hey, Edward- Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't see you, Rachel," I heard Alice chuckle as she stopped on the last step. "I'll just come back later."

"No, no, it's okay," the doc said, and I looked up to see a contemplative look on her face. "Actually I have something to discuss with both of you so it was perfect that you stopped by."

I was confused but what else is new.

"Okay?" Alice said, smiling curiously. "I was just gonna ask Edward if he and EJ wanted to come over for dinner."
I sighed and lit up the umpteenth smoke of the day.

Glancing over at the doc didn't help my thoughts cause it's quite fucking clear she wants me to accept the damn dinner invitation. But I don't. Not yet. I'm not ready yet. Fuck, can't I have a couple more days? Is that so much to ask for?

"I'll think about it, alright?" I muttered, rubbing the back of my neck.

The doc pursed her lips, obviously thinking about my answer and I found myself imagining ways to get her out of my house. Or off my porch. It was quite calming. If only in my head. There, in my head, I told her to fuck off. Over and over.

"How about we compromise, Edward?" doc asked. "How about you wait going over to Alice and her husband's, but that you invite Charlie and Esme over for dinner here tomorrow. That will give you tonight with EJ alone."

"Deal," I said right away, nodding once.

Much better.

Mom was already here as it was and it was about time I added Charlie into that mix anyways.

"And then maybe you can go over to Alice in a couple of days?" she asked, looking between the two of us.

Relentless little shit, that one.

The doc. Not Alice. Well, I suppose Alice is, too.

Then there were Alice Whitlock's motherfucking puppy eyes.

"Yeah, yeah, a couple of days, whatever," I muttered again.
"Very good, Edward," doc complimented me.

Like I was a fucking dog.

Nah, you can't say I appreciated that.

"Alright, now that you're here, Alice," the doc said, giving Alice her attention. "I was thinking about EJ's next sessions, and you mentioned something about moving them."

"Yeah, I figured it might be good," Alice shrugged. "EJ's already closing himself in a little when we enter my classroom, and if he's coming back to school... later when he's ready... I just thought his classroom might not be the best place to continue."

I hadn't thought of that at all, but... I suppose she's right.

EJ will associate his classroom with the questions about Garrett and that can't be good, right? Shit, so much to think about.

"Well, I agree," the doc said. "And I told Agent Denali as much. Now... either we can hold the last two sessions in my temporary office down at the station, or we can decide on another place where EJ might feel more comfortable – an environment that's a bit homier."

There were pointed looks.

Should I play my gender-card? Cause I still don't understand shit.

"We could do it in our house," Alice suggested. "I'm sure Jazz won't mind."

Twenty minutes later, the doc and Alice left.

It was decided that EJ's last two sessions would be at their house across the street, and after the doc had explained it all to me, I admit that I was
grateful for their meddling. I mean, they know what they're doing, and I
don't. Not really. But they do, and they saw that EJ's classroom shouldn't
be associated with discomfort. I didn't see that. No surprise, I didn't. I'm
not really thinking ahead, which is fucking understandable, but this just
proves I need to man the fuck up and involve family.

Anyway, the doc left to go and take care of the permits and paperwork to
have the sessions at Alice's, and I darted upstairs to be with my son
again.

**September 11th**

The first session over at Jasper and Alice's house was... weird.

I didn't feel comfortable at all with the questions.

They were really fucking different, and at times I felt that they messed
with EJ's head, which was my downfall in a way. Downfall simply because
his pain is my fucking pain and when I can't be there for him, when I can't
be in the same room, or in this case; their backyard, everything hurts like
a motherfucker.

The questions were all about Garrett's behavior, and not only were the
questions getting on my nerves but they were also repetitive in a way that
upset my son.

The same question was asked in several different ways in case EJ
answered them differently, and they didn't move onto the next question
until they were two hundred percent sure they'd milked every drop of
information from nugget. Yes, fucking painful, and during this time,
Charlie, mom, and I were stuck in Alice and Jasper's living room – wearing
the damn headphones, watching the damn laptop.

*Did Garrett tell you about his job, EJ?*
Did he tell you what he liked to do?

Did Garrett work like other uncles, EJ?

EJ, was Garrett home all day or did he leave for work in the morning?

Yeah, fucking repetitive. And they went on. All about Garrett's everyday routine.

At times I was so fucking livid because it felt like they forgot about my son's age. He's only three years old for fuck's sake. I may not be very experienced with children but come on, a three year old doesn't know about jobs and... adult stuff. Still, they got some answers. The profilers knew what they were doing and by the end of the day, everyone concluded that Garrett has a history in the army.

Even Jazz noticed it, but that's most likely cause he has his own history in the army, and he recognized many of the hints that were hidden in EJ's answers. And just like the profilers, Jasper's guess was that Garrett has brains. He's a smart fucker, and that just fucking kills me. Just thinking about the fact that this sick bastard has my wife is enough to floor me, but to add that he's smart... Christ, that's just... fuck, no words can describe the sinking feeling of dread, of despair, of fucking failure.

Is there any hope?

Fuck.

Anyway, this was the first session Jasper listened in on since we were at his house, and at first I thought he would... well, I don't really know what I thought, but... yeah, he acted weird. He wasn't just some concerned friend or neighbor, he was fucking intense. Standing with us by the laptop, wearing headphones, he was listening intently, looking all serious, and it was like... shit, I can't form a fucking sentence. I'm just... tired, messed up. Exhausted. Annoyed.
Jasper acted like he was there to solve and figure out. Yeah, that's it. He acted like he was a professional. Not a retired Sergeant, but a very much active one.

By the time the session was over, EJ and I was equally distressed but in different ways, so I brought him home and the two of us relaxed and goofed around in the bedroom. In other words, we wrestled and then we fucking napped. It was needed on so many levels. Not being close enough to hold him gets old pretty fucking quickly.

Then... a few hours later, mom announced it was dinner downstairs, and fuck, that was another painful event. Painful because Charlie was close to falling apart.

He's Pops to EJ now.

Think about it.

We sat in mine and Bella's kitchen, ate dinner with EJ, joked around a little, talked... and the entire time, there was this fat space of nothing, reminding us of the person missing. Bella wasn't there to witness her own father and her only son bonding.

The word 'family' hung heavily in the air as we sat there.

Family. Yeah, sure, but where the fuck is my missing piece? Where's the rest of my heart? Where's EJ's mommy? Where's Charlie's life?

Christ, angel, I'm trying to be strong... It's just so fucking hard.

Gently I pressed my lips against EJ's forehead, careful not to wake him up.

Yeah, long day. But at least I have my son here, lying right next to me in bed.
Bella doesn't.

She's alone.

My eyes closed, and as always I see her. My angel. Smiling at me. Eyes full of mischief. The sun in her hair. Summer freckles on her nose.

It plays like a movie in my head.

I can see her.

I can hear the echoes of her laughter.

So many memories, so many...

Our house is full of them.

They're all I have left of her.

As I opened my eyes and saw my sleeping son, I realized that that isn't true of course.

*He's* all I have left of her.

I cleared my throat, swallowing the emotion stuck there but it's futile, and my vision blurred... when nugget mumbled in his sleep.

"S'real, Mommy... *Mommy*..."

Oh, *God*.

Biting my lip to keep the sounds bottled up, I bury my face in Bella's pillow.

*It... it doesn't smell like you anymore, angel*...

I need strength. Please.
Please help me.

*O*O*O*

**September 12th**

At seven oh hundred this morning, a man started his drive.

The drive, away from Memphis and the secured bunker... and towards New Orleans.

Three hundred and fifty-nine miles.

He wore his cargo pants, his t-shirt, his combat boots.

And a sinister smile.

All across the state of Mississippi, he wore that smile.

When he entered the state of Louisiana, all he could think about was how badly he wanted to want his Irina again. It was all he wanted. He wanted to feel the urge to touch her. He wanted to love her again. But two people were in the way. He won't want his Irina, and his Irina won't want him.

Until Kate Denali and Edward Cullen are dead.

So, when he finally reached New Orleans seven hours and thirty-two minutes after he started his car this morning, he could feel it. He could feel the buzz, the familiar thrill. The adrenaline pumping. It was always the same, every mission was the same.

The man was on high alert. Every sense heightened.

In control.

This, he knew. He *knew* this.
His training kicked in when he reached a certain street. The street.

He knew this.

He knew the cars with tinted windows that were parked.

He knew the drill.

He just fucking knew.

So, he watched. That was the key – observe.

He counted, and if he was right, which he always was, the house in yellow was the one. He couldn't get close enough to see the actual house number but fuck that because he didn't need it. Counting was enough. The yellow house was the one.

He observed, took everything in, calculated, planned.

Then he saw. After a while. He saw a man, and the man crossed the street. The man carried a little kid that was oddly familiar to him.

Through his binoculars he watched the man approach another house.

Agents. The man made a disgusted face at the thought of the agents. Nosy fuckers. He used to know one. One he called father-in-law. Fuck them.

It didn't matter, though. None of that mattered.

What mattered was the fact that the man carrying the kid had left the yellow house. It could only mean one thing.

That man is Edward Cullen.

He snickered at the thought of Edward Cullen having a kid.
If only Irina knew his precious Edward had betrayed her.

Pretty much like both she and her sister had betrayed him all those years ago.

The man went back to observing and planning.

It was only a matter of time.

*O*O*O*

Edward Cullen.

At four pm, I carried nugget across the street.

Time for his last session with Dr. McKenna.

Our day so far has been nothing but alright, and it was all about EJ, mom, me, and Charlie... you know, more bonding. And EJ was giggling some. It still meant the world to me, and goddamnit, when mom presented nugget with my old Turtles, I thought I was going to fall apart.

EJ's carrying my old Rafael right now, and every now and then, he mumbles, 'I's mine, i's mine.'

It's the first toy he's ever been able to call his own.


And now... now it's session time.

Can't wait.

Sense the sarcasm.

"Mr. Cullen?" an agent inquired as I reached Alice and Jasper's house.

"Edward," I corrected, feeling EJ tighten his hold on my neck.
"Alright. Edward," he nodded, shaking my hand. "I'm Special Agent Jacob Black. But please, call me Jacob... or Jake."

He flashed me his mega-fucking-awesome-out-of-this-world-cool badge that I couldn't have cared less about, and I nodded once in response.

I remembered him of course, not that we'd been introduced but he's been here from day one, and I remember Charlie telling me that it was this dude's father that was in charge of EJ before the DNA results came.

"Where's Denali?" I asked.

I was still apprehensive about new people and I didn't know what to make out of this one. Obviously I was reading too much into it but I couldn't exactly help it, and as I studied the man in front of me, guessing and estimating... A man in his late thirties, maybe... black hair... dark eyes... fancy fucking suit...

...I realized I was turning into one of them fucking profilers.

I mean, he looked like a sane person, I suppose. But what nutcase doesn't? I mean, really.

Damn, I'm losing my fucking mind.

"He had to leave," Agent-call-me-Jacob... or-Jake said. "He told me to tell you that the sketches just arrived from Seattle, and he'll be back in a few hours. In the meantime, I'll be here."

Yeah, you and all the other ten agents.

"Alright," I muttered, shrugging a bit.

Then we entered the house, and Alice greeted us as usual with her chirpyness.
"Hey, guys!" She beamed, throwing her tiny self at us.

"Look here, Miss. Alice," EJ said, shoving the Turtle in Alice's face. "Daddy and Nana gave it. I's mine now. I got lots of 'em but this is my favorite. Daddy say also Wrafael s'his favorite."

I smiled and nuzzled his cheek a little.

"Wow, that's so cool!" Alice replied in amazement. Yeah, she was good at making my son feel comfortable. "You said thank you to Daddy and nana, yea?"

I grinned proudly and EJ nodded shyly.

There's no denying that my son is a polite boy, and I... guess I have my angel to thank for that.

Pushing that pain down for now.

"Yeah, he did," I chuckled quietly, to which EJ buried his face in the crook of my neck. "What's the matter, buddy? Are you shy?" I whispered before I tickled his sides and nibbled on his cheek.

That earned me giggling and squealing.

It warmed my heart.

"No, Daddy, don't eat me!" he gasped through his giggle-fit.

"But you're so yummy, better than a hamburger," I growled playfully, trying to nip at his flailing arms. "And Daddy's hungry."

It was emotional. Each time I heard his laughter, my throat closed up.

I've waited three years and five months to hear him, see him and hold him.
"You two are just too cute for words," Alice snickered, shaking her head in amusement. "And you can continue goofing around soon, but Rachel's here now."

I sobered. Sighed.

EJ stopped laughing, too, and I grimaced slightly as yet another pain was pushed down.

I wanted him laughing. Always.

*Last session. It's the last one,* I reminded myself.

Too soon, I released nugget and he went out back with Alice and the doc while I headed for the living room where Charlie and mom already waited.

"Let's get this over with," I sighed, nodding in thanks as an agent handed me a pair of headphones.

Then the questions came.

*Did Garrett often mention the army, EJ?*

*Did he wake you up at the same time every morning?*

*Was he ever gone?*

*Did Garrett often speak on the phone, EJ?*

*Did Garrett have any friends?*

*Did Mommy ever tell you anything about Garrett, EJ?*

Then of course follow-up questions.

It was two hours of nothing but tensing and swallowing emotion.
We didn't find out much, only things that strengthened the theory of Garrett being military. It made sense. The man, that sick bastard, lived on a schedule. Everything went like clockwork. Routine. Everyday the same. Every single day.

A big part of me is fucking thrilled that Garrett never really talked to my son. Don't ask me why he never did but I'm glad nonetheless, because I don't want him near nugget, and the thought of having that son of a bitch close enough to influence my son...

I took a deep breath.

Problem is that the profilers aren't happy.

They don't see reason for the kidnapping.

Without motive, motive for kidnapping my wife, the odds tell us that Garrett is ill. Ill as in truly fucking delusional.

Sick. Twisted.

I closed my eyes.

Deep breaths.

I gulped.

Words from EJ's sessions assaulted me.


Oh, God...
"Breathe, kiddo," I heard mom murmur. "They're taking a break in ten minutes."

Is that it? Is Garrett so sick that he doesn't even... I don't know how to finish that sentence. Of course he's sick. Of course he is. Oh, God... And he has my angel. My wife. Keeping her locked up. Torturing her slowly but surely. Taking her away from life.

"Fuck," I wheezed out. "I need some air."

Throwing my headphones off, I left the living room, passed a few agents, and headed outside. Outside. Fresh air.

I crossed the street, patting my back pocket for smokes.

Found them. And the lighter.

I lit one, took a deep drag, and collapsed on my porch.

I just sat there, head down, elbows on my knees.

I had to be strong. I knew that, but it was so fucking hard.

Three years and five months.

Three. Years. And five. Months.

How is she alive?

"Fuck," I breathed out.

My eyes welled up. The pain in my eyes, fuck... prickling, stinging... It was heavy.

Is she alive anymore?
Christ, she has nothing. Nothing. Her son... our son isn't there. Her only friend. Oh, God, EJ said he was her only friend.

Deep breaths.

My chest felt heavy. Like someone was stomping the shit out of it. Sitting on it. Pressing down.

I lifted my hand, trembled, in need of the fucking nicotine but... I noticed it had already burned down to the filter. Fuck it. I pulled out my pack. God-fucking-damnit. Empty. So, I stood up and with a shaky hand I brought out my keys.

Unlocked the door.

"Mr. Edward Cullen?"

I focused on my breathing, turned around, and saw yet another motherfucking agent.

Not what I need.

What I need is a fucking smoke.

What I need is a drink.

What I really need is my wife back.

"I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions about the recent events," he said.

Recent events?

Buddy, my wife's been gone for more than three years.

That aint recent.
"Sure," I muttered almost inaudibly, still having trouble breathing properly. "But make it quick. I gotta get back to my son."

Without another word, I stepped inside, and he followed.

The door shut.

Before I made the turn for the kitchen, there was pain.

Physical pain.

In the back of my neck.

It spread too quickly.

My knees caved.

No time for a final thought.

I was gone.

Chapter 19

...Always the young one...

...All this damage...

...Words don't commit, they withdraw...

...Remember when promises were revoked...

...Somewhere, approved without him...

...Someday this ends...

~Highlights by Theatre of Tragedy – chapter song for Alice's part.
September 12th

Alice Whitlock.

I was thankful when Rachel told me it was time to take a break, because I truly loathed having little EJ under this stress, and it was so evident that he needed Edward.

"Come here, honey," I said lightly, motioning for EJ. "Want us to find Daddy?"

I giggled as he nodded furiously, and soon I had him positioned on my hip.

"Such a big boy you are," I chuckled, tickling his tummy. "Soon I won't be able to carry you."

"Daddy carry me, he's strong," EJ said. "Daddy and pops say boys are strong."

I snickered. Of course they would say something like that.

Men.

As I reached our living room, I smiled as I spotted Esme and Charlie.

"Hi, guys," I said, grinning. "This little guy is looking after his daddy."

I frowned slightly when Esme's smile was rather strained, but from experience I knew how Edward reacted to his son's sessions, and this was clearly one of those times where it was painful for him to stay calm. I couldn't blame him. Half the time, I was close to tears myself and I held no real relation to the little boy, but Edward sure did. Christ, the bond between the two was... so strong. Just a few days into their new life, and they're already so dependent on each other. It's both beautiful and terrifying. The latter because they have a long road ahead of them, and
I'm afraid Edward will close himself in and focus solely on EJ instead of seeking help for both of them.

"He went to get some air about fifteen minutes ago," Charlie sighed, smiling sadly at EJ. "How are ya, sport?" he asked EJ, ruffling his hair a little. "Havin' fun with your Turtles?"

I smiled when EJ smiled, proudly holding up his Rafael. "Wrafael's my favorite. Daddy's also."

It tugged on me everytime he mentioned Edward.

I knew he mentioned Bella a lot, too. According to Edward, EJ often talked about her in his sleep, and bedtime was hard for him, them both really, because EJ cries and asks for his mommy. I can't even imagine how it breaks Edward each time. They all deserve to be together. Happy and together.

"Well," I said, clearing my throat. "How about we find some snacks while we wait for Daddy, little dude?" I asked him, plastering a smile on my face. "I do believe we have juice boxes, soda, and animal crackers."

"M'kay." He nodded, frowning slightly. "Daddy be here soon?"

"Absolutely," I assured.

That seemed to calm him, and I carried him out to the kitchen, ignoring the two agents sitting there.

"What's animal cwrackers, Miss. Alice?"

"Oh, you're gonna love 'em," I told him. "They're shaped like little animals."

I smiled again, for such a simple thing as hearing his giggle.
It made me long after children of my own.

"Hey, you two," I heard Jazzy drawl behind me. "Everythin' okay?"

After digging out a soda from the fridge, I closed the door, and nodded once to him, knowing he'd understand it was okay given the circumstances.

He approached with a wary smile, and I sighed in content when he dropped a kiss on my temple. It always soothed me, and though my husband may look strict, always walking stiffly with his hands clasped behind his back, he's my softy. He's my warmth, something I've understood is the same for Edward and his Bella.

All the photos I've seen of them, the home videos, the stories. They worship each other like Jazzy and I do, and it's... heartbreaking that they don't have each other. Just the thought of being without my husband...

I shook my head, swallowed the emotion, and pulled out the animal crackers for EJ.

"He's a special little kid," he murmured, watching EJ who currently played with his toy on my shoulder. "You love him, doll," he stated softly.

He knew me well, he knew everything. So, I just nodded.

"Well," he drawled, sending me a wink. "You'll make a great mama."

I gasped quietly, looking up at my husband.

Does... does... does that mean he's ready?

I know Jazzy wants children, and preferably soon since he's thirty-five years old, but he's hesitating... or rather doubting himself. He doesn't know he'll make a terrific father. I've tried countless times to tell him otherwise, but my husband's a bit stubborn.
"Yea," he said, nodding slowly, maybe answering my unspoken question? "Seein' you with him..." he trailed off. Then he smiled crookedly, softly. Loving eyes. "I say you stop takin' them pills." He winked.

Oh, God.

Nothing could stop the beaming smile from taking over my face.

"I love you," I sniffled, not realizing my eyes had welled up.

"I love you, too, doll," he chuckled quietly, kissing my nose once before pulling away. "So..." he sighed, smirking. "Anythin' I can do?"

I shook my head. "Nope, just go relax or somethin'. I'm just gonna be with EJ for a while until Edward comes back."

I mouthed 'Edward,' not wanting to upset EJ. He was already so afraid of being left alone.

"Yes, ma'am." And with that, Jazzy walked out again.

Without an ounce of guilt, I gave the agent pointed looks to just... be gone from my kitchen, and they took their coffees and left, leaving me and EJ at the table with sodas and crackers for a while.

"Was it good?" I asked, laughing softly as EJ's eyes grew big.

"S'like I'm eating a cat," he giggled, nibbling on a cat shaped cracker. "S'not a real cat," he told me... or maybe himself. "I know i's not real. I's a cwracker."

Everything that little boy does make me choke up on emotion. He's so damn innocent and cute, yet his life has been filled with wrongs and pain. He deserves so much better. The best. They all do.
Thinking back on when EJ identified Bella on a photo that Charlie had brought, I feared for her life. Why? Because EJ had trouble identifying her. We know why, of course. More than three years. Who knows what Bella looks like now? Who knows how mistreated she's been, or how much she's changed?

I thank God Edward wasn't there for that.

I remember that he was giving Agent Denali his statement then.

Had Edward seen his son that second, the second EJ was frowning and asking if that was his mommy on that picture, Edward would've died. Again.

I sighed, shaking my head to clear it, and then I walked over to the cabinets, brought out a small bowl, and filled it with crackers.

"How about you carry these, and I carry you?" I suggested.

I really needed a pick-me-up, and I knew where to find it.

"M'kay, can I also carry my soda?"

"Of course," I grinned.

So, with him on my hip, and a bowl of crackers and a soda in EJ's hands, I carried him towards Jazzy's office where I knew he'd be. That's where he always was.

"Where's Daddy?" EJ mumbled as I knocked on the door.

"He'll be here any minute," I smiled, "but before he comes, how about I show you something really cool?"

That had his attention, and I winked at him as Jazzy told us to enter.
My husband may have left his military past behind him but he's still a fanatic when it comes to memorabilia, and I have a feeling EJ's gonna get a kick out of Jazzy's collection of miniature planes, hangars, destroyers, and tanks.

"Well, howdy, you two," Jazzy chuckled as we came in.

He sat behind his desk as always, reading papers from different countries, always needing to know everything about war and foreign affairs.

"Hey, baby," I grinned. "I thought I'd show EJ some of your shi- stuff."

Oops.

"Nice save," he replied, glaring at me playfully. "I'd love to think that the save was for my benefit but I have a feelin' it was for EJ."

I shrugged and giggled.

It wasn't a secret that military shit wasn't my cup of tea.

"Go ahead," he snickered, motioning for the shelf on the right wall where all the... shit was. So, I headed over there with EJ. "Just don't-"

"Touch anything," I laughed, cutting him off. "I'm very aware, honey."

My laughter got stuck in my throat, though, because EJ froze completely in my arms, he dropped the bowl and the soda on the floor, and then let out a loud cry.

The glass shattered on the floor.

The can spewed out soda all around us.

Hysterical cry.
"No, no, nooooo! I don' want Un-un-uncle G-Garrett to come g-get me!" he screamed.

I stood frozen, slack jawed, and completely unaware of what was going on.

Eyes wide in shock.

"E-EJ, h-honey?" I breathed out shakily.

"Fuck," I heard Jazzy curse, and in the next second, he was standing right next to us. "I... I... can't believe this," he muttered, almost as if we weren't there.

"Follow EJ's gaze," Jazz hissed at me.

But I couldn't. I couldn't do anything but to focus on the ear piercing scream EJ let out. Over and over he screamed in what seemed to be horror and fear.

It broke me.

"This picture," he gritted out, taking down a picture from the bookshelf, and he brought it closer, to which EJ screamed louder. "Alice, it's the photo of my unit."

I heard him say the words.

My mind just wouldn't connect the fucking dots.

"Is this Garrett, EJ?" Jazz asked. His voice wasn't my husband's. It was eerie. To calm. Deadly.

EJ screamed as he nodded, clinging to my neck for all he was worth.

Oh, God.
Oh... God.

Then came the gasping sobs. "N-n-noooo! D-Daddy! M-moomyyyy!"

"Garrett’s from New Orleans," I heard Jazz mutter... as he barged out with the photo in his hands.

Snap out of it, Alice!

I nodded to myself, still slack jawed.

EJ continued to cry, shriek and scream.

Before I knew it, the entire house full of shouting.

Charlie and Esme came barging into the office.

Questions.

Shouting.

Crying.


I took a deep breath.

The minutes that came next... Christ, they were full of... I... and... shit. Question. Answers. Conclusions. I tried. Esme and I tried to calm EJ down. We whispered words of comfort, promising him Garrett would never come back. Nothing worked.

Charlie went to find Edward. Jazz spoke to the agents, and then Agent Denali arrived, looking paler than a fucking ghost.

"I came as fast as I could," he panted.

In his hands were... papers. Several of them.
"It's him," Jazz said, pointing at the photo of his old unit. "That's the Garrett. His full name is-

Agent Denali cut him off with a choking voice. "Garrett Call."

Everything went silent.

The entire house, or where we were gathered in the office and the hallway – everyone was silent.

Expect for EJ who was still sobbing.

Jazz and Denali stared at each other. Then at the photo, the sketches.

It was the same person.

"He used to be my son-in-law," Agent Denali breathed out.

Esme and I gasped.

How... but... oh, God, this is... shit... too much.

"He was a member of my unit," Jazz stated coldly. "He blew everyone up during our way back from a mission. We thought he died in the explosion."

This time it was Denali who gasped. "You were his commanding officer that walked away."

Tears of shock streamed.

Was this good? Was this bad? It must be good news, right? I mean, they have all the info they need! All they need to do is to get that picture out! Fuck, use the media!

"I was his drill Sergeant." Jazz nodded.
He wasn't my husband. I saw it so clearly. He was back in the army. He was the Sergeant. Stiff, cold, firm, relentless... ruthless. His men loved him. He was respected. Fierce and unyielding but fair and... the perfect leader. You listen to Jasper Whitlock.

It was all too much, especially when orders were barked, radios were crackling, and everyone was running around.

I stood still.

Esme stood right next to me.

EJ clung to my neck, still crying for his parents.

I kept my eyes on Jasper who was now quietly conversing with Denali.

And then... as if hell hadn't already broken loose...

Charlie ran in. Eyes wide in confusion, worry, and... fear.

Everyone went quiet again.

"I can't find Edward! His door was locked, I had to use my own but... he's not there, and... his... his phone was shattered in pieces on the floor."

*This*, EJ heard.

"D-Daddy?" he whimpered.

My eyes closed.

Esme gasped.

EJ started wailing for his daddy.

Orders. All over.

"Report back, Agent Black!"
"I want this picture on the six o' clock news, understood?"

"Someone get Black to call in!"

"Biers, Smith, I want you two over at Cullen's house. Now!"

"Mommy! S'not real! I... I... Momyyyy!"

"Could you please debrief us on Garrett, Mr. Whitlock. I know a lot, but you know more about his personality."

"Check the perimeter!"

"I can't find him, he won't answer."

"Keep searching!"

"D-Daddyyyy! I wa-ant Daddyyyy!"

"I want every goddamn earpiece functioning within ten seconds, you hear!"

"Yes, sir!"

"He was one of my snipers. Fast as hell, never missed a shot."

"Photo or sketches, sir?"

"Nooooo, nana, I want d-d-Daddy!"

"Both! Get it all out there and I want it to go national!"

"Still can't get in touch with Black."

"What's Garrett's weakness?"

"...He didn't have one."
My eyes shot open, landing on Jasper right away.

I may not know of Garrett's weakness, but I know of my husband's. There's only one. A single weakness.

He can't tell a lie and have me believe it.

He can lie to anyone. Anybody. He's trained to do it very successfully. He can lie. But not to me. I'm the exception.

As if Jasper sensed me, he turned around, and met my gaze.

My eyes didn't falter as he tried to make me believe him.

He was lying.

With a sigh, he turned back to Denali, and Charlie joined them.

I left them all, needing to focus on EJ. He needed to calm down.

Rachel joined us. Esme, too.

Soothing words. Nothing worked.

He was shaking.

After a while, he allowed Esme to take him.

I took deep breaths.

I knew my husband. Very well. And the feeling I'm having... I know it can't be good.

Nothing feels right.

It's supposed to. This is a major lead. It's supposed to be a great thing. But it's not. I can fucking feel it. Something is very wrong.
Where's Edward?

Why did Jasper lie?

I needed to get out. I needed quiet.

With that thought, I headed to Jasper's office that was empty now.

I closed the door behind me.

I paced.

Deep breaths.

After a few minutes, the door opened, and I snapped up to see Jasper walking in. He saw me, but he was too determined to let me halt him, and he strode straight for his desk... the top drawer... Why wasn't I surprised?

"No," I said firmly, already knowing Jasper's mind. "No, Jasper. You won't."

"I will, yes," he said calmly, attaching the clip to his beloved Sig. "You know I lied."

"Yes, but I don't know why."

"That's because Garrett only has one weakness and it isn't one Denali can use. Legal matters."

"And what's that?" I gritted out, glaring at all the ammunition he pulled out.

"Because I'm the fuckin' weakness, Alice!" he growled. "I was the one who trained him! I was the one who made him lethal!"

"This is none of your fault!" I snapped, wiping angry tears away.
"I know, honey," he sighed. "But I'm the one who can stop him. I can track him better than anyone because I know his signs. I know his work."

"We have to go," I heard the unmistakable sound of Charlie's voice say behind me, and everything clicked. "Oh, didn't know you were here, Alice."

I didn't even turn in his direction. I kept my glare on Jasper.

"You're takin', Charlie?"

"Yes."

"For Christ's sake, Jasper!" I yelled. "You're turning this into some personal vendetta!"

"It is, Alice!" he yelled back. "He killed my entire unit! I owe them this. Fuck, I owe myself this! Not to mention Charlie! He deserves the mother of paybacks for what Garrett's done to his daughter!"

I opened my mouth to scream... but I had nothing.

Panting for breath, I knew I had nothing.

Pointing a finger at him, I seethed. "You better get back, you hear me? You better get your ass back here."

Tears fell. I sobbed.

With a promise of returning, he kissed me hard before he... left.
*O*O*O*

I tried. So hard. Both Esme and I tried.

Nothing worked to calm EJ down.

He'd fall asleep in pure exhaustion, only to wake up twenty minutes later to start all over again.

The despair in EJ's eyes, the sheer terror... it killed me. He was literally shaking. Scared. Confused.

Rachel had left to go get Dr. Masen – EJ's doctor at the hospital – and in the meantime, there wasn't much to do.

We held him.

Rocked him back and forth.

"D-Daddyyyy!" he sobbed. "I want M-Mommy an-an-and d-d-Daddy!"

We cried, too.

It was all too much.

Jasper and Charlie had left hours ago, the house was quiet but far from empty. Security. Agents. Not Denali and four agents he brought with him, though. They're gone, too, they left a couple of hours after Jasper. Trying to find Edward.

He's... No one knows where he is.

"Daddy! He pwromise! He say i's r-r-reeeal!"

Oh, God...

"Please, Daddy! I'm good! M-Mommy say I am!"
"Christ," I whimpered, trying but failing to keep my tears at bay. "EJ, baby, please listen to me. Daddy's very real, okay? We're going to find him. He will be here... I... I promise."

Shit. Yes. I know.

I shouldn't tell him that. I know.

But fucking sue me.

EJ hiccoughed on his heart wrenching sobs, shook his head in what could only be described as defeat.

"S'not real," he croaked. "Don' like it all alone. S'all pretend."

"No, EJ," I said firmly, not bothering to wipe the tears. "It's all real. I promise Mommy and Daddy are both real. The yellow house, Mommy and Daddy, it's all real."

"No," he whispered, sniffling. "Mommy and Daddy say they not leaving me. I say I don' like it lonely and they say they not gonna go away... but..."

His lip trembled. Eyes welled up all over again.

His sobs ripped through him.

I felt so fucking useless.

*O*O*O*

Dr. Masen came a few hours ago.

He had to sedate EJ, and now I'm watching him sleep.

The doctor, or Carlisle, is talking to Rachel and an inconsolable Esme in the kitchen.
Then I heard an agent mentioning my husband... right outside the door.

I listened to the conversation with wide eyes.

I called Jasper, hoping, praying.

**Jasper Whitlock.**

...*I will never forgive myself...*

...*For running away...*

...*He went too far, the fucker...*

...*So gather your strength and break free...*

...*You will surely die...*

...*My dreams, dreams of violence...*

...*See them coming true...*

~*Criminals by Katatonia – chapter song for Jasper's part.*

I welcomed the calm that washed over me.

I ran away from this once. This mindset. This part of me. I left it all behind after we returned from our failed mission.

It's back now. That part of me, that old part full of habits and routine, it's back. In full force. In control.

I thought he was dead. Garrett Call. I thought he'd died.

He *should* be dead.
Charlie and I crossed the street. We didn't care about anything but finding that fucking trail. And I knew it would be there. It's always there. No one can escape that quickly and not leave anything behind.

"Hey! You can't enter that house!" an agent shouted.

We paid him no mind and entered anyway.

"You armed?" I asked, quietly.

"Yes."

Good.

"No, this way," I said when Charlie headed for the stairs. "With so many agents around, I'd be willing to be he escaped outback."

Charlie chuckled nervously, but it got stuck in his throat, and his eyes looked pained. "You speak like you're sure my son's been kidnapped."

I always knew he viewed Edward as a son, but it was nice nonetheless to hear him say it. I suppose times like these bring out the true feelings in words.

As for his question... or statement. Yes, I'm pretty damn sure.

Call it a gut feeling.

I didn't answer him. I think he knew my answer.

Instead I headed straight for the backyard. Through the living room.

Once we reached the backyard, I cocked an eyebrow.

"Yeah, I figured I'd run into you here."

Emmett.
Standing by the tall wooden fence that surrounded Edward's house, Emmett held up a shoe.

I recognized it.

*Seems like Emmett's thinking the way I am.*

Then we can use him.


Emmett nodded. "Sorry to be eavesdroppin' but I wanted to know what was goin' on over at your house," he told me, and I understood. He's a police officer after all. He probably planted a damn bug. Sneaky fucker. "When I heard about Edward, I geared up and came out here."

I nodded and walked over to him.

My mind spun.

"He must have dropped it," I thought out loud. It wasn't impossible. The fence is tall, and my guess is that Edward's been drugged or beaten, leaving Garrett to carry him. Garrett may be strong but he wasn't known for his muscles. Not in my unit anyway. For a man, sure he's very strong, but if Edward was conscious, I think he'd be able to take on Garrett.

Alright. Let's get to work.

"Shall we?" I asked.

Two grunts of 'yes' followed, and them we jumped the fence, entering Charlie's backyard.

"It gives us a direction," I pointed out. "Garrett's probably takin' this way in order to stay out of sight."

With that said, we continued jumping over fences, crossing backyards, and running faster and faster.

Time was against us.

Hopefully Garrett had to lay low at some point after getting out of Edward's house, and hopefully that will make it easier for us to catch up.

"The shoe," Emmett said as we jumped another fence. "I found it where I stood. But could he leave a dummy trail? Maybe he ran the opposite way."

I shook my head because that wasn't Garrett. He never cared for any of that when it came to escaping, which is odd, because something in him must have changed. Before, he never cleaned. He never wiped away the evidence of him being at a sight. But he sure does it now, and that thought made me hesitate... Then again... No. He didn't really clean up after himself in Washington. He just burned the place down, which still left proof of him being there, and I'm sure that if we knew where else he's been over the years, I'd recognize his trail.

"Shit," Emmett panted as we reached the end of the street. "Alright, which way?"

I scanned the area, immediately ignoring the wooded area to my left. It was not only predictable but it wouldn't give Garrett a clear view of our street, and he must have observed for quite a while to learn the agents' watch.

"This way," I said, nodding to our right.
Once we reached the end of our street, we observed the sights that would give Garrett a clear view of Edward's house, my house, and Charlie's house.

"Skid marks," Emmett announced quietly, and we walked over to him.

*Four sets of them,* I thought. So... the car has a four wheel drive. Probably a bigger car, judging by the tires.

I was about to bring out my phone to call in a few favors, but when Emmett brought out his own phone, a phone with one hell of a camera, I knew he had knowledge, too. He knew his game.

"I'll send a picture to my buddy back in Nebraska. He knows his shit."

Charlie and I nodded, and I glanced over at him, frowning.

"You sure you're up for this, Charlie?" I asked carefully.

"I have to be," he grunted. "I just... fuck, I need them back."

I nodded once more and left it at that.

That's when I noticed an old Jeep standing a few spots over. Tinted windows.

And as I narrowed my eyes I noticed the license plate.

*Tennessee.*

I approached it, going with my gut feeling like I always do, and it has never failed me before. So, with my sleeve, I tried the door and fuck me if it wasn't open. I noticed right away that it was stolen, hotwired, and when I saw that the windows had been painted black, that feeling in me urged me to continue. And it didn't take long until I came to a conclusion.
It was obviously Garrett's before, and that theory strengthened when I checked the glove compartment, the backseat, and the pockets on the insides of the door.

Maps, candy wrapper, pacifiers, CD cases, old grocery bags, and in the trunk I found a fucking stroller. Yeah, this car is definitely stolen. Obviously it belonged to a family before the thief took it. Before Garrett took it, in other words.

"Perfect," I mumbled to myself.

Tennessee. That helps. A lot.

Thinking ahead, I knew we were going to need a car, and running back to get my own truck would not be difficult but it would raise questions from the dumb ass agents.

Old habits, training, all of it, kicked in, and I approached a black truck parked on the street, much similar to my own Ford.

I surveyed it, deeming it worthy, and it was almost in reflex that my elbow made impact on the car window. It shattered immediately, and I unlocked the car, jumping in to hotwire it... again without difficulty. This was what I knew after all. This was part of many alternatives when it came to making a quick escape. You needed to know a lot, and I was the one training, I was the one teaching my recruits. That included Garrett. He may know, but damn it, I know more.

"Jesus, there's man lyin' here!" I heard Charlie gasp.

Emmett and I rushed over to him, at the side of the road.

There. In the bushes. Fuck.
Suit missing. That’s how Garrett slipped through. He pretended to be an agent. That must be it.

"He's dead," he muttered.

Not that he had to say it. The bullet wound between his eyes pretty much said it all.

I recognized the man.

"That's Agent Black," I stated quietly, looking in the direction of our houses down the street.

Safe to say, the skid marks belongs to Garrett, and he's obviously found himself a new car.

Emmett's phone dinged then, and we watched him for our next clue.

According to the marks left by the tires, he headed north, towards... heh... towards Mississippi and later on Tennessee, but more to go on would be nice.

"Fuckin' Goodyear tires," Emmett cursed, looking at his phone. "That gives us shit cause the model is used on many cars. The only thing my buddy can say is that the model is commonly used on SUV's but that's about it."

I nodded in thought, glancing at the house the car had stood in front of.

"Alright, we split up," I told them. "We each take a house close to where the car stood, and we ask who owned... or owns the fucking thing."

We did, and ten minutes later there was an old man getting ready to report his red Ford Escape stolen. Ford Escape, how fitting, Garrett. But before he did that, I ushered us into the truck I had acquired, and then we were off.
Without wasting time, I filled the guys in about the Jeep, and this, this was good news. Charlie breathed. I actually saw the way he took deep breaths in nothing but relief because we had a lot to go on all of the sudden.

We know the exact car Garrett had driven to get away, and I doubt he'll be changing cars before he reaches Mississippi, and... we know he's most likely heading towards Tennessee.

"Hey, Emmett," I said, looking at him in the rearview mirror as I reached the I-10. "And Charlie. You two don't happen to have buddies in Mississippi by any chance?"

"I have a few friends on the Mississippi Highway Patrol," Emmett replied.


"I have two buddies in Troop M," he chuckled. "That's Bookhaven for you. And then one friend in Troop E, and that's Batesville."

"That's the one," I said, snapping my fingers. "Batesville's perfect. Close to the Tennessee border."

"Sounds like the Sergeant has a plan," he laughed.

I just shrugged and sped up the car. "We gotta use what we can get out hands on. Anything in order to halt Garrett, and if you could give that buddy of yours a call, he might be able to slow down traffic for a while."

Emmett's answer came by the sound of his phone dialing.

"That's a specific order, Emmett," I told him pointedly. "I don't want anyone pullin' Garrett over, cause we know that won't stop him. But a traffic jam might slow him down enough for us to catch up."

*O*O*O*
It was dark by the time we had passed Batesville, and Emmett had taken over the wheel while Charlie got some rest in the back, and I studied the maps we'd bought in Jackson. Not that he was able to sleep or anything. But we needed to keep our calm for... whatever we would find or encounter later.

We all shot up when Emmett's phone rang, hoping to hell his buddy had news. We got lucky with his pal, because Emmett divulged what he could without the troopers having to report it, and we now had five troopers checking the I-22 and of course the I-55 where we hoped and thought Garrett would drive through to enter Tennessee.

There's still way too much against us and we're grasping at straws, but if Garrett hasn't changed cars, this could very well work.

"Talk to me," was Emmett's greeting. "Okay... that's what we thought, and the 55?"

"Huh," he grunted. "Alright, well, start clearin' out within the hour. That's how long it oughta take us to get there. I'm floorin' it right now." And he did. Well, almost. Floor it, that is. I smirked when he pushed a hundred and ten mph. "By the way, Mick, if you see a black Ford pass by in a fucking flash, don't stop us," he chuckled before hanging up, and then he turned to me. "Nothin' on the I-22 as we thought. Our hope is that Garrett's stuck in the jam they're created right before the state line."

"Good." I nodded once.

Half an hour later, we started noticing the effects of that traffic jam, and there were more cars on the road than usual at this hour. But Emmett didn't slow down. He maneuvered his way through the traffic without batting an eyelash, and it was quite fucking obvious that he was sharp and good at his job.
Thinking back to Garrett's escape, it was clear that he was not as good. It was almost too stupid. Just the thought of leaving his Jeep behind, the Jeep with Tennessee plates, so fucking stupid. Either he was in that much of a rush that he didn't care about what he left behind... or maybe something was wrong with the Jeep and he panicked.

I doubt he's planning on sticking around in Tennessee. Maybe that's it. He think he'll be able to leave Tennessee, and that's why he didn't bother cleaning up after himself.

But... Christ, there's so much. He's so much.

I can't say he was reckless in the army, but there was still something that didn't sit well with me. His mind was a bit terrifying, and I remember reading through his psyche evaluation thinking that he could turn out to be a threat. But when he aced every test, every training exercise, not to mention the raw skill he showed at the shooting range... my commanding officer noticed him, made him go through the psyche evaluation again, acing it, and before I knew it, two years had passed and he was promoted to Corporal.

The fucker was my second in command.

I followed orders, not my gut feeling about him.

I did try to push my feeling down, though, because there's no denying that we worked well together. He was excellent.

For a while.

Until that last mission.

"Jazz," I heard both Emmett and Charlie say then, and I looked up from my map, at them, and then... I followed their gaze... out, there... in the next lane... a few cars over... Fuck. Finally.
My body became alive.

Adrenaline pumped.

Rushing, surging. That familiar buzz.

"Pass it slowly, Emmett," I ordered quietly, keeping my eyes on the Ford Escape that fit the description. Louisiana plates. Yes. Good. "File in right in front of him and call your buddy."

Sinking down in my seat, I watched as the driver slowly came into view as we passed him.

Yes.

It's him.

Not dead. He walked away.

I know I only managed to get him in the shoulder and that's the regret I live with today. Because I only wanted him to stop from blowing our cover. I only wanted to slow him down, not kill him. But instead of faltering, he continued. He blew our cover. He exposed us, got my unit killed. Blew us up.

But he walked away, that fucker.

I should've aimed for his fucking head.

I should've killed him.

"It's him," I confirmed as Emmett changed lanes.

"And... shit, what do we do now?" Charlie asked in a strained voice. "I mean, I didn't see Edward in the car."

I shook my head. "Don't think like that, Charlie. He could be in the trunk."
I refused to think otherwise.

"Now we follow him," I answered his earlier question. "We hope he leads us to Bella."

And follow him we did.

From a safe distance, we followed Garrett. Across the state line, all through Memphis.

Then my phone rang, and I pulled out my phone as we reached a wooded area.

My wife.

I sighed. And answered.

"H-" but I didn't get my greeting out before she cut me off.

"Tell me you're across the state line, Jasper!" she hissed quietly. "Tell me you're in Tennessee already!"

I grimaced at the usage of my name. I'm supposed to be Jazz... or Jazzy to her. Jasper's... not me. But that's bullshit. No one knows me like her, and she obviously noticed the way I slipped back into my old self before I left. And I can't say I'm surprised she knows where we are. The agents were bound to figure their shit out at some point, and hell, I stole a car with a GPS. It doesn't take a genius to figure this out.

"We're outside Memphis. We're followin' Garrett," I replied calmly.

"Oh, crap, really? Shit... um, okay... Christ, I can't believe this. You actually found him? Okay, okay... um, well, ya'll have agents followin' you, and they're catchin' up."

Fuck.
"You know just how close they are, doll?" I asked warily.

Granted, I expected them to follow. I counted on it, really. But I thought we would have more time.

"Last I heard, two hours behind you."


"Thank you," I sighed. "I need to talk to Charlie and Emmett. Was there anythin' else, baby?"

"Emmett's there? Oh, Jesus, don't get yourselves killed, Jasper!"

"Yeah, he planted a bug in our house to listen in," I told her, giving Emmett a sideway glance. It wasn't a surprise when I saw him shake with silent chuckles. "Anyway, we're followin' Garrett, but don't worry. We know what we're doin', okay?"


"I will. Love you."

"Yeah, yeah, love you, too."

She hung up.

After I filled Emmett and Charlie in, we agreed very reluctantly that there wasn't time to take Garrett out the way we all wanted. It would be impossible. Not to kill him, but to get rid of the evidence before the agents caught up.

There's only one way to end him now if we don't want to get arrested for murder.

And that's with his own gun.
Had I been a child, I would've called dibs.

"Kill the lights," I told Emmett quietly as we reached a narrow road. It led into the woods, and we followed, keeping our distance.

We felt it in our bodies. That was evident. It wasn't just me. I could see the way Emmett and Charlie's expressions changed, morphed into anger, determination, and... hope. Hope that this was going to end soon.

My phone dinged, alerting me of a message, and at first I thought it was Alice.

It wasn't.

**Give him one from me – Eleazar.**

Five words. One informal name.

They gave me all I needed.

Agent Denali is obviously trying to help us, stalling for us, knowing that we can give Garrett what he deserves. At least more than the authorities. After all, it wasn't the FBI agent that texted me. It was the father that lost two daughters.

Yes, he told me, and I was grateful for his help.

So many deserved closure.

This was our chance to give them, us, that.

Closure.

"We need to think fast," I said. "We need a new plan."

The important task at hand was put on hold as we saw Garrett stop his car.
Outside a small cottage.

Emmett pulled over, too. Still out of sight.

We watched. Observed.

My stomach dropped when we watched him drag Edward out of the trunk.

Bloodied.

Unconscious.

"Fuck," I heard Charlie choke out.

Deep breaths.

"Okay," I said, nodding to myself. "Listen to me now, guys."

Chapter 20

...I open my eyes...

...I try to see but I'm blinded by the white light...

...And I can't stand the pain...

...And I can't make it go away...

...I've got nowhere to run...

...The night goes on...

...As I'm fading away...

...I'm sick of this life...

...I just wanna scream...

...How could this happen to me...
...I try to make a sound but no one hears me...

...I'm slipping off the edge...

...I'm hanging by a thread...

~Untitled by Simple Plan – chapter song.

**September 12th**

**Bella Cullen.**

I'm trying to remember, and I think... I'm not sure, but I think it's my birthday today. Or maybe it's tomorrow. Can't be sure.

Did Garrett leave this morning? Or yesterday?

Time in here stands still. Nothing happens, so I can't be sure how much time has passed. It's not like it matters but if I try to occupy my mind, maybe time will move faster.

Maybe this will end sooner if I just keep my mind occupied.

I know what the end of this is of course, because I'm not naïve. It's obviously death for me.

Pacing around on the concrete floor, barefoot of course, I try to think. Doesn't matter what I think about, as long as I think about something. Anything. Please. Just... something. But it's hard because everything is fleeting. As soon as my mind picks something up, it leaves again. It's impossible to make the thought linger.

I sit down on the pallet when I feel lightheaded.

I know I shouldn't walk around, I know I shouldn't use up all the air.

With a grimace, I pull my knee up and rest my chin on it.
The fabric of my black sweats... So fucking dirty... almost stiff from filth, sweat, mud... I know I reek, but I can't smell it anymore. I've been in here for too long to notice anymore. And I'm sure my white t-shirt is so far from white. It doesn't matter, I can't see down here anyway.

I can feel a rip. At the seam above my shoulder. So, not only is it dirty and disgusting, it's also torn.

The thought leaves me when my fingers play with the hem of my sweats. The hem down by my feet, and they, my fingers, they come across the three things I've managed to keep safe all these years.

The locket with your picture in it, and my rings.

Three times the chain goes around my ankle, and on it... that's where I have the locket and my two rings.

At times I've had the necklace around my neck, but only for our EJ, Edward. I needed him to see you. I've shown him the rings you gave me, too. But he fell for Sadie, that's for sure. He often asked about your guitar.

Tears burn in my eyes because I want to open the locket and see you, if only for a second. I want to see your picture, but I can't even do that. It's too dark. But I have the tiny photo memorized. I can see your smile as you squint through your lashes because the sun is in your way, and... the smile is crooked and beautiful. As are your eyes. And you're holding Sadie, playing on her... for me. You always did that. You always played for me.

And I miss you, Edward... so much...

"So much," I breathe.

I wish I knew EJ was with you.
Tears well up again.

Christ, is our son with you, Edward? Please tell me he is. Tell me isn't alone.

Please.

"Please," I whimper.

In the dark, my fingers trace texture of the heart-shaped diamond on my engagement ring.

I remember thinking it was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen... when it comes to material things. I remember your smile when you slid it onto my finger.

I wish I could wear it now, but... it doesn't fit. It's too big. Same goes for my wedding band. Also too big, and I hate it. I wish I could wear it, Edward, I really do... but I can't.

So, I keep it on the chain around my foot... or ankle.

At times I scream. Just because everything is so unfair, and I have no choice. Everything is eating at me, destroying me, and I scream out because it's all I can do.

It's foul.

To actually feel the raw fury surge through you because everything's been taken away from you. The desperation you feel when you know that this is all you have. It closes in on you. It's suffocating.

Sweat. Tears.

Hopelessness.
It all rips you apart.

From inside out.

It hurts just to breathe. I have to fight to do it.

Then when EJ invades my mind, I... can't... and... it's so hard. The pain tugs at me... Please, it's our son. My flesh and blood, and I don't know where he is. I don't know if he's safe or not.

He was my friend.

My life.

My chest heaves.

Staggering breaths.

Wheezing.

Please stop pushing me down.

Please be safe, Edward. Please tell me he won't get to you.

*O*O*O*

I'm on my back, down on the pallet.

Staring up. At nothing.

I can breathe better because I'm pretending EJ's lying right next to me.

We can't be loud, but he needs to sleep, and only two things work to get him to sleep.

Either you tell him a story... or you sing.
I can't sing loudly. My voice can't carry, and we don't want Garrett to be mad.

"Hush, little baby, don't say a word," I whisper.

I clear my throat.

"Mama's gonna buy you a mockingbird."

I close my eyes, causing tears to fall down my cheeks or temples, and I imagine our little boy right next to me. He's giggling in anticipation of the next part of the lullaby.

"If that mockingbird won't sing..."

My voice cracks. "Mama's gonna buy you a diamond ring..."

I whimper, cry.

This is where EJ would've told me, "No ring, Mommy... I want Sadie. I wanna play it 'cause you say you can play on Sadie."

After that, I often told him a story about you or Dad, Edward, and about your guitars... about our life... and he soaked it all up. He wanted it so badly. He wanted more than this.

My eyes hurt.

*O*O*O*

I sit up when I hear him.

I hate him.

I hear him unlocking lock after lock, and he's early.

Two days can't have passed, can it?
He told me he would come back in two days but I've only eaten once since he left. Has time really flown that quickly?

My eyes searches blindly for light but he hasn't opened the door yet, and already my heart is pounding. In fear. Has he hurt... you, hubs?

My throat closes up.

Click.

Click.

Click.

Locks are unlocked.

Click.

Click.

Then...I hear him, and I hate him for this. I hate him for putting me through this. I don't deserve it, but he doesn't care. He's sick and fucked up.

He opens the door, and my eyes close slightly.

I don't think the light is very bright but it's still blinding me.

"I'm back, Irina," he says gruffly, and then he fucking enters, and I'm terrified all of the sudden. More so than before because he stalks toward me and I cower away.

Not that it works.

I choke on a breath when he grips my arm tightly and pulls me up.

"I need to tie you up for a little while," he says softly.
My insides churn.

Before I know it, he's tying me to the wooden beam in the middle of the floor.

I struggle but he just snickers at me.

Ow...

"Too tight," I whimper because the rope is digging into my wrists, cutting the circulation off. "Please, it's too tight, Garrett."

"I brought you a gift," he announces, ignoring my plea. Then he crouches down to tie my legs, and I try to knee him in the face but he's too fast.

"Nice try, you little bitch," he chuckles. "But it's okay because this will all be over soon."

Soon I'm hugging the beam as my hands are tied around it, as are my feet, and it fucking hurts. Splinters. The roughness of the wood. The rope. It all cuts into me. But he doesn't stop there. No, he actually ties my waist, too. Circling me several times, he ties me to the beam. He doesn't care that it hurts. He doesn't care that my legs ache to the point that I'm trembling to stay standing. He doesn't care about the fucking burn.

"Here's the thing, Irina," he sighs, surveying his handy-work by circling me. "I've spent more than three years searching for Kate, and I forgot to consider the fact that maybe it's no necessary to kill her."

I swallow.

My eyes have adjusted and I see him.

Please die, you sinister bastard.
"My guess is that I won't want you until Kate's six feet under." He smirks, stopping next to me. "And you won't want me until your lover is sharing that space with Kate. But perhaps that's wrong. Maybe all we need is for your former lover to be gone."

No, no, no, no...

My eyes close. I chant out my no's.

Please.

No.

No.

No.

"Maybe all we need is for you to desire me again, Irina, and then I'll desire you in return."

Bile.

Oh, God.

Nausea.

"And maybe if you saw that your precious Edward had betrayed you, you'd desire me that much faster." He chuckles. "Because that's exactly what he's done. He betrayed you, Irina. Just like you betrayed me with him, he betrayed you with someone else... Because guess what. He has a son!"

My eyes shot open before I was even aware of it.

Son. Son. Son. Edward has a son.

Does that mean... I mean... EJ?
Oh, God... or... I can't...

He gives me his sinister smile and my eyes well up.

"Yeah, I found him," he laughs and I start crying. "Don't cry, Irina!" He laughs harder but then stops... and sneers at me. "Yeah, betrayal's a bitch, aint it? But that's karma for you. And apparently he got over you pretty damn quick because my ventured guess is that the kid was a few years old."

"Oh, God," I choke out, feeling my entire body sag. Tears fall faster and faster, and I continue to sag... but it's in relief. A son. A son. He has a son. A few years old. Christ, it has to be EJ.

"Oh, God." This time it's a cry. And I'm so fucking relieved.

Have I ever thought about Edward moving on?

Yes. Of course, but... there's still a part of me that knows. A part of me so aware of the love Edward and I shared. The bond. The history. Everything we shared. It was always unbreakable.

That part of me knows he hasn't moved on.

And now he has our son.

My forehead rests against the beam, and I just cry.

You have our son, Edward. I can feel it. I can fucking feel it.

"So, here's the thing, Irina. If you see his betrayal before I kill him, maybe you and I can finally move on."

My head snaps up.

I gasp.
Eyes wide.

Don't... no. He's... he's safe. Edward's safe. He has our son and they're safe.

Please.

Please.

Then... dread. Because... why am I tied up?

"Why-?" I croak out. Clearing my throat, I continue. "Why did you tie me up?"

He smiles.

"Because I don't want you running loose when I bring that fucker down here."

"No!" I gasp, and my body hurts. Everywhere. Churning, twisting and pulling. Oh, God... No... no... "He's not... Tell me he's not here!" I scream at him. "TELL ME HE'S NOT HERE!"

Shit. Oh, God... my chest... No... No... nooo...

I'm panting. Gulping and choking for air.

Black spots fill my vision.

Rage. Fuck, the rage that surges through me... and the fear, the horror... Oh, God...

"Tell me!" I shriek.

He laughs.

Die.
Die.

Die!

"Oh, he's here all right."

My stomach drops.

I gag. Nothing comes up.

Please.

Please.

"Let me get him for you, Irina. It'll be good. Once he's awake, I'll give you a few minutes to say goodbye, and then it'll be over. Perhaps you should give him a piece of your mind for betraying you."

He leaves me.

I gag again out of reflex, and this time I throw up. All over myself.

Over and over.

I hear him heading upstairs. Every step is like a punch to my gut.

Sobbing, throwing up, sweating, and panting.

I can't breathe.

Everything hurts.

Inside and out.

"P-please," I choke out.

_Tell me Edward's not here, you sick fuck!_
I jump in fright when a chair gets thrown down the stairs... followed by steps... Oh, God... no, no, no... Tell me you didn't bring my Edward here... PLEASE!

One step. Closer.

One step. Closer.

Then he reaches the landing and my eyes widen.

I take the sight in.

I can't understand.

I gulp for air. My body's shaking.

No.

No.

No.

So long. It's been so long.

Oh, God...

You're here, hubs.

You shouldn't be.

But you are.

"He'll wake up soon," Garrett laughs, and then he drags you toward me, making my body tingle.

I cry and my eyes stay wide to take it all in.
I hate that he brought you here, baby, I hate that he's tying you to the chair right now, and I hate that you aren't with our son. Oh, God... EJ. You're here, and he's not. Is he alone? Is he...? Fuck. You shouldn't be here.

Christ, I've missed you, hubs... Oh, my God, you're here.

I sob.

"Edward," I whimper. You're here but you're not here. You've been hurt. I...I...I can see. I can see the blood. On the side of your face. Your neck.

"Please, baby..." I wanna see better. The light isn't good and I need to see you, hubs. I need to see you better. But I see the stains. I see the cut above your eyebrow. That's how close you are and I'm trembling but if I relax, the ropes cut deeper. Christ, what did he do to you?

So close. Just feet away. Maybe ten.

You're here.

"You're here," I breathe out.

I'm realizing. It's dawning on me. Oh, God, you're actually here.

I dip my head, wiping the disgusting vomit from my chin onto my t-shirt, and I see Garrett standing there. Arms across his chest. Glaring at me.

"What did you do to him?" I whisper thickly. "You hurt him!"

"I had to keep him from wakin' up." He shrugs. "Don't worry. It wasn't much. Just a blow to the neck with the back of my Glock, and then I had to punch him a little 'cause he pissed me off everytime he started wakin' up."

Then he smiles. That smile. The smile that makes me shudder.
"I didn't hurt him yet. The real pain comes later. Or maybe... hmm, maybe he won't feel the pain. Maybe he'll die instantly... but where's the fun in that?"

"I have some fun to plan now, Irina," he chuckles and turns to leave. "I'll be back soon, so you better say your goodbyes quickly. Cause I can't wait to have my fun with him. I assure you... there will be pain."

He leaves.

The door closes.

Click. Click. Click.

Only three locks this time.

I turn back to you, and I can't see you anymore. It's too dark-

"Gah!" I gasp.

There's suddenly light. It hurts my eyes so fucking badly.

I hear echoes of Garrett's laughter and I understand that he's flicked the light on.

I didn't even know there was a fucking lamp here, but there is, and God, it hurts.

Squinting through my lashes, I try to see you. Through blinding light and tears, I just wanna see you, baby. Please let me see you.

I blink. Over and over. Still trembling, still feeling the ropes digging into my flesh, and my circulation is cut off. Numbing.

Then I hear you groan and I try harder to see you.
Your head lolls forward and I cry because I can't see your face anymore. Please be okay. You... Oh, God, you can't be here. You need to be with EJ.

You groan again.

I'm rigid.

My eyes are adjusting. It still hurts, stings and pounds, but... I'm starting to see you better. But not your face. Oh, please... Hubs, let me see you. Christ, you're here.

"Fuck," you mumble, and I gasp.

Eyes welling up rapidly.

Oh, Edward... Please... Three years and... so many months... Please...

I chew on my lip, forcing every sound to stay inside.

Every sound. Sobs, whimpers, cries, screams... pleas.

I feel something warm trickle down my hand, and in a split second I pay attention to it. Blood. Ropes cutting too deeply. I don't care and turn back to you. You're waking up, hubs. You're waking up. Oh, God... this is too much. I understand everything but I don't understand.

You're here. I can see you... but... It's been so long.

You're real. Christ, you're real. You're not a figment of my imagination. What we had... it was all real. I always knew but... you're here now, proving it. My stories. Everything I've told your nugget, it's all real.

My eyes. Widening even further. Because... oh, because you're waking up. You're moving. Baby, you're waking up. Fuck, you're gonna see me. You're gonna see what I've become. You're gonna see where you are.
I bite down hard on my lip, stopping myself from screaming.

And then you lift your head.

Slowly and you groan. I'm so sorry. You have to be in pain.

I'm so sorry...

I'm sorry...

Your eyes flutter and I realize my eyes have adjusted to the dim lighting.

Your eyes, baby. Please let me see your eyes. I haven't seen them in days. I haven't seen them since I lost my son. Our son. Please show me your eyes. I need it, hubs... Oh, God...

Tears fall.

And you open your eyes.

I gasp. The green. Watery and green. Your eyes, baby... oh, your eyes...

You groan, pulling at your restraints a little.

You don't know where you are yet, you don't know that your hands are tied behind your back, and I'm so sorry, baby.

I taste the metal flavor on my tongue, making me realize I'm biting too hard on my lip.

I don't care.

You're trying to focus your eyes, and I need to see them.

I'm holding my breath.

I love you.
You're... my heart and soul. Or you have it. All of it. It's yours.

Everything stills when your eyes land on me.

You blink slowly.

My tears continue to fall.

You blink again and frown.

You breathe heavier, I see the way your chest starts rising and falling rapidly.

You're so beautiful, Edward. Despite... everything. You're an angel.

I know it's dawning on you now. I know you can see me.

Your chest heaves. Your eyes are wide, devastatingly beautiful... and welling up.

You know I'm here, Edward.

"A-angel," you choke out.

I fall apart.

I let everything go.

You're here.

Sobs rip through me.

**Chapter 21**

...*Your words in my memory*

*Are like music to me*
I'm miles from where you are

I lay down on the cold ground

And I, I pray that something picks me up

And sets me down in your warm arms...

~Set The Fire To The Third Bar by Snow Patrol – chapter song.

**Edward Cullen – Midnight – September 13th.**

"Hi! My name is Bella. What's your name?"

The girl is smiling. Really big smile and stuff. She is missing a tooth. I also lost a tooth but it came back. A new one.

"Hello. I'm Edward Cullen," I mumble.

Should I tell her she gots peanut butter on the cheek?

Mama always say I should tell the truth.

"Okay. Wanna be my friend?"

But... she's a girl. Don't wanna make her sad, though.

"I dunno. I guess so?"

"Oh. You better come find me when you're sure then. I'm gonna play with Sadie now."

She runs away.

Just... runs.

I don't like it one bit.
So I run for her.

"Bella!" I call, running fastest in the world. "I'm sure now, Bella." I caught up cause I'm fast. "Who's Sadie?"

*O*O*O*

"Mama, this is my new friend!" I yell, taking Bella's hand and then we run for mama's car. Bella is not the fastest in the world so I run slower so she can still hold my hand.

I see mama smile and I wanna run faster. "This is Bella and she's my new friend," I say again cause now mama can hear me.

Bella giggles and I smile.

"Your new friend, huh?" mama ask and she's all smiley with Bella. "I'm Esme. Edward's mom. It's very nice to meet you, sweetie."

Bella holds my hand harder and shake mama's hand only quick. I think Bella is shy.

"Hi," Bella says quietly. And then she holds up her doll. "This is Sadie."

"Bella likes her doll lots and lots," I tell mama. She's all smiley again.

I wanna play with Turtles instead. Much funnier.

Girl stuff aint fun. But I still like Bella. She's my new friend. She's cool for a girl.

I hear Mrs. Ateara holler for us and I remember she's watching us cause I had to ask nicely to bring Bella to mama. Bella's daddy isn't here just yet so Mrs. Ateara is watching her.

"Bella, your daddy's here now!"
Oh, okay. I s'pose he's here now.

"I gots to go, Edward," Bella say squishing my hand a little. "I see you tomorrow?"

"Um, yes." I nod and let go of her hand. "Will you be my friend tomorrow also?"

Mama chuckles, and I don't understand what's so funny!

"Of course, silly!" Bella say. Smiling big and stuff again. "I'm your friend everyday now."

I smile really big.

"Wanna play with Turtles tomorrow?" I ask.

Please say yes!

"Okidoki, but can Sadie also play?"

"Okay, but I'm Rafael," I tell her. Cause he's my favorite.

"M'kay, see ya tomorrow, Edward," she giggles. "And bye, Edward's Mommy."

Then she runs again.

Still don't like that very much.

But I'ma see her tomorrow again.

"Can I bring all my Turtles tomorrow, mama?" I ask.

She just smiles really big and stuff and nods.

"I see you're enjoyin' kindergarten, kiddo," she say in a sing-song.
I wanna stick my tongue out to her cause she's teasing me.

This morning I didn't wanna start kindergarten so much.

But the first day was cool, I guess.

*O*O*O*

"Whatsa matter, Bella?" I ask, sitting down next to her.

"Nothing much," she say and I don't believe her.

Mama always say to speak truth but I don't think Bella's mama told her that.

"You don't look so happy," I mumble, touching my knee. I have a band-aid there with Turtles on cause I fell when I was playing. Mama say I have summer legs. Summer legs is when you have shorts and no pants to protect when you fall a lot in the summer. I have some small cuts. I think they are cool.

Bella also have summer legs.

She has pink band-aid cause she's a girl.

Mama likes Bella.

I met her daddy few days ago. He was nice. With a funny mustache.

And now we're waiting on my mama to pick us up cause Bella's daddy is making dinner for us and some grownups.

I'm gonna see Bella's tree house. She has one. That's cool.

"Do you like having a mommy?" Bella asks now.

I scrunch my face together 'cause the sun is big and in my face.
"Yea." I nod. "Mama's cool."

Bella just nod and look down again.

I know she don't have a mama of her own.

Then I got the best idea. "Hey, Bella? You can borrow my mama if you want."

She smiles a little and I smile, too. "Yea?"

I nod and grin. "Yea, 'cause she likes you and you're both girls."

Now she giggles and bump my shoulder with her own. "You can borrow my daddy if you want."

My eyes become really big and I grin bigger.

A daddy?

That would be so cool.

"Deal!" I say, laughing a little. "Now we both have both!"

"Bella, Edward?"

Bella and I turn around to see Bella's daddy there.

Huh.

"I talked to Esme," he tells us. "She's runnin' late, gettin' some stuff for the barbecue, so I'm picking you up. That okay?"

"Sure," I say, giving my hand to Bella so she can jump down from the bench easier.

"Hey, Daddy?" Bella say, walking to him. "Edward say I can borrow his mommy sometimes and I say Edward can borrow you sometimes."
Bella's daddy's smile is very little when he looks at Bella. Like he's sad or something so I look down cause I don't want him to feel like he gots to be my borrow-daddy.

"Well, I think that sounds perfect," I hear Bella's daddy say then and I look up and now he's grinning. "I guess I have someone to play catch with now, huh?"

He's chuckling a little and Bella sticks her tongue out at him.

They're just teasing so it's okay.

"Come on then, Bella... and son?" he chuckles a bit more, and I chuckle, too. "Barbecue's waitin'."

"Mama can play with dolls with you, Bella," I tell her, shrugging a bit.

And she smiles big.

"Sounds good to me," Bella's daddy laughs.

*O*O*O*

"You okay, Edward?" Bella asks.

Am I okay?

Hell no.

I didn't like it when that damn boy asked Bella out.

I want... huh. What do I want?

Mom says that life is easy when you're eleven, well, almost twelve. I don't agree.

Many things are weird. With me.
"Aren't you a little young to go out with boys?" I ask, scowling. "Besides, Charlie would never let you."

Bella closes her locker and gives me the Bella-pose. Eyebrow cocked, chin dipped, and arms crossed.

I'm in trouble.

"Aren't you a little young to go out with girls?" she retorts. "Besides, Esme would never let you."

"What the hell are you talkin' about?"

"Didn't that Bree ask you to Spring Dance?"

I laugh a little but not really. "I said no."

"Yea, well, so did I."

Oh.

And things are good again.

"All right." I shrug, trying to play cool. "Let's head to class."

Bella narrows her eyes at me and I can feel my damn ears heat up.

Shit.

"Come on," I say, grabbing her arm. "We don't wanna be late."

She doesn't believe me – that things are 'all right' – but I don't know what to say cause I don't know what's happening to me.

Thankfully Bella lets it go.

"Wanna do something after school?" she asks as we go to class.
I do but I can't, and just the damn thought makes me blush.

I can't tell her why.

I can't tell her that I need to be home early. I can't tell her that I need to beat Mom home so I can wash my damn sheets before she sees them.

I flush.

"Ben and I might have plans," I lie.

Bella doesn't believe me but we're in class now.

*O*O*O*

"Happy birthday, Edward," Bella chirps from behind me.

I turn around and I'm immediately so close. Her arms go around my waist and it feels like... home. Comfort.

I smile when I smell her hair. Cherries.

"How does it feel to be a teenager?" she asks seriously, cradling my face.

She's making fun of me but I can't help but to smile wider.

And I can't wait until I grow taller than her! Right now we're equally tall and I don't like it.

Hopefully this summer will be good, and I can grow taller.

"Oh, it feels excellent," I tell her, playing along.

"Hmm, tell me about it," she continues, and now she's sticking a Coke bottle up, pretending it's a microphone.

She's too cute.
Whoa!

What?

Cute?

But she is. Bella's very pretty. I have to admit that.

What I don't have to admit to, though, is that I have weird dreams about her.

Well, not weird but... yeah.

At least I wake up nowadays, you know, before I uh... yeah.

*O*O*O*

I sneak up behind her, glad Angela was distracting her.

Angela sees me and I motion for her to be quiet.

As Bella reaches for her locker, I sneak even closer and wrap my arms around her waist, lean in and whisper in her ear. "Happy 13th, Bella."

She jumps ten feet in the air, and I can't stop the laughter from coming, because I freaking love startling her.

"Damn you, Edward!" she gasps, clutching her chest... before delivering a Bella-punch to my own damn chest.

Bella-punches are hard.

"Ow!" I cough out between my laughs.

In the end I think Angela had most fun.

That shit hurt.
"You have yourself to blame," Bella grits out... but her mouth's twitching.

Victory.

"You can never hold your scowl, Bella," I chuckle, walking forward again, not stopping until I had her in my arms. "Happy birthday," I whisper again, feeling a bit smug that my mouth was in the same height as her ear.

I'm still waiting for my growth spurt, but I'll get there. At least I'm a little taller than her now.

"Thank you," she mumbles.

"So..." I grin, releasing her. "How does it feel to be a teenager?"

"Jesus, you two," I hear Angela chuckle then, and Bella and I look over at her curiously. "Oh, come on! You're so obvious!"

"What do you mean?" Bella asks.

Angela starts jumping around then, and Bella and I just stare at the weird chick.

"Edward and Bella, sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G!" she sings.

I flush.

Bella, too.

I'm sooo staring at the floor.

"Um, time to go to class," Bella says quietly.

I nod.

*O*O*O*
Wait. "Did you just say I was cute?"

She did, didn't she?

"Guys aren't cute, Bella. Guys are hot or sexy or handsome. Never cute."

"You think guys are hot?" she teases.

I groan and roll my eyes at her. But I still smile. I can't help it. She's just... yeah, she is cute. Very cute. And pretty. And hot. And gorgeous.

Mmm, beer.


"Depends," I smirk. "Are you telling the truth?"

"Maybe," she replies shyly, again trying to hide her blush. "Like you didn't know it already," she adds in a huff.

Bella thinks I'm hot!

Yes!

I wanna fist pump the air.

"Why are you looking so proud?" she asks then. "You look like you had no idea."

I shrug.

I mean, I know there are a few girls in school that likes me, but I never cared. No one could compare to Bella. I know I look sorta good, I suppose, but it only matters when Bella says it.

"I dunno," I say.
My beer is empty.

Just gone.

"Well, you are," she tells me, smiling shyly. "And strong..."

My eyes bug out. Did she just say that?

And why the hell is she watching my bicep?

Should I flex it?

I flexed it.

She's biting her lip! Oh, God!

"Are you flirting with me?" I blurt out.

Ah, man! I did not just say that! Crap!

"Maybe I am," she whispers. "Do you want me to stop?"

Shit!

No!

"No," I say, shaking my head furiously.

We stare at each other. Not always in the eye, though, because I can't tear my eyes off her mouth. I want to kiss her. So badly. But I don't know how. Never done that before... What if I'm bad and she doesn't want me around anymore?

"Do you want to kiss me?"

My eyes snap up again. Wide as hell. Can she read my freaking mind?

Better well be honest.
"So much," I manage to say before gulping.

"Then kiss me. I want it, too," she breathes out.

She barely got the words out before I attacked her.

Mouth on mouth, tongues, teeth clashing. I'm so terrible at it, and she isn't much better but I love it. I want more and more.

"We need to practice," she giggles in between my sloppy kisses.

I chuckle but I can't stop kissing her. I love her lips. "I'm up for that."

*O*O*O*

"Hey, sweet!" Mom exclaims as we enter the bar. "And hey, kiddo!"

Mom and Bella hug for a life time, and I just stand there.

We've been down at the arcade with my cousin and some friends, and I'm so ready to be alone with Bella now.

I wanna take Bella to our apartment upstairs. I wanna kiss her more. It's pretty much all we've done since 4th of July last week but I'm addicted now.

"You're usually at Bella's house," Mom says, kissing my cheek. "How was Tanya today, kiddo?"

"Good," I say, feeling Mom's eyes on me. Like she's studying me. "And um... we decided we wanted to be here today."

Mom says nothing. Just watches me.

For a while.
"Yeah, we have some things to discuss for Ben's birthday," Bella chimes in. "We should probably head to your room, Edward."

Yes, exactly.

I nod again and dodge Mom's stare.

As Bella and I dart up the stairs, I'm pretty sure I her Mom giggling but I can't be sure.

Once we were in my room, all that was forgotten, though.

I grin. Bella locked the door.

"Don't do that," I whisper, releasing her bottom lip from her teeth. Then I put my hands on her hips... and lean in.

We're getting much better at this kissing-thing, and I love it more and more each day.

I push her gently, walking her backwards until I have her against the door, and then I deepen the kiss.

"I love kissing you," she sighs in my mouth.

I smile into the kiss, pressing my body against hers. "I love it more," I mumble, and then I push my tongue into her mouth.

I gasp then, as she sucks on my tongue, and I have to move my lower body away. My body is crazy around Bella.

Then her fingers are in my hair, and I groan quietly in her mouth.

She moans.

I'm going nuts.
"Hey, Edward. She's upstairs," Charlie says, standing to the side to let me pass.

I'm nervous.

But very determined.

Today is the day I confess my feelings. I have to. She's driving me insane with her... everything.

I knocked on her door before just entering, cause we have nothing to hide. There are no secrets. Well, expect for the part where I'm ridiculously in love with her.

"Hey, you," she purrs, sitting on the windowpane.

Yes, she sure is a flirtatious gal. Thankfully she's only flirtatious with me. Otherwise I would've punched someone.

"Hey," I reply lamely, walking over to her.

This is where we usually kiss. But I can't. Too nervous.

"Can we talk?" I ask nervously as I fidgeted with my pocket knife.

A gift from Charlie. I love it.

"Uh-oh, that doesn't sound good."

We both sit down on her bed, and I cursed myself because the bed wasn’t the right place for this. The bed only makes me hormonal and I don’t know how many times I’ve jacked off after leaving Bella’s bed. I mean, we often lie here together, but since... a while... a long while ago... I've had to take care of a problem when I return home.
"What's wrong, Edward?" she asks softly, placing her hand on my thigh.

I stare at it. It feels so good. I want more.

*Time to fess up.*

*Shit, what if she hates me?*

*Ah, fuck it. Here we go.*

"I wanna take you out, Bella," I tell her quietly, still staring at her hand on my leg.

"Heh, okay? Why does that make you nervous?"

"No," I say, shaking my head. "I mean... I wanna take you out... on a date."

Silence.

After an eternity, I look up at her.

Imagine my damn surprise when I find her smirking at me!

*I don't see how this is funny!*

"Took you long enough!" she exclaims then, and before I can do anything, she throws her arms around me... oh, and her lips... mmm, lips... on my neck.

"You have feelings for me?" she asks before she kisses me. Hard on the mouth.

*I gasp, she takes the opportunity to thrust her tongue into my mouth.*

"Uh-huh," I manage to get out, even nodding for emphasis.

"Oh, God, I have feelings for you, too!" she squeals.
Yes, squealed. In my mouth. But I can hardly think about that because all of the sudden I'm on my back on her bed, and I have a gorgeous Bella on top of me.

On top of me.

She likes me, too.

Oh, God, we're on her bed.

My hands found her waist... but... um, what if I want more? Boyfriends can grope, right?

Christ, I haven't asked her yet!

"Bella," I groan. "I have to ask you something."

She whimpers – a sound that goes straight to my dick – so I push her off me before I embarrass us both. Mostly me.

She just smiles widely, cocking an eyebrow, silently telling me to ask away.

Deep breath.

"Will um... ahem... will you be my uh, my girl?"

Smooth. Very smooth.

"Oh, Edward! Of course I will!"

I'm the luckiest guy on earth.

*O*O*O*
"Shouldn't we be downstairs, baby?" I chuckle as Bella closes the door behind us. "I think that's a part of Christmas, you know. To spend time with the family."

She just shakes her head at me and pushes me down on her bed.

I don't mind at all, especially not when she straddles me.

Slowly my hands makes their way up her thighs, and I smile when she leans down to kiss me.

"I love you," I murmur, nibbling on her bottom lip. "So much, angel."

"Hmm, I love you, too," she hums. "More than life."

"More than life," I echo quietly, and I roll us over so I'm on top of her. "Fuck, you're beautiful."

And when I say it, it doesn't come close to how beautiful my girl really is.

No words are enough to explain.

We've seen a few of our friends fall in and out of love, especially now in High School, but... I just know that will never be me. Or Bella for that matter. What we have is solid. Forever.

We may only be seventeen, but... I know this. We both do. It's us.

"So are you," she whispers, and her eyes. Christ, her eyes are so fucking gorgeous. Deep and soulful. Coffee brown. Matching her silky hair. "You're everything."

I smile and Eskimo her. "You too, angel."

We kiss for hours.

We get riled up.
We don't think or worry about our family downstairs in Bella and Charlie's living room.

Yeah, it's Christmas, but we're in need of some alone-time after today.

Jesus, don't get me started on Charlie's sister and nephew. Emmett and his mom, they're both hilarious, but a fucking work-out to be around. Goofballs both of them. Much like the Swans, really.

I chuckle at the thought because it's true. My girl's a crazy one, and I wouldn't want it any other way.

"What's so funny, baby?" Bella asks, smiling beautifully at me.

I lick my lips at the sight of her thoroughly kissed ones.

And it hits me.

I'm ready.

There will never be another. There's never been one before, and there won't be another in the future either. It's all Bella. My Jezebel, my angel.

I've been sure since before I was sure. No, that doesn't really make sense, but... it's always been her.

We haven't been ready for the final step... but now... I need it.

I know Bella's ready. She told me so in her own blunt way last month. I was the one hesitating. Mostly for her, I told myself. But it was for me, too. I was nervous.

I'm ready now, though. That's clear to me. So clear.

It's all about you, angel.

Slowly I push my tongue inside her mouth, massaging hers with mine, and I position us so I'm lying next to her, leaning over her... and my hand wanders...

"Edward," she moans quietly in my mouth as my hand unbuttons her blouse. "What... oh..."

She understands.

"I love you, angel," I mumble against her lips. After pecking her a few times, I hover over her... kissing her as I remove her clothes. I caress her soft skin.

When we're both naked, I cover her body with mine.

I smile when she hums against my neck, and her fingers find my hair, making me moan.

"Are you sure?" she whispers softly.

I shiver, feeling her lips ghost over my neck, and I nod because I've never been surer.

I continue kissing her, all over, and my hand travels down her toned yet soft stomach. Shivers run through us. Christ, yes, I'm sure. I need it. There's an urge. And I reach her pussy, a pussy I've felt and tasted so many times before but this is new. All I can think about is... I need to make love to her. I need all of it. So, I tease her. I make her wet. I make her squirm under me as I kiss her, finger her, and whisper to her. I live for the noises she makes.

"Please, Edward," she moans, clinging to me.

I groan as her thigh brushes against my dick.
"What, baby?" I whisper, leaning down to kiss her breast. "What do you want?"

Before she answers, I slide two fingers inside her, and I groan because I know... I know that those fingers will be replaced soon... replaced by me... with me... fuck. I need a distraction before I embarrass myself because I'm fucking throbbing for her and I haven't even entered her yet, so I focus on her... which only makes me throb that much more but... Shit. Christ, she's gorgeous... writhing, moaning... my name. Harder. With a little more force, I finger her, and my thumb rubs her clit.

"Oh, mmm, yes... more, Edward..."

I suck on her nipple, loving her taste, loving her hands tugging on my hair... loving all of it.

I feel her tighten around my fingers, and her legs are trembling.

"I know you're there, Bella," I groan quietly, reaching up to kiss her jaw. "Come for me, beautiful..."

With a gasp, she falls apart under me, and I watch it all happen, and I love it. I crave it. The face, the sounds... the way her pussy constricts around my fingers... But then nerves hit. And she's looking up at me. Eyes shining, a little sleepy, a lot horny... and very ready... and I'm so damn nervous. Because... what if I can't satisfy her? What if... ah, shit, I'm gonna embarrass myself by coming too soon, I just know it. I should've jacked off before.

And Christ, I'm going to hurt her!

"Don't over think it, baby," she whispers, cradling my face. "I want this... you want this... right?"
I relax a little, nod, and brush my lips against hers as I position my erection—of, fuck, she's hot... wet...

Shit.

"C-condom?" I stutter, feeling so fucking ridiculous.

I know my girl's on the pill of course but I don't know if she wants more, and truth be told, I've heard you last longer if you wear a condom. Alec might have told me.

And I wanna last. But I also wanna feel her and only her.

Bella made the decision, though, and she shook her head once.

"Just you and me," she murmurs.

You and me, angel.

We kiss softly, and I... oh, God... the tip of me... right there.

I groan.

Slowly, very slowly, I push into her, and I close my eyes as the feelings assault me. She's everywhere. Around me, under me, kissing me, holding me, and I do the same. I kiss her hard, hold her hard, and continue to push inside of her.

"Y-you okay?" I breathe out.

Damn, damn, damn... I'm never gonna last. Christ, she's tight.

Bella nods but I know she's in pain. At least a little.

I stop because I'm right there. Right there.
"Do it, Edward," she gasps, closing her eyes tightly. "It's inevitable. Do it."

Fuck!

I steel myself, and with one deep breath, I kiss her harder than before, and push all the way in.

I moan loudly.

"Shit, shit, shit," Bella gasps, and I groan and grimace. Groaning because she's unbelievably tight and I'm about to blow my load, and... shit, grimacing because she's in pain. I hate that, and I kiss her gently, softly... as I whisper stuff to her. I barely know what I'm whispering but it seems to be working, and she starts relaxing.

"It's okay," she breathes out shakily. "It's okay to move."

No, because if I move, I come. Simple as that.

"Ah, shit, Bella," I pretty much whine because she starts squirming, and I'm so, so, so close. Damnit! "Don't more, Bella, please! I'm too fucking close to losing it," I whimper. Yeah, I'm such a fucking man right now.

That's when Jezebel makes an appearance, and I feel her hot breath against my neck... oh, God, her tongue... And I gasp. Loudly. Because Jezebel's fucking squeezing me. Or my dick.

"But I want you to come, Edward," she moans. "We'll have the rest of our lives to do it all over again."

My eyes are open before I know it, and I pull out of her, groaning and fighting to keep myself in check.

And then I thrust into her again.
My eyes roll back.

Fuck.

She moans encouragingly. My name. Over and over, and she knows it's driving me insane with lust, love, and... oh, fuck!

I thrust jerkily, feeling it. It. That. I can't hold it. She feels too damn good. Oh, God.

"I'm... I'm... Fuck, Bella," I grunt.

Then she meets my thrust, and I lose it.

Buried deep inside of her, I lose it, and my orgasm takes over.

Black spots fill my vision.

I pulse inside of her.

I feel everything.

My cock inside her hot pussy, so tight... so amazing...

I feel her kissing me. My face. My neck. My shoulder.

But most of all I feel this weird connection. It's powerful and consuming, and I know it's all her. She's the one making me feel this. She's everything to me, and now we've shared everything with each other. Our firsts. Everything. She's the only one.

"I love you," I gasp, collapsing on top of her, cause I'm so fucking spent. Panting. Shivering. Even more so when she wraps her arms around me, and her fingers are scratching my back. Slowly and... lovingly if you can do that. But she can and it feels amazing.

"I love you, too," she murmurs before kissing me.
I kiss her back.

No, I didn't last.

But Bella and I are proof of that practicing makes perfect.

I can't wait to practice.

*O*O*O*

"Edward Cullen!"

I grin and accept my diploma, shaking hands with the principal before I look out.

I wink at my girl.

She blows me a kiss.

We're finally graduating High School, and tonight... tonight is the night I propose to my angel.

Charlie smirks and shakes his head in amusement because he knows why I'm so fucking giddy.

Yeah, I was fucking nervous when I asked for his blessing. Not because I didn't know if he was gonna approve of me because I know he does, but... more because I was afraid he'd think it was too soon.

But he said yes. Without hesitation.

*O*O*O*

With a nod from Charlie and a watery smile from mom, I grab Bella's hand, eager to get her away from our Graduation party at her house.
The house is full of friends and family and one might think I should plan this for a night where we're alone, but... no. Besides, it's not like I'm gonna propose in front of all the others.

"Where are we going?" she asks as I usher us outside.

I'm aiming for the tree house.

"Our spot," I tell her with a wink.

She smiles up at me.

It's everything.

I'm nervous, yeah, but also sure. It's us two.

Linking our hands together, we head for the tree house in the back of their backyard.

"So, I heard the Johnsons sold their house," she says conversationally, nodding at the house to our left. "I wonder who's movin' in."

Well, hopefully it'll be the two of us, angel.

"Hmm," I hum noncommittally.

"And we should probably start lookin' for a place, too," she adds.

Instead of answering, I help her up the ladder leading to our spot.

When we were kids, it seemed that the little house was so far up, but now... Yeah, it's at the level of my chest, and I hoist Bella up easily before I follow.

"Edward!" she gasps, and I grin.
With help from Tanya and Aunt Liz, I've managed to keep my plans secret, and the three of us were here this morning setting things up. And while I was distracting Bella at our Graduation party, Liz and Tanya returned to light the candles, put up the stereo, and drop off the red velvet cake I had mom make for us.

I'm not very good in a kitchen but I know my angel's got a thing for red velvet cake, well, so do I... so, I had mom bake it.

And now... now there are lit candles, two plates with cake, two beers, two Cherry Cokes, a blanket on the floor, and a bunch of pillows all over.

After pushing play on the stereo, there's also music.

"You like it?" I ask quietly, sitting down on the blanket.

We're way too tall to stand, so, sitting it is.

"Love it," she says, sitting down in between my legs with her back to my chest. "You're amazing, baby."

I kiss the top of her head.

"So are you, angel."

As long as I can distract her when it comes to our living arrangements for the summer, I know this will be perfect. Moving in together was the first thing we decided after our finals. With Bella heading to college and me working in at the bar, we want to stay close, we want to come home to each other after a long day, and we will.

I just hope I can distract her for a few months while Charlie and I work on the house next door. The house that I bought for us.

There's no way I want us to settle for an apartment. Not when we can afford a house, which we can now. Not that Bella knows, and I won't tell
her until the house is finished. Hopefully it will be just in time for her birthday in September.

Then I'll surprise her with the house, and... that mom's making me partner.

Not officially until I'm twenty-one obviously, but she's helping us out until then.

I smile at the thought and pick up one of the beer bottles.

"What does this remind you of, baby?" I chuckle quietly and pop the cap of it.

I feel her shake in silent laughter.

"The first time I had beer," she replies. "We were right here. Fourth of July."

I hum in acknowledgement and sip my beer, trying not to think of the box I have in the pocket of my dress pants. Yes, dress pants. It's our Graduation day. That means fancy clothing. For me that's dress pants in black, and a white button shirt with my sleeves rolled up. I lost the tie after dinner, though, cause that was just too much. Suffocating thing, really.

But for Bella, dressing up means wearing a gorgeous summer dress in light blue. Like the white one Marilyn Monroe wore, but in blue. So, wearing dress pants and a fancy shirt is so worth it if you get to have Bella wearing that dress next to you. Or in my case, in my arms.

I sigh in content, resting my chin on the top of her head.

"And then we kissed for the first time," I murmur.

She shivers and breathes out a 'yes,' and I wonder if she's on to me.
It wouldn't surprise me. I may be stealthy but we can't hide anything from each other.

"After our third date, this was where I took you and told you that I loved you for the first time," I whisper with my lips brushing over her hair. And I smile, remembering the stuttering kid I was. "How old were we?" I chuckle quietly. "Fourteen? Fifteen?"

She nods minutely. "You were fifteen. I was still fourteen," she whispers.

I think she's on to me, and the thought should make me more nervous, but it doesn't. It just proves how synched we are.

Fifteen. That's when I told her I loved her. She said it back. Fifteen. And our first kiss when I was fourteen and she was thirteen.

Now I'm nineteen. She'll be nineteen in September.

Nineteen.

I met her when I was five.

I've been hers since then.

Since the day she approached me with her doll, her toothless smile, and cheek with peanut butter on it... I've been hers.

"It's always been you, angel," I whisper, kissing the top of her head.

Turning in my arms, she looks up at me with her big, expressive eyes.


You know what I'm about to do, baby.

I dip down and nuzzle my nose with yours.
And I whisper, "Be my wife, Bella."

I feel her breathing hitch and I slide my nose along her jaw.

Cherries.

"Please," I add quietly, and my hand pulls out the box.

I swallow hard and present her with the ring.

She's breathing heavily. A tear falls. I kiss it away.

"I love you so much," I murmur, kissing her cheek. "I always will. So... please... be my wife."

"Oh, God," she whimpers, and before I know it, she straddles me. Eyes flickering between the ring and me. "Edward," she croaks, and I cradle her face. I kiss her softly. Her mouth. Her wet cheeks.

And then she makes me choke up on emotion, too.

"Y-yes. Yes, Edward... Yes!"

My body... my soul, my heart... everything inside me shifts. She's the one holding me in place. Fuck gravity. It's her.

The smile that takes over my face is... face-splitting, I'm sure, but I can't contain it as I slide the ring onto her finger.

Perfect.

So fucking perfect.

"No matter what, baby... I'm yours," I tell her thickly. "You and me."

"You and me," she echoes. "And no matter what... I'm yours, too."

I kiss her passionately, holding her in my lap, and she's my life.
All wrapped into one, I have my angel, my Jezebel... my future wife.

Bella.

Bella.

My Bella.

"Soon," she whimpers then, as I kiss her neck. "I want to marry you soon, baby... Before I start school."

Just when I thought I couldn't get happier...

*O*O*O*

"Do you have any idea how beautiful you are, Mrs. Cullen," I murmur quietly.

She acknowledges me with a blissful smile but keep her eyes focused on the twinkle lights in the tree above us, and I twirl her around once, making her laugh as returns to my arms. My arms where she belongs. My arms where I'll keep her forever.

My wife.

We're married.

The ceremony was perfect for us.

All our close ones are here, here in Charlie's backyard, and after the ceremony, we just moved the chairs and we had the best wedding barbecue on earth. I swear. In fact, this day... the best day ever. Again I swear. Because this is my reality. I have my girl, the girl I married a few hours ago, and like I said, our close ones are scattered around us, here in the backyard. Drinks are flowing. There's snacks and red velvet cake. There's good music. Jokes and goofy toasts have been shared.
Photographs have been taken, so many of them. Rose and James' burgers have been devoured. It's summer. August 13th here in New Orleans. Laughter. The smell of barbecue, freshly cut grass, and just... summer.

And right now... right this second... I have my wife in my arms, and we're under the twinkle lights, dancing if you can call it that. We're more... just moving around slowly, hugging, kissing, and smiling like goofs. And Bella's looking up at the lights while I twirl her around and make her laugh.

"Uh-oh," Bella chuckles then, peering at something behind me. "Cousin Em is on his way to the stereo."

"That can't be good," I laugh quietly, looking over my shoulder, and sure enough, Emmett's walking... or running towards the stereo. "What's your guess, angel? Sappy ballads or cheesy serenading?"

"Isn't that pretty much the same thing?"

You laugh, and it's beautiful.

That's an understatement, though, because she's out of this world. Her dress is white and summery, ending right above her knees, and she's barefoot.

Then there's the white rose in your hair.

Her hair is down. The way I love it. Dark, wavy, shiny, and thick.

She had a veil earlier, though. It was symbolic, cute and beautiful.

I kiss her nose because I want to.

She's got summer freckles on her tanned skin. Her make up is light, barely there, and perfect. Because she doesn't need it. Only some of that stuff that makes her eyelashes even longer than they already are.
In a British accent, a horrible one that made me laugh, she called me dashing.

I'm wearing black linen pants, a white button shirt with my sleeves rolled up, and yes, my wife allowed me to wear flip-flops. But hey, she's barefoot. Obviously she couldn't tell me to wear fancy shoes. Not that she would. We're casual, laid back, and comfortable. Although, my flip-flops are in leather. So, they're a little fancy, if I may say so.

The black tie hangs loose around my neck.

But to her, I'm dashing.

Then we hear Emmett.

"This is for you, Eddie! Take care of my little cus!"

Emmett, Emmett, Emmett. He may look like a giant, but the dude's listening to cheesy pop. However, when the song comes on... it's perfect.

And Bella and I look up at the lights before we look at each other.

We're in our own little world. We hear the party, all of them, the laughing, the story-telling, but we don't pay attention. We're in our corner of the backyard, the corner where the big cherry tree is, the corner where the tree house is... the corner with all the twinkle lights above us.

The corner where we got married a few hours ago.

And yes, the song is perfect, Emmett. Thank you.

It's even more perfect when Bella sings along, and I twirl her again before pulling her close.

...Oh, kiss me beneath the milky twilight
Lead me out on the moonlit floor

Lift your open hand

Strike up the band and make the fireflies dance

Silver moon's sparkling

So kiss me...

I dip down.

You tilt your face up, standing on your tiptoes.

And we kiss.

"We're married, hubs," she whispers against my lips.

I smile. And chuckle a little.

"Hubs?"

"Mmhmm, you're my hubs now."

"And you're Mrs. Cullen."

"Damn straight."

*O*O*O*

"Time to go home, baby?" I ask quietly, feeling Bella's head rest on my chest. My arm is around her, and I twirl a strand of her hair around my fingers as I talk football with Emmett and James.

Our day's been long. Getting married sorta takes it outta ya, and I still have my surprise for her. The surprise I first thought would be her birthday present in September, but... no, I want this now. It's perfect for us.
Plus, she's been a bit annoyed with me over the past few weeks because I haven't been so active in our search for a place to live.

It's time she found out why I never helped. It's time she found out I already bought our house.

Right next door.

Charlie's been a big help, and the two of us have worked on it over the summer when Bella was out with the girls or something.

Nudging my wife gently, I realize she's fallen asleep in my arms, and I chuckle... because she's fucking adorable when she's asleep.

"Bella?" I say, nuzzling her temple. "Wake up, baby."

She does after a while, and Emmett laughs, effectively waking her up more.

"I fell asleep?" she mumbled.

"S'been a long day," I chuckle. "I'm tired, too. So, whaddya say we go home, eh?"

She looks up at me, smiling curiously... before chuckling in confusion.

"What do you mean, Edward? We are home."

I smirk crookedly and Eskimo her once but tell her nothing.

No, this isn't out home anymore.

Sure, I've lived here over the summer. Partly because we wanted to be close while planning the wedding, and partly because we were supposed to find a place of our own anyway, and this was a good start – to live together at Charlie's – but that's not all. It's not all because it was also
perfect for him and me to be so close to the house next door. The house I'm now going to present her with.

Instead I just take her hand and pull her up.

I look over at Charlie and he grins before sending us a wink, and then we say goodbye to everyone, and fuck me if Tanya, Alec, Emmett and a few of the others don't throw rice at us.

"Bye, newlyweds!" they all shout.

Bella and I laugh... and then we leave.

She's so confused.

When we reach the street, and I continue to the right, she wants to say something but I stop her with a shake of my head.

A few seconds later, I stop, pull her to me, and turn us so that we're facing the white house in front of us. Well, it's in front of us now, and I rest my chin on the top of her head as I bring out the key from my pocket.

I hold it up. In front of you. I hear you gasp.

I smile and murmur. "Welcome home, angel."

That night we make love in our house. The first night as a married couple, the first night in our new bed, the first night in our own home, and when you wake me up the next morning, you're beaming. Brighter than the sun, and you tell me that we just have to paint our house yellow.

I fall in love with you every morning.

Over and over.
A little harder every time.

*O*O*O*

I knock on the door. Again.

"Bella, please, you're killin' me here. Let me in!"

I'm so fucking worried that she's really sick.

Groaning and pulling at my hair, I pace in our bedroom, and ever so often I glance at the bathroom door, hoping she'll come out. But she doesn't. And I don't know why. All I know is that she's called Tanya and Angela, and they're on their way over because she refuses to talk to me. She just... fuck, I hear her crying and throwing up, and I'm this close to kick that fucking door down.

Before I can threaten my wife to call 911, I hear my cousin and Angela run up the stairs.

I'm still in my pajama bottoms.

I look like shit after pulling at my hair, and Tanya makes sure I know that I look like shit, to which I flip her off and tell her to get my wife out of the bathroom before I kill someone.

"Alright, alright, comin' through," Tanya says, waving me away pretty much as she passes me. Angela follows.

"Just... get her out here, okay?" I plead with them.

Tanya laughs, the bitch.

And Angela throws me an amused smile, and then they both... ah, great. My wife can let them in but not me. Awesome. Perfect. Shoo the husband away but let the chicks in. Yeah, by all means. Don't let me interfere!
"Love you, Bella!" I say... a little sarcastically. Sorry, but I'm a bit nervous, alright?

I go back to pacing.

Oh, the pacing.

And I'm so fucking tired cause I came home 3 am this morning, as per usual. That's the life of a bartender, and man, I need some sleep, but how easy is that when you have your wife puking her guts out?

Not so easy, no. I mean, I can barely leave the house if I think there's something remotely wrong with her, so don't expect me to be able to sleep if she's sick.

And I'm fucking worried, cause this is isn't the first day either. She's been throwing up for weeks. Months. Years. Okay, I'm overreacting a bit. A little bit. But a few days. She's been throwing up for days, and I'm losing my mind.

Before I go bald from pulling at my hair, Tanya and Angela finally emerge, and I'm... uh? What?

"What the fuck are you two smilin' about?" I snap, glaring at them. "Is she okay? Why won't she let me in?"

Tanya laughs, and grrrr, I just wanna punch her!

"Weeeell, cus," she drawls. "I think she's let you in good and plenty... if you ask me."

The fuck?

Aaaargh! Women!
"Oh yeah," Angela giggles. "You did good, Edward! There's no stoppin' you from getting' in!"

Humumph?

What the hell are they on?

"You chicks high or somethin'?" I groan in frustration.

Their reaction? They just laugh. And leave.

I hear them as they head downstairs. I hear them downstairs in the hallway. Through the open window in our bedroom, I even hear them after they've left! Still laughing!

"Bella!" I snap, cause I've had it. She can't do this shit to me. She can't shut me out forever, so I pound on the door until I...

"Oowwaa!"

...get hit by the door. In my fucking face.

It hurts.

I think I whimper.

"Ah, shit, hubs! Are you okay?"

Oh, so, now you're worried about my well being?

I whimper again, and I touch my nose, cause I'm pretty fucking sure I broke it. It feels dead, I'm sure.

Sometimes my wife calls me a drama queen. I don't know what she's talking about.
"I'm gonna need medical attention," I grumble, cause this is my opportunity. Bella's obviously fine since the chicks left laughing, so I think we're good. "Can you be my nurse?"

Bella chuckles.

I roll my eyes.

 Lovely.

But then the humor is gone, and she tells us to sit down.

I'm suddenly nervous cause I can see her tear straining cheeks.

"You okay, baby?" I ask, sitting down on the edge of the bed.

"Yes and no," she replies, leaving me confused. "I'm very fine if you're fine. Yeah, that's how I'd put it. But unless I know~"

I cut her cute little rambling off. "Bella, tell me what's wrong. Please."

She nods. Stares at her lap. And stays quiet.

She's nervous as hell, so I'm nervous, too. That's how it goes.

Shit. Deep breaths, Cullen.

"Just don't be mad, okay?" she mumbles, and I frown in confusion. "I know it's early, and... but..." She huffs. "For the record, this is all your fault. Unstoppable fucking sperm." My eyes widen and I'm not really sure how to react. But she ain't done. "I mean, I'm shocked as hell but... now I'm sorta... or really... and truth be told, I can't wait... You know?"

Um, no, baby, I really don't. Know, that is.

So, I give her the tell-me-before-I-lose-my-mind look.
"Right... sorry," she mumbles quietly, and then she retrieves something from the pocket of her pajama shorts. "I asked T and Angela to get it for me. I wanted to be sure..."

I'm looking at it.

That. Stick.

I think I know what it is.

I'm, yeah... I think I know what she's holding up.

Hmmph?

"Edward... I'm pregnant."

Right.

Uh-huh. Sure.

I get it.

I don't get it.

"Please say something, hubs."

In a minute, angel. I'm busy here.

She's... so, she's pregnant.

That means... what does that mean, exactly? I mean, really.

I stare at the stick. The test. There's a smiley. A smiley smiling at me.

Yeah. Back atcha, buddy.

Shit, she's pregnant!

Christ, that means we're gonna have a baby!

A baby. We're gonna have a baby. Together. Bella and I. We're having a baby. Oh, fuck! I'm gonna be a dad!

Bella's gonna be a mom.

My eyes find hers instantly.

We're gonna be parents, angel.

"I don't know, Edward... I don't know if I should be afraid but... you're smiling. Does that mean you're happy?"

Uh, yeah. Cause we're having a baby, Bella.

Maybe I should man the fuck up and actually open my fucking mouth.

Yeah, let's try that.

"We're havin' a baby," I breathe out, and just like that, my vision blurs.
"Holy shit, angel, we're havin' a baby!"

And you laugh through your tears. I think you're relieved.

Then I attack her with kisses, and we're rolling around in bed.

We're going to be parents.


You laugh and I laugh, too, and I kiss your belly. Okay, I don't kiss it. We laugh because I make obnoxious farting noises on it. And I'm sorry, but I'm rather proud of my 'unstoppable fucking sperm', and I think my wife is, too. Because we're having a baby.
"Nervous, Edward?"

I stare at my wife.

Then I realize that my knee is bouncing, my fingers are twitching and tapping the arm rest of the chair, and oh, I have a hand in my hair. Pulling and twisting.

Nervous?

Nah. Not at all.

"Why would I be nervous, Bella?" I ask sarcastically. "We're only finding out the sex of our baby. Why on earth would I be nervous?"

She just giggles at me.

So does the doctor who is currently spreading some gooey shit on Bella's not so flat belly.

I love watching her belly, and at times, if I stare intently and concentrate really hard, I swear I can see it grow.

I'm full of shit of course, but whatever. I love watching Bella's body change.

She's breathtaking.

Thump-thump-thump-thump-thump-thump.

My head snaps up, and I stare at the tiny screen with wide eyes.

Thump-thump-thump-thump-thump-thump.
I've been to every appointment, but I'll never get used to it, and I'm not surprised when my visions blurs.

Thump-thump-thump-thump-thump-thump.

"Strong heartbeat," the doc comments.

I squeeze Bella's hand.

Thump-thump-thump-thump-thump-thump.

I lean over and kiss her forehead. "I love you, angel," I whisper quietly. "Fuck... no words..." are good enough.

"I know," she croaks, also watching the screen.

Thump-thump-thump-thump-thump-thump.

I have no idea what I'm looking at but I know that I've never seen anything more amazing.

Don't ask me where the little baby's head is. Don't ask me what's up and what's down, because I don't know.

But it's beautiful.

Thump-thump-thump-thump-thump-thump.

"I understand you want to know the sex?"

Bella and I nod.

The doc smiles and points at the screen... "You're havin' a son. Congratulations."

Uhm... humph. A boy. Yeah, fucking tell me about it.

I can fucking see it.
So can Bella and she starts laughing through her tears.

It's a boy.

Christ, we're having a little boy.

Nugget. You're a boy.

"Yep, that's Edward's son alright," Bella giggles.

You have no fucking idea how I proud I am, but shit, the doc is very present, so I'm sorta blushing.

"We're havin' a boy, hubs."

I look at her, smiling through my own very masculine tears.

"Yeah," I whisper thickly, pressing my lips to her temple. "We're havin' a boy, angel."

EJ.

"EJ," Bella murmurs softly, echoing my thought. "Our little EJ."

*O*O*O*

"What are you up to, hubs?" she asks over the phone.

I chuckle and sit down on the porch swing with my guitar.

You're always so impatient, angel.

"She questionin' you again?" Charlie asks, sitting down in the rocker with his own guitar.

I nod in answer but points at his cheek, silently telling him he's got paint on it, and that'll just give us away.
“You’ll find out when you get home, angel,” I snicker before sipping my beer.

It’s been a long day but we’re finally done with EJ’s room, and I can’t fucking wait to show Bella. It turned out so good, and Charlie’s been a great help.

Checking my watch, I realize she should be home soon.

"Where are you by the way?" I ask, holding the phone to my ear with my shoulder. "Your classes are over, right?"

"I’m about to fill up the Beast," she chuckles and I chuckle, too. "He's getting thirsty."

I laugh a little. "Are we weird for talkin’ about our truck like it’s a damn person?"

Charlie rolls his eyes at us, shaking his head in amusement.

"Nah," Bella replies, and I practically hear her grinning... if that's possible. "It's called quirky, remember?"

I sober up and smile as I tune my guitar.

"I love quirky," I murmur sincerely.

"That's good," she tells me, and in the background I hear her killing the engine. "Otherwise you wouldn't be with me."

"You two are still actin’ like teenagers," Charlie chuckles.

I throw the towel I had around my shoulders after my shower at him, but he manages to dodge it, the fucker.
"Laugh it up, old man." I laugh through my nose, covering the phone so Bella can't hear me.

Charlie just smirks, showing his laugh lines, and then he turn his attention to the guitar.

"Are you on the porch?" Bella asks then, and my head snaps up, almost making me drop the fucking phone, but shit, is she here?

I look around me, but I can't see her. "How'd you know? Are you close?" I ask her. I mean, I heard her shut the engine off but I figured she'd reached the gas station or something.

"No," she laughs, and I relax back into my seat. "But I hear the guitars. You and dad playin'?"

Oh. Shit. Well... now what? Am I supposed to tell her?

I mean, Charlie's here all the time but I'm afraid Bella's already suspicious and she knows he's helping me with EJ's room...

"Maybe," I reply slowly. "You should just come home and find out." And then I add, "Cause I sorta miss you, you know."

It's the truth after all.

Charlie chuckles again, but I pay him no mind.

I focus on Bella and Sadie.

I can't wait to play her EJ's lullaby. It's finally done.

"I miss you, too," she murmurs softly, and I sigh in contentment. "Cause I sorta love you, you know," she adds, mimicking me from before.

She's teasing me. I love it. Always witty, quirky, and fucking adorable.
"Love you more, angel," I murmur back, playing the first chords of the lullaby I wrote to Bella all those years ago... Christ, that makes me sound old. And shit, now I really fucking want her to come home. "So, I'll see you soon?"

"Yes," she tells me, and I smile. "I'll see you soon, Edward."

I hum and disconnect the call.

Can't wait to show you his room, baby.

"No, you hang up, Edward... No, you hang up, Bella... No, you hang up," Charlie laughs. "Seriously, son, I'm happy for you, but..." he laughs again. I let him, because it doesn't bother me one bit. I'm amused, too. Cause it's no secret that Bella and I are... affectionate. "You two crack me up."

"Yeah, yeah," I chuckle, ignoring that my ears are heating up. But it's getting darker, so it's alright. He can't see it. It's... I look out... It's twilight. Sighing, I lean back again, and after a sip of my beer, I tell Charlie that Bella will be here soon. "So, are we gonna play somethin' before she gets here, or do you have more of them funny, funny jokes, old man?"

"Alright, alright," he concedes, still laughing. "Let's play."

So, we do.

We play a few songs.


Drinking a few beers.

And I wonder... shouldn't Bella be here by now?

Frowning, I put my guitar down before checking my phone.
Shit.

I swallow hard, feeling... something... creep up my spine.

"Two hours," I mumble. How's that possible?

How did two hours pass just like that?

"What?" I heard Charlie ask.

"Two hours," I repeat, looking up at him. "Bella called two hours ago... Sh... Shouldn't she be here by now?"

Stupid question.

Of course she should.

The gas station's only fifteen minutes away.

I swallow again.

Did... did something come up? Maybe T called her? Or Angela?

Maybe she forgot something in school...

But...

She'd call.

She knows I'm a worrier. She would've called if something came up.

So, why aint she here yet?

I pinch the bridge of my nose.

I try to relax. I tell myself... something. Maybe her battery died.

Maybe.
Again, I swallow.

"She doesn't answer her phone," I heard Charlie say, and I understand that he tried to call her. But that means... that means her battery's fine.

I notice now that it's dark out.

The porch light and the few mosquito candles are lighting the porch up, but it's completely dark out.

I shudder involuntarily.

Calm down, Cullen. I'm sure there's a rational explanation.

Yeah, and what's that!

I worry.

A lot.

Something's wrong, I can feel it.

Fuck.

We spend the next twenty minutes trying to reach her.

You're not picking up, angel. Why aren't you picking up the fucking phone!

I pace.

Charlie's worried now, too, and we go inside to call my mom and Tanya and... the others. Maybe they've heard something.

We call everyone.

They haven't heard from Bella.
One word echoes in my head. On repeat like a broken record.

Accident. Accident. Accident. Accident.

Is she hurt?

Christ.

What if she's lying on the side of the road somewhere and...

Fuck.

"Edward?"

I look up at Charlie, cause his voice was all strained and shit.

I follow his gaze but I can't see anything, so I approach him where he's standing by the sink... looking out... there... on the street... and I see... I see the car pulling over. A police cruiser.


No.

No.

No.

No.

No.

All I see now is Bella. I picture her lying in a hospital bed. I can almost hear the doctor rattling off injuries.

Then we're at the door. Charlie and I. And I open it.

Officer. Not looking happy.
My eyes well up.

I can fucking feel it.

Something's... Something's very wrong.

"Mr. Cullen?"

I swallow hard and nod. Only once.

Do not give me bad news. Don't you fucking dare.

"I'm Officer Joshua Scott." His eyes flickers to Charlie and recognition flashes over the cop's features, and I know they know each other. Then he looks back at me. Frowning, sighing. "Your... Your wife is Isabella Cullen?"

I heard defeat in his voice.

I inhale shakily and fold my arms across my chest.

My body goes rigid.

I nod. Only once.

"I'm afraid I need you to come with me... down to the station."

I clench my teeth.

Why the station? Why a police station?

Why not the hospital?

"Scott, you better tell me," I hear Charlie demand. "That's my little girl you're talkin' about so skip the fucking protocol and tell us."

I hold my breath.
Angel. For fuck's sake, you're scaring me.

My vision's all blurry again, cause I'm looking at the officer, and he's got this expression.

It's not an accident. She hasn't been in an accident, has she? She's not lying in a hospital bed with a couple of fractured ribs, is she?

"I'm sorry, Chief Swan... Mr. Cullen, but... it looks like Isabella's been kidnapped."

My stomach drops.

Nausea.

Kidnapped. Kidnapped? Kidnapped...?

"We have footage that we need you to look at. It's down at the station. And we tried to come sooner, but the security camera only caught half the license plate number, so it took some time."

My head snaps up. "What car," I grit out. "What car was it?"

It's not you, angel. It's not you. It's not you. You're on your way home.

"A Chevy. They're still working on the year, but the footage is quite grainy. It's a truck, though. An older one. And we saw a man drive off with a woman..."

All air leaves me.

I lean forward, resting my hands on my thighs. Words echo.

Gas station. Chevy. An older truck. Man driving off...

"I'm about to fill up the Beast," she chuckles and I chuckle, too. "He's getting thirsty."
Gas station. Chevy. An older truck. Man driving off...

"I'm about to fill up the Beast," she chuckles and I chuckle, too. "He's getting thirsty."

Gas station. Chevy. An older truck. Man driving off...

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Gas station. Chevy. An older truck. Man driving off...

"I'm about to fill up the Beast," she chuckles and I chuckle, too. "He's getting thirsty."

No, it can’t be.

Oh, God... Bella...

Someway. Somehow. We arrive at the station.

I'm... about to lose it.

"In here," Scott says, ushering us inside a small room... a room with a TV.

I'm shaking, fighting tears and nausea.

And now... as we sit down in front of the TV... EJ enters my mind.

My son. Our son, baby. Where the fuck are you!

"It's gonna be hard to watch," Scott warns us.

"Just show the damn thing!" Charlie snaps.

He does. After pushing play, we watch.

Oh, God.
Oh, God... Bella... Bella!

My eyes sting. Prickling.

I blink away tears as I see my angel driving in, parking... I see her exit the truck-

"Fuck-" I choke up.

She's on the phone. Oh, God, we're on the phone, angel.

I can't breathe.

I can't fucking breathe.

My insides churn.

I force myself to stay put. I force myself to see... to watch, as she refills the tank... and I can fucking see her smiling as we're on the phone. Please, angel, get away from there.

Drive. Drive. Please come home... Drive.

You hung up the phone, angel. You said, 'I'll see you soon, Edward.' You said that, angel. I remember.

Charlie's crying and I can't fucking stand it.

And after Bella has exited after paying for the gas, I watch-... holy...

My eyes widen.

Every muscle in my body tenses.

I wanna scream at her. I wanna tell her to run.

But she doesn't run.
She doesn't see the man approaching her from behind.

Tears fall.

And I watch the masked man push my angel into our truck.

I watch it.

I see it.

I watch him drive away with my wife. My pregnant wife.

Bella. EJ.

I lose it.

EJ. EJ. My son.

Oh, God...

In a trashcan I lose it all.

My life.

My whole fucking life.

Angel...

Everything.

Devastation doesn't come close to this...

*O*O*O*

"Enough is enough, Edward. For fuck's sake, have you looked in the mirror lately?" Alec bellows, glaring at me.

I shrug and down another shot.
Standing in the doorway to the kitchen, Alec could look intimidating with his inked arms crossed over his chest, but I don’t give a flying fuck. No, instead I turn my back at him, pour myself another shot and look out the kitchen window.

It's a clear view of our little front yard, and I see both Charlie and Ben out there.

Fuckers.

"It's been six months, Edward. We're done. This ends now."

I frown in confusion.

Six months?

Is he fucking retarded?

"It's been ten mo-onths," I slur. "Shhs'been gone for t-ten months... not six."

The glass is too fucking small so I throw it in the sink and chug from the bottle instead.

Much better.

"I know, man... I know," he sighs. "I'm not talkin' about Bella, though. I'm talkin' about you. You've been drunk for the past six months, and your family's had enough."

Four months. That's how long the police searched. Four months.

Then they gave up. Nothing to go on.

Charlie and I couldn’t do it alone. We tried but we couldn’t.

I failed her.
I'm so sorry, baby. So fucking sorry.

My head snaps up as Alec snatches the bottle from my hand.

"Gimme that!" I snap.

"No," was his simple reply as he poured down the contents in the sink.

My liquid.

I'll buy more.

"Esme's worried sick about you," he mutters.

Something inside me snaps, and my haze clears. Fury takes over instead.

"I don't give a flying fuck, Alec!" I shout. "You don't think I haven't noticed the goddamn pity-looks? I'm so fucking sick of it! Instead of feeling sorry for me, why don't people help me find her!"

"We've all tried, Edward!"

"THAT'S NOT ENOUGH!" I scream. "She's still not here, is she? NOTHING will be enough until she's found!"

I'm panting. Chest's heaving. Fists clenched tightly.

"There's nothing more you can do for her, Edward," he replies calmly, quietly, sadly. "You haven't slept properly in ten months. You don't eat, you don't take care of yourself." He sighs, shaking his head. "You're killin' yourself."

I bark out a humorless laugh, cause who gives a shit?

I'm dead without her anyway.

"Bella wouldn't want you to-"
I don't let him finish. In two strides, I'm in front of him, and my fist connects with his jaw. Hard.

I'd already punched the police officer who gave me the news about ending the active search. My fist could take down a few more. Not a problem.

"You do NOT speak of my wife," I grit out through clenched teeth. "You have no fucking idea what she would want me to say or do."

Alec glares at me as he rubs his jaw.

I feel no pain in my fist that is still clenched, clenched so tightly it's shaking.

It feels good almost.

"I'm aint givin' in here, Ed. Your bender is over," he says, still rubbing and flexing his jaw.

"Perhaps people shouldn't focus on me," I reply dryly. "Perhaps people should focus on findin' Bella."

And it's apparently Alec's turn to snap. "Focus on findin' Bella? Isn't that what we've all been doin' for the past ten months?"

"For fuck's sake, Edward! You've... We've done it all! Interviews, TV, radio, newspapers, flyers..." He shakes his head. "We've all been out there searchin'. And don't think Charlie hasn't noticed you sneakin' off in the middle of the fuckin' night to search more than you were really capable of."

I shrug in 'whatever.' Of course I've been out there. I've been all over the state putting up flyers.

"I'm just sayin' this one more time," he continues, pointing a finger at me. "This aint over, but your bender is. You can still search or whatever, but
from today; there will be structure in your fuckin' life because you're not only killin' yourself by doin' this. You're killin' Esme, Liz, and Tanya, too."

Charlie and Ben appear in the doorway then.

I laugh.

I really fucking laugh.

They stand there, flanking Alec. It's ridiculous. Why care about me having a drink every now and then? Why not care about my angel?

My angel.

My laugh gets stuck in my throat.


Our son.

My knees cave. I lose it.

I lose it all, and sobs rip through me. The pain’s excruciating, it stabs at me. Unbearable.

Bella.

Bella.

Bella.

My breakdown is total.

I'm nothing. A shell.

*O*O*O*

I stare at it. The bottle of Jack.
I bought it. I want it.

Now I'm sitting in our living room, another room that Bella decorated, and I'm staring at the bottle.

A part of me wonders why I sat down in the living room. I rarely sit here. It's full of memories. Much like our bedroom but the living room is different. The memories are of laughter and long nights. Pictures everywhere.

You loved taking pictures, angel.

I sigh. My eyes found the bottle again.

You should be here, baby. I need you. It's our wedding anniversary.

Yeah. August 13th.

And I'm here alone. Without her.

Another year has passed.

I've dreaded this day. Just like I've dreaded the past ones she's missed.

For the past few weeks, I've buried my ass in work, even helped mom with paper work at the bar. All to make the days go faster.

July 14th was awful. I didn't leave the bed.

With another heavy sigh, I pull out the pack of smokes and my lighter.

I open the Jack. Swallow hard as I smell it.

Didn't drink it. Yet.

I'm using the little cap as an ashtray, though, cause I'm too lazy to go get one in the kitchen.
I light the smoke. I take a deep drag.

I know, you'd be fuming if you knew I smoked indoors. Sorry.

I don't smoke indoors normally, though.

Bella didn't smoke. Not really, anyway. Only sometimes when we were drinking. She tried to get me to quit or at least cut down.

I promised you I'd quit the day EJ was born.

Leaning forward, I bring the bottle to my nose again, and I sniff the amber liquid.

I remember the burn.

I miss being alive.

*O*O*O*

"Ask away, Elijah," Alice says softly.

"Um... is this pretend?"

"Pretend? I'm afraid I don't understand, honey," Alice replies, still very softly, and I wondered if maybe it was the new kid in her class. The one that's shy.

For some reason, I stop fiddling with my guitar, and look up.

My eyes narrow. I zero in on a boy, standing up in the back.

The boy mumbles shyly again, almost as if he was afraid. "If is' pretend... Then tha's Sadie."

He's pointing at my guitar.

"S'there a yellow house for Sadie also?"
I pale.

I stop breathing.

*O*O*O*

"Can you tell me again, nugget?" I murmur, our foreheads touching.

He's about to enter Alice's classroom, and I'm freaking out.

"You're real," he mumbles, playing with my hair. "You're Daddy."

"And you're my...?" I trail off.

He cracks a small smile. It's everything to me.

"Nugget," he whispers.

My smile grows and I give him an Eskimo kiss. "That's right. Promise you believe daddy?"

He blinks slowly, stops playing with my hair, and places his tiny hands on my cheeks.

"Say it again?" he whimpers.

Fuck.

One step forward, two steps back.

"I'm real, EJ," tell him, cursing my eyes as they water again. "M-... Mommy told you I was real. She told you I was your daddy, and she told you that you were my nugget. It's all true, buddy."

He nods minutely, not releasing my face, but he does this a lot. It's like he needs skin on skin contact to make sure I'm really there, and it fucking kills me. The pain I see in his eyes... it's unbearable.
"I love you, nugget," I murmur, kissing his forehead. "I'm not leaving you. I'm here."

Will it be this way everyday?

For how long?

Will we always have to start over?

Granted, I know it will take time. Weeks, months, years. But I need to know that he will recover... some day. I need it so fucking desperately.

"Daddy," he says, this time touching my nose.

"My nugget," I reply, nuzzling our noses together with his finger still in between. "I promise."

He nods again.

"You're my daddy."

"I'm your daddy."

Another nod.

"You're real, Daddy."

My eyes closed as a tear spilled over.

The pain's excruciating, having to hear your son convince himself that what he sees, touches, is real.

"I'm real," I whisper thickly.

*O*O*O*

"Can we see the yellow house now, Daddy?" EJ asks after finishing his glass of chocolate milk.
I wink and wipe away his milk mustache. "We're in the yellow house, baby."

"S'not yellow here," was his reply.

I chuckle. He's so fucking cute. "You're right, nugget. How about we go outside, and I'll show ya?"

"Okay," he says, nodding furiously.

My heart does some weird flipity-flop thing as he smiles my smile, holding his arms out for me.

My son.

EJ Cullen.

I pick him up without hesitation, once again settling him on my hip, and then I glance over at mom. "You comin'?"

"Mmhmm," she nods.

Yeah, she's crying again.

I pass her, drop a kiss on the top of her head, and leave her in the kitchen, thinking maybe she wants a minute alone before joining us.

"Shoes, Daddy!" EJ whisper-yells as I reach for the screen-door. "Don't you want shoes?"

I snicker and look down at my bare feet. "Nah, it's okay, bud," I say, bumping my forehead gently against his', but don't hold it against me, cause it makes my son giggle. "Do you want your shoes?" But as soon as the question is out, I regret it. Just the thought of letting him go once we're outside... no.
"No, you carry me, Daddy."

"Oh, thank God," I whisper under my breath, feeling my body relax again.

Shit. Deep breaths.

Then I step out on the porch, feeling the heat from the floorboards under my feet. The sun's out. It's still summer in New Orleans and for once, I appreciate the scenery I grew up with... or in.

One quick glance in the direction of Charlie's house told me that they're probably still asleep, but I did however see the cars with tinted windows down the street.

"It's yellow, Daddy!" EJ gasps, eyes trained on the house wall.

My eyes closed before I'm even aware of it. I smile contently. I nuzzle his soft cheek.

Home.

"It is, yeah," I murmur, kissing his cheek before I step out further, and I continue. Down the three porch steps and out to our little front yard.

It aint big at all, and it's completely open but now... now I can see myself building a fence. A white picket one. For EJ's sake.

I can see a future.

You belong in our future, angel. You have to be in it.

With my feet on the soft grass, I turn around, both of us facing our house.

"Whaddya think, nugget?" I ask.

He stares at it, eyes taking it all in, and it's wonder... and awe... I see in his eyes.
I can imagine children visiting Disney World for the first time and wear my son's expression. But this is what he wears for our home. A home he'd only hear Bella talk about.

"Mommy say i's real," he whispers, eyes wide and still fixed solely on the house, and again I feel his hand in my hair, making sure maybe.

"It's real, EJ," I murmur. "So am I. This is all real."

"Promise?"

"I promise," I tell him, burying my nose in his hair. "I'm your daddy, and you are...?"

.

.

"Daddy's nugget."

Thank you.

"Exactly. And our yellow house is real."

He purses his lips, thinking about it perhaps. The need to make him realize... to make him understand... to make him see... The need is great.

"Look at me, EJ," I say. He does... with a frown, and damn, he's chewing on his lip. Clearing my head from images of Bella doing the same, I continue quietly but firmly. "Tell me your real name, nugget."

Thankfully, this comes without doubt.

"Edward Anthony Cullen Junior."

"Perfect," I say. "And touch your nose."
I chuckle when he... well, he's looking at me like I'm insane.

So, I take his little hand, and press his finger against his nose. "Can you feel your nose, nugget?"

He nods, still staring at me like I'm an idiot.

I move his hand to his hair next. "Can you feel you hair?" Again he nods, and I continue, moving his hand to his stomach. "Feel your tummy?" Another nod. "It means you're real, EJ. You can feel that your nose is there when you touch it." Then I move his hand to my nose, and I make a funny face to see him smile. It's a small victory everytime. "And you can feel Daddy's nose, right?"

"Yea," he giggles.

Warmth. All over.

"And Daddy's hair?" I asks, moving his hand to my clusterfuck. He giggles again... and nods. I move his hand to my stomach. "And Daddy's tummy?"

"Yes, Daddy!" he laughs. He fucking laughs.

Christ, I'm alive.

"That means I'm real, too," I grin, again bumping our foreheads together. "Do you believe me, EJ?"

"Yes," he nods, placing his hands on my cheeks. "You're real."

"Good," I reply, and then I head back to the porch, not stopping until I'm close enough to touch the house wall. "Now... touch the wall."

He hesitates for a second, so I place my own hand on the wall, and soon he follows, placing his little hand right next to mine. On the yellow painted wood.
"You feel that, buddy?" I ask quietly, swallowing hard as the emotions assault me. I try to ignore it but it's impossible. This isn't just important for EJ. It's important to me, too. I need to see this for myself. I need to see him here. Here at home. In our home.

"I's real," he whispers. "Yellow house is real. Mommy's right, Daddy. Yellow house is real. S'not pretend, i's real."

I nod, unable to speak.

*O*O*O*

"Mr. Edward Cullen?"

I focus on my breathing, turn around, and see yet another motherfucking agent.

Not what I need.

What I need is a fucking smoke.

What I need is a drink.

What I really need is my wife back.

"I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions about the recent events," he says.

Recent events?

Buddy, my wife's been gone for more than three years.

That aint recent.

Pain.
"Sure," I mutter almost inaudibly, still having trouble breathing properly. "But make it quick. I gotta get back to my son."

Without another word, I step inside, and he follows.

The door shuts.

Before I make the turn for the kitchen, there's pain.

Physical pain.

In the back of my neck.

It spreads too quickly.

My knees cave.

No time for a final thought.

I'm gone.

*O*O*O*

I'm... fuck.

The throbbing. My head's pounding. A few places and everywhere at the same time. I crease my forehead and a sharp sting rushes through me, like an echo, coming from my... eyebrow. I think. I'm not sure. And my neck. Shit. The back of my neck. Pounding. It's like I can hear my own pulse in that... is it a wound?

Out of instinct, I try to touch, feel... reach. But I can't. Something's holding me back. It tugs at me. My wrists. Digging into my flesh. It hurts as I flick my wrist. The sharp sting spreads quickly.

I curse.
There's something. Everywhere. I don't know. It's jumbled. One pain overrides the other, but all in all, there's something everywhere.

I groan.

I'm not... very aware.

I'm getting there.

Bella's on my mind. All the memories. I remember them.

The laughter.

They don't fit... in this. Not with the way I feel. This is different. I'm not used to physical pain. Not this pain. But this... Christ. I groan again, knowing for sure that I can barely more. Even if I could, I can't. It fucking hurts, aches and throbs, but it doesn't matter because I'm pretty sure I'm tied... uh? Tied?

I squeeze my eyes shut, which reminds me of the pain above my eye.

I breathe. It's heavy. For more than one reason. The pain, yes... Jesus, the pain in my lungs. Wheezing. I can fucking hear my own breath. But it's more. It's the air. It's... old. Stale. Humid.

My throat constricts and I want to cough.

Scratchy. Burning.

I feel hollow.

Slowly, I try to lift my head. I try to understand.

The pounding in my head increases, and I have to squint through my lashes.

I'm dizzy. My mouth is dry.
There are urges everywhere. My body's in need. Fuck, water. Relief. Pain killers.

Air. Goddamnit, I need air.

Through a blurry vision, I squint... I focus... I see a light bulb dangling in the ceiling. It's blurry. So, I blink.

I'm not home.

This isn't right.

Narrowing my eyes, I try harder. I try to focus on that... right there. It's blurry. Standing. Under the light. Is it a beam? Or a person?

The pounding continues.

My muscles protest with every move I make. The tiniest shift in my body makes me wanna scream.

I'm forgetting something. I'm sure of it.

The labored breathing... Jesus fucking Christ, it really hurts. Pushes me... pushes my chest together... or in. As if my ribs are cracked, as if my lungs have collapsed, as if some idiot's stomping on it.

I blink, seeing the figure in front of me move.

From side to side and I know it's my vision. Too blurry. Focusing, zeroing in.

The pounding continues and I groan, again, but I need to know. I need to find out where I am. I need to... get back... or something, because... there's something... I need. Shit. There's someone I need. Yes? I think. Shit.
And my vision... I see. Slightly. Still blurry, but I start to... see. I'm beginning to return. I think.

Harder. I work harder.

And then I see.

But that's what I want. So, it can't be real.

What I want isn't here. What I want hasn't been mine for years. Obviously I'm delusional. And I feel brows furrow. Into a frown because it can't be.

But I see.

And it's not a dream.

I know.

I hear my breaths. Shallow pants. It hurts. But I need. Christ, I fucking need. Because that... there... right there... she. Her. It's a girl. A woman. My heart starts pounding so fast I can almost hear it. Fuck that. I can hear it. In my ears. Ringing, pounding, buzzing. But I focus on her. She's...

Oh.

God.


In the back... right behind my eyes, it stings. So badly.

My throat is sore and I choke without a sound.

Yes.

No.
I shake my head, blinking as the pain shoots through me.

I breathe faster.

I need.

Focus. Focus.

The sight. The fragile body. Dirt. The dirt. Clothing... ragged, ripped. Hair. Long. Tangled. And skin... dirty, pale... frail...

My breathing gets stuck in my throat.

Blood.

Skin and bones.

Tied up. right There. So frail. Skinny.

My lip trembles.

I clench my teeth.

No. Oh, God...

Please. I beg you. With everything I have, I beg you. Please.

And the eyes.

The eyes. Those eyes. It's them but... God, it's not.

So fucking painful.

Staring right back at me.

I'm waiting. For something. A sign. Or maybe... for the buzzer to buzz. The pin to drop. The alarm... or bell... to go off. Something... that takes me away. Snap me out of it, please. This is... this... can't be.
But it's dawning on me and I'm realizing that...

Oh, God.

My head hurts. Fuck, my chest. My heart. And it all comes crashing down. All at once. It's the little things. The little things that I've kept close to me. My memories. All the little things. The freckles. The tiny things. The toothbrush that had to be pink or light green. It's the red boiling pan that had to be washed extra carefully because to her, it was pretty. And my eyes well up. The pain is excruciating as I remember.

Our shoes were always next to each other because it represented 'his and hers' in our hallway. It was all her quirky stuff that made me smile. And it was the yellow on our house because we stood out. We weren't bland. She made us special. I always said that and she disagreed. She said it took two to make special and I didn't understand but... it didn't matter.

All those little things.

She painted the tire swing in our backyard light blue.

She wanted a tire swing. She wanted it light blue.

When it was her time of the month, she wore combat boots.

One time she painted her nails in different colors because she couldn't decide on one color.

When she gave me Cherry Coke, she added real cherries to it because otherwise it wasn't real.

The tiny things.

She loved walking barefoot.

When she laughed really hard, she snorted and cried.
I lived for it... I lived for her.

All those little things.

She could bake a tiny cake but add heaps of frosting... cause the frosting was the good part anyway.

I've lived for them. All those things. It's all I've had for years.

All that makes up my wife.


Angel. Jezebel.

My heart... it feels like it's going to explode.

Because all those things... that's all I've had.

So, when you remember all that. When you... are consumed by all this... all these memories... for years... and it all comes crashing down at once, holding you down, pushing you down... and you can't reach it...

But you can see it.

And you believe it.

It hurts. On every level. It hurts. I can't reach her.

Because she's right there.

Standing. Tied up. Hurt. Hurt beyond comprehension and words.

I shatter.

Every little piece of me is ready, aching, screaming, to be let out.
Then panic sets in.

I believe.

I breathe harder.

Faster.

Faster.

Faster.

More pain.

Stop pushing me down.

Please. Don't be... you.

You're so hurt.

You're so fucking hurt.

And I love you.

So much.

So, please... I beg you. I need you... to be alive.

I'm nothing without you, baby.


But when I open my eyes, you're still broken.

All air leaves me.
Tears burn their way down my cheeks.

You’re everything to me and I need you. I've been miserable, angel.

A shell of a man.

Pathetic. Broken and weak.

Tell me you're back in my life.

Tell me. Reassure me.

And forgive me for not being stronger.

I can't lose you. Not again.

I'm dizzy.

Everything is happening at once. All these thoughts. The pounding in my head. You're alive. But I can't reach you. It's killing me. Fuck. Something is so wrong and I don't understand much. All the fucking pain. I need her. I need you, angel. Because you're right there. I see you and you're fucking real. All this time... All this time, Bella... Oh, God... you're here.

Painful sobs rock through my body, shattering me.

You're here.

I gasp for air and it's scratchy, throaty, and painful.

And I choke. "A-angel."

Because it's you.

You're real.

Chapter 22
...Free of joy and bliss...

...Listen to your heart, never forget...

~Perils Of The Wind by Crematory – chapter song.

**September 13th**

**Bella Cullen.**

You know I'm here, Edward.

"A-angel," you choke out.

I fall apart.

I let everything go.

You're here.

Sobs rip through me.

Save me.

Tears burn and I blink them away. Over and over because I need to see you. It's not a choice, it's a fucking need, because I'm terrified. So terrified that you're not here for long. And that... Oh, God... He's going to hurt you, baby!

"Ed-ward," I gasp through my tears. "G-Garrett... he's here..."

I'm so tired. My heart is heavy, and I'm spent... I... Fuck, I need you. I need strength. Hope. But is there any?

"Bella-"
It's strangled and it causes more tears to fall. It's everything. Your voice. Seeing you. You're here. You shouldn't be, but I want you here so much. Christ, baby, your voice...

Everything burns.

"You're... You're h-here, Bella," you cry. "Jesus... I... I..."

I sob harder.

Everything comes crashing down.

I see your pain, hubs. I see your anguish. I see the way you're trying to hold yourself together.

I choke on my sobs.

No air.

Fuck.

"Bella, baby! I... Please... Fuck! Listen to me, angel!"

I gulp, trying to focus.

"No-" I manage to choke out. Don't pull at your restraints, baby, it's fruitless. I've tried for years...

"I love you," you croak out hoarsely. "I need... I need you, baby... Please!"

Oh, God... God...


And you love me.

Breathe.
Breathe.

"Breathe, angel," you whimper as more tears fall. "I need you with me, baby. We all fucking need you."

EJ. EJ.

Dad.

You.

Family.

"I-" Gulping for air, I fight. For you. Because I need. So much. I need to know. I need... to know. "EJ," I manage to cough out.

"He's... He's fine, baby," you assure breathlessly. And you stare at me with your Cullen determination. I've missed it. "He's with... Charlie... He's so perfect, angel... and he needs you, too. We both do... Christ..."

You close your eyes. You shake your head. You bite down on your lip.

I can't stand it. The pain on your face. The despair.

So, I close my eyes, too.

I breathe.

Blood. Sweat. Tears.

 Everywhere.

Stinging, burning...

"I love you," I whimper. I need to say it. Again. And again and again. "I love you, Edward... I love you. I've missed you so much, Edward..."

You cry harder. The sound is... painful. Desperate. Needy.

"I love you, Bella... so much... please... You and me, angel... Always, you and me. I... I l-love you so fucking much..."

We're both chanting it. Through cries.

It's still us.

"Bella, please... We need... fuck... I need to know where... where we are..."

I thought I lost you.

I can't focus.

I'm only human. I can't take the pain. It's assaulting me. From every side, every point... every direction... stabbing me. Physical pain. Making me weaker and weaker. Emotional pain... draining me. Lifeless. Please. I can't.

I'm sorry.

I'm so, so sorry.

"No, Bella... Don't you fucking dare!" you growl. "We need to get out of here. Think about our baby, Bella. Think about EJ. He-" you choke up, I do, too. But you're strong, and you struggle through it. "He misses you... he needs you, Bella..."

I try clenching my hands... into fists, but... I have no strength left in them. It's too tight. They're cold. Getting cold, anyway. Christ, it's too much. Too much for me.

My legs can barely hold me up but if I let go, the ropes pull harder at me. Not digging in anymore. It's cutting.

My eyes are open before I know it, and I zero in on you right away.
I know you hear it, too.

Someone coming down the stairs.

More tears.

We both know who it is.

"No, no, no, no," I beg through gasps.

Click.

"I love you, Edward," I cry. "I love you!"

Click.

Oh, God.

Click.

"Bella, don't... don't give up."

Please.

The door opens.

Garrett enters with a sinister smile. He's rubbing his hands together.

I shudder.

I fight nausea.

Oh, God...

In fear, I look at you, hubs... But you're not looking at me.

You're looking... glaring... at that sick, twisted fuck.
"Well, well," Garrett chuckles, making me flinch. "Looks like loverboy's awake, huh?"

"Fuck you," you growl at Garrett. With so much hate. Disgust. "You sick son of a bitch, I swear to God, if you weren't such a fucking coward tying me up, you'd be dead by now."

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to stay standing.

"Hah! Irina, what did you ever see in this idiot?"

You growl again, baby, and I... fight. But I'm slipping. "You're sick. Her name's Bella fucking Cullen."

Every fiber in me burn in protest. I just wanna lay down. Shit. I can't... It's vibrating through me as I use all my power to stand on my legs. The fucking burn.

"Her name's Irina Denali, and as soon as you're dead and gone, she'll finally love me again!"

"Shut the fuck up, you delusional bastard! She's my fucking wife! My. Fucking. Wife!"

Garrett laughs, most likely at my Edward, and I slip. It becomes too much.


I gasp.

I'm sorry.

I can't.

"It's about time I show you the way out, Cullen. Out of life."
No.

Evil laughter.

Nooo!

I scream with all I have, which isn't much, but as I see Garrett approach you... Oh, God... No. No. No!

"Let h-him g-go!" I sob.

I watch. Oh, God...

A syringe. Fucking needle.

You thrash, hubs. My Edward, please...

"Edward!" I scream.

"Bella! I... Fuck, don't... give up..."

I scream again.

Rushing inside me. Twisting, churning, surging, and pumping.

Garrett's almost there. Holding the needle out.

"I love you, angel... Shit..."

No.

Please.

"I love you, Edward!"

Garrett laughs and... then he pushes the needle through your skin. In your thigh, and there's nothing you can do. There's nothing I can do.
"When you wake up, Cullen, I'm gonna show you some things I was taught in the army."

Torture.

"Edward," I plead, gulping, trying, fighting... needing. "Edwaaaard!"

"B... Bella..." you mumble. Your eyes are drooping. "Angel..."

No. Please. No.

Wake up.

Wake up!

"Now, now, Irina. Don't be so melodramatic. I only gave him enough to lull him asleep for a little while," Garrett laughs. "I'd say he's as good as new within the next ten to twenty minutes."

I don't reply.

I have nothing.

No strength.

And I watch as Garrett unties you. Drags you away. Away from me. Up the stairs.

I have no strength.

No life.

No hope.

I feel nothing.

Numb.
I slip.

I close my eyes.

But I don't fall under. I don't slip into the darkness.

Which is what I expected.

Instead I just stand there.

Breathing shallowly.

Time passes.

Garrett didn't close the door, but I can't see more than... one... two... three... nine stairs... or maybe it's more.

The blood slowly but surely trickles down my arms.

I don't feel it.

So tired.

Sleepy.

Exhausted.

I hear voices.

Garrett laughing, and... I think Edward's up.

You. Hubs. My husband...

My eyelids... so heavy...

If I just close my eyes for five minutes...

In the distant... is that shouting? I can't be sure.
I'm slipping.

My knees are caving.

Then... my blood freezes.

A shot rings out.

I hear my husband scream.

I'm out.

Gone.

I give up.

I lost.

**Chapter 23**

*Depeater by Katatonia – chapter song.*

**September 13th**

**Jasper Whitlock.**

"Circle the house, Emmett," I said quietly as we approached said house. "I need to know if there's another way to enter."

With a nod and gun ready, Emmett took off, leaving me and Charlie as we headed for the nearest window.

Sometimes it was a curse to so easily slip into this mindset. The way my mind worked made it impossible to see anything but a target and possibilities. In other words, I saw Garrett's downfall, and ways to take him down. Nothing else. Nothing else mattered in the army, because when we had orders to follow, we followed.
Get the job done.

Get the job done.

Collateral damage? Doesn't matter.

As long as you. Get. The job. Done.

Trained to kill, disarm, locate, fight, protect... We were good. Unbelievably good. All trained well. I made sure of that. And this obviously meant there was rarely collateral damage, because we all knew. We just fucking knew how to do our job. As smoothly as possible, we got the job done everytime. But that doesn't mean much because even though we were trained to be fierce and sharp, we knew of the risks. We went anyway. The risks didn't matter, and if someone got hurt... well, that's part of this life. You fight but you can't win everytime, and we all knew this going into this life. That life. And now I'm back. I see a job and it needs to get done. Taken cared of.

So, my mind spins. I analyze everything.

Options pop up in my head automatically as my mind processes each of them.

_Midnight. Darkness. Our advantage._

_The element of surprise. Also our advantage._

As we reached the house wall, we moved closer towards the window.

I kept Charlie behind me.

I go first. Always.

_Living room. Small. One couch, small TV in the corner, coffee table._
I noticed the duffel bag on the couch.

My gun was aimed as soon as I heard the crunching of gravel, but... I relaxed when Emmett came into view.

"At ease," he chuckled nervously, walking over to us.

I cocked an eyebrow, silently telling him to spill.

No bullshitting.

"There's a door," he muttered, gesturing for the other side of the house. "It leads down to a basement. However, it's been buried... or filled. You see the rail and the first few steps, but that's it. The rest's been filled with dirt and concrete... or cement... whatever."

I nodded once.

*Basement. Bella. Locked up without way to escape. It's a possibility.*

"I passed the kitchen," he said then, in a hushed tone. *Nervous again.* *Swallowing hard.* "Edward's on the floor."

I ignored Charlie's curse and gasp.

*What are you up to, Garrett? Why leave him in the kitchen?*

Think. Think. Think.

He could be preparing. Perhaps in the basement.

I turned to Emmett again. "No sign of Garrett?"

He shook his head in the negative.

With a nod in acknowledgement, I focused on the living room again.

"Charlie, check to see if there are other rooms," I said.
I kept my eyes on the door I saw just outside the living room.

It was in the hallway.

That could be the door leading to the basement.

"There aren't any other rooms," Emmett replied. "I checked."

*Nice of you to share.*

Okay, so... a kitchen and a living room.

There should be a bathroom. Maybe an outhouse.

My eyes scanned the living room once more, and this time I registered the closet. It made me wonder if Garrett was still OCD. Most likely, and that could mean he uses that closet for pillows and blankets. He had odd routines he lived by religiously, and I do remember his bedtime routine. The way he refused to go to sleep before everybody else. The way always paced as the rest of us got ready for bed. The way he packed his blanket and pillow into a ziplock bag every morning. He was adamant when it came to certain things. Nothing could budge him.

This was on missions.

But my recruits told me he was no different back at camp.

So, he sleeps on the couch here? Small couch. Maybe he doesn't plan to stay long. Probably not.

My eyes snapped up then, and I motioned for the guys to get behind me.

That door. The one in the hallway. It opened.

Garrett emerged.

I also saw the stairs.
Basement then. Yes.

We watched as he went out of sight, into the kitchen, and a minute later, he returned... dragging Edward with him.

Blood. Injuries.

Again, Garrett disappeared. Down to the basement.

It would be incredibly easy to kill him.

But we need to know where Bella is.

Okay. Think.

First things first. I brought out my cell phone and sent a quick text to Denali.

Have medical personnel standing by – Whitlock.

His reply was instant.

Consider it done. You have an hour and a half – Denali.

"Alright," I said, turning back to Emmett and Charlie. "We need to get inside. Emmett, that means you and me. Charlie, you stand guard."

"Problem is," I continued, "we have no places to hide, which means you have to be ready to cover us, Charlie."

Charlie nodded.

His hands are shaking.

I frowned.

That won't work with a gun.
My mind spun again. Options. Alternatives.

Analyzing.

Emotions were foreign to me. When I was... this man... I was emotionally detached.

Feelings don't belong here.

This is too much for him.

"Change of plans," I announced quietly, still working through the plan in my head. Yes. That could work. No escape. Okay. Yes. "Charlie, you and Emmett cover the windows. There should only be two, yes?" Emmett nodded at me. "Good. We need to make sure Garrett can't escape. So, I need you two to stay by the windows. If he comes, shoot first, ask later. Aim for arms, shoulders, legs. Nothing that will kill him, because he's the key to Bella."

I will be the one killing him when that time comes.

"And you?" Emmett asked.

"I will go inside," I replied simply, cocking my gun.

"With no one to cover you?" he asked, obviously not approving.

"I don't need it."

Again, we spun to face the window again, as we heard laughter.

Garrett's laughter.

He left Edward down there.

Then I watched as he headed straight for the duffel bag on the couch.
Fuck. No. Don't tell me...

I growled lowly as he emptied the duffel bag's content on the couch.

That sick son of a bitch.

"What the hell's that?" Emmett hissed quietly.

I shook my head. I sighed.

"Pliers." And so much more.

I didn't know if this meant anything to Emmett or Charlie but it sure did to me. It made perfect sense. That sick bastard's planning torture.

Well, there was no way I could enter now.

Not before I knew what he had planned exactly... and for whom.

Instead we watched. Observed.

I clenched my teeth at the sight.


The question is why.

He must have a reason.

Torture is for getting information. Answers.

Hmm.

Could it be for EJ?

No.
I ruled that out immediately. Garrett was in New Orleans. He watched Edward. He would've seen EJ, and if he was after the boy, he would've taken him. So, that can't be it. Which leaves Edward and Bella. Edward. Yes. Not Bella. I doubt he'd torture Bella for information. She has none. But Edward could have. Still... there's something missing here. Reason. Motive. I can't see it.

Garrett's held Bella captive for years.

Why take Edward now? After all this time.

No reason.

That leaves vengeance.

Grudge.

For what? I don't know, but Garrett's going to kill him.

Not on my watch.

"Shit, should we follow?" Emmett whispered.

I shook my head, and we watched – yet again – as Garrett headed for the basement.

I had my idea.

Yes, otherwise he would've brought his tools with him down there.

"I think he's bringing Edward up," I told them. "And I think Bella's in the basement."

I ignored Charlie's watering eyes.

Determined to see this through, I changed my plan once again.
"Emmett, instead of covering a window, stay by the door. Right outside. I will get in, and when I give you the green light, you go inside and head straight for the basement."

They don't understand, Whitlock.

I clarified. "I think Garrett's planning something for Edward and since all his... tools... are in the living room, right in there," I gestured, "it's a pretty good chance, he's doing it in there, which leaves me to occupy him. In other words, I will enter the living room once he and Edward are both there."

Turning to Charlie, I continued. "You cover the kitchen window just in case Garrett manages to pass me, and I will cover the living room window myself since I'll already be there."

They nodded in understanding, and then we waited.

We prepared ourselves.

Deep breaths.

My fingers traced the gun.

I knew this.

I suppressed the pain, the ache, from hearing them. Them. My men. My unit. As they cried out in pain. As they caught on fire. As arms and legs were blown off them. As they died around me.

Seeing someone die is one thing. It's a visual hard to carry with you for the rest of your life. But it's not the worst. The worst is hearing someone die. The sounds. The gut wrenching pleas for help. The heartbreaking words thrown out to loved ones. The choking. The strangled groans as you
gag on your own blood. As you drown in your own fluids. Those sounds... they won't leave you. Ever.

I still wake up at night. Sweating bullets. Breathing heavily.

He did that.

He killed them.

I welcomed the anger. The pure hatred.

I channeled it.

I'm going to use it.

*To kill you, Corporal Call.*

Speaking of...

The door to the basement was kicked open, and I motioned for Emmett to take his place by door before turning to Charlie.

"You can do this, Charlie," I told him quietly. Imploringly. "Because you're like me. You need this. Don't tell me you haven't imagined ways to punish the fucker doing this to your daughter."

He breathed. Inhaled deeply. Channeling. Because I knew he needed this. He had one chance to help – he wasn't going to fuck this up. Which was why I wasn't surprised when saw the way he detached himself. From himself, from emotions, from his reality. From everything.

He saw the job now.

"Kitchen window," I said, nodding in that direction. "Stand by, and if you hear a gun shot, smash the window in and enter through it."

He nodded firmly. Once. Cocked his gun. Ready.
Then he left, and I turned back to the living room window, feeling my rage only grow stronger as I watched Garrett tie an unconscious Edward to a chair in the middle of the room.

With a determined nod to myself, I went after Emmett.

*Time to end this. Time to get the job done. Time finish what I failed to finish before.*

My hand's steady. No tremors. Calm.

"You ready?" I asked quietly, approaching Emmett.

He nodded firmly.

Good.

"What do I do...?" he trailed off.

I understood, though.

*He's afraid of what he'll find in the basement.*

It's his cousin.

"If she's there, get her out," I answered, even though the answer was obvious. "But..." I hesitated. *Get it out. He needs to hear it.* "We don't know what you'll come across, but Emmett... I can tell you that you won't find her in the condition you last saw her in. Understood?"

He swallowed. And nodded once.

"Let's do this," I said calmly. "When I say 'Riyadh', you go. Are we clear?"

He nodded in understanding, eyes darkening, and he knew what was on my mind.
We may not be close but I'm sure he's heard of my past from Alice or Charlie.

With my hand on the handle, I closed my eyes.

Retribution is mine. Ours.

Unlocked. For a second, disappointment washed over me.

He wasn't on guard.

That stung. We should've found him sooner. He's not careful enough. It's mocking that he's been able to stay away for so long.

But it is what it is.

Slowly, quietly, I opened the door, stopping twice when the door gave away a silent squeak.

The scent from inside hit me. Emmett, too.


With my gun ready, I walked inside.

One step, two. Three.

Emmett followed silently behind me.

"Ah, look who's wakin' up," I heard him say. Him. That... fucker.

My muscles tensed. My pulse quickened.

We heard the unmistakable sound of someone getting punched then, and I was glad Charlie couldn't see this.

Edward groaned.
"We're gonna have some fun," he continued.

I heard someone spit. Most likely Edward.

I could practically see in front of me – him spitting out blood.

"You're a fuckin' coward, you know that, right?" Edward coughed.

He spat again.

Garrett laughed, and I used his laughter to mask my own sounds as I closed in the last distance. Now standing right next to the living room doorway.

Three doorways so close. With my back to the wall, I had the living room to my right, and across from me, I saw the kitchen. Then there was the door leading to the basement in between those.

"I'm no coward. I'm a protector."

I clenched my teeth.


Then silence.

It bothered me. Because I knew. I knew Garrett would see me as soon as I stepped into the room, and I had hoped for more time. But again, it is what it is. This isn't the time to get lucky. This isn't one of those moments where the son of a bitch has his back to you.

*Gun!* Fuck, I heard the clip of a gun being attached from the living room.

Time's up.

With a pointed look at Emmett, I made things clear. *This is it.*
He nodded once.

With a last breath, I stepped into the light.

In the middle of the doorway.

Garrett looked up.

I stared at the man. Gun aimed. At him.

Only, he had his gun pointed at Edward.

"S-Sergeant Whitlock," Garrett sputtered. But it wasn't in fear or surprise. It was in anger and rage.

His reaction wasn't natural. Not sane.

He didn't know I was here.

He should be more surprised.

Edward's reaction was natural. Tears streamed down his face. Silent ones. Relief, hope, fear.

He breathed heavily.

"Call," I said flatly, moving closer. Slowly. Purposefully. But I needed to get away from the doorway. I needed to distract Garrett for when Emmett passed to reach the basement. "You should be dead," I told him, raising an eyebrow when I saw his hand tremble. The hand holding the gun. Not good. Loose cannon. Unpredictable. "I should've ended you that day. You remember?"

I continued moving. Not closer to them, but closer to the other side of the living room.

My eyes flickered quickly to Edward. He's confused.
He doesn't know our history.


My step faltered.

Re... returning from the dead?

Get the job done.

Get the job done.

"How many have returned from the dead?" I asked dryly, finally reaching the other side of the room.

"Only two," he said... grinning like he was *proud*. Sick fuck. "But you shouldn't have. Irina was enough."

I narrowed my eyes at him.

He thought I'd died.

"He's callin' Bella that... *Irina,*" Edward gritted out through clenched teeth. Eyes shut tightly.


"Call!" I barked, but it was too late.

Garrett pulled out a knife from the waist band of his cargo pants.

I aimed.

Garrett stabbed Edward in the arm.
I pulled the trigger.

No recoil. I knew this.

I don't miss.

Edward screamed out, masking Garrett's growl, and I heard a window smash.

Charlie.

Garrett didn't seem to notice. Too much in pain perhaps.

"Stay back!" I ordered, hoping to hell Charlie understood I was talking to him.

He could enter the house, but he needed to stay back.

"You-" Garrett choked out, glaring at me as he pressed a hand against his shoulder. "Again? You-... you go for the shoulder again!"

**Edward Cullen.**


Rage.

All the anger.

The fear, the relief. Fuck, the pain!

My bicep.

Blood. I felt it.

I didn't dare opening my eyes.

I still felt the fucking gun pressed to my forehead.
I gasped for air.

Dizzy.

Fuck.

Bella.

Sweat mixed with tears.


"Fuck," I choked out.


"Don't come any closer!" I heard Garrett scream.

Jesus fuck.

I gulped. Choked.

Coughed.

My muscles tensed.

Again, the pain shot through me.

"Why not?" Jazz asked. Calmly. Fucker. Just pull the fucking trigger, you asshole. "I thought we could reminisce, Corporal."

Yes, then there was that.

They know each other.

My chest heaved, lungs craving air.
"Surely you remember Riyadh, Garrett."

The gun pressed against my skin pressed harder.

My eyes were still closed.

And Jazz was closer now. His voice. Closer.

"Maybe more people have come back from the dead." Jazz chuckled. And I understood. He was riling Garrett up, but I didn't understand why. What the fuck was going on? Did he want Garrett to pull the fucking trigger on me? "Maybe they will come here. Like I did. Maybe they want their go with the pliers."

I shuddered.

That had been the first thing I’d seen after waking up again.

The tools.

Then when I saw Jazz enter with his gun aimed, I felt hope for the first time since I woke up the first time.

But now? Now... all the pain... the gun...

Is there hope?

"Aaaargh, sonofabitch!" I screamed out, feeling Garrett twist the fucking knife in my arm. "Fucking shit!"


Oh... fuck!
Unbearable. Penetrating.

Shooting through me. Sharply. All over. Jesus Christ... I gulped for air.

"One more step and I'll use the pliers on Cullen here!" Garrett growled.

Christ.

I panted.

Nauseating.

Why? Why, Jasper? What the fuck are you doing!

The gun never left my forehead, but I heard the rustling. Of tools.

I can't fucking take it!

Bella. Oh, fuck, Bella... I love you, angel. I love you. I love you so fucking much.

Fight, Cullen. Don't give up.

Breathe.

I tried.

Fuck.

More.

Faster. Shit. Throbbing.

Overwhelming.

Breathe.

My skin crawled. Prickled.
My heart pounded.

I recoiled then, feeling that fucker grip my arm. The arm where the fucking knife was still buried in my flesh.

I couldn't fucking move.

Pulling at my restraints didn't do shit. The rope dug into my skin, cutting in. Twisting and pulling. Jesus H... I can't... Fuck. Too much. The pain is everywhere.

I groaned, struggling, and my eyes opened.

Sweat and tears stung.

Blurry vision.

Gulping and gasping.

"Don't do it, Call."

Jazz was close. Right behind me.

Again, I tried to struggle but it was fucking useless. My legs, feet- ankles... everything. Arms, hands. Tied. Tied together, around the chair. So hard. Too hard. Hell, I remember. Shit. Bella. She was tied so fucking tightly. Bella. Angel. Oh, God... She's down there.

Breathe.

Breathe.

I choked. Something. Fuck. In my arm, where the knife already was. Oh, God. Too much.

Then below my ribcage.
More.

I let out a garbled, choking, scream.

My insides churned.

I gagged.

Too much. All too much. Everywhere.

I saw it then. Looking down at myself.

Right there.

Pliers.

Digging in.

Much like the fucking knife but this was... not as sharp. Not slicing. This was... ripping, twisting, wrenching... digging.

"This aint nothin’, loverboy," Garrett gritted out, and it was a promise. "Next up is your finger nails. I'll pull them out. One by one."

I believe you.

"However," he coughed, "if the old Serge could just leave... your death might be a little more merciful."

Then I was punched in the face.

Something ripped off my skin. No. Not ripped off.

Peeled off.

It burned.

I couldn't scream.
I choked. Again.

More tears sprung to my eyes, and I saw... through a blurry vision. Some... paper... the fuck? Christ. Pain. There was paper covering his fist. Rough paper. Shit. Sandpaper?

Breathing... no, I can't. Christ... I can't. It's too much.

My forehead creased, and that's when I noticed I didn't have the gun pressed to my skin.

It was gone.

**Jasper Whitlock.**

I gritted my teeth, watching how Garrett dug pliers into Edward's skin. Right below his ribs.

My finger twitched over the trigger.

It would be so easy.

But I can't. Not yet.

*This will get done properly.*

A minute ago, I watched Emmett carry Bella outside in my peripheral.

Charlie's in the hallway.

This will soon be over.

"This aint nothin', loverboy," Garrett gritted out, trying to put pressure to the wound in his shoulder. "Next up is your finger nails. I'll pull them out. One by one."

I aimed for his head as his eyes flickered to the table.
I knew his mind. Sick fucker wasn't done.

"However," he coughed, glaring at me, "if the old Serge could just leave... your death might be a little more merciful."

I saw it, I allowed it, because as he reached for the sandpaper, and as he punched Edward across the face, I took my chance.

Garrett lost focus for a split second. At least focus on his gun.

His attention was focused on Edward and the fucking sandpaper.

With a deep breath, I leaped.

Precision and determination.

Strength.

I reached him.

My elbow shot up, hitting him in the face.

My other arm reached out.

My knee made impact in his stomach.

*Don’t break a bone, Whitlock. Don’t break anything.*

I won't.

Garrett screamed.

I growled and used all my strength as I twisted his arm, which positioned him right behind me, his chest to my back, and I reached further. Further. A little bit more. He struggled but I was stronger. And with another growl, I managed to reach his hand. The hand holding his fucking Glock.

My fingers touched it.
Further.

More.

He punched my side.

The pain didn't even register.

I saw his gun. That's it. The key was his gun. So, it was all I saw.

Get the job done.

Get the job done.

And finally, my hand took over.

I walked us backwards with force, using all my strength, and soon I had him pressed between my back and the wall. One last thing. *Surrender, Garrett.* I threw my head back, hitting him on the forehead. Yes. He lost strength. And I grabbed the gun from his hand.

Finally.

Mine.

He screamed again, but I didn't care. I didn't even care about Charlie who came flying in, and I suppose Emmett's tending to Bella outside. *Good man.* He probably forced Charlie to stay back, knowing it would be too much for Charlie to be alone with her now, especially if she's battered.

Get the job done.

One last time, I pushed us against the wall, and then I spun around fast as hell, eager to get his own gun shoved down his throat.

I settled for his forehead.
Everything stilled.

It was just the two of us.

Nothing around.

Me and my second in command.

I backed away until my arm was straight.

Slowly I slid the gun down. Down from his forehead to the bridge of his
nose. The perfect spot where he could see it. Because I wanted him to. I
needed him to see this.

All the pain he'd caused.

Death and despair. Heartbreak.

I breathed.

He gulped. Eyes wide.

I smirked.

"You're done, Corporal," I whispered.

My finger reached the trigger.

And Garrett stared down the barrel of his own gun.

"Any last words?" I asked, moving the gun again.

Unfortunately, he will get away with an easy death.

Anger flashed through his features. He clenched his teeth.

He knew what my plan was.
I chuckled once, humorlessly, and pressed the gun hard against his skin. Digging upwards hard enough to make him gulp.

Right under his chin.

"Yes," he gritted out, blinking as a bead of sweat reached his eye. "This isn't ove-"

I pulled the trigger.

The shot rang out.

Blood splattered.

Yes, it is.

It's over.

You're dead.

I watched as his body collapsed on the floor.

But I wasn't done. The job wasn't done just yet.

So, on autopilot, I walked over to the wall, and with a knife from the coffee table, I dug out the bullet – the bullet that had pierced through his shoulder when I shot him.

I pocketed the bullet.

I grabbed pliers.

I wiped the Glock.

I planted the Glock in Garrett's hand, placing his index finger on the trigger, and then I held it against his shoulder, right over his wound, and again I pulled the trigger, angling it perfectly.
Looks like you shot yourself twice, Corporal.

I knew my job.

Carefully, I maneuvered my hand behind his body, and with the knife, I dug the bullet out before I pushed my own bullet in there. I smirked, glad that there was no extra blood I needed to clean off. That'd be a bitch to explain to the forensics.

Then I took the bullet from Garrett's Glock, and headed back to the hole in the wall I had made with my Sig, and with the pliers, I pushed Garrett's bullet in.

After that was done, I wiped the knife, the pliers, and put them back on the coffee table, and then I picked up my own gun from the floor, pocketing it, a bit sad that I would have to hand it over to Denali.

Lastly, I headed to the kitchen, careful not to get my prints on anything, and I washed my hands, knowing that there was no way I could explain having gunpowder that didn't belong to my own gun on me, and after using the Glock, I most definitely did. And when that was done, I touched my Sig, because it would be equally hard to explain why I didn't have gunpowder on my hand from my own gun.

Everything covered?

I almost snorted at myself. I'm nothing but thorough, and I really doubt they'll go far with this investigation.

Denali will be in charge after all.

I doubt they'll check the sources of fucking gunpowder but fuck it, you can't be too thorough.

I sighed to myself, thinking.
Done. Done. Done.

Yes.


Satisfied that I had covered everything, I headed back to the living room where Charlie had untied Edward.

They were both wide eyed, watching me. And I understood.

I knew I wasn't the man they knew right now.

"You okay, Edward?" I asked.

"No," he coughed, wincing as he looked down at where the pliers dug into his flesh. "But I'll live. I hope."

I nodded once. "Alright. Here's the story. It isn't long, so don't worry, but the Feds will be here soon, and you need to get the story right."

They both nodded warily, and I kneeled in front of Edward as I saw the wound on his arm.

*Charlie shouldn't have pulled the fucking tools out.*

After ripping off the sleeve of my hoodie, I tied it as hard as I could around his arm. "Don't touch the pliers below your ribcage," I told him... or both of them. "They are what controls the blood flow. Understood?"

They grunted in understanding, and Edward clenched his teeth as I tightened the wrap around his arm even more.

"Good," I said. "Now. I didn't shoot Garrett. I shot a warning shot, right there," I pointed at where Garrett's body sat collapsed against the wall, "and I did that to get his attention. And he shot himself in the shoulder
where he stood over Edward, hoping to play victim once the Feds got here."

I waited to see if they understood so far.

They did.

"I fought him," I continued, inspecting Edward’s wound below his rib cage. Deep. Too deep for me to take care of. "But I failed to disarm him. However, he failed to disarm me, too. And then you walked in," I said pointedly, eyeing Charlie. He nodded for me to go on. "That's when Garrett realized his game was over, and he pulled the trigger on himself."

"Questions?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"That's why you waited so long?" Edward wheezed out, grimacing as I put pressure onto his stomach. But I needed to see the blood flow. It didn't seep fast, though. *That's good.* "You waited cause you needed his gun?" he coughed out.

I nodded. "It will save us months worth of trials and investigations if we just say Garrett killed himself. Besides, I have no fuckin' wish to get sentenced for shooting him," I chuckled quietly.

"But is it believable?" Charlie asked hesitantly.


"They can't prove anything else," I finished by saying. But then I added, "Some might doubt and question, but they can't prove it."
"Okay," Edward croaked. "I get it."

"Yep," Charlie sighed. "He killed himself."

"Good."

Job done.

I want Alice now. I want to be done. I want to leave this behind me.

I want a family.

I want to feel better.

I want to heal.

Too old for this shit.

**Edward Cullen.**

The pain was impossible to ignore.

It kept pulsing, shooting through me, but there were two thoughts rushing through me as I watched Garrett's dead body collapse on the floor.

Two thoughts that fought all the pain.

It's over.

Bella's safe.

After Charlie had untied me and pulled the knife and the pliers out from my arm, my skin started prickling. Clawing at me from inside. And I knew why. Because Bella was outside. That was the first thing Charlie told me. He chanted it through tears. Bella's outside with Emmett. Bella's outside with Emmett. Bella's outside with Emmett. Over and over, and I need her. More than air, I need her. Need to see her, to fucking touch her. But
according to Charlie, Emmett's not allowing us. Well, I've already seen my angel, and I know how broken she is. Doesn't matter, because my body won't allow me to move a fucking inch.

But Charlie. Emmett refuses Charlie to see her.

I understand.

If I saw my son... in that condition, I'd fall apart. I'd die.

Too much went on.

Too much was happening at once.

Pain fighting for my attention.

The knowledge of my wife being outside.

Garrett's dead.

Jasper's some fucking mercenary, I swear.

He terrified me. Charlie, too.

All what's left in me right now is some weird... emptiness. I don't feel much. I'm wincing and flinching in pain, and everything in my body hurts, but other than that? I feel empty. I feel... out of control. Hollow.

I understand but... it hasn't settled. I don't understand.

I can't comprehend shit.

Bella's right outside.

I don't understand that, despite having seen her.

Garrett's dead.
I don't understand that, despite watching his dead body.

It's over.

I don't understand that. At all.

It can't be over. Surely something's waiting around the corner to rip me apart again and again and again. Over and over. Shatter me. Destroy me. Rip my fucking heart out.

It's been my life for too long.

I'm used to it.

"The Feds are here!" I heard Emmett yell from outside.

I didn't understand any of it.

It's over.

Over.

Bella's alive.

I don't believe it.

"Alright, you remember the story?" Jazz asked.

I nodded once with a grunt.

Fucking insane, that dude.

I owe him everything, but I need time to fucking understand.

Right now I'm just muted. Emotionally numb. Not physically because the pain is very fucking present.

My arm was killing me.
The pliers still digging into my... fuck... yes, also killing me.

My face was still on fire.

Everything ached, throbbed... As soon as I moved a single muscle, my body went through another wave of pain that was too great to describe.

My body was starting to shut off.

But I fought it, because apparently my wife is right outside.

No. She's not.

I didn't see her before. She didn't tell me over and over that she loved me.

I swallowed down a sob.

Did she?

Christ.

Is she out there?

The room was suddenly filled with people.

Voices all over the place.

My skin prickled.

Is she out there?

My eyes welled up in a rapid speed.

"Bella-" I choked out.
There were EMT's doing shit with my body, being in my way. In my way of getting to Bella. And agents, everywhere. Orders being barked out. Red and blue lights outside. Outside. Oh, God, is Bella out there? Is she?

"They just got her into the ambulance," I heard someone say – an agent, I think. "She's alive."

My throat constricted.

She's out there.

Fuck.

I breathed. Faster. Faster.

"Get-" I coughed. "Take me to her."

Shit. They're taking her away from me.

No.

Not again.

My angel. I need to see her.

Not again. No. Please.

Faster. Adrenaline pumped. Rushing, surging.

Faster.

Faster.

"You'll see her soon, sir."

No.

Faster.
Faster.

"No," I wheezed out, feeling my chest constrict. "Right... right fucking n-now. I aint askin'!"

Fuck. Panic.

I blinked back tears as I tried to find-

"J-Jasper!" I coughed. He looked over at me, and I didn't give a flying fuck that he was in the middle of something with Denali. "I need to get to Bella," I forced out, grimacing as the fucking what's-his-face worked on my ribcage. Oh, shit. I flinched. Pain. The pliers were out. Fuck. Breathe. I coughed.

No.

Need Bella...

"God-fucking-damnit!" I growled.

Pain. Again. All over, shooting through me. Blinding.

"Please, sir, you need to be still."

Fuck you.

"Edward," I heard Jasper say, crouching down in front of me. "They need to get that shit out of you, and they need to get you to a hospital. You've lost a lot of blood."

No.

No.

I need Bella.
"Bella," I whimpered, trying to get up, but hands pulled me back.

"Sedate him," I heard. I think it was Jazz. Hard to hear. Blood rushing. My ears rang. "Make sure he ends up with his wife."


My eyes closed tightly.

Breathe through it.

"He went with Bella."

Shit. Okay.

What about me?

My eyes opened again, and I saw it. The needle. It didn't feel anything. But I saw it.

Fuckers all of them.

Go to hell.

I felt heavy.

Sleepy. So fucking drained.

I just... I just want my wife. Is that so much to ask for?

*O*O*O*

I stare at her.
I'm touching her. My hand on hers. Thumb rubbing small circles on her skin.

My hospital bed has been pushed closer to hers, and I can reach her.

Tears stream.

She's right there. Sedated but alive.

Charlie and Emmett are asleep in the chairs on the other side of her bed.

But all I see is Bella.

She's here.


But she's here. Alive. Her chest is falling and rising. I know because I'm watching it. I need to see it. Need to see, need to make sure she's breathing, and she is. Because I see it. And the machines say so, too. I hear them.

I'll fix you, angel. I promise. We'll get through this.

It'll be a long road but... we'll get there.

I blink away tears. I swallow sobs.

He's gone, angel. He won't hurt you again.

I love you.

We'll get through this.

We have to.

We're a family. Tomorrow our son will be here. We'll be whole one day.
Because we're Cullens.

We don't give up.

Chapter 24

...Spend all your time waiting

For that second chance

For a break that would make it all okay...

...I'll find some peace tonight...

...In the arms of an angel

Fly away from here...

And the endlessness you fear

You are pulled from the wreckage...

...You're in the arms of the angel

May you find some comfort here...

~Angel by Sarah McLachlan – chapter song.

September 14th

Edward Cullen.

A day has passed. I'm waiting for my son to arrive.

Because of all the testing, the surgeries... all of it, mom and Alice decided with some Dr. Masen that we should wait with bringing EJ up here to Memphis. I didn't quite agree because it hurts being away from him, and they told me how he reacted when they didn't find me... but... if he saw me
and Bella... bloodied and sedated... No, that would be worse. So, waiting it is. Not just for my son, though. I'm waiting for my wife to wake up, too.

It's torture in another way, to have her so close... but not awake.

Yesterday you turned twenty-five, angel...

I wiped away tears. Again.

There's been too much.

Since we arrived at the hospital in the middle of the night yesterday, there's been too much going on.


I don't care about the words I've been told.

The injuries.

I remember. I don't need the doctors to tell me how pliers and a knife dug into me.

I remember.

I'm lucid, and looking down at my bandaged arm, I remember how he stabbed me in my left arm, not just with a sharp knife, but with pliers, too. In the same wound, he dug pliers in. Then the same below my ribcage.

I remember he punched me with a sandpaper covered fist, peeling off skin on my cheek.

The words echoed in my head, but I didn't care.

Grade 3 blood loss...
Severe...

Blood transfusion...

Radial nerve damage...

Bruises...

Internal and external bleeding...

I don't care because it can be fixed.

My shit is nothing.

While I was sedated, they took me to surgery. They repaired the tear – the nerve damage. They fixed me, and I'm ready to heal. With rehabilitation, I'll be as good as new within three months. Luckily the wound below my ribcage wasn't as bad as they feared. Fuckers, they weren't ones getting stabbed. I was. But whatever. It could've been worse. My arm was worse. Emphasizing on was. Because they repaired it.

What's worse is my wife.

Those wounds... all that hurt, that will take a long time to heal from. So, no, I don't give a shit about my own pain. I don't care about the annoying as hell tingling in my arm. Like it's sleeping. I don't care about the headaches either. I don't care about the throbbing and burning on my more superficial wounds. I don't care about the sharp sting I feel whenever I breathe. Because there's pain medication, and soon, my pains will be gone.

But Bella...

Christ, I broke when the doctors told me.
Aside from severe blood loss, deep cuts in her wrists and ankles, there's malnourishment and malnutrition. Not having enough food and nutrition for more than three years have caused too much, and my eyes well up from just thinking about it. Christ, at 5'3" she should weigh around a hundred and fifteen pounds. But she doesn't. She doesn't.

Ninety-one pounds.

She hasn't been fed properly. *When she was fed, it was with junk. Shit that did nothing good for her body.*

The test that they made...

It breaks you.

Her muscle mass is close to non-existent.

She's dehydrated.

Her hair is matt and thinning.

Dark bruises under her eyes.

Protruding bones.

Vitamin levels, protein levels... Every fucking level... they were all shit. Too low. She's in need of so fucking much. All of it. She needs everything from oxygen to protein, carbs, and every lettered vitamin known to man. Still, that's not all. Because her body was dangerously close to shutting down. Close to kidney failure. I... I can't even think about it. But I still hear it all. The words they spewed out. Everything from how it was now... to how they would proceed. Because after testing her, they came to the conclusion that her physical recovery will be a long one. They'll start with intravenous feeding. Yeah. My wife's body's so weak that it won't accept the nutrition it desperately needs.
Last but not least, the doctors fear that Bella's road to recovery will be even longer after they've tested her eyes. Think about it. Being locked up for three years without going outside. Without seeing daylight. Yeah.

With a sigh, I turned my head, facing the ceiling. But it didn't last for long, and soon I found myself watching her again.

It was impossible to stay away.

The need to see her was just overpowering.

Only one thing can make me look away, and it's not by choice. But all the meds... the emotional rollercoaster... It's tiring. Exhausting.

My eyes drooped after a while.

*I love you, angel...*

*O*O*O*

"Edward."

I stirred.

Waking up was the last thing I wanted. Fucking headache.

"What?" I grumbled in a voice heavy with sleep.

My eyes stayed close but I felt my pulse quicken when I heard the beeping of machines.

It's still real.

It all happened.

She's safe now.

"EJ will be here in half an hour."
That had my attention, and I rubbed the sleep from my eyes with my
good hand before sitting up in my bed. Maybe not sitting up, really,
because I can't thanks to the wound below my ribs... but a little. Very
little. *Fuck*. Hate needing help, but my left arm's good for nothing. Then
the throbbing. Terrific.

I nodded once in thanks as Charlie placed another pillow behind me, and I
cringed as my stomach tensed.

Didn't matter. As long as I could see Bella better.

He was watching her, so I did the same, turning back to her.

*You're real, baby.*

We'll get through this.

"What time is it?" I asked, running a hand through my hair. *Filthy*. I
grimaced.

"Noon."

I nodded, never taking my eyes off my wife.


*But you'll get better, angel. We all will.*

One day.

Because we're a family.

"Any word on when they're takin' her off the sedatives?" I sighed.

"Yeah," he whispered thickly. "Tonight."

I swallowed.
Tonight. Then you'll wake up.

A nurse walked in then and informed us that they were going to clean Bella up as much as possible for EJ's arrival, and I was thankful. Thankful he wouldn't have to see the worst. But also knowing that... this... this is his mommy. This is, sadly, the Bella he knows. The Bella I married... this isn't her. EJ doesn't know her. Yet. He will. One day he will see her healthy and smiling. Even if it's the last thing I do. It will happen.

My eyes never left Bella when two nurses cleaned her. Even when it was my turn, I never stopped watching her. Three years. More than that. Shit. So much time. Of not seeing her, holding her... knowing whether or not she was alive. But she is, and as I watched her... cleaned up, tubes hidden under the blanket, weak limbs as well...

...I know that it's my one and only dream. It's all I want, for us to one day be the family we deserve to be.

I hissed as the bitch of a nurse cleaned my cheek with alcohol.

Sadistic piece of bitch.

"My baby!" I heard someone gasp then, and I turned towards the door to see mom, frozen in the doorway, eyes flickering between me and Bella. "Oh, God... you're... you're both here..."

It was instant. My eyes welled up.

She looked like shit.

And I fucking need you, mom...

"Mom," I forced out. It was a strangled sound. A mix between a chuckle, a sob... fuck, it was just relief, pain, sadness... all of it. "Get over here, will ya?"
Another gasp escaped her, and then she ran over to me, tears falling, and I cringed in anticipation, knowing that-

Yes. There it is. Pain.

"Shit-" I coughed, cringing even more as she hugged the... well, shit outta me. "Mom-... too tight."

"Fuck, I'm sorry!" she cried, releasing me from her death grip to cradle my face. Eyes checking for injuries. "God, baby, I was so worried..."

She sobbed. I held her and cried silently.

So tiring.

"Where's EJ?" I whispered thickly, releasing mom slowly.

I brushed a thumb under her cheek.

_Tears, be gone. Please._

"He's outside with Alice and Rachel," she croaked, cradling my face again. "We told him before we left New Orleans..."

I took a deep breath, ignoring the pain.

He's here. He knows.

"How is he?" I asked quietly, terrified of the answer, and my eyes welled up all over again. "What exactly-" I cleared my throat. "What have you told him? Fill me in."

Mom sat down on the edge of my bed, grabbed my hand and played with my fingers. And her eyes, they stayed focused on my hand, my wedding band.

"The first day was..." She took her head. "Awful. We had to sedate him-"
Her voice cracked.

My heart broke.

I could picture him. I could see the way he went back, the way he closed himself in. It had happened before. During sessions, if something went wrong, he stepped back. He started apologizing and calling himself Elijah.

That pain was indescribable and no medication could take it away.

I'm supposed to be his constant. The person he trusts.

"When he woke up," she sniffled, "Alice and I repeated your game with him. He touched your house... our noses... Christ, kiddo, it was so painful to see his doubt..."

I shut my eyes closed. Tightly.

I heard Charlie sniffle, too.

Will the pain ever go away?

"It got better when we heard from you... or Charlie, I should say," she breathed. "Rachel advised us to tell EJ that we had found you... so we did. And he was so mad..." Then she chuckled through her tears. "He threw his first tantrum."

I laid my head back on the pillow again. Blinked away tears, wiped them with my thumb and forefinger.

"He reminded me so much about you, Edward," she whimpered. "He was so upset, demandin' that we took him to you. But we had to wait... and he-... Rachel gave him a sedative just to calm down."

"Fuck-" I choked out.
Shaky breaths. Weak whimpers.

I was sick of it. I wanted to be strong. Not crumbling.

I wanted to be the one my family could hold onto for support.

*I need to be that person.*

"The car ride was thankfully okay, cause he slept through most of it," she continued quietly. "It took more time but flying might have cause him distress, Rachel told us."

I nodded once, acknowledging, but kept my eyes focused on the ceiling.

To admit that I was terrified was painful but still the truth, because I was. I was terrified that I was going to fail them, hinder them... Shit, I don't know. Just... too much. It's all too much. Warring inside of me. One side screaming at me, demanding that I hide us all from the world. Then the other side, obviously my brain, that tells me we'll get through this if we do it right. But that's just it. *Can* I do it right? Am I strong enough?

Patience was never really a part of my name.

In this case patience will be all of it. It has to be.

But now... now I have to see him.

"I need to see him, mom," I whispered.

I looked at her, and she nodded wordlessly and stood up.

"Just one thing," she murmured, glancing over at Bella. "EJ doesn't know she's here because Rachel didn't know how it would affect him."

I drew a shaky breath.
"It's your choice, kiddo," she breathed. "Either you tell him, or Rachel does it."

Swallowing hard, I thought about it. This was my chance to step up, to show that I can take care of my family, but... to show and prove that I can take care of them also means I have to accept help, and truth be told, I don't know how to tell him a thing like this.

"How will I tell him?" I forced out, letting my eyes travel over Bella's sleeping body. "Any... any advice from the doc?"

Mom gave me a small but genuine smile, silently telling me I did good by asking.

Reaching out for help has always been my problem. The need to be able, the need to fix things on my own... yeah, that's me. But it can't be anymore. I need others, too.

"Yeah," she whispered thickly, nodding once. "She told me that it was probably best for you to tell him that his mommy is now safe, and that Garrett won't ever come back. And once you've told him, wait for his reaction."

I stared at her blankly, trying to push down the panic.

His reaction? Fuck, it can go either way, but... will he even believe me? Does my own son trust me?

I doubt it.

Christ, I left him.

"EJ will have to see her for himself, Edward," she murmured. "Then you'll take it from there. Rachel says the game you have with him is nothin'
short of perfection, and you can do that with him. Play your game to prove that Bella's right here."

Deep breaths.

I watched as mom and Charlie slid the curtain around Bella's bed, effectively keeping her out of EJ's sight.

This was up to me.

The doc offered to be here... but...

"Jesus," I mumbled under my breath.

*Man up, Cullen.*

"Rachel's right outside, kiddo. Want me to get her for you?"

Deep breaths.

I shook my head, steeling myself. It was time.

"No, I'm fine," I sighed. "I need to do this now."

I added a firm nod for good measure as mom studied me.

*I need this.*

.

.

"Okay," she said after a moment. "I'll bring EJ in, and remember, we're right outside if you need us."

I nodded. Took more breaths. Deep ones.

My son.
"And holler when you want help to get the curtain out of the way," she added.

Another nod.

Then they left.

I was left alone with my thoughts... but only for two seconds.

The door opened almost immediately, and I looked up.

Oh, God.

"Daddy?"

It was a cry.

*Nothing* could stop the onslaught of emotions. *Fuck,* they *crippled* me.

Eyes welled up. Muscles tensed, which hurt like a motherfucker. But I couldn't relax. I *couldn't* relax. I just... I just stared at him. Dressed in a Turtle themed pajama set in blue and tiny Nike sneakers, he was *everything.* And he was here. Sitting on mom's hip as she brought him over. But what almost killed me was the expression EJ wore. The expression of hurt, doubt, and confliction.

"Nugget-" I coughed out.

Then he sobbed. "Daddy!"

He struggled against mom, and I was on the same page, struggling against my pains in order to sit up. *Fuck.* It was impossible, but as mom closed the last distance, I didn't care. He was here. With me. I may not be able to have both my arms around him, but the good arm held him tightly. Shivers ran through me as I almost crushed him against my chest, and I ignored my arm in the fucking sling that was in the way.
He clung to me. Arms around my neck.

I breathed. I breathed him in.

He sobbed.

I… wasn't far behind.

You're here, baby.

"D-Daddyyyy!" he wailed into my neck.

"I'm here, EJ, I'm here," I whimpered, unable to hold myself together.
"Shhh, nugget, I'm here."

Seconds, minutes, hours… I held him. He held me. It was painful but it didn't matter. It was a need too great to deny, and if there's one thing I'll never do, is underestimate the power this three year old little boy has over me. Definitely not in a bad way. Never in a bad way. But I do need him. For so many reasons, too. He can calm me down by holding onto me, he can make me feel needed by the strength he uses. And it's all vital for me. It doesn't matter that only a few days have passed since I found out about him. He's my fucking son, and I need him like air.

Eventually his crying stopped though he was still visibly upset, but what tore at me was the fear. He was scared. Even in my arms he was scared and I knew why. I knew because he told me over and over through his whimpers and cries. Over and over he told me he was afraid I would be gone again.

My heart was shattered.

I tried to calm him down, I told him I'd never disappear without telling him. Yes, I knew it was a foolish fucking promise, but I'm human. I will
make mistakes. It's inevitable, but at least I didn't tell him I'd never leave him.

I wanted to, though, because 'leaving' to me is different. I won't ever leave him, willingly anyway, but to him it's different. According to him I'm leaving him if I go to the bathroom only to return two minutes later. So, I settled on telling him I'd never leave him without telling him. It'll have to work for now.

The doc will help us later, but now... Christ, no doctor-talk now, please.

Just me and my son.

"You're real," EJ breathed into the crook of my neck, and I held him harder, feeling his fingers in my hair. "Daddy, you here now?"

"I'm here, nugget. We're both here," I murmured, pressing my lips against his head. "And I love you... so much."

He didn't release me but he shifted on my lap so that our foreheads were pressed together, followed by his small hands on my cheeks.

I told him again. "I love you with all my heart, EJ. Believe me?"

He nodded once and I closed the tiny distance and kissed his little nose.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered. "I would never leave you if I could help it."

I knew right away of course, that he didn't understand what I was saying. He was only three. How the hell can I ever explain that I was taken against my will? How can I make him understand without scaring him half to death? How can I even bring in Garrett to this conversation?

*With care.*

I sighed, knowing it was time.
I took a deep breath.

I kissed his cheeks.

"Can I tell you something?" I asked gently, positioning him on my lap with one leg on each side of me. Well, as gracefully as I could with only one arm functioning. But I kept him close. It wasn't just EJ that needed it.

"Yea," he replied, chewing on his lip.

Now that Bella was here, I could smile a little. Only a little, but still... Seeing my wife's traits, mine, too, for that matter... It's just very obvious that he's our boy. And every time I see him bite his bottom lip, it's Bella I see. I think it always will be.

Hopefully he's got his mother's strength, too.

With another deep breath, I focused on his eyes. Time to tell him.

"When Daddy was gone," I murmured, swallowing hard before I continued. "We... we found Mommy."

Fuck.

Just saying the words turned me into a scared little boy.

"M-mommy?" he whimpered, wide eyes welling up quickly.

"Yeah," I whispered thickly. "We found her, baby, and she's..." What, fine? Fuck. She's not, but... "She's okay," I decided, not caring about semantics. She's alive. "And I want you to know that G... Garrett will never hurt you or Mommy ever again."

"I... I... Daddy, I don' want Uncle Ga-... No, not here." He started crying instantly, and it struck me hard that he was more afraid of Garrett finding him than Bella coming back.
There's only one reason for that. And it kills.

EJ must have lived in nothing but fear.

"EJ, baby, please listen to me," I urged softly, holding him to me as he cried harder. "Garrett isn't comin' back. Ever. I promise you that. He's gone. Forever."

Christ, I wanted to just fucking shout out that the fucker is dead.

But I won't.

I'm not that stupid.

"Daaddyy!" he cried. "I be good, I pwromise! No Garrett!"

My eyes welled up. "EJ, don't even say that," I told him, firmly yet quietly. "You are a good boy, you hear me? You're perfect," I choked up, "and he won't ever hurt you. I'm not leavin' you."

Rocking us back and forth, I continued comforting him, swallowing my own anxiety as he shook in fear.

"I promise, EJ... I'm never goin' to let him come close. I promise."

"Pwromise, Daddy," he whimpered against my neck.

I closed my eyes.

"I promise, EJ," I breathed. "He's never goin' to hurt you or Mommy again. He's gone."

Minutes later, he calmed down a little but I didn't stop. I kept reassuring him, and I'll do so for the rest of my life if I have to.
"EJ?" I asked quietly after a moment. "Can you look at Daddy?"

Slowly he left my neck, and I swallowed emotion for the umpteenth time today as I stared into his vibrant eyes. There was too much distress, too much sadness. So, with our foreheads pressed together again, I wiped away stray tears with my good hand, and hoped the mentioning of his Mommy would be better this time.

"Do you want to see Mommy?" I asked softly, and then rushed to assure, "I promise you won't ever see Garrett ever again. Both you and Mommy are safe, and..." I took a deep breath. "And she's here."

I watched as his little eyebrows furrowed together. I watched as he bit down on his trembling lip.

Please be well, nugget. I need you smiling.

"Mommy's sleeping in that bed there," I pointed in Bella's direction, "right behind that curtain."

He said nothing, and I... didn't quite know what the hell I was doing, but... maybe he needed to see her before he reacted? Maybe. I had no fucking idea. But with a small nod to myself, because... you have to do this, Cullen... I called out for mom.

EJ threw himself at me, almost as if it was a reflex, and locked his arms around my neck as mom entered.

"I'm not going anywhere, EJ," I whispered, rubbing his back. "I promise, baby, I'm here. We all are."

He nodded.
But he didn't let me go.

"Want me to pull the curtain aside?" mom asked quietly, eyes full of sadness as she watched EJ.

I just gave her a nod.

Mom nodded once in return and pushed the curtain to the side before she left us again.

My eyes were stuck on Bella.

She almost looked peaceful. Almost. Still too hurt. Still broken. But... Fuck it, here we go.

"EJ," I murmured. "Do you want to see Mommy now?"

He stiffened in my arms, and I held my breath.

"S'not pretend?" he whispered against my neck.

My heart broke. Again.

"It's very real," I breathed, blinking back tears. "She's sleeping right next to us, nugget. I promise she's real. We all are."

.

.

After a short moment, he peeked in Bella's direction. I felt his face leave my neck, and under my chin, he turned to Bella. I was terrified and holding my breath again, because I had no idea how he would react. Then, ever so slowly, he slid down slightly on my lap, and rested his face on my chest – facing Bella. But he said nothing. Nothing at all.
"Do... do you see her?" I asked quietly, feeling like an idiot, but I needed to... Christ, I wished I could read his fucking mind because I was losing mine.

Wordlessly, he nodded against my chest.

But said nothing.

"She's real," I whispered, not knowing if he needed to hear it.

I watched her, too.

I watched her.

EJ watched her.

.

.

"Mommy's sleepin'?" he mumbled quietly, fistin' my hospital gown. "Mommy s'real?"

"Yes," I exhaled.

I didn't know. I had no idea. Was he... I mean...

Fuck.

Does he believe it? Does he know she's real? Does he know she's lying right there?

I realized then that I was expecting him to fall apart or something.

Shouldn't he?

"We best be quiet, Daddy," EJ whispered then.
I frowned in confusion.

"What do you mean, buddy?" I whispered back.

Then he looked up at me, and when I saw a tiny smile play on his lips, I didn't know whether to laugh or cry... or maybe fear for my life, because... was this normal?

"Mommy say nap-time s'good. In dreams you can go to any place and Mommy say she go to playground with me and Daddy in dreams and after playground we go home to yellow house and sometime we go to Pops. In Mommy-dreams. But she say Charlie... not Pops."

Oh, God...

My throat closed up as the emotions hit me harder than before. It was overwhelming. Too much. Dreams? They talked about that? *Jesus*. Yes, too much. Because... Christ, that's where she could be free. The only place...

*O*O*O*

Hours later, EJ still hadn't broken to pieces.

Was I terrible for thinking he should?

The doc said no, I wasn't terrible for that.

Instead she spouted off some doctor-bullshit about the mind of a child and how you never really knew for certain how a child would react. She did however caution us that his eventual breakdown can come whenever.

I bit back a few colorful words.

It was one by one that they had started filing into the room, starting with mom because EJ was most comfortable with her – after me – and then
Charlie followed, and lastly the doc. But EJ stayed close to me. Eyes trained on Bella. He didn't talk. At all. He just sat there, on my lap. One hand in my hair. Head resting on my chest.

Eventually he fell asleep.

The doc headed to her hotel shortly after, but not before telling us that she would be back in the morning, and if we needed her, she was just a phone call away.

Mom and Charlie were settled in their chairs.

No talking.

Just waiting.

Just waiting for Bella's doctor to take her off the sedatives.

And then he did.

And told us, 'It can still be a few hours.'

*O*O*O*

**Bella Cullen.**

Esme. The mother I always wanted. She's... she's here.

I wipe tears away even though it's useless. They stream down my cheeks regardless. There's no stopping it.

And... Dad... Dad... my dad. I've missed him so much.

They're sleeping in chairs.

But I can't keep my eyes off of you for too long and I'm watching you again.
I'm watching you, hubs. Absorbing. Trying to understand.

A part of me tells me this isn't true. But I see. I see you. So, it has to be true, right?

I don't understand anything. How... how did I get here? What happened?

I'm crying silently but for the first time in over three years, it's not just sadness, hopelessness, and despair. All because I see you.

And our boy, Edward. He's here with us. With you.

The facts; we're in a hospital room. Dad and Esme are asleep in chairs. Then there's you and me... and our son. You're sleeping in your bed with EJ on your chest, and I can see your eyes moving underneath your lids. The lights are dimmed. Maybe not dimmed but there isn't much light. Only from a small lamp in a corner. Outside I see, through the blinds, that the sun is about to rise, and I cry harder because I see that, too.

It's symbolic if it's true. Is it? Is this true?

Was I saved?

Are you here, lying in the bed next to me?

I'm breathing. Almost easily. The air, it flows in and out of me, making my chest rise and fall... with ease. It's... new. Refreshing. God, I hope this is real. Please be real.

I've tried to remember.

The last thing I remember clearly is hearing a shot ring out.

And I remember your scream, Edward.

Looking at you now, I know you've been harmed.
I sniffle.

I swallow sobs.

Please be real.

But you're so hurt. I see the bandages. Everywhere. There are butterfly bandages above your eyes. Same goes for your bottom lip. You're bruised. Then there's your arm. What happened to your arm, baby? I see the cast... the sling.

Your face... God, your face. Half of it is covered in scrapes. Almost like... burns. My fingers twitch.

A part of me wants to lift your blanket, needing to see if there's more hurt. Is there?

But the other part is afraid of finding out.

I think this is true, hubs. I think you're here.

I think you're here with our son.

I whimper.

Blurry vision.

But through the blurry vision, I see you stir.

Are you waking up?

Oh, God... Please tell me it's over.

Please tell me our son is safe.

Please tell me I'm safe.

Please tell me you're safe.
I don't care about my injuries. I feel them. I see them. My wrists covered, my ankles, too. But they're not important because I can fucking breathe. Christ, Edward, I'm breathing. Do you know how liberating it feels? Through my nose, I inhale. And just doing that makes me cry. Still silently but God, I don't think I'll ever stop crying. I exhale. Also with ease. It's clean.

Again, I whimper.

You're here.

And I think you're waking up. Slowly but surely. You don't move and I want to smile because you're so aware of EJ. But I still see it – your eyes fluttering. Oh God, you're waking up.

Then you open your eyes.

My breathing hitches. So does yours when you see me.

You see me.

Your eyes are welling up.

You swallow hard.

I chew on my lip to keep the sobs in. But my lip still trembles.

You're here, baby.

And... I'm here, too?

Tears spill over, and down, down, down your cheeks.

Tell me it's real, hubs.

"Bella," you whimper, and it's all I can take.
I close my eyes. Then I open them again because I have to see you.

"Tell me-" I choke out.

Everything inside me is ready to burst. It's... unbelievable. Overwhelming.

"You're safe, angel," you breathe, and I exhale. "He won't hurt you. He's..." you sniffle – I do, too, and I need to touch you. "He's dead."

The last word is a whisper but I heard it as if it was shouted, and it echoes. Dead. Garrett's dead. I can't... I can't understand. I can't wrap my head around it. I don't remember what it's like... what it's like to be safe. But you're telling me I'm safe and I trust you. I always did. It's just going to take so much time to understand. I haven't even started yet. Nothing is... Nothing makes sense right now.

But you're here, and... "I love you," I whimper, blinking back tears, and I reach my hand out. Slowly. Ignoring the dull ache.

Your face is contorted in pain as you reach out, and nothing can stop the sob from escaping me as you wrap your fingers around my hand. Oh God... we're touching, baby. I can't... It's... It's too much to understand. You're warm and... you.

I cover my mouth with my other hand, and then I squeeze your hand.

You squeeze back and we both cry silently.

"I love you, Bella-" you choke up, unable to continue but it's okay, hubs. It's okay. But you're you and you never give up. "I've been a mess without you... I can't... I can't be without you again."

I shiver and cry harder and I'm fighting to keep the sounds at bay. "I've missed you," I whimper.

You're touching me, hubs, and it matters so much. It's overwhelming.
I need you.

God, I need you so much, Edward.

"I never thought I'd see..." I can't go on but you understand.

"But we're here now, angel," you croak. "We're here, beautiful. You're safe."

I don't understand.

"I love you," I tell you again. I need to say it. "I love you."

"Always you and me, Bella," you whisper thickly, and then you look down at our sleeping son. "The three of us, Bella."

I nod once. It's us three.

"We're a family, angel. We're together."

I nod again because I can't speak.

Family. Together.

I breathe deeply.

Finally.

I survived. I'm alive.

"How is he?" I sniffle, watching EJ, and I'm afraid of the answer. "Was... was he ever alone?"

I'm close to a breakdown, I can feel it. The wrong answer will make me fall apart. I know it. Please tell me EJ was never alone. Please tell me he's okay.
"He's..." You breathe deeply, clearing your throat, and I know you're thinking about the answer. "He'll be okay. It... it could've been a lot worse."

I need more. My eyes are pleading.

"And he was never alone, angel." And now I can relax, if only a little. He was never alone. "It's..." You shake your head a little, and there's almost a smile. Almost. "It's a long story, but..."

I squeeze your hand because it's enough for now.

"Later, hubs," I whisper. "We're safe."

I don't understand but I trust you.

"Hubs." You almost smile again but then there are more tears. "I've missed hearin' that, baby."

I almost smile, too. Almost.

My hand aches, and I accidently cringe, but I make it abundantly clear that you are under no circumstances letting me go.

It takes a while to convince you but in the end you concede.

Then you tell me about our injuries, but mostly about mine, and I cry, both pained and relieved. Relieved because we're still us. We haven't changed our priorities. You still care more about my hurt, and I don't care about mine, because I'm too busy caring about yours. But what it all comes down to is that we are alive and that we will move forward. Not today, but one day we will. It's what you say anyway. I believe you and I love you for being so strong for us, but I'm still not... quite there yet. And I don't think I will be for a while. But you have patience, you say. You tell
me that it will take time but in the end, it will work out. Again, I believe you, I trust you.

At this moment, though, I'm satisfied to have you here. Here with me. At last.

You're still squeezing my hand every once in a while, and I do the same.

It's heaven, you have no idea.

Or maybe you do.

"I love you," I whisper for the umpteenth time but it doesn't get old. You don't think so either, because you crack a small smile every time I say it, and your eyes are brimming with tears of relief. "It's us now, right?"

You squeeze my hand again, rubbing your thumb over my skin.

"It never stopped being us, angel," you murmur, eyes serious yet still soft and loving. "I know we have... a long, long road ahead of us, but... no matter what, it's always us. Just like it's always been."

You have... I mean... Jesus... I can't think straight, but I'm relieved, you know. To hear you say it, to hear you tell me. It's us. So, more tears are flowing and I can breathe more. Even more. It's a relief. Such a fucking relief, hubs.

I love you, Edward.

I'm about to tell you yet again that I love you, but your expression changes into one of fear and dread, and I'm suddenly terrified.

"Did he..." You swallow hard and grit your teeth together. Then you speak with your eyes closed. "Did he ever...? I mean..."

And I understand.
"No," I breathe, feeling my eyes sting again. "He did a lot but... never... never that."

"Oh, thank God," you whimper as another set of tears spill over. "I was so fucking worried, baby... I'm sorry for bringing it up-"

I cut you off by a squeeze of your hand, because I understand your fear, and I don't ever want you to apologize for it.

"It's okay, Edward," I whisper softly. "Don't apologize. Please. I understand."

You nod once, and I try my damndest to comfort you just as you have comforted me, but it's hard. It's so hard because... because... because I want to hug you, baby. I need you so badly. I need a hug. My arm is aching, throbbing, but I can't let you go. I need more. So much more.

"I need to get a fuckin' doc in here," you mutter then as you wipe your tears. "Or someone capable of pushin' our beds closer together."

I can't help it, but I chuckle quietly though my tears because you're on the same page as I am, hubs, and... God... I need you, too.

"You read my mind," I croak.

Then it happens.

You give me your crooked smile and it's breathtaking.

Literally, I cannot breathe, baby. I've missed that grin... more than words can describe. But it doesn't last, and our gaze is broken when we both see EJ stirring on your chest, and you smile down at him...

It's everything to me. You smiling down at him, it gives me hope.

There is a future for us all.
Because we're finally a family.

"You're beautiful together, Edward," I sniffle. "I knew you would be..."

You smile softly and kiss the top of his head.

This brings the next round of tears.

I doubt it'll ever stop.

"He's perfect, angel," you whisper. "I... I love him completely."

Of course he's perfect.

We made him.

Again I almost smile because you were the one bringing my sass out, and my thoughts... the thoughts I just had... they come from you. So, I believe you more. I do. I believe that we'll get through this. Someway, somehow, because we have each other, and we bring out the best of each other.

"He's wakin' up," you whisper, and I blink away tears to see you both more clearly.

And you're right.

EJ's waking up. Our baby with your eyes.

Slowly but surely, EJ wakes up on your chest, and it's painful and comforting all at once. Painful because this should've happened the day he was born. Not now, more than three years later. But I'm sick of pain, baby. So sick of it. So, I focus on the comfort for the moment. The comfort, the love, and the warmth, and it's all from watching you two together. As father and son.

At last.
"M-Mommy?" EJ mumbles then, sleepily and quietly, but I still hear it. "You're wake? No more nap-time?"

Oh, God...

I literally feel my face crumble. Tears fall all over, as if they ever stopped.

All the stories I've told our son, Edward... It was all I could do to keep something good in our life, but to hear it now... Christ, I hope I haven't ruined him. I hope he won't always think that his mommy is happiest in my dreams if I don't have him next to me.

"EJ, baby," I breathe. My eyes actually hurt a lot. It's stinging and pounding. But it matters little when our son is watching me with your eyes, hubs. It's everything to me.

"You sad, Mommy?" he whimper, and I know how fragile he is.

He can't stand tears.

"Happy tears, EJ," I croak and it's not a lie. In this second, I have my two boys with me. My lip trembles at the thought. My two boys. My two Cullen boys. "Only happy tears, baby. I promise."

I squeeze your hand, Edward, needing you to see my truth.

I think you do and you nod once. Just a small nod. You were never an emotional man, and it's... very hard to see you choked up. It's hard to see you in pain.

You're my hero and I want to take care of you.

"Mommy?"

I smile through my tears. "Yeah, sweetie?" I say, looking back at EJ who is watching us curiously.
It's small, my smile, but definitely there, and you're smiling, too, hubs. We both are. We deserve it. We fucking deserve it.

"Mommy... this is Daddy."

.

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I'm momentarily stunned.

So are you, Edward.

But then I hear you choke on a sob, and I fall apart.

"Yeah," I whimper. "It is, EJ."

EJ nods slowly. "He love me, Mommy, and he's real. He prwomises."

It's... It's... It's too much, EJ. I can't... Oh, God... We're together. For the first time.

I start sobbing.

I'm sorry but I can't hold it in.

And then I feel a hand on my arm.

Out of instinct, I flinch, and shivers run through me, rocking through my body, and I'm not sure I like it. I can't decide because my breathing hitches unpleasantly. But then... through my blurry vision... I see dad.

Dad.

He's awake. Tears are streaming down his face. And he... looks broken.

"Bells," he chokes up.
I can't form words. But I mouth the only thing I need to convey, 'I love you.'

I almost can't believe it but he shushes me.

I can't stop crying and I hear so much all of the sudden. I hear you crying, too, Edward, and please stop because it's breaking my fucking heart. I need you whole. And I need our son whole, too. Please. Please. And please, hug me. I need you, damnit.

And then you're closer. I understand because dad is pushing your bed closer, and I sob harder, feeling your fingers trail up my arm. I love it. I've missed it. So much.

"Angel," you croak. "Please."

I don't know what you're pleading for but I can guess because I hate seeing you in pain as much as you hate seeing me in pain. Then there's EJ. He can't handle sadness very well, and seeing us all in tears is bound to hurt him. So, please, God, help me stop. I need to be strong for my family.

Christ, my family.

I shiver again but this time it's... you. Your fingers on my cheek.

And I notice all of the sudden that my hand is on your chest. It's warm. And EJ's close. So close. It's the three of us, hubs. So close now.

"I love you," I cry, eyes flickering between my two Cullen boys. "I love you both... so much."

It won't stop now. The tears, they won't stop. I know this.
"Mommy," EJ whispered, and I curse myself because his eyes are welling up. "Only happy tears?" he asks, scrunching his nose and chewing on his lip.

"I promise, s-sweetie," I tell him as firmly as I can. "I'm so happy that we're finally t-together."

I want to sit up. I want to reach better and my arm is killing me in this angle, but... I also need to touch you, hubs. And EJ... God, I need you both.

"Y-you need to rest, Bella," you breathe, brushing your thumb across my cheek. "For me, angel. Please rest."

No. That's... that's stupid, Edward.

I shake my head.

No more sleeping. I'm fine. I'm ready to go home. I'm ready to leave all this shit behind me, and... I know what a big lie it all is. I know I can never fully walk away from the past three years, but... God, I want some peace.

"I need to see you," I whimper, pleading with my eyes.

But exhaustion hit. My arms are throbbing, my eyes are heavy.

Please. Not just yet.

"I love you, EJ," I tell him, just... needing it, and I caress his little cheek. "I love you so much, baby."

He's still not convinced about my tears, so I smile. As hard as I can, which isn't a lot but... it's all I can do.

"I love you, Mommy," he mumbles, resting his head on your chest again. "And I love you also, Daddy."
I see the tremors. I hear the gasp. And your eyes are welling up faster than before, hubs. You hug him closer.

I love you.

"I love you, too, nugget," you breathe against his forehead.

Your eyes are closed for a second.

Mine are getting heavier.

"We'll be here when you wake up, angel. I promise."

And I trust you.

Chapter 25

...I'm looking at you through the glass

Don't know how much time has passed

Oh God it feels like forever...

...How do you feel? That is the question

But I forget you don't expect an easy answer...

...So while you're outside looking in

Describing what you see

Remember what you're staring at is me...

...How much is real? So much to question...

~Through Glass by Stone Sour – chapter song.

September 15th
Edward Cullen.

Real. Alive. Here. And around her neck, I saw the locket, the engagement ring, and the wedding ring.

Charlie had held onto them for her.

Her rings were too large.

"I love you," I whispered thickly. Again.

My lips lingered, never really leaving her hand. Her palm, her knuckles, her fingers, even the tips, the pad of her thumb, her wrist, my mouth was there.

"I love you," she whispered back, cracking a small smile.

Her eyes flickered between one of my tattoos and her hand that I refused to let go.

She had cried for two hours after I had shown her the tattoos I had done in their honor.

It was when I was finally allowed to get out of the damn hospital gown that she had seen them.

For years they were what I had, but that wasn't the case anymore, because they were back.

Right here. Close to me, within reach.

The 'corset,' as my wife had named it, dug in like a motherfucker but it didn't matter. I was closer to her, able to sit up today, and I did. My bed was pushed aside, and I was sitting in a chair right next to Bella's bed. It made things easier because we didn't need to twist our bodies to be close. She could lie down, with her head on the pillow, and I could sit there.
Right there. Holding her hand to my face. Breathing her in, kissing her skin, holding her.

If only I could lean in further... but I was getting greedy.

This was enough for now.

It was the condition the doctor gave me. If I wanted to sit up, I had to wear that fucking thing around my torso. It kept my back straight, or more importantly, the wound below my ribcage in the same position as before, making sure I didn't accidently rip the stitches or some shit like that. I'd grimaced when they put it on me because it itched like hell and whenever I would lean forward, it pretty much mocked me, 'Nuh-uh, too far, buddy. Straighten up.' And that was just fucked up. But as I looked into Bella's eyes, the annoyance dissipated because I could hold her hand. I could kiss it.

"Itchy?" she whispered, watching me as I tried to scratch my stomach through my t-shirt... and through the 'corset'. It was futile of course. But whatever, Bella was smiling a little. Everything was worth it.

"Little bit," I replied as quietly. I didn't know why we were whispering but... it was comfortable.

"At least you can wear your own clothes. I'm stuck in a hospital gown." Again, a small smile. Do it again, angel.

She was right, though. I was allowed to wear a pair of my old sweats and a t-shirt that mom had brought, and it was nice not having to worry about flashing my ass. Why hospital gowns are open in the back is a mystery to me and completely fucked up.

But whatever.

"I love you," I whispered. It had been a while since I'd last told her.
Another smile, a little wider. But her eyes also watered. Not good. "I love you, too, hubs," she breathed.

_No, no. Don’t cry, angel. Please._

I squeezed her hand. My lips ghosted over her knuckles.

Then we heard a small voice coming from behind me. "You say that lots and lots." And we knew our son had woken up from his nap.

Looking over my shoulder, careful not to twist my torso, I saw EJ stretching his little body in my bed.

"Good nap, little man?" I asked quietly, nodding for him to come over.

He nodded and scrambled off the bed before jumping onto to my lap.

I breathed him in, squeezing Bella's hand as I kissed the top of EJ's head.

Home. They were my home. They were everything.

Both real.

Right?

Yes.

My own eyes welled up, too, then. But to see his little hand on top of mine... on Bella's. Fuck, it was symbolic.

"You no tired anymore, Mommy?" he asked, chewing on his lip.

It went without saying that Bella slept a lot. But at least they'd taken her off some of the drugs had been giving her for the first thirty-six hours. Many remained of course, but every little thing was a step in the right direction.
"Not anymore, no," Bella said softly, motioning for nugget to come to her, which he did eagerly.

The doc had almost broken her heart when he told her that EJ wasn't allowed in her bed, but I argued for her. Christ, it was her son for fuck's sake. So, I told the doc that if it was the damn tubes and needles he was worried about, which it was, I said that I would keep an eye on it. I didn't leave it up for debate.

"Easy, buddy," I murmured, helping him up in her bed before quickly claiming Bella's hand again.

It was emotional to see EJ snuggle up against Bella. To see her do the same, breathing him in, kissing the top of his head... Yeah, emotional rollercoaster. A big one.

"Hungry, baby?" she asked him softly, nuzzling his cheek.

I blinked back tears.

EJ cuddled himself impossibly closer to her, snaking his arms around her neck and burying his little face in the crook of her neck, and there was no describing it. The love I felt the two of them. Mother and son. My wife and our son. The way their hair mussed together, making it impossible to see the difference. Because there wasn't one. Not when it came to the shade anyway. It was the same. Wavy, chestnut brown. I just wished Bella could regain the life of hers. But it would happen. With time.

"Can you use your big words, honey?" she whispered. "I can't hear you when you're hidin' like that, you know."

I smiled wistfully, soaking up every moment. It was new to me, to see them together, but it was evident how close they were, and I was eager to
create as many memories as possible. This time where I was included. The three of us.

*Home.*

It would take days, and even then it was only to move Bella to a hospital in New Orleans, but again I reminded myself that every little step was a step nonetheless. Eventually we would get there, though. The day would come, and I would be able to bring my wife and son back to our house. Our home.

"No answer?" I murmured.

I scooted my chair a little bit closer, turning it slightly so I could lean back but still hold Bella's hand. Losing touch was out of the question.

"I hear muffled mumbling," she chuckled quietly.

And then we heard EJ's giggling.

It was the first one I'd heard in days, and as I locked eyes with my wife, I knew it was as powerful for her. Eyes welled up, breaths became shallow.

I squeezed her hand, threading our fingers together.

My heart was full.

I breathed deeply, swallowing emotion.

My eyes never left them.

The comfort I felt just by watching them was indescribable and vital. Then, another giggle and I swallowed hard as I watched Bella's mouth curve into a smile. A smile wider than before. Another step. Small but so significant. I made it all count. It all mattered.
Leaning forward again, I placed my free hand on EJ's back, ruffling him a little to see if he would look up from Bella's neck. He didn't, but he laughed. He laughed.

"Somethin' funny, nugget?" I asked thickly, pushing my tears back.

"Yea," came a muffled giggle. "I say yes again and again but Mommy don't hear," he laughed, peeking up at me through a curtain of Bella's hair. "I say quiet to see, but Mommy don't hear, Daddy."

My grin faltered when something flashed across Bella's features, and I instantly knew.

Rachel had told me about this just this morning, and she said that is was something that was inevitable, not to mention that it would probably come fast. And now it had. Whatever it was it obviously had to do with Bella and EJ's time with... him. I didn't know details or reasons but judging by Bella's expression, I knew it was something they shared.

"It was a game we played sometimes," she whimpered, blinking back tears. "To see how quietly we could talk and still hear each other."

I felt nauseous.

Looking away for a second, I forced myself to get my shit together. Man the fuck up, Cullen. Be strong. But it wasn't easy. To hear about their life was like the doc had told me – inevitable and bound to happen before any of us were ready, but just because I'd been warned didn't mean I was prepared. It should but it didn't. Not even a little. Because it hurt. It hurt to know that Bella had to use her creative mind to keep that son of a bitch from snapping at them or... whatever. From EJ's sessions I knew all too well how unpredictable he was, and from what I knew, he didn't even like Bella. What he did like was to snap at her and either treat her like shit... or nothing.

More nausea.

*He's dead,* I chanted internally. *He's dead. He's head.*

But the damage had already been done, hadn't it?

Yeah.

*Jesus, I need a smoke.*

"Edward," Bella whispered. It was a plea.

My eyes snapped to hers again. *I'm sorry,* my eyes said. *I will be strong for you.* I needed for her to know. *I won't look away. I will face this.* *Together we will face it all.*

"I love you," I breathed, again squeezing her hand. *"We'll be okay. Tell me."* Now it was my turn to plead. But I needed to know, too. I needed her Bella Cullen strength. The one I fell in love with when I was a teenager. *"Tell me, angel. Tell me you're with me."*

She whimpered and squeezed my hand. *"I'm... I'm with you."* She nodded once. Firmly. But her eyes betrayed her. It was too soon. Fuck, too broken. Eyes full of pain and sadness.

*No,* I growled internally. *Not too broken. She's broken, we all are, but god-fucking-damnit, we'll recover.*

Until she was there, I would be there. And I knew she would be there one day.

"You're with me," I said firmly. Honestly. *"We won't quit."
Tears spilled over, and I ached to wipe them away but I couldn't reach. In this case, though, I could comfort myself with the fact that I saw it was tears of relief. She trusted me. I wouldn't lie to her.

So, I said it again. And more. "We'll recover from this, baby. I promise. We'll face it all, so help me God. One hour at a time."

She trusts me.

"Okay," she sniffled, "one hour at a time. We'll get through it."

That's my girl.

I squeezed her hand. And told her, "I love you."

She whispered it back with emotion, "I love you."

A few moments later, we realized EJ had fallen asleep in Bella's arms, and we were quiet for a little while, knowing that mom and Charlie would return with dinner soon.

Charlie.

It had been emotional to see him and Bella this morning.

Charlie had had the same urge. Touching her hand, stroking her forehead and cheeks, and tears had fallen freely as they said nothing. Just gentle squeezes, eyes locked, and crying. After a while Bella was exhausted and Charlie was losing it, so he excused himself for a moment while mom and I sat on either side of Bella's bed, holding her hands, talking quietly until she fell asleep.

I knew Aunt Liz, Tanya, and Emmett were here, but judging by how easily Bella became overwhelmed, we weren't sure bringing in more family was a good thing. Thankfully they understood and were happy to be here regardless, just in case.
Refusing to leave Bella and EJ's side, mom acted as our messenger. Through her I had also learned that Jasper had gone back to New Orleans with Denali to give his statement.

I knew there were people, authorities, eager to speak to us, but it would have to wait. At least for a few more days.

The only one I had really met was the doc, Rachel, and that was when she came in this morning while Bella's sleeping. Then doctors, of course. Two of them were assigned to Bella, and did rounds ever so often, checking her vitals and all that shit.

I didn't like it because Bella didn't like it. It was so clear on her face. Her breathing often quickened. She didn't like touching.

Understandable.

We didn't speak about it yet but we could all see it was something she would have to work on in the future. Again, understandable considering how many people she interacted with during her years with... Garrett.

He's dead, he's dead, he's dead.

"I love you," I heard Bella murmur then, squeezing my hand.

You always know what I need.

"I love you, too," I breathed, squeezing back.

I just watched her, unable to stop. Even as her eyes drooped a few minutes later, I watched her. Both of them asleep.

September 16th

"How are you feeling today, Edward?" a doctor asked me.
Annoyed cause you're not needed here, and I still need a fucking smoke.

"Fine," I muttered, dropping a kiss on Bella's open palm. "My ass is killin' me from sittin' in this chair, the sling is in the way, and the fuckin' shit around my torso is itchin' like a motherfucker. But other than that I'm just peachy."

I knew I was a grumpy fuck but hey, it got Bella's to smile, even chuckle a little. Even if it was at my expense. It didn't matter. I just needed to get all the curses out while EJ was napping, and I didn't exactly wanna lash out on somebody important. So, the doc it was.

Unfortunately I knew there wasn't much to be done in my case. I had to wear the damn body braces as long as I was adamant about sitting up, and the sling would be a part of me for a couple more weeks until the nerve damage had started to heal better. And fuck, that damn nerve damage was getting on my last... well, nerve. My arm was tingling and falling asleep all the fucking time and it was annoying as hell.

Yeah, I was moody today. But all day had been about evaluations and check-ups. In other words, Bella, EJ, and I had barely gotten any alone time.

I exhaled in content when my doctor took a hike, but... the sweet relief was short lived because Bella's doctor entered then.

Dr. Wilkins.

"Evenin', Bella, Edward," the old woman greeted us softly. I also knew that this was the doctor she was most comfortable with, and I didn't know if it had anything do with the other one being male. "Is everythin' alright, or as alright as it can be?" she asked.

"I suppose, yea," Bella murmured, shrugging a little.
She didn't talk much.

"Good," the doc said gently before taking Bella's chart. "Well, I came into tell you that you're makin' remarkable progress, honey."

I breathed. Because I could.

_Fuck yes, angel._

"And if this continues, which I believe it will, we will be able to take you off intravenous feedin' within the next couple of days. Sounds good, huh?"

"Very," Bella said, blinking back tears as she gave me a smile. "That means one needle gone, right?"

I smiled against her hand.

"It sure does," the doc chuckled quietly. "It also means you can be moved back to Louisiana."

_Another step. We're getting there, baby._

"And food, baby," I murmured, knowing very well how she had been eyeing the pot-roast mom had given EJ for lunch. "You can eat real food."

So far, the only thing she was allowed to eat and drink on her own was ice chips and a protein-shake she didn't like at all. But it was so that they could build up her levels correctly. It was all vital for her recovery. Having been without important vitamins and shit like that for so long, they needed start all over again. Slowly, so fucking slowly, but otherwise her body could've rejected it all.

"I can eat?" Bella asked, chewing on her lip.

And her eyes, they looked more alive for a second.
"Absolutely, honey," the doc assured softly. "You will be on a strict diet, but yes, you will be able to eat."

A diet? Yeah, I grimaced.

*That don't sound all that delicious, baby.*

"Whatever, I'll take it," Bella replied, still smiling.

**September 17th**

"But I like this, Daddy," EJ said, scrunching his nose. "S'got Turtles on 'em."

True. So true. He had a point there.

"But you've been in that pajama for a few days now," I murmured. "Don't you wanna try another pajama set that Nana bought?"

"No," he mumbled, shaking his head against my chest. "I saw them. Just blue. No Turtles. This is blue *and* gots Turtles."

I sighed, feeling fucking helpless, and looked over at Bella and Charlie, both of them watching me with amusement and emotions swimming in their eyes. Yeah, fucking lovely. *Thanks for the help.*

We had tried to get EJ to wear real clothes but in his eyes, Mommy and Daddy were wearing pajamas, so that kinda settled it for him. If we wore pajamas, then so was he. And EJ parting with his blue Turtles themed pajamas? Not a chance.

"He got that stubbornness from you, you know," Bella murmured pointedly before turning back to Charlie.

Hmph.
Mom was laughing silently through her tears.

So, no help there either.

"Great," I mumbled under my breath.

I've never said no to my son. How will I ever?

**September 18th**

Today was an emotional day. Fucking draining.

After a few days in the hospital, Bella started asking questions, and Charlie, mom, and I answered them all. It was painful but I wasn't the only one stubborn. My wife was definitely the same, and even when she was sobbing inconsolably, she demanded that we continued. She needed to know, she said. So, we continued. We told her about how we had found EJ, and... we told her about his sessions. It all came out, and by the time we were done, we were all choking up. And Bella was exhausted.

They had also lowered the dosage on my pain medication, so instead of taking a million pills each day, I was down to a hundred.

My head was pounding.

I wanted a goddamn cigarette.

My arm was tingling.

My ribs ached.

Which meant I had to lie down. And that it turn denied me access to hold Bella.

Just fucking painful.
To top it off, EJ didn't take the news about moving Bella to New Orleans as we had hoped. Actually, we hadn't thought he would react at all. But he did. Shit, he did. He threw one hell of a tantrum, screaming that Mommy wasn't allowed to be in a car.

It all came crashing down.

His experience of Bella in a car wasn't the best, and now he was terrified about his mommy being locked up in the trunk.

*O*O*O*

I could walk. I could carry him.

But not at once.

So, I ended up in a wheelchair with EJ in my lap, and I was pushing down the panic of leaving Bella, leaving our little sanctuary. I knew it was necessary but that didn't mean I liked it. At all. But it was for EJ’s sake, and the staff had been nice enough to let EJ see the ambulance that would take us back to New Orleans.

"It's gonna be okay, son," Charlie said, patting my shoulder as he pushed my chair.

I felt weak but pushed that feeling down, too.

When we reached the garage bay, EJ clung to me under the blanket as two EMT's greeted us.

"And this must be little EJ?" the woman named Bree said.

It took a long time before EJ relaxed, and even more when he realized that I wasn't going to be able to carry him when Bree and Diego showed him the ambulance. Luckily, Charlie was there for EJ, and after a while, he let me go and clung to Pops instead. Not that I was far away. Fuck, I'd die
if I didn't have EJ in sight. So, I stood up from my chair and watched as Bree gave EJ and Charlie a tour of the ambulance. Tour. Yeah, the space was crowded to say the least, but it proved to work, and Bree was gentle and nice to EJ, telling him about the equipment that his mommy would use to be comfortable as we headed back to Louisiana the next morning.

Diego and I stood outside and he pointed at a few things he thought EJ would like or consider to be 'cool.' I on the other hand was just eager to find a way to make EJ relax around vehicles. Well, vehicles his mommy would be near.

It hit me hard and in a way I had never felt so connected with my own son, because it was so evident that EJ was protective of Bella. It was emotional as hell to watch EJ as he looked around, still clinging to his Pops.

Leaning in to Diego, I asked quietly, "Could you tell Bree to mention that there isn't a trunk or anythin'? Just... that this is it, and that his parents will both be there."

I knew they had gone far to accommodate us. They had truly been helpful, especially when they told us this morning that it was okay for both me and EJ to stay with Bella during the patient transfer.

"Of course, man," Diego replied quietly before alerting Bree.

He whispered in her ear as she leaned out of the vehicle, and I glanced at Charlie who sat with EJ on the gurney while he pointed at the machines and told him what they did. Charlie obviously came in handy, having spent his entire career around this. In one way or another. Even if he was a police officer, he knew this of course.

I realized then how tense I was. Biting my thumb nail, frowning, thinking hard, dreading, hoping, unable to stand still. Fuck. I needed a smoke. I
hadn't had one in days and I hated myself for even thinking about it, but... the craving was there nonetheless. Big time.

It didn't help that I could smell it on Charlie every once in a while.

"So, what do you think, sweetie?" Bree asked EJ, smiling at him. "It's pretty cool, huh?"

EJ shrugged, pretty much the way his dad would, and mumbled, "I guess."

I let out a quiet chuckle, not really knowing why, but... he was my kid, that's for sure.

"But you see that it's safe, right?" she asked softly, sitting next to Charlie on the gurney. "This is where Mommy will lie, and you and Daddy will sit right there," she pointed at the seat next to the gurney, "and you can hold Mommy's hand the entire way if you want. I promise. And Diego and I will take you back to New Orleans so quick."

"Sounds good, doesn't it, buddy?" Charlie asked him. "I wish I could ride in this cool truck, too, but it's just for mommies, daddies, and EJs."

Yeah, he was awesome. Really fucking perfect. I couldn't have asked for a better father-in-law. Or father figure of my own for that matter.

"Daddy and I be here close to Mommy?" EJ asked.

"Yep," Bree said. "Right here next to Mommy."

Looking over at me, his eyes searched for confirmation.

"I promise, nugget," I murmured. "You, me, and Mommy will ride back here with Dr. Wilkins, and Bree and Diego will drive us."
"You remember Mommy's doctor, right?" Charlie muttered gently. "The lady that gave you the new colorin' book?"

"Yea," EJ mumbled. "Was it called?"

Charlie chuckled. "Batman."

EJ nodded then, a bit more relaxed.

Thank you.

"Hey, EJ?" Diego asked, grinning at him. "Wanna see the cool lights this truck has?"

"Oh, you definitely wanna see that, buddy," I said, thankful for everything they did for my son. "They're your favorite color, too."

"Turtles on 'em?" EJ asked, making us all chuckle.

It felt heavenly. Liberating.

"No, but I think you'll like them anyway, sweetie," Bree chuckled, motioning for them to step out of the ambulance.

My side throbbed as I took EJ, but I didn't care. As soon as I felt his little hands in the back of my neck, playing with my hair, I was home again.

"Was kinda cool, Daddy," he whispered in my ear. "And we be rights with Mommy. If she cry, i's happy tears only."

Christ.

"Yeah-" I choked up. I cleared my throat. Fucking emotions. "Only happy tears for us now, nugget."
Once Charlie was out of the ambulance, he took EJ again and we headed for the front of the ambulance where Diego showed us the 'awesomeness' of the ambulance, including the lights.

"Hey, Charlie?" I said quietly, eyeing the open garage bay.

*I would still be close, able to see him.*

"Yeah?"

He sat with EJ in his lap, and I was glad Diego had his attention. Yeah, the lights were definitely a hit.

So, I motioned for Charlie to hand over a fucking smoke.

He did, with a grin, and turned back to make sure EJ was occupied.

"Do you mind?" I asked Bree quietly.

She smiled in understanding and shook her head. "Go ahead. There's an ashtray in the smoking zone right around the corner."

*I'll be close.*

I nodded in thanks and thanked God the bay was open. Hadn't I been able to see EJ, I wouldn't be able to... which would've been good, all things considered. And I knew I was going to quit. Very soon. But not today. I couldn't.

Standing in the smoke zone, I could still peek around the corner where I saw EJ playing with the lights. *He's smiling.* I lit up, feeling guilty about my need, but I decided I would quit for his and Bella's sake as soon as we were back in New Orleans.

I sure wouldn't be quitting for my own sake.
I wasn't a liar.

But I had my life back and wasn't going to throw it away.

Soon I was back with them, and I chuckled as Charlie offered me some gum.

Chuckling. Yeah. That happened in my life now. There was chuckling because there was reason for it.

Even as we returned to the hospital room and Bella was asleep, there was a reason to smile, because we were together again. I had my angel, my wife, back. And my son. Our son. Family. The Cullens. Holy fuck. Emotions.

*And tomorrow morning we’re going back to New Orleans, angel.*

**Chapter 26**

...*Take a look at my body*

*Look at my hands*

*There's so much here*

*That I don't understand...*

...*I need*

*A lullaby*

*A kiss goodnight*

*Angel sweet*

*Love of my life*

*Oh, I need this...*
...Do you remember the way

That you touched me before

All the trembling sweetness

I loved and adored...

...I need this...

~My Skin by Natalie Merchant – chapter song.

September 19th

Bella Cullen.

I know you're upset. I know this is too much for you. Not just with me or EJ but everything around us. You don't miss a thing. You see me. Everytime I flinch, you frown and clench your teeth. But this was always you. You always notice me.

You know me.

You know I'm afraid of touch. You know that my breathing picks up everytime someone enters the hospital room. You know my signs. Nothing escapes you where I'm concerned. It hasn't changed, hubs. You're still you, and when I asked you yesterday... a bit hesitantly... if you ever tried to... move on... you got upset with me in a very Edward Cullen-manner. It didn't last long but I saw it in your eyes and I'm sorry for asking. I know I shouldn't have because you and I were always solid. But still...

I asked.

Then you told me as calmly as you could that there wasn't a way to move on. It didn't exist. There wasn't one. Because I'm everything to you and I broke down. And I'm sorry for asking. I'm sorry.
I just needed to know. I needed to be sure, and I told you as much... so, you leaned back in your chair for a while and thought about it. Then you whispered that you understood my fear because you would probably have feared the same. Losing me is the worst thing that could ever happen to you.

I feel the same, hubs. If I lost you again... I wouldn't survive.

I wonder if it's okay that I'm glad you never found... you know... another one. Maybe it's horrible of me but... I think I'm in a position where it's okay that I'm selfish for a while.

Because it's you. You and our son. You two are all I need.

I won't let you go again.

This also means I want to take care of you, baby, because I can see that you won't do that on your own. You're already neglecting yourself and I don't approve of that. So, if you're going to be stubborn and only focus on me, then I will do the same and only focus on you. Is that what you want? Because I can already see ahead. I may not understand much but I'm not a complete tool. I know a little about this, and I know you need to vent. You need to heal, too. I'm not the only one. Or EJ. It's us, hubs.

You're broken, too.

You see me.

But I see you.

I won't allow it.

You asked me a few days ago... I think... if I was with you. You asked me that, and I know you saw the doubt in me, but I wonder if maybe the question was wrong. Or maybe we need to ask more than one question.
One can't be enough. Can it? I mean, are you with us, Edward? Are you aware of that in order for us to heal, you have to heal, too? I'm not sure you are because you always put me first, and now EJ too.

I bet you don't know how much you have already pushed your own pain down. Or maybe you know but don't care. I care, though. Christ, it's all I care about. You and EJ. So, maybe you should have asked yourself that question. Instead of asking me, you should've asked yourself.

As for me... I don't know. I'm still confused and... sorta gone. Living in between realities. It sucks, you know, because I'm so aware of what's real and what's not, but... everytime I wake up from a fucking nap I think I'm with... Garrett. Everytime I wake up, my heart clenches in pain because I just know that he's getting ready to take EJ to daycare. Until I hear the beeping of the machines. That's when my head starts spinning.

It's painful.

Falling asleep is wonderful because you're right there, holding my hand, kissing it... whispering your love for me... and now I'm crying again. Fuck. Deep breaths. I'm trying. Another deep breath. Yeah, falling asleep is my favorite, because I'm where I want to be. With you and our boy. I'm aware of that I was rescued and that we're alive and recovering in a hospital in Memphis. It's glorious to me, baby.

Then I sleep. I always dream fuzzy shit. Sometimes you're there but not often. It's usually just... a blur. And I don't always remember. But then I wake up, Edward, and it hurts so badly because I think I'm still stuck in hell. My insides churn and twist and it's awful.

Everything is jumbled. One second I'm thinking about a possible future, and the next second I'm thinking about your tattoos. It's racing inside me, so fast... I can't keep up at times. It's like I'm afraid of something happening, so I think about everything, all at once. It doesn't work very
well but I can't help it. I'm just... a mess. But you will help me. You said so, and I will help you. Maybe that's it. Of course it is. I pull you, you pull me. Until we can pull ourselves.

I breathe.

Deeply. In and out and it's still so refreshing.

Problem is, I don't want to fall asleep. I don't want to start over. Not again. I just want Garrett to be gone forever.

I refuse to let him be in my thoughts before I succumb to sleep again, though, so I look at you. I look at you and our son.

God, he loves you so much already.

You're both at peace together. With him sleeping on your chest as you sit in the chair. You're asleep, too. But I know you will wake up soon. You always do. You never rest for long.

"I love you," I whisper. A deep breath. I look at you. And I know. I know that... "I'm with you."

We'll make it.

I will get that Cullen strength back. One day.

Until then, I have you.

*O*O*O*

I'm not breathing. I have to remind myself.

I can't open my eyes because I'm scared.

I hate my fear. I wish I could push it down. I wish EJ didn't have to see it.
"Breathe, angel," you whisper thickly.

I try. It's staggering.

I try not to focus on the movements but I feel them and I'm scared, hubs. Fuck. Aren't we there yet?

"Try to relax, honey," I hear Dr. Wilkins murmur softly. "Only an hour or so left, and then you're back in New Orleans."

I whimper.

New Orleans.

Home.

"Edward," I croak. Tears escape in the corners of my eyes. Even though they're shut tightly.

I'm sorry.

"I'm here, baby. I'm here," you breathe. "Can you open your eyes for me?"

I... I don't know. Maybe. No. Please.

But what if you're not here. What if I open my eyes and... What if I open my eyes to see that I'm back? What if... what if...

"Mommy? Only happy tears?"

Oh, God...

Blindly I reach out my hand, ignoring the ache, but I need you. I need you both.

I can't see you but then I can feel you. Both of you.
"I love you," I whimper. It's the first thing I think of. "Both of you. You're my boys, right?"

I cry harder as I hear EJ giggle, and I hear your breath catch. You think it's an amazing sound, too, hubs.

"Daddy s'not a boy, Mommy," EJ giggles. "He's a Daddy."

Of course. Silly me.

"So, you're sayin' that Mommy's not a girl, nugget?" you murmur, and I can picture you. I can imagine the way you smile into his hair as you try to get rid of the overwhelming emotions.

"No, Daddy!" Another giggle. "Mommy's a mommy."

I'm glad he's okay, hubs.

I'm glad he thinks the ambulance is... cool.

I'm glad we're all together.

Then I breathe. I breathe. I breathe. I breathe. It's easy because we're together. I just need to remind myself.

"Much better, honey," the doctor murmur.

You squeeze my hand before you lift it to your face, and I smile when you kiss my fingers.

"Me too, Daddy." And then he kisses my fingers, too. I feel it.

It's warm and tingling.

I relax.

We're home soon. At least... in our home state.
I fall asleep. Again.

*O*O*O*

I whimper.

Not another day... I can't.

Everything hurts. Christ, my chest.

I don't want this. Please take me away. I can't live like this anymore.

Will I ever see you again, Edward?

I need you. Oh, God... I just... Please don't take EJ away from me. I'll do anything!

Hurt me more, hit me, starve me again... pour icy water over me... Just don't take my son. Please, he's all I have.

_Beep. Beep._

I choke on a breath.

_Beep. Beep. Beep._

But...

I'm blank.

_Beep. Beep._

I hear it.

Then I flinch. And gasp. And whimper again. Everything in me goes rigid. No, please don't touch me. Please don't touch me!

"It's me, angel." Hoarse whisper.
There's a quiet but strangled cry and I realize it's coming from me.

It comes back. In flashes, everything returns and I inhale audibly as I remember.

"Edward-" I choke up.

You're here. You're here. You're here. It happened. Oh, God... it all happened.

I exhale shakily as I force my eyes to open. Just a little bit, but when I see you, I open them fully.

You're here.

I breathe.

You're here.

"I'm here, baby," you breathe, and I hate seeing you in tears.

As I look around, I see that we're in a new hospital room. That means we're in New Orleans. We're back, hubs. Christ, we're in New Orleans! Home. Home.

"Where's EJ?" I whimper. He's not here. It's just you and me.

"Mom took him for ice cream down in the cafeteria," you reply thickly. "I sent Charlie with 'em cause... he's... um."

And now you're sheepish.

Don't be.

"Cause he's got a gun," I chuckle through my tears. It's no pretty sound.

You exhale and sorta smile a little. It's almost shy. You're beautiful.
"Yeah."

"S'okay, baby," I say quietly, and I'm smiling again.

Because you're here and everything is all right in the world again.

Then you look up at me with tear-filled eyes and please don't, hubs. Please don't be sad. You know I can't stand it.

Is there anything I can do? Tell me and I will do it. Anything to make you smile again. Anything. It's all yours anyway.

Your hand is so warm. I love it. But...

I breathe and blink back tears. I'm sorry, Edward, but... God, I need you. After all this time. I miss you so much, and I know it will be painful for you... I'm sorry for being so selfish but I can't help it. I need it. I need you. Please... please hug me. Hold me. Tell me we'll be okay. Tell me again that you love me. Fuck... kiss me. Kiss me.

"Don't cry, angel." You're pleading with me but that only make things worse. I cry harder. Tears fall. They don't stop.

"Please, hubs," I cry. More and more. Harder and harder. "I know it will hurt. I'm s-sorry... please..."

"What is it, Bella? Please tell me," you rasp.

You stand up and my breathing hitches as you slowly lean toward me, over me. I can't stop it. Please. Don't stop. I see how painful it is for your stomach. God, I'm so selfish. But my eyes say it all. And when you brush your thumb over my forehead, I start sobbing. My arms reach out. Too fucking weakly. Please come closer.

I need this.
Please.

"I n-need y-you, hubs," I sob.

And I gasp before I choke on a sob, because you're there in a flash.

All air leaves me in a whoosh.

You're holding me. Jesus, I can't believe it. You're holding me.

I shiver and shudder and it's you. Your face is buried in the crook of my neck and I hear you cry. Please don't cry, baby. Christ. Breathe, Bella. I do and I hold you. I ignore the throbbing ache and I hold you. It's everything. You're everything. We're here, Edward. Fuck, we're here. Together. I hold you harder. And I know you're in pain. You shouldn't twist your body this way but... I don't think you care.

"I love you, Bella," you cry into my neck. "Love you so fuckin' much... I can't... I can't be without you again."

I gasp for air. I can't speak, but I hold you harder and I hope you understand that I feel the same. You have to know. You have to know that I can't be without you either.

"It's you and m-me, angel," you whimper, and I feel your lips on my skin. It sends shivers through me and my arms ache as I hold you even harder. "You and me. We'll get through this." We both cry. It's hot against my skin. "We're a family, Bella." But when you let out a quiet sob, I break instead of heal. Again, I'm sorry for being selfish. Healing will take time. I love you. I'm here for you. Know that. Cry. Let it out, hubs. Fuck, you need it. So much. We will both need it. Over and over.

"I love you," I cry.
You cry, too, but I find comfort in the feeling of you holding me. It's been too long. And your lips, hubs. I need them, too. If only for a brief second, please kiss me.

Hold me, kiss me.

"Please, hubs," I force out in a strangled voice. I can't say more. I can't continue. So, I turn my head. Understand, Edward. Please know what I need. Please need it, too. Tell me it's not just me. And then you do. You do understand and turn your head, and we both whimper...

As you press your lips against mine.


I'm with you.

Slowly you move your lips against mine, and it's soft and sweet. Pecking and touching, so we can still breathe. And we breathe heavily as we hold back even more tears and cries.

"I love you," I whimper against your soft lips, and I cradle your face. I kiss you. I kiss you. I breathe and kiss you. I breathe and kiss you and taste our tears. But we're together. They're happy tears. Only happy tears.

"Always," you breathe and I taste it.

I caress your cheek and I'm glad your wound there is healing.

Then I open my eyes and yours are already open. Gazing down at me. Vibrant and beautiful. It's us. Green and brown. You always said they looked like coffee. You called them sparkling and I called you mushy. But when I called your eyes gorgeous, you just rolled your eyes at me.

You're so sweet. Do you know that, hubs?
I kiss you again and then you kiss me. Softly.

And again.

We're calmer and almost smiling. Our eyes are still locked.

"My angel," you breathe as you Eskimo me. "My Bella."

I breathe and smile and I can feel that the smile reaches my eyes. It's been too long.

"My hubs and my Edward," I whisper.

You smile and close your eyes. I see the contentment. I see it because I feel the same. For now, everything is bliss.

*O*O*O*

The next two days pass quickly. Between resting and spending time with you, EJ, dad, and Esme, we don't do much. We talk a little but mostly it's about embracing and just being together. And we kiss a lot. I love that and I know you love it, too. EJ thinks it's funny and giggles, which in turn make us all smile. But there is one more thing. It's right around the corner and we all hate it.

It's time to face people.

Yesterday, my new doctor told us that my magnesium levels were finally catching up with my other levels, and he said that I was strong. I didn't quite understand all the doctor-talk, but when he finally started speaking English, I found out that now that my body was accepting what I was fed, I could start counting on my body. In other words, my body was starting to heal, and as long as the results come back with more success, I can leave the hospital within ten days.

Ten days. In ten days I might be able to go home.
I will be on bed-rest for a month, and there will also be a strict diet for me to follow, but... I will be at home. At home with my husband and son. With you and EJ. The three of us will be at home. In our house.

There's no describing that feeling.

But before I go home, there are people I have to meet, and the first one comes today.

I don't like it one bit but I know it's for the best, and it's the woman who held EJ's sessions that recommended her to our family, and our recovery.

I don't know anything but I trust you. As long as I have you close, I'll be fine.

It's just a meeting. A small meeting. You and me... and that lady. Yeah, I can survive.

Deep breaths.

*O*O*O*

"Is it good, baby?" you ask, scrunching your nose a little.

"It's heaven," I chuckle before taking another sip of my juice.

You don't understand how my food can be heaven but... it is. It is, because the food Garrett gave me...

I shudder.

No, this is perfect.

When the nurse came in with my food, she told me, pretty much like she had done the other times, what my food included and what it would do for
my body. Everything about the vitamins, minerals, and proteins... yeah. Whatever.

I saw soup, a sandwich, a glass of juice, and a smoothie.

They don't have to tell me what's in the food. I will eat it anyway. It doesn't matter that my smoothie is green or that my juice is... well, sorta brown... and the soup is... the soup is...

"What would you call this color?" I ask, tipping my bowl of soup for you to see.

"Lemme see," dad asks, and I tip the bowl in his direction, to which he also grimaces. "Grey... brownish?"


Or something like that.

"Well, it tastes like chicken," I say.

It feels good to sit up properly. It feels really, really good, and it means we can kiss more without having you twist your body.

It feels good to have a body that's healing. Even if it's a slow ride.

Things just... feels good right now.

My needles are out, I can eat, I can go to the bathroom – with help from Esme and a fucking wheelchair – I can move my wrists and ankles a little, and my body allows me to move with a little more ease, which means I can sit. I'm still not allowed to actually do things on my own, such as sit up or go to the bathroom. Someone has to help me, but... that's okay for now. Even it's with help, I can sit up a little, and my muscles don't protest.
As you remind me of several times a day, "A small step is still a step."

Who knew you'd be the voice of reason, hubs?

Just kidding.


Esme and EJ are busy with one of many coloring books, all of which they have spread out on your bed, but... you don't use it anyway, so they sit there. Just like dad, you insist on sitting in a chair... which means you're wearing your pretty corset under your t-shirt. But you don't complain. The only thing I know you're thinking about... apart from me and EJ... are your cigarettes. You have quit, you say. And apparently you dragged dad with you. Don't take me wrong, I'm pleased, but... I wonder if you're ready. I don't want you to have extra shit to care about, and maybe that makes me sound horrible, but I don't care. In any way, I support you. I obviously don't want you to smoke. I really don't. Just don't put too much pressure on yourself right away.

"What are you thinkin'?" you murmur, playing with my fingers.

I smile when you smile.

"You."

You smile wider.

Yes, a good hour. Because that's how we deal. Hour by hour.

It shifts. Just this morning I was crying rivers, and my mind is exhausted. It's hard to sit still and not be able to ask too much. It's hard to just... be. I'm still so confused and scatterbrained. Like everything is pulling at me. But at the same time, all I want is to just hide here. I don't want to face anything. I have it all here. Who cares about the outside world?
I want to know but I'm afraid to find out.

I want to heal but I don't want to face my fears.

I want to be happy but not when I know that one little thing can make me fall apart all over again.

I want to hide but I'm growing bored and frustrated.

I wish there was a switch. A switch to go from broken to fixed.

Knock, knock.

I freeze. I drop my spoon.

Too soon, it's too soon. It's too soon!

"It's probably Dr. Ireland," Esme whispers.

No. No, it's so soon, hubs. I can't. Not yet. Oh, God... Not yet. Please.

"Bella, baby, please open your eyes," you whisper.

I closed them?

Yes, I did.

It's safer. Maybe. I don't know. But oh... it's too soon, Edward.

"Angel, I promise you're safe," you murmur as you cradle my face. My scrunched up face. "Please trust me, love. We're safe."

I hear clicking of heels. Just a few steps. I hear whispering. I think it's Esme and the... that other... that other one. The doctor that is supposedly so exceptional.

"Should I stay, Bells?" dad asks. "You want me and Esme to stick around?"
Yes. No. Fuck. I want... I want to be able. I don't want to be weak.

Then I feel your lips against my forehead. And you whisper, so quietly.

"Mrs. Cullen."

Well, god-fucking-damnit.

That's not fair, Edward.

"Start with breathin', angel," you whisper against my forehead. "It's just you and me and EJ."

But it's not. It's not.

"Breathe, baby. Just breathe." And I feel you. Your hands trailing up and down my arms. Slowly. Soothing and comforting. I focus on that. "I love you... You remember that?"

I hum and nod. Still focusing on your hands, your lips, and my breathing.

I breathe in. I breathe out.

"You're my girl, right?"

I nod again because fuck yes, I am.

I shiver... and you're my hero.

You're the one making me relax and breathe. You're the one making me strong. And you're right. I'm a fucking Cullen.

Inhale through my nose... and exhale.

Okay.

I nod. Okay.
"Can you open your eyes for me?" you murmur.

I think so. I'm relaxed and I'm breathing, so I guess opening my eyes is the next step, but... It won't be just you and me and EJ here, you know. It will also be dad, Esme, and... Dr. Ireland. What kind of name is that, anyway? She was named after a fucking country? Hmmm, I breathe. My snark is returning, and I'm sure that's your doing, too, hubs.

Slowly, I open my eyes, and it's you I see. Right there. So close. It makes me feel better.

"I love you," I breathe.

You smile and you're still my hero.

"I love you, too."

Shit. Okay. I have to do this. For our family.

But before I look toward the door, I see her. There. Sitting with Esme and dad. Right in front of me, but still not too close. That's good.

She doesn't look... mean. She looks sorta nice, I suppose. Older. Maybe in her late forties or early fifties. Definitely older than Esme and her forty-two years, but... umm, maybe Dr. Country is in dad's age. Okay, I think I can do this. She doesn't look evil.

Okay.

I'm glad you're still here, hubs. Stick around. Close to me.

"Scoot over, angel," you whisper, and I comply in a heartbeat, cause I want you here, too. In my bed.

"Can I also, Daddy?" EJ asks, squirming down from dad's lap. "I wanna sit wiv Mommy also."
"Actually, honey, why don't you, me and Pops go buy some chocolate," Esme suggests. "Remember they have M&M's here?"

"Um, okay," EJ replies, nodding with eager.

I look at you, and it feels good. Our son is smiling and can eat chocolate and play with toys. You have no idea how many times I've wanted to give him treats... or just... to be able to play with him. But he can do that now, hubs. Because we made it.

"We gots to be back soon," EJ tells Esme... sorta sternly, actually. "Only quick to get chocolates. Right, Nana?"

You tighten your hold on me as I bury my face in your chest. You know how big this is to me, because you feel the same. We've both been robbed.

"I promise we'll be real quick, Sweet," Esme promises in a chuckle. "Maybe you can sit on Pops' shoulders again. Want that?"

"Yes!" It's a giggle. It warms my body.

"Then hop on, Junior," dad says and I can practically hear the grin in his voice. "Let's go get some chocolate."

It doesn't take long until it's just you and me and Dr. Ireland left, but I focus on you only. You and the fact that dad is armed and keeping EJ safe. And they will be back soon. Real soon.

"Thank God he's got a gun," you whisper in my hair, shuddering a little... and we're on the same page. As always.

Deep breaths. We can do this, Edward. We're the Cullens and our son needs us.

Right.
Yeah.

So, I breathe and... turn to face the doctor.

I want to show strength, so I speak first. "Hi," I mutter. Fucking breathe, Bella. I do. "I'm Bella, but... I guess you know that."

Shit, I sound lame. Whatever, I opened up. I'm talking, and she looks happy. Not happy, maybe, but... she's smiling a little.

"I do," she says, smiling kindly. "And I'm happy to meet you both. I'm Dr. Anna Ireland, but please just call me Anna."

She has a warm voice. That's good, I suppose, and she looks friendly.

"Nice to meet you," you say and you're full of shit, hubs. You're lying. It almost makes me smile.

I look up at you. You're stiff and you're frowning.

"Relax," I whisper, to which to chuckle incredulously, and I suppose that makes sense. You just calmed me down.

Then you sigh, and you relax. Good.


"Did you meet Rachel, Bella?" Anna asks softly, and I shake my head. "But you heard of her?"

I nod. "Yeah. Edward told me about her work with EJ."

I know it was that Rachel woman who recommended this one. Apparently Rachel was only here for the investigation.

"Excellent," she says. "Well, I won't take up a lot of your time. This is just for you both to see if you can be comfortable with me."
"All right," you mutter. "And how do we find out?"

"We talk," Anna replies simply. "How about I tell you a little about myself first, and then if you feel ready, you tell me a little about what you know of the investigation."

"That won't take any time," I say, fighting the urge to snort. "I don't know anythin' about the police work."

"But you know about the days EJ spent with your husband before you were found?" she asks softly.

So damn softly all the time.

"Yes. Edward and dad filled me in."

"All right. Then we can talk about that."

Then we talked. She told us about herself and all the fancy degrees she has, but... it was kinda hard to resent her, cause she didn't say anything to come off as all-knowing or something like that. It was more like... she told us to gain our trust. I know she doesn't have your trust, but... I guess she was sorta nice. Wasn't she? She didn't press for information. She was no pusher. She did study us, of course, but I think that's hard to get away from. She will need to study us if she's gonna help us. And again, I'm caught between a rock and a hard place, cause yeah, maybe this short meeting went well, but... we didn't really do anything. But one day we will. And that day will come soon. According to Anna, that day can come any day now, cause there are people eager to speak to us, and we know this... but fuck, we're not ready for that. I'm not, EJ's not, and I know you're not.
But we don't have a choice. We have to get this over with if we want to move on, and we do. Jesus, that's all we want.

So... I think she will be the one. Anna will be the one helping us.

I just gotta talk to you first. You call me stubborn, hubs, but...

Dude. Pot, meet Kettle.

We can do this, Edward.

You got me, and I got you.

**Chapter 27**

*...Maybe it's not enough*

*Maybe this time it's just too much*

*Maybe I'm not that tough*

*Maybe this time the road is just too rough...*

~Road Salt by Pain of Salvation – chapter song.

**September 22nd**

**Edward Cullen.**

I still couldn't believe it.

It was impossible. I just... I couldn't fucking believe it.

Bella and I had both sat there, in her bed, and listened. We had listened to Jazz and Denali. It was all... so twisted. It was unbelievable and insane.

It had taken us two hours to calm my wife down, but we knew it was time to face the outside world. There was much to deal with and it wasn't going
to go away. We had to work through it all, and we were going to start with Denali and Jazz. I knew, the second Denali had entered the hospital room, that he wasn't here wearing a badge. He was here for some other reason, and it didn't take long until I found out.

At first I had been more focused on Bella. I knew it wasn't meeting new people that scared her. She had told me that after we had met with Anna. No, it was the fact that she had spent the past three years only focusing on EJ and Garrett that had split her in half. Focusing on Garrett had been for the purpose of being able to predict his next move. She had studied him to find out when she could relax and when she should back the fuck away. And focusing on EJ had been simple. Our son was the only joy she had.

But it all led to this. She was scared when she couldn't predict Anna's next words or movements. It made Bella feel out of control, and even though she had been out of control in Garrett's grasp, being able to predict his moves had brought her some peace, regardless of how little. It was what she had, and she was used to grasping at straws. So, after more than three years locked up with only two people, she was more than a little overwhelmed and confused. Because it wasn't just meeting Anna Ireland. It was everything. It was being reunited with me and her son, her dad and my mom. It was the hospital, the light, the food. Fresh air and freedom of fucking speech. Nothing had settled yet, and it would be a while before she could take a few things for granted. And until then, I knew my wife would analyze every move, take everything into consideration, and fear the worst. Yeah, it was quite fucking clear that she would have trust issues.

Who won't?

So...
When Jazz and Denali had entered our room this morning, I had focused on my Bella.

We went through introductions, and I was glad they both kept their distance. Even though I had told Bella about Denali, not to mention Jazz, and how he was our neighbor and a good friend of mine, I knew it was still overwhelming for Bella to meet new people, especially more than one at a time.

I also found out that I didn't like others coming too close to Bella... but I pushed it down.

Anyway, Denali sure had my attention when the small talk about the investigation was over.

He had been blunt.

"Edward... I need to tell you both something." He took a breath. "I had a son-in-law once. His name was Garrett. Garrett Call."

After almost punching him in the face for sending Bella into hysterics, Denali started explaining. Explaining about he knew the fucked up man named Garrett.

He told us everything about his daughters. Kate and Irina.

I remembered Garrett calling Bella that. Irina. That was Denali's dead daughter.

Bella was inconsolable and scared out of her mind. She didn't know, she didn't trust... To her, someone who knew Garrett might as well have been Garrett himself, and it took a long fucking time to calm her down. In the end Charlie had entered and taken a seat on the other side of her. That was the only way.
No words could describe the pain I felt. But I pushed it down.

As if all this wasn't enough, Jazz opened his fucking mouth.

"Cullen... remember my past in the army? Remember the man that lost it during my last mission?"

I nodded, wondering what the fuck that had to do with anything.

"That was Garrett."

And so the puzzle pieces connected.

It took some time but the memories came back to me. I remembered the cabin, that day, and Jazz... seemed to know Garrett. Yeah, he called Garrett Corporal and Garrett called Jazz Sergeant.

It was all connected, and I remembered sitting there with Bella in my arms, staring at Jazz and Denali as a shitload of emotions rushed through me. It was all too much. Anger, fury, disbelief, shock, and I... grew suspicious. Only for a little while but... if we were all linked, why the fuck couldn't we find my wife sooner? But of course, as soon as the questions came, I saw the answers. If Jazz had sat in on the sessions with EJ, would he have connected the dots sooner? But if he had, we still wouldn't have known where to find them. However, we would've been able to get Garrett's photo out there much sooner. And then, why the fuck didn't Denali understand? Again, I sorta understood. Cause Denali had no reason to believe it was Garrett. For all he knew, Garrett was dead. Jazz thought the same. So... really, there was nothing we could've done to make this happen sooner.

After they had told us their stories, Denali and Jazz told us a bit more of the investigation, and we filled Bella in about what really happened the night we were rescued.
My angel shone through then, and chuckled. She fucking chuckled when we told her about Garrett's 'suicide'. Now, I knew very well how unstable she was, but... I knew. I knew my Bella was in there. She was still alive. Her sass, wit, and attitude, it was all there.

Lastly, before Jazz and Denali left, they told us that things were running smoothly and that we still had a few days before we had to give our statements. Denali also told us that due to his link to Garrett and the case, he had to step down. He would still be there, but another agent would be in charge.

It didn't really matter to me. It would be painful regardless, right?

But I pushed that away for now.

**September 23rd**

"Daddy's strongest in all the world, right, Mommy?" EJ asked seriously, making it very hard for me and Bella to hide our amusement. "He gots to be."

In fact, it was so hard to hide it that I had to bury my face in Bella's back.

It was dawn, and I was sitting in a wheelchair by the hospital parking lot with Bella in my lap. In turn, Bella had EJ in her lap. So, yeah, we were three people bundled under the blanket, and I was pretty much hiding behind Bella at the moment.

"What makes you think that, sweetie?" Bella asked amusingly.

"Cause I'm here and you're here, Mommy. Daddy carry both us."

*Ah, this is just too good to miss out on.*

"That's right, nugget," I said, keeping a straight face. "I'm the strongest. Right, Mommy?" I asked, cocking a brow at Bella.
I totally ignored Charlie's chuckling. Mom's, too.

"Oh, yes," Bella said, furrowing her brows to look serious. "Daddy's the strongest." Then under her breath, quietly, only for me to hear, "Or... somethin'."

So, I sorta leaned in and bit her in the arm.

"Real mature, Cullen," she giggled, rubbing where I had nibbled a little.

It was heartwarming to hear.

Our eyes would water every now and then but it was just... it was still hard to believe. It was hard to believe that I had them both there, right with me. Bella and my son in my lap. My one arm around her waist, and my other around EJ.

Looking down to my right, I could see Bella's legs dangle over the armrest of the chair, as she sat sideways on me, and... just that tiny thing... to see her carefree for a minute, it was everything.

And it was thinking about things like this that made my eyes well up.

But it was happy tears.

Bella said nothing, just smiled softly and wiped one away.

"C'mere," I murmured.

Just to be able to kiss her again... there were no words.

"Love you," I whispered against her lips. Light, soft kisses. I loved them.

"Love you, too," she whispered thickly, playing with the hair in the back of my neck. "So much, hubs."

I hummed and shivered. It was... too amazing to describe.
"Nana, they're kissin' again!" EJ exclaimed. "Again and again, lots and lots!"

Bella and I both burst into hearty chuckles, unable to hold the amusement in, but still reluctant to break the peace with loud noises.

The early morning was peaceful and wonderful, and it was the second time we'd done this. Yesterday being the first time, but unfortunately it had rained, so we had to stay under the roof. But not this morning. I could already see that it was going to be a good day. At least weather-wise.

"Remember what I told you, Junior?" Charlie snickered.

I didn't see him because my forehead was very comfortably resting against Bella's, but I could hear him come closer. Both him and mom.

"No," EJ replied, and Bella and I looked at each other, smiling in anticipation. There was no denying that EJ and Charlie had gotten close, and it was wonderful to watch the two. It felt amazing to see EJ trust another person.

"Sure you do, Sweet," mom laughed softly. "Pops told you to tell Daddy somethin' next time they made kissy noises."

Yeah, this oughta be good.

I knew Bella thought so, too.

"Yes, I remember!" EJ gasped, then turned to me and Bella. "Mommy! You gots a Daddy on your face!"

Great, thanks. Now I sound like a fucking pimple.
"Your humor is awesome, Charlie," I said dryly, shooting him a glare, to which the others cracked up. "Ya'll think it's so funny, eh? Yeah, just laugh it up."

And they did.

Didn't matter that it was at me. It still felt amazing to hear laughter.

But after a while it got a bit tedious. My Cullen pride couldn't take it.

"Shush, people," I said. "I thought we were gonna watch the sunrise. Not laugh at me. And by the way? Why not say that Daddy has a mommy on his face, hmm? Hmm?"

"Aaw, poor hubs," Bella said, pouting. "Are we bein' mean?"

"Fuck, yeah," I mumbled, burying my face in the crook of her neck.

"Nana say tha's a bad word, Daddy."

Oh, shit. Yeah, I hadn't really thought of that.

Damn.

"You're right, bud," I said, nodding firmly. "I'll try not to say it again."

Bella snorted.

Charlie said, "Good luck, son."

Mom laughed.

They have such faith in me.

I couldn't really stay mad, though, because as I looked at Bella and saw where her eyes were glued, it all vanished. The only thing that I focused
on was her, and how I could practically read her mind. I could see it all so clearly on her face, in her eyes and how they welled up with emotion.

The sky was in pinks, reds, and oranges.

She was outside. Fresh air, deeply inhaling. I watched her.

She was about to see the first sunrise in over three years.

At first it was all about going outside, but she didn't want to encounter too many people because it would overwhelm her, and then there was the fact that her eyes were sensitive to sunlight. So, this was the time of day. Dawn. No people, and not too much light. It was just us. Family.

"Mommy, I'm sleepy again," EJ yawned.

"Come here," she whispered, motioning for him to lean back against her chest. "Sleep, sweetie." She kissed the top of his head. My eyes never left them. The two most important people in the world, and I held them both a bit tighter.

They're really here.

Then we watched, in silence, as the sun rose over the buildings.

Correction; they watched the sunrise.

I watched my wife. I watched how she cried silently. I felt how she held us tighter and closer.

September 25th

"You okay?" I asked her quietly, softly kissing her temple.

My abs tensed uncomfortable and my arm throbbed, but I pushed it down. It was much more important to hold Bella.
Because shit... I can do that now, angel.

"I'm fine, hubs," she said softly. "What about you? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

Woman rolled her eyes at me.

Yeah, my wife was returning all right.

"If you say the word fine one more time... I swear to God, Edward."

Yep. You're definitely returning.

"Fin- I mean, okay. I'm... okay. My arm is a bit tired but it's f- it's okay. Okay?"

Okay, that was a lie, because I was suddenly aware of Anna taking notes, and I just fucking knew the woman was studying me again, ready to play mindfucker on me. We were sitting much in the same way like last time. I had Bella close to me, in her bed, and the Ireland doc was sitting in a chair by the wall across from us, scribbling and scribbling and scribbling.

I can't even ask my wife if she's okay without have the doc write a fucking essay about me?

Terrific.

The purpose of having her here today was because Bella and I were giving our statements to the Feds in a few hours, and Anna was here to reassure Bella, and tell her what to expect. Well, I was going to give my entire statement, but Bella had a bit more to go through, so they were expecting for her part to be over after four sessions, and they were going to cover everything. Not too much in detail but still detailed enough. Simply to find out where they had been the past years, and if Garrett had committed more crimes, and which they were in that case.
Can’t wait, I thought sarcastically.

"How's your physical recovery coming along, Edward?" Anna asked softly.

I narrowed my eyes at her, unable to help myself, but I didn't know where she was going with this. Was there something else she really wanted to ask, but instead asked that? Shit... I was over thinking again. Maybe. And maybe not.

"It's going okay," I said slowly. She didn't seem satisfied with that answer, so I added, "I'm going to start rehabilitation with my arm as soon as we get back home. My face is practically healed, as you can see, and the wound below my ribcage is healin' well. They will remove the stitches before Bella's discharged."

There. I spoke. Better?

No biggie.

"And you, Bella?" Anna asked, still in that soft voice. "How are you healing?"

I couldn’t help but to smile at Bella because she had been doing so fucking well, and had already gained four pounds. Her levels were all going up, and her strength was slowly returning. It would take months and months of physical therapy, but she was getting there. To say I was proud of her would be an understatement.

"It's goin' well," Bella said softly. "I just wish I was stronger." She sighed wistfully. "And I wanna go home."

Me, too.

"Soon, angel," I whispered, kissing her forehead. "We'll get there soon."
A big part of me was afraid, though, to go home. The idea of finally seeing my Bella in our house... after so long... after all that fucking despair... after waking up without her for years, all alone in that house. But I pushed it down. I just wanted my wife happy again, and I was going to do everything to make that happen.

"Edward, how are you feeling about leaving your statement today?" Anna asked.

I sighed, turning back to her, and shrugged. "I don't know. I mean, it's gonna be hard, I guess. Relivin' that night isn't exactly what I want."

"You mean the night you were rescued."

"Obviously." I fought the urge to roll my eyes.

*Man, she can scribble, that doc.*

"Do you remember the night?" she asked... still softly.

Again I shrugged. "Unfortunately, yeah."

I remembered it too well. Seeing my broken angel, tied to a pole. All the bruising, her skin... skin and bones. Lifeless, pleading, crying. All that heartbreak.

*Fuck.*

I pushed that thought away.

"It must be hard to relive the pain Garrett inflicted on you," she commented gently.

"Hard doesn't really cover it," I muttered. "I'll never forget seeing her..." I swallowed hard, took a breath. "It broke me to see her tied up. It just...*fucking broke me.*
I sighed and shook my head.

_Fuck. No more. She's here now. You're here, beautiful._

"Mm... of course... but I was talking about the physical pain Garrett inflicted on you, Edward."

_Oh._

_That._

I shrugged. "It was nothin' compared to Bella."

Anna furrowed her brow, studying me, but only for a minute... before she started scribbling again.

I gave up on understanding her.

Instead I focused on my angel. Her hair was a bit shinier, a bit fuller. And she was... still the most beautiful girl I'd ever laid eyes on. Still my angel. My Bella, and I couldn't wait to see her quirk. I couldn't wait to see the multicolored knee-socks, the combat boots that were reserved for her time of the month, and her logic when she told me how our shoes were supposed to sit next to each other in the hallway. Or how our toothbrushes had to be boy-color and girl-color to represent the two of us.

"And what about you, Bella? How do you feel about leaving your first statement today?"

I watched my wife as she contemplated her answer. How she pursed her lips. How she scrunched her nose a little. She didn't have any freckles anymore.

_Because the sun brought out those... and there was no sun for her._
"It will be hard to be alone with an agent I don't know," she admitted quietly.

My heart clenched. It was painful and I didn't want to think about it. But it was true. I wasn't going to be there. I wasn't allowed. I hated it. I fought... but they said they had to do it with her privately. The only thing I could do was to wait outside the door.

I held her a little tighter. Needing it.

"I can't even imagine," Anna said quietly. "But remember that you can take a break if you need it, okay? Just say the word and Edward will be there."

Yeah. Nothing can stop me.

Bella nodded, took deep breaths.

The doc continued for a while, telling us a little about what to expect, and we knew today was going to be hard. Painful. Because they would cover the abduction. Bella would sit in here, all alone, telling an agent how Garrett had taken her, and I felt selfish because I didn't wanna hear about it. I had no desire to find out about the hell she lived through. I knew how fucking selfish I was. But could you blame me? Was it weird that I didn't want to hear about the abuse? It didn't matter if Garrett didn't actually hit her or... fuck... violated her. He still abused her. He still robbed her of her life. He still made her miss so much. He still... he still took her from me.

Fuck, my chest. Will the pain ever go away?

I pushed it away.

*O*O*O*
"You gonna listen, son?" Charlie asked, holding up a pair of headphones for me.

I couldn't speak. My throat was closed up and I knew... I knew if I tried, it would be... strangled.

I didn't have EJ with me because he was with mom and some Dr. Masen in the cafeteria. I didn't have Bella with me either, because she was in there, in her hospital room, and I was out here, in the hallway, with Charlie, Denali, and another agent.

I felt... alone. I felt much like I had felt the past few years.

And no, I don't want to listen.

I nodded once, and took the damn headphones.

We didn't take up much space, as we stayed by the wall. It was just some agent, holding a laptop. Then Charlie, me, and Denali, standing there with headphones. I... I didn't want this. But I manned up, I guess. And we listened. We listened as the agent in there asked Bella questions, and we listened as she answered every question flatly. No emotion in her voice. She was... It was like she wasn't there.

It was all pressing down at me, pulling and twisting in every direction. My insides were churning, screaming at me to run in there and steal her away. But I couldn't. Instead I stood there, stoic, and listened as Bella told her version of the night our lives were shattered. I listened as she described her last phone call with me, as she filled up our old truck... and then... how she was grabbed from behind and pushed into the truck. But that wasn't enough. No, she also told us about Garrett sedating her.

Then when she woke up, she was in Arizona.
The agent, thankfully a female agent, asked her if she wanted to take a break, and I pleaded with her internally. Please take a break, angel. But she didn't. Bella said she wanted to cover Arizona before she fell apart. She admitted it so easily. Just said, "Let me get this out before I fall apart."

So, they continued.

Charlie and I listened. We stood there with clenched fists, strained muscles, tears falling and chests heaving.

Bella spoke about the pregnancy and it killed me. It all fucking broke me, but I pushed it down and continued to take it all in. Even when Bella, still void of emotion, spoke about a nurse, a fucking nurse, I stood there. I just stood there and let it all hit me.

Garrett most likely killed the woman who helped deliver my son.

My wife lived with a sadistic murderer for more than three years.

How is she even alive?

That night, EJ didn't believe Bella when she said they were only happy tears. For hours, I held Bella. She got it out. She sobbed and shook as I held her, and there was not a fucking thing I could do about it. I sat there completely useless. I couldn't comfort her. I couldn't take the pain away.

After a while, mom took EJ to the cafeteria, and Bella clung to me, so desperately. As if I was leaving. It all tore at me.

But I pushed the pain down, because if my wife could live through that... and still come out alive, then I better suck it up and listen to her. I wasn't going anywhere. No matter how much it pained me, I would listen to it all.
Luckily my own statement didn't take that long to give. In the same way as Bella, I just got it out. I spoke flatly. Like I was detached. It was easier that way.

I was just… numb.

As I sat there with my crying wife, I just... I sat there, wondering when I wouldn't be able to take it. Not that I would... back away... never... my family is everything... Bella and EJ are everything, but... was I going to break? After hearing how my wife was locked up, all alone throughout her pregnancy, I felt it all shatter inside me. I knew then... at least it felt like it... that I wouldn't be enough for them. I felt too weak. I didn't feel like a man. I felt like a fucking child. Helpless... useless.

*Will I be enough?*

**Chapter 28**

*I stare at the ceiling from my side*

*I reach out and you're right there*

*But you're lost in the details*

*I wait for the end of a long night...*

*Something is changing between us...*

*Can we hold on, can you hold on*

*Cause I need you more than you know now...*

*Don't run away 'cause I need you more than ever now...*

~*Blame It On The Changes by Dashboard Confessional – chapter song.*

*September 26th*
Bella Cullen.

I'm worried about you, hubs. Your smile is forced, your eyes are full of anguish. You won't open up to me and I know you're trying to be strong. But can't you see that you're already so strong? Can't you see how much you already do for me? Don't you realize how much your touch calmed me down yesterday after my first statement?

This isn't you.

But then again, I'm not me anymore either, am I?

We have changed.

So, you shouldn't act like your old self. You can't handle this like a minor issue, Edward. This is anything but minor, and we can't be stubborn. You can't hide. It will only hurt. We have to work together, which we were always good at. Remember, hubs? We were the best team. Always. This has to continue but we have to include more people in our team. We really need that.

"You haven't answered, Bella," Anna reminds me softly. "I asked what your greatest fear is."

I breathe deeply, thinking about my words, but... I know I have to tell the truth. Right? I need to, I think. Honesty, yes? So... I should tell Anna that my greatest fear is that my husband won't get help. I should tell her that you think too much about me. I should tell her that you overuse the word 'fine.'

I raise my head and look at Anna. "My biggest fear is that Edward will sweep his own pain under the rug."

I ignore your humorless chuckle as you sit in the chair next to my bed.
It stings, Edward.

Anna nods thoughtfully, watching you. "And you, Edward? What's your greatest fear?"

I watch you now. You watch me, too. It hurts because you're hiding behind a mask of indifference.

This isn't the time to be strong, hubs. Please talk to me. Open up. Break down and be honest.

You speak, eyes glued to me. Quiet voice. "I'm afraid Bella and EJ will be disappointed in me."

My eyes well up immediately, and... "How could we ever be disappointed in you, Edward?" My voice cracks. I'm in disbelief.

"Because I'm not strong enough," you say flatly.

You're killing me, hubs. You're fucking killing me.

You look away. Your face is blank.

My tears fall.

I can't believe you, baby. I can't believe that you would ever think that. Can't you see the strength in reaching out? Can't you see that you're my rock no matter what? But most of all, can't you see that you're EJ's hero already? You can't do wrong in his eyes. Fuck, I'm changing my mind just because of that. Or maybe... shit, I don't know. I just... I mean, you are strong, hubs. It's just that you would be even stronger if you allowed others to help you. You need to acknowledge your own pain. These past years have been hell for you, too.

"Bella, what are you thinking?" Anna asks softly.
I wipe my cheeks and look at her, and I force myself not to shrug anything off. I will be honest.

"I don't like that Edward thinks he has to pull this off all by himself in order to be strong." I snifflle. "I want him to realize that his own pain-"

"Quit talkin' like I'm not here!" you snap loudly.

I flinch and shivers run through me, quickly followed by another set of tears, and I hate this. I hate this, Edward. I fucking hate it. I'm having a hard time as it is to reach out, because believe me, I want to hide, but I won't. I fucking refuse, Edward. You can forget it. I won't back down.

"Fuck!" you groan. You pull at your hair, you lean forward – elbows on your knees. I know you're frustrated. "I'm sorry for yellin' at you, angel, but I'm fine. You need to realize that."

I shake my head. No, no, you can't honestly believe that. You can't believe that you're fine. You're a fucking mess, baby, and frankly, it would be fucked up if you weren't.

"Edward?" Anna says quietly, tilting her head. "There is nothing fine about this." Her words are soft and kind. I feel comfortable with her, I really do. "You lived without your wife and son for more than three years without knowing whether they were alive or not. It hasn't even been a month since you saw your son for the first time." She takes a breath. "Can you really tell me you're fine?"

You can't, Edward. There's no way.

"Fuck it," you mutter. "I need a smoke."

I watch through a blurry vision as you leave.
I whimper. "This isn't him, Anna." More tears fall. "He needs to get better." My voice cracks, I won't survive if you don't get better. I want my husband smiling, I need it. "What can I do?" My eyes are begging for an answer.

Anna's eyes are sad.

"It's going to take time, honey," she says softly. "And you might be right about this being out of character for him, but self doubt is to be expected in this situation. It's normal and understandable for family members to victims to feel guilt, self doubt, and frustration." She takes a deep breath, like she's thinking about her words. I listen intently because I need my hubs healed and grinning crookedly again. "Edward is a victim in this situation, too, we know this." I nod. "But you were the one Garrett took away, you and your son. This is what Edward sees. Even if he suffered through hell, living without you, he only sees you and EJ as the victims."

"But that's wrong," I croak. "All that pain will grow inside of him, won't it?"

"It won't go away by itself, no," she sighs quietly. "He needs to open up but it can take time. Because as important it is for him to realize he needs help, it's also important not to pressure him to opening up too soon."

That's not what I want to hear but I have to trust Anna.

I have to.

I wipe my cheeks with the sleeve of your hoodie, I love wearing it. I used to wear your clothes all the time, remember? You used to laugh and kiss my nose because my cotton shorts disappeared under your shirts. I want that, hubs. I want you to laugh and kiss my nose again.

"So, I will give him time?" I whisper, biting down on my lip.
"Not necessarily but don't push him into breaking down," she explains gently. "Don't tell him to 'break down.' Those words will most likely have a negative effect on him. They contradict what he wants, and he wants to stay strong. He wants to be your support."

I nod in understanding because I understand. You were always the man, hubs. Strong and confident. I can definitely see that those words would make you roll your eyes and keep your mouth shut.

"Bella," she says before pausing. Again thinking about her words, maybe. "Even though Edward is keeping everything to himself right now, I want you to know that he's still working towards better days. His mind is processing and will continue to do so until he's ready to talk." She smiles ruefully. "I won't go into the whole the-human-mind-is-extraordinary with you, but it's still true. Edward's mind will let him know when enough is enough."

"And then what?" I breathe.

She purses her lips. "We can't be sure how it will happen, but in one way or another, Edward will come to you. You are his major concern and confidant. He might be your rock, but you're also his. That's very evident. Your love is very strong."

My eyes well up.

Our love is strong, hubs. It really is. It never faltered.

We can do this.

"So, until he comes to me willingly..." I sniffle. "I will urge him gently? Is that it?"

She nods slowly. "Yes, talk to him, open up, but don't expect him to do the same. It will come when he's ready, but watching you open up might
help him reach that place sooner." Then she frowns. "Edward is a very proud man, isn't he?"

I nod. I want to smile. "Yes. He always was."

"Well, just give him time. But... Bella, I can't be certain how he will come to you. It can be loud and emotional, and it can be a quiet plea. In other words, there's no knowing when he'll be ready. Something can trigger him, and it can come out sounding harsh and angry."

For some reason I understand right away. "I think I know what you mean. Opening up might be... like defeat to him? Because of his pride?"

"Exactly," she says, smiling kindly. "I just want you to know that just because he shouts and accuses, doesn't mean he means it. But like I said, I don't know how he will come to you."

Again I nod, and I think I know. I think you will lose it in Edward-style. You will shout. But don't worry, baby. I can handle it. We will work it out together.

"As you know, I live very close by," she murmurs. "Never hesitate to call, Bella. And if I have other patients, I will be there as soon as I can. Okay?"

"Okay. Thank you, Anna."

"No need to thank me, honey. Now, are you prepared for your next statement?"


But I don't want to. Today I'm going to tell Agent Green about what happened after Phoenix, and... I don't want to. I don't want to relive those days. No matter how detached I get when I speak, I still see him before my eyes. I can still smell the rooms he kept me in. I can still remember
the grease in my hair, the way my clothes stuck to me because they were dirty. Or the way I had to be everything for my son. I wasn't a mommy, not a real one, not the one I wanted to be. But in a way I was, and more. I was all he had. I was his mother, his father, his friend and teacher. I had to play every role, and it was painful. So incredibly painful to smile for him.

"As ready as I'll ever be, I guess," I mutter.

I can't really explain Anna's expression, but I just know that she's understanding and kind. She's not overbearing or judgmental. She's simply a kind woman who isn't defined by all her fancy degrees. She's very down to earth.

"Well, I will be here, Bella. Then if you want to talk after meeting with Agent Green, just let me know."

I already know I won't call on her. All I will need after my statement is you.

I will want you to hug me close.

But I nod to her, knowing that I can talk to her if I want to.

"Okay, honey. I'm going to leave you for a bit. Want me to find Esme and EJ for you?"

I smile, knowing we will go through a minor hell later on with EJ's sweet tooth. Maybe we should tell Esme not to give him so much damn candy from the cafeteria, hubs. "Yes, please."

Then my smile falters. "What about Edward?"

"Give him time. He loves you and his son too much to go far. He will come back soon."
I exhale. Please come back to me, hubs.

*O*O*O*

"Are you ready to start, Mrs. Cullen?" Agent Green asks softly.

When I first met her, I didn't tell her to call me Bella. Edward told her automatically to call him Edward. Just like that, an automatic response as he tried to hide the pain of having me in here, alone, talking about my past. And maybe that's why I didn't tell her to call me Bella. Maybe I need to hear Mrs. Cullen in the middle of this mess. It's my reminder. I'm not with Garrett anymore. I'm in a hospital room with an FBI agent. There's a recorder and a camera. A small one. And I know hubs and dad are right outside listening, just like last time.

"Shoot," I sigh, resting my chin on my knees.

I'm still wearing your hoodie. A black one with the Twilight-logo, but it's a new one. Esme must have grabbed it from the bar because it doesn't smell like you yet.

There is no lint.

I'm also drowning in a pair of your light grey sweats.

EJ laughed at Mommy's daddy-clothes.

Deep breaths.

"Last time you told us about Phoenix," Green says, flipping through her notepad. "I quote; He called me Irina for the first time in Phoenix. He was furious when he found out I was pregnant. He stopped talking to me. He became a robot. He decided it was time to move to Hamilton. Let's take off there, shall we?"
Deep breaths. I nod. I rest my forehead, instead of my chin, on my knees. I think your sweats are new, too. They don't smell you. They don't smell our house. Why did Esme buy new clothes? Couldn't she pick up clothes from home?

Home. Home. Jesus, only a few more days to go.

"What can you tell me about after Phoenix?"

I take a breath, I don't look up, I close my eyes, I hug my legs closer.

I'm a ball, drowning in daddy-clothes.

"Garrett took us to Hamilton, Montana," I say flatly. "It was in the middle of the night. EJ was a week old... maybe two weeks old... He put a bag over my head..."

Deep breaths, I see him, I don't want to.

I'm Mrs. Cullen. Think and focus. Garrett's dead. I'm here, you're right outside.

"At first he tried to take EJ from me," I continue. "But I refused to let go. He gave up and let me have EJ in my arms. Then we were in a car."

My heart clenches.

"And he drove you to Montana? Hamilton?"

"Yes."

"Do you know how long it took? Did you stop on the way?"

I squeeze my eyes shut. Memories stab me.

"You stay in the fucking car, Irina. And get the fucking kid to quit crying."
I flinch.

"Only for food and gas," I breathe. "I don't remember much. I had the bag over my-, I couldn't see-"

Deep breaths. Fuck.

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"What happened when you arrived in Hamilton, Mrs. Cullen?"

Cullen. Cullen, that's me.

"I don't really know," I mutter. "He pulled me out of the car. I focused on keeping EJ close to my body. I couldn't see anything... um... it smelled very... outdoorsy. Like we were at a ranch... or something. And then we were inside... He ushered me into a room, a small room. He removed the bag and then he left me and EJ there."

Wide eyes, shaky breaths. *I hold you close to my body, EJ. I don't know where we are, I'm so sorry for being a bad mother to you. I wish I could give you what you want and need. The room is empty. Completely empty... except for a bucket. Wooden floor, light blue walls. The wallpaper is coming off. The small window is covered from the outside. The light bulb hanging from the ceiling flickers. I'm so sorry, EJ. I wish you could be with your daddy instead. God, Edward...*

"What more can you tell me?"

"Nothing," I say flatly. "I was locked up in that room for a year. Garrett never spoke."

I remember for each day that passed... how the walls seemed to close in on me.
Closer and closer, suffocating me.

That's where I started telling EJ stories about home. Even if he was a newborn and wouldn't understand, I needed to use my voice. I needed to talk about what I used to have. I wasn't afraid that I would forget. I was afraid I was going to wake up and believe my old reality was nothing but a figment of my imagination. So, I kept talking. I talked and talked to my son. I held onto every memory.

I was so alone.

"Do you want to take a break, sweetie?"

"No," I croak.

My eyes are still closed but tears fall anyway. I rock back and forth, breathing your clothes in. I wish they smelled like you.

"What about food? What about clothes and stuff for Edward Junior?"

Deep breaths.

"I told Garrett. I banged on the door, shouted at him, told him what my son needed, what I needed." I exhale. "When I woke up... Garrett had gotten me what I needed. He didn't give me the food I needed but he gave me what EJ needed."

"Did you ever hear Garrett leave?"

"Rarely. Sometimes I woke up to him shouting outside, but I don't know... and then he would drive off, only to come back shortly after, often with food." I feel nauseous. I wouldn't call it food. The shit he fed me. "He had a thing for giving me carbs and sugar. French fries, potato skins, fried cheese, sugary sodas and stale cookies. It weakened me. I was always tired but I couldn't sleep very well."
"And this went on for a year? You never saw him?"

"Yea, a year. And I only saw him when he ushered me and EJ into the bathroom for our weekly shower."

"What about going to the bathroom?"

I swallow the lump in my throat.

"I had a bucket," I whisper. "Garrett took care of it while I was asleep."

I flinch as I hear a bang coming from outside.

The wall, did you punch it, Edward?

Please let this be over soon.

"Did you ever get sick, Mrs. Cullen?"

I nod, forehead still attached to my knees. "I had the flu once. Only for a few days, but yea. I was just lucky that EJ didn't catch it."

"Garrett never let you leave the room for doctor-appointments? Did a doctor or anyone ever visit?"

"No, nothing. Garrett bought vitamins for EJ and I didn't want to press my luck. I asked for a few things but when I didn't get them, I understood that Garrett didn't want me to have it."

"What did you ask for?"
"Painkillers and better food. The food he bought gave me headaches."

"But he didn't bring any of this for you?"

"No. He bought EJ Tylenol for children because he was teething. He cried a lot and Garrett didn't like that. EJ had been crying all night, and I was afraid he was sick at first. I pleaded for a doctor first but..." I trailed off.

I remember. The nights he screamed and sobbed.

I was frantic. My heart was stuck in my throat.

I remember the nights you and I spent on the porch. We read parenting books and baby-books, but in Hamilton I didn't remember what I had read. I couldn't remember. I thought he was sick.

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"Is there anything you can add about your time in Montana?"

I swallow a sob.

"No."

*O*O*O*

I sob, you hold me.

I cling to you, you hold me tighter.

We say nothing.

You're in pain, so much pain, but you say nothing.

You don't say a word. It's almost like... if you open your mouth, you will fall apart. So, you stay quiet and it kills me.
I just love you, baby. You and EJ. I need you.

I cry harder.

**September 27th**

"Can you tell me what happened after Hamilton, Mrs. Cullen?"

I'm sitting on my bed, still wearing your clothes. I refuse to part with them.

I look out the window. It's cloudy. My chin is on my knees.

"He came into my room," I say, still looking out the window. I'm numb. "He said that he thought 'she' would be there because 'they spent their honeymoon there'. Now I know, from what Agent Denali told me, that Garrett talked about Kate. I didn't know at the time."

I take a breath. "He told me we were moving to Maine."

I tell Agent Green about Maine. I tell her about the basement I was locked up in. I tell her that I'm not sure we were really there because I only had his words to go on. I never saw anything. One day I was in Montana, then we were in a car and I was in the trunk.

Then I was in a basement.

I tell her about Garrett taking EJ to daycare. I tell her. When she asks me if I want to take a break, I say no. So, we continue. I tell her everything I know, which isn't much. And then we move on to Utah. I tell her about that, too. I answer questions and I tell her about Garrett's behavior and few words. Lastly, before I fall apart in exhaustion and pain, I tell her about Washington and Forks. I tell her about the time there, I tell her about EJ being my only friend. I tell her. I remember so vividly.
Once we're done, you come in. You wrap your arms around me and I sob again.

You say nothing.

Not a word, you're killing me.

I'm breaking all over.

September 28th

My last statement.

I tell Agent Green about losing my son in New Orleans. I tell her that I didn't know where we were. I tell her about being locked up. I tell her that Garrett stopped feeding me. I tell her about the buckets of ice cold water he poured over me. I tell her about Garrett's change. How he became more unpredictable and unstable. I tell her about being tied up. I tell her about leaving again, this time to Memphis. I tell her about the bunker, I speak of the shit Garrett said. About killing Edward, about wanting me to desire Garrett. I tell her how fucking delusional he was. I tell her about Garrett throwing in food to me again. I hated it all. I speak. I'm numb, I just get it out. I cry, thinking how lost I was. I whimper, thinking of how I gave up on life. Garrett had taken everything from me. My husband, my son, my dad and Esme, friends, my home, my freedom, my spirit, my hope. I had nothing left.

We're done after three hours.

I'm done.

I'm shaking.

I need you but you don't enter the room.

You're not here.
This time you don't come in to hold me.

Esme comes in and tells me that dad is following you. I find out, hubs. Esme tells me where you are. Dad is with you. He's pleading with you to come back here.

You're at Twilight.

Just you, dad... and Alec. I haven't seen him in so long.

The three of you.

I push my pain away, only for a little while, as I hold EJ to me.

I pretend to be okay for a little while. For his sake.

But I'm dying inside.

Anna's here, too. Talking to me.

When dad calls to tell us that you're on your way, Anna and Esme take EJ to another room so he can sleep.

And when you come in, I fall apart.

You're drunk, Edward.

You're drunk.

It's past midnight.

"Honey, I'm ho-ome," you slur, smiling bitterly.

Sobs rip through me, at which your mask finally falls.

And you crumble before my eyes.

Chapter 29
...It seems like yesterday

That we were making plans

For the future

But it's been so long...

...I'm haunted by your face

And the memory of your kisses

Sweet kisses...

...Do you remember?

I still remember so much

I remember never feeling so alive...

...We swore we would never end

We knew our love transcended space and time...

...Do you remember?

God, I remember so much...

~I Remember by Stabbing Westward – chapter song.

**September 29th**

**Bella Cullen.**

You're drunk.

It's past midnight.

"Honey, I'm ho-ome," you slur, smiling bitterly.
Sobs rip through me, at which your mask finally falls.

And you crumble before my eyes.

Literally... I watch as you sink to your knees next to my bed, and I'm so broken for you, for all of us. Why, Edward? Why do you do this to yourself... and... me.

No, I don't understand and I cry harder and harder as you clutch your chest.

Movements in my peripheral make me look up, and I see dad and Anna outside the door. Standing, looking in through the glass, will they come in? I don't... I don't know what to do.

Then Anna motions with her hands, silently wondering if I want help.

I'm glad she's here, sticking around for us, but... I think I have to do this on my own. I think I want it, so I shake my head at her. I've got this. Maybe. I have to.

With the sleeves of your hoodie, I wipe my face. Not that the tears stop.


You shake your head. Rocking back and forth, clutching your chest, looking down at the floor. All the pain, God, the pain, you can't live like this. We can't. I can't. I won't have it, hubs. I fucking refuse. So help me...

I get out of the bed, I'm a bit stronger. I get tired easily but my muscles carry me. Towards you, I won't quit, Cullen. Fuck no. I'm your wife, damnit.

"Get up," I breathe, slowly crouching in front of you. "Get up and talk to me, baby."
You shake your head, I don't think you're really here. You're in your head and whatever you have in there is killing you. Get it out, baby. If you won't, I will force it out of you. Because it's time. I know my statements crippled you. It's time you vent.

So, I push.

I will push, Edward.

"If you don't talk, hubs... then, I will," I say.

I sit down next to you, Indian style on the floor. Drowning in daddy-clothes. Your clothes. You need to heal.

"Please don't," you breathe out. "I can't..." Another shake of your head. "I c-can't take it, angel."

You have to. If you won't talk, I will.

Here I go.

"One of the first stories I told EJ..." I take a breath as you stiffen. "Was about our wedding. I told him at nights... when he was just a little baby... about our wedding... and about our friends and... the song. Do you remember the song Emmett played for us?"

I know you remember.

"We danced under the big tree," I whimper. "I sang along and you smiled... and you kissed me. It was magic to me, Edward. It was what I had when I was alone with our son. All the memories-"

"Please..." Stop, Edward. Stop shaking your head. "I remember, Bella... God knows I remember." Your voice cracks. "I mean... fuck... all those years... All I had were memories."
I know. We both lived with nothing but memories, so can't you see how we're both victims?

"Tell me," I whisper. I reach out, slowly, and I touch your arm. "Talk to me, hubs. You've heard about my time. Isn't it my turn to know?"

Your head snaps up, oh, eyes bloodshot.

God, you need this.

"My time, Bella?" you grit out. Yes, your time. Get it out. "You wanna know what I did while you lived through hell?"

I nod once. I'm not backing down, even if you look pissed. I don't care.

"I did... nothing," you say venomously. "I stopped livin'. I stopped. I gave up. Like a fuckin' coward."

No, no, no, hubs. Don't do this! Don't push yourself down!

"Stop," I breathe. "You're not a-"

You cut me off and you've reached your limit. "No, Bella. You fuckin' asked for it, so let me fill you in." You stand up, I do too. I follow you, you sit down in your chair. I sit on my bed. Please, don't push it down anymore. Your pain is real. "I... shit... I..." you chuckle humorlessly, pulling at your hair.

Then you look at me, and I see the heartbreaking sadness in your eyes.

You say nothing for a while.

But I can read you, hubs. I know you're lost in a memory.

I see the wistfulness.
"You were… are… everythin' to me, Bella," you whisper. "We shared it all, baby." Your eyes well up. Mine do, too. "And… everythin' was just… so fuckin' perfect..."

I blink back tears.

"Then you were just gone." You release a breath, slowly reaching forward to rest your elbows on your knees. "I lost my best friend… the love of my life, my wife… the mother of my unborn child… My son. So… don't talk about memories, Bella, 'cause I fuckin' remember." You shake your head again, you wipe your cheeks. "For more than three years, I saw you. I saw you everywhere, Bella. In our house… at the bar… in Charlie… The sonogram picture on the fridge."

Oh, _God_, Edward...

I gasp, my hand covers my mouth.

It's still there, isn't it? The picture, it's still there on the fridge?

Did you... Has nothing changed? Is our house exactly the same?

You whimper. "But you weren't there, angel. And everytime... every mornin'... I died all over again. Wakin' up in our bed... without you... you were never there."

_Please_, Edward... I... Christ, I need you.

I cry silently.

I was dead without you, too.

"I can't even imagine," I croak. I really can't. Fuck, the pain you must be in. To live in our house where we shared everything. All the plans we made for our future. All the memories.
I carried them in my heart, but you lived with them.

"No," you say, frowning. "You don't get it, Bella." You look up at me. "I was pathetic," you spit our angrily. "While some psychopath abused you, I cried myself to sleep because I didn't have you next to me!"

I flinch.

You stand up, you're close now. Close to falling apart completely. "While that fuckin' lunatic held you locked up in basements, I did nothin'. Nothin', Bella! Can't you see? Can't you see how pathetic I was?"

Jesus, the pain. You don't see... Don't talk to me about seeing, because you're one failing to see your own version of hell.

You pace, you pull at your hair, you shake your head.

Tainted, foul, you hate this. Your thoughts are eating you, swallowing you hole, please, baby, talk to me! See reason. I beg you, hubs. I need you to see how messed up this is. I need you to understand how... how... how incredibly heavy your pain in weighing on you, and how much your pain matters. It isn't just mine, it's yours too.

"Every single day, I got swept away in memories," you growl. "I did all I could to keep you with me. Fuck... Your face haunted me... It was everywhere. All the pictures, angel-" you choke up. "The smell of you... Christ, all the videos from barbeques... Your fuckin' laughter, Bella. I had it on repeat in my head."

"Edward," I whimper.

My heart clenches, my breaths are choppy, it hurts. Fuck, it hurts. Everywhere, my heart, my chest... heavy, gutting.
"You have no idea, Bella... You have no idea how fuckin' sorry I am," you rasp, still pacing, you won't look at me. "I was dying, Bella." You stop dead in your tracks. Your eyes, painful eyes, full of anguish, lock with mine. "I spent months tryin' to drink my life away while you hade no choice but to give yours away."

And my heart shatters.

I choke on a sob.

"Yeah, you had no idea, did you?" you say bitterly. "You think I'm so fuckin' strong? Well, while you were locked up in Phoenix or Hamilton, fightin' for your life, as well as EJ's, I-... I tried to drink mine away."

"Edward," I choke out, shaking my head. "Don't do this to yourself... Don't act like-"

"Like what, Bella!" you snap, glaring at me. "I shouldn't act like your hell was worse than mine? Fuck that! It's nothin' but true! You fought for your life for more than three years! I spent months pushin' mine away! Everythin' and everyone! I wanted nothin' to do with it!"

"S-Stop, Edward!" I sob.

I can't. Fuck, breathe, Bella. Nausea.

No.

You're killing yourself.

"I don't c-care," I cry. "I don't care how you dealt with your fuckin' pain, Edward! All I care about is movin' forward!"

I gulp, I clutch my stomach, fuck...
"There's no changin' the past," I whimper, my eyes close, it hurts. Stinging, stabbing and everywhere. "I just want us to deal with it, hubs. Please..."

"I can't deal with it, Bella." Now you sound defeated. That's worse. "I will always live with this gut wrenchin' guilt."

I cry out.

I shake my head.

I want to wake up.

Tell me this is a nightmare. Tell me it's not real.

"You have nothin' to feel guilty abou-"

"Bullshit, Bella!" you shout, please stop. I flinch, curling into a ball. "No matter what, I will always be the one who threw his life away while his wife was robbed of hers!"

NO!

"Stop sayin' that!" I scream. I'm panting, gasping, I have to get this out. "Don't you fuckin' dare, Edward. Don't you fuckin' dare tell me that you threw your life away!" I get out of the bed, I'm in front of you in two seconds. You're tall, so tall, but you've got some fucking nerve, Edward. So, I give you a piece of my mind as I jab my finger in your chest. "First of all, we're still alive," I grit out, shooting you a glare. "So, stop actin' like we're dead, because believe me, Edward, I know what it feels like to be dead."

You flinch, you shatter, you still don't understand.

"And so do you," I pant, wiping tears of anger and heartbreak. "I know, hubs-" I choke up. "I know how much you love me. I know that you were
robbed of your life as much as I was the day I was taken." I'm shaking. "You better fuckin' snap out of this, Edward, so help me God..." I'm furious, I have no control, but I have words. I give them to you. "It's my God's honest truth when I tell you that you have nothin' to feel guilty for."

You try to look away, but you can forget it, so I grab your face, I'm on my toes. I won't quit, my hands cradle your face. You cry. I cry.

"Answer me this, Edward Cullen." I breathe, I breathe, I breathe. "If you hadn't thrown your life away, as you so stupidly put it, would you feel less guilty? If you had tried to live on. Not necessarily move on, but... if you had tried to get better, if you had tried to feel better, if you had tried to get your life on track... without me and EJ... would you feel less guilty today?"

I'm still not done. I breathe. In and out, it's heavy.

"I don't know about you, hubs, but if you were kidnapped..." Jesus, breathe, Bella. I try, it's wheezing. "If you were-" I whimper, you squeeze your eyes shut, but I see your tears. "If you were taken, and I moved on," I breathe, "I would feel worse. Maybe that's selfish of me, but I'm only human, baby. The fact that you didn't move on... it only proves how badly you need me. It proves that we can't function without each other, and some might call that unhealthy but fuck them."

You whimper again, I feel your hands on my hips.

Foreheads touching.

"I'm sorry, angel," you whisper thickly. Eyes still closed. "Today... I should've been here."

"Yea, you should have," I croak. "You shouldn't have headed for the alcohol, that's for sure. And you were a fuckin' idiot for doin' it."
You flinch. Again. But I'm still not done.

"But you're here now," I say. "And you're done closin' yourself in. You're gonna talk to me from now on, right?"

You nod, but... why won't you look at me?

"Open your eyes," I whimper, brushing my thumbs under your eyes. "Please look at me, hubs."

And when you do, I see it all. The heartbreak, the guilt and shame, the love and devotion, the sadness and the despair. I see the raw pain, the burden and all the memories you've kept close to your heart. But we'll share it. In sickness and in health. When you need a rock, I will be there. When I need a shoulder to cry on, you will be there. Because we're a team, Edward.

"Tell me," I breathe. "Just... tell me... anythin'."

You lick your lips, I see that you want to admit something. There's something you need to say but you don't want to.

Tears fall harder and faster, I love you. I wipe them away from your cheeks.

"It just... It hurts, angel," you breathe, I hear the heart wrenching anguish. "It's everywhere."

Finally you admit.

I nod. "I know."

You're not done, I know you need me and I'm here. So, I walk us towards your chair, and you don't struggle when I push you down in it. You don't struggle when I straddle you either, because I know how exhausted you
are, and I know how much you need this. We both do, you know. I need you so much it hurts.

"I'm here," I whisper, locking my arms around your neck. "I'm here, hubs."

Finally you let go.

You hug me tight, you cry and cry. You apologize and tell me you love me, you cry and cry. I cry too. I know there will be more of this. I know I will need you soon, I know I will need you to be my rock... because we're going home soon. It's just tomorrow and then we'll go to bed and we'll wake up to the 30th of September. And we'll go home. I will need you then. I can barely think about it. Just the thought of seeing you and EJ in our house... I cry harder. I want it so badly but it will be much to handle.

I'm scared, so scared.

I remember, hubs. I remember so much. We had it all, our dream home, plans for our future. We had it right there, and we lived. We were so alive, baby.

I was your Jezebel.

We were undefeatable.

Unstoppable.

Are we still?

Chapter 30

...Heartache that was handed to me

Holding on just don't make sense
But the hardest thing of letting go

Is tryin' to find a way

To let you know...

...So we'll just cry, cry

On each other's shoulders

Cry until it's over

Can't it just be over?

And we'll just cry, cry

Cry until it's all gone

Been holding on for too long

Time for us to move on

I'm tired of tryin' to find a reason why

So let's just cry...

~Cry by Jason Walker – 1st chapter song.

September 29th

Edward Cullen.

No words could describe the pain that pushed its way into me as I listened to my wife's statements. In every direction, the pain tore at me. My heart broke, my head throbbed, my chest ached. I couldn't breathe. The weight was... indescribable. Her words went on repeat, echoing, making sure I didn't just hear them, but felt them. And God, I felt them. I felt them, heard them, fucking choked on them.
"I... I don't know, I couldn't see. I had a bag over my head."

"Um, I'm not sure, cause I wasn't allowed to leave the car."

"I didn't have a choice. Never a choice."

"He left me in the car but he brought EJ with him, makin' sure I behaved. Besides, there wasn't much I could do when I was bound and gagged in the trunk of the car."

"I don't remember... The days blurred together... I don't remember much of Utah at all. Barely anythin'. I didn't uh... there was no light in the basement, and... yeah."

"I wouldn't know if he talked to someone on the outside. He never really spoke, and if he did, it was about Kate or that I was Irina."

"I had a bucket."

"He didn't have to say anythin' to come off as threatenin'. Cleanin' his gun in front of my two year old son pretty much did it."

"No. I only saw the basement."

"He did leave sometimes, but never for long, and he usually took EJ with him."

"Yeah, I was locked up."

"No, Garrett went through EJ's backpack everyday. He questioned him and threatened him. There was no fuckin' way I would risk my three year old son's life by tellin' him to deliver a fuckin' note. Are you insane?"

"EJ was terrified of him as it was. I didn't want anythin' to depend on him."
"Um... Garrett started changin' before we left Washington. He knew that EJ was growin' up, and I guess he recognized the threat in EJ's ability to speak... or somethin'."

"No, we were separated. I'm not sure but I think it took up three weeks to get from Washington to the new place, which was in New Orleans as I found out later on."

"Only at night. I was in the trunk while he drove, and EJ was with... with Garrett. I couldn't... I couldn't do anythin'."

"Yea. He would leave EJ in the motel room and then come back for me. Then I would have EJ with me durin' the night. And then we were on the road again."

"As soon as we were there, he started changin' EJ. Um... we uh... were in the kitchen, and... fuck... Garrett tied me up to a chair, and... um... gagged me... Then he pulled his gun out, placed it on the table with the barrel pointed my way, and... he... he started tellin' EJ about his new name... and who Garrett was to him, and that I was sick... and... and that... that his daddy was... was d-dead."

"No, it was an apartment. I tried screamin'... but no one heard me. And then... Then he came back, and... my son wasn't with him."

Standing there, listening to my wife as she told the agent all she knew about Garrett, for the purpose of finding out whether or not he committed more crimes along the way, was slowly but surely killing me. Literally. It never ceased. It grew and grew until I could barely get a grasp on reality. Every breath was heavy and labored, loaded with stabbing pain and heartbreak. I breathed but it brought no relief, only more pain.

I remembered crying myself to sleep for years, for not having my wife next to me. At that time, she was locked up with our son in a basement
somewhere. I remembered all the pity-looks and how much I hated them. While I focused on that, Bella told EJ stories about me and her for the sole reason of keeping her sanity. I remembered throwing a fucking fit because Charlie and mom wanted me to leave the house every once in a while and have dinner with them. I turned that down while Bella didn't have anything. I remembered drinking myself into oblivion… and while I was doing that, my angel had nothing. But this wasn't the worst part. No, the worst part was that I took what I had for granted. The fact that I could wake up in the afternoon, grab my guitar and go out, take a seat on the porch, play for hours, and look at the fucking sunset or something. And while I was doing this – something I didn't even appreciate – EJ was across the country, saving pieces of apples to give to his mommy.

The guilt pushed me down as I stood there. Bella's words assaulted me, and I realized what a fucking ignorant bliss I had lived in. Charlie and I always refused to think they were dead, but at the same time we- well, at least I didn't… think about how they actually lived. I was the master of avoidance. So, to hear how they lived… or didn't live… God, it fucking broke me. It broke me in the most painful ways, and not just in my fucking mind. I broke everywhere. The physical pain was incredible, unbearable, and at the same time it dawned on me what a fucking weak man I was. I was just so damn weak. I couldn't take it. I could barely take EJ’s statements, and I sure as fuck remembered how he calmed me down at one time. Him. My three year old son, he calmed me down. And now it was happening all over again. I was too weak to pull myself together.

It just… hurt.

Everything hurt.

So… I did the last thing I should've done. Instead of going in there, instead of comforting my Bella, I left. I left, ignoring the ache in my arm as I drove away. I ran like a fucking coward. Words echoing in my head,
Bella's words. The pain, the raw pain, it twisted and churned inside of me, and I ran. I headed straight for Twilight. It was open, I didn't care. I walked through the crowd, ignoring Tanya, and walked up to Alec who tended the bar. Told him to shut the place down for the night, no questions asked. Then I went out and bought smokes, and by the time I had returned to the bar, it was empty. Just Alec. Arms crossed over his chest, stern eyes. Clearly he had talked to Charlie, who'd been following me, the fucker. But I was too out of it to care. Instead I made a beeline for the Jack. I never hesitated, I never wasted time.

I just opened it and drank.

Straight from the bottle.

The liquid burned in my throat, reminding me of the lifeless months I drank my way through after Bella's case died. It made me choke. But not enough to make me stop. Instead I took another wheezing breath that twisted my insides, and then I drank more.

I smoked.

I drank.

I shook.

I sat there on a barstool, staring at absolutely nothing. While my insides were screaming at me. Screaming and pleading, begging for relief and better days. It was all I wanted. Just some fucking sunshine in my life. Contentment. The feeling of warmth and good mornings. My wife next to me. Photo albums filled with pictures of my son. Laughter coming from more than memories. I wanted that, *needed* that. So badly. But everything inside of me was black and foul. The guilt, the shame, the utter despair that ate me. Clawing and chewing. I couldn't breathe. I just wanted it to be over. Just to... be *over*. I was nowhere near contentment,
though. All I had was the fucking guilt, the shame. I felt guilty and shameful for every smile I had smiled, regardless of how rare they were, and believe me, they were rare. But even the half ones I cracked at times. It made me feel guilty, because now... thinking about it... who knows; maybe Bella was starving somewhere while I cracked that fucking smile. Or the times Charlie and I tinkered with our guitars on the porch... Maybe that was one of the times Garret pointed his gun at my... at my son.

Then even more shame and guilt for turning away simple things my wife wished she had. Healthy food, the ability to use a fucking toilet... or... being outside. Inhaling fresh air.

I waited for the alcohol to make me numb.

It never did.

If anything, the pain grew.

More and more, breaking me down.

After a while, I'd had enough of Charlie and Alec trying to convince me to return to Bella, so I left the bar. I left, not thinking about where I was going, and I remember laughing humorlessly as I found myself parking outside the fucking hospital. I was drunk, yes, and I still drove, because I was at my lowest. I didn't care. I just... didn't care, and how fucking weak wasn't that? I had just finally found my wife again, and I was giving up?

That brought me even more pain. And guilt... Fuck, the guilt and the shame.

I loathed myself.

And in a final attempt to keep myself together, I headed up to Bella's hospital room.
She was there, sitting on the bed, wearing my clothes.

I was falling apart.

I remember saying something, something stupid about being home.

But then... then she let out a sob, which just *ripped* my fucking heart out.

I had done that to her.

To my wife, my angel.

My best friend.

The mother of my son.

The love of my life.

My *Bella*.

It felt like I was having a heart attack. The stabbing, the soul deep sorrow and... *everything*... I just fell apart.

I let it all out in the worst way. I was bitter. I shouted at her, I yelled, snapped, and snarked.

Bella, on the other hand, showed nothing but strength as she spoke her mind.

I admired it. I wished I had it.

But I didn't, and still don't.

In the end I had her in my lap, and I clung to her like a lost boy, which admittedly, I fucking was. Broken and so goddamn lost. Crying and sobbing, I just let her take over. I had no control as I just let it all go. The days of pushing every pain down, the years without her, the times we had
lost, the times we'd been robbed of, because Bella was right, of course. We had both been robbed. Not that it lessened my pain very much, but it felt a bit better as I realized that I was a victim, too. I didn't want to admit it. It felt like... admitting was defeat.

I wasn't very rational.

With Bella in my arms, though, I stopped caring. I gave in to what my body wanted, what my mind needed, and what my heart ached for. It was her. All her. It was her I needed. I stopped caring about coming off as strong. I needed her to hold me, which she did. She held me.

It felt... liberating.

The strongest love is the one between a parent and a child, there's no denying that, but... I know I wouldn't be able to survive without my wife. She's my rock. My best friend, and the only one who knows everything about me. She can take one look at me and just know. She's my other half. With her close to me, I can breathe. With her in my life, I can live. With her, I don't have to pretend to be something I'm not. And right now I'm anything but strong. I'm broken and shattered, but I'm not alone anymore. I have my Bella, and with her I don't have to pretend things are okay, because they're not.

**September 30th**

"You first," she whispered, motioning for me to get in the car.

I knew she was nervous. Understatement. I knew she was terrified. So, I just kissed her on the forehead and got in, holding my hand out for her once I was seated in the back.

It was time to go home.

Finally.
I had been completely cleared. All I needed was some mild rehabilitation. My stitches had been removed from my stomach, and I no longer needed the sling. I was weak as fuck in my arm, and it still tingled annoyingly because of the nerve damage, but I could at least use it a little. That much was obvious since I drove last night, like the fucking piece of shit I was.

Bella was another matter, and for some reason, she looked even more fragile outside, in daylight. Dressed in my sweats – where two of her could fit – and a hoodie, she looked... yeah, fragile. Small. She was also wearing a pair of my aviators to shield her from the direct sunlight. Her eyes were adjusting, though. It was just a slow process. One that could be harmful if pushed.

"Ready to leave this?" I murmured once she was sitting in my lap.

There was no question or hesitation. She was in my lap and that was that. Cars still terrified her, not to mention EJ.

"The hospital? Yeah," she mumbled against my neck. "To say the least."

I tightened my hold on her.

It had taken hours to get her discharged. Tests upon tests had been taken, and I cracked a smile at memory of her snapping at the doctors. She was so ready to leave. As was I. Same went for EJ.

And speaking of...

Mom got in after us, with a sleepy EJ in her arms.

That little dude was in serious need of a nap, but the excitement of returning to the yellow house was evidently enough for him to stay awake.
"Look, I'm in Nana's lap, Mommy," EJ said. "You're in Daddy's and I'm in Nana's."

Bella said nothing, and she didn't look up from the crook of my neck, but she did reach her hand out for EJ, which he took right away, and I was glad that we had warned him this morning that there would be many 'happy tears' today. Happy, sure, in a way. Granted. But Bella and I both knew it was a bit more complicated than that. However, it was the easiest way to explain things to our son, and thankfully he understood. He knew Mommy was happy to finally go home, and that it would make her so happy that there would be tears.

"We have everythin'?" Charlie asked, closing the door after getting in behind the wheel.

"Yep," I said.

"Good. Let's head home."

_Home._

I swallowed hard and once again tightened my hold on Bella.

We were finally going home. Home to the house I bought for us. Home to the house Bella turned into the most welcoming place on earth. Home to the house we started our family. Home to the house that's full of memories.

"Who's car is this?" Bella whispered closely.

"Um." I cleared my throat, for some reason feeling nervous. "It's our car."

She lifted her head, but dropped it again as she remembered where she was, and I ignored the sting. Our pains wouldn't go away over night, and this was just another thing we'd have to work on. Later. Definitely not
now. Her fear of cars wasn't exactly the most important thing to deal with. That much was clear, especially as I held her small body to me. She was still too thin, too fragile.

"You uh... you bought a Volvo?" she asked quietly.

I shivered slightly as her breath wafted over my neck, and I nodded once. "Yeah, they said it was safe for children. I... I thought of EJ."

There was no way I could wave this off without offering her an explanation, and I had lever lied to her before. I sure as hell wasn't going to start now. "They uh..." I blew out a breath. "They found the... the truck." Fuck. My eyes stung. "Shortly after you were t... taken. But I couldn't drive it any longer," I rushed the words out before I choked up.

Memories were both a blessing and a curse. Memories of our past were what kept me breathing when I didn't have Bella with me, but now... now it was memories of my lonely existence, and they were painful to relive as they reminded me of the emptiness that pretty much defined me when she wasn't there. They were memories now, but they used to be my reality.

Again I shivered, feeling Bella hug me harder.

"It's okay, hubs," she breathed. "It will be."

I nodded, unable to speak, and turned to bury my face in her hair.

.

.

The rest of the ride was quite, except for when mom told us that Aunt Liz and Tanya had cleaned our house and restocked the fridge, freezer, and cupboards. She said that they wanted us to be able to just relax and
spend time as a family, to which Bella and I both choked up all over again. Partly for their help, and God knows they've been there for us, but... Christ, it was the word family. It was suddenly very real. This was happening.

Then it really was, because we were there.

Charlie parked in front of our house.

I didn't move, neither did Bella, but she did look.

Out the window. Our house.

"Um, EJ," mom murmured. "How about you, me and Pops go over to Alice to pick up the rest of your Turtles?"

"Miss Alice?" EJ asked, tilting his head.

"Yeah. And maybe we can have some animal crackers. Remember them?"

I held my breath. I didn't know why but... I did, and I didn't know what I wanted him to say. A part of me wanted to have this moment alone with Bella because I knew it was going to be hard, but then there was the other part... the part that still hated to part with him, if only for a short time.

"Mmmm'm'kay, but only little bit and then we gots to go back to yellow house," EJ decided. "The cat crackers were yummiest."

I wanted to smile. He sure had my sweet tooth.

But I couldn't because I felt the way Bella trembled in my arms.

"Okay, sweetie," mom chuckled quietly. "We'll eat animal crackers for a little bit and then we go back to Mommy and Daddy."
Few words were exchanged after that.

I promised EJ that Mommy and I would be in the yellow house, and Charlie promised him that he would be able to see the yellow house from across the street, which appeased EJ enough to cross the street, clinging to his Nana. Charlie followed them after handing me the keys. The house keys to our home.

Shit. Deep breaths.

"Ready, angel?" I whispered.

The two of us stood outside the car, leaning against the side of it.

I was watching her. She was watching the house with teary eyes.

Trembling lip.

She was so tiny.

Tears spilled over.

She blinked over and over.

My own eyes watered at the sight of her.

She was... lost. Lost in memories, perhaps.

But then she nodded. Just once. And took a deep breath.

I felt myself doing the same and then I placed my arm around her waist so she could hold onto me, which she did, and then we walked.

Slowly, up the pathway that led to our porch. The porch where we had spent so many nights together. Hell, we lived on that porch. Breakfasts on sunny days. Dinners in the middle of the night after my shift at the bar had ended. Or the countless hours I sat between her legs, me on the
floor, her on the porch swing, and me with the guitar... and her fingers in my hair.

Up the steps, I heard her whimper, I hugged her to me.

One step, two, three, four and five, we were there, and I took another deep breath before I unlocked the door.

It was... unbelievable.

Overwhelming.

Shaky breaths, we entered and I closed the door behind us.

A soft click and it was just the two of us.

The smell assaulted us both.

Home.

*Christ*...

My throat closed up.

"Edward-" she choked out.

That was it for me. I turned to her, crushed her to my body, and emotions took over.

I both heard and felt her cry.

She was here.

She was here.

I couldn't believe it.

In my arms, right here, in our home.
I hugged her harder, she hugged me harder. Her face was buried in my chest, my was face buried in her hair.

Tears burned. Fell. Faster and faster, until I couldn't keep quiet anymore.

I let out a quiet sob.

You're home, angel.

"E-Edward."

I sucked in a shaky breath and lowered us both to the floor. Resting my back against the wall, right there on the hallway floor, we both broke down.

She was here, straddling me, holding me, she was here, right here, in my arms, I was holding her.

You're home, angel.

"I love you," I croaked. "I love you, baby."


"I love you, hubs," she sobbed into my neck. "So much."

I squeezed my eyes shut, internally repeating the words over and over. Over and over, chanting. She was home. She was home. She was home. After almost three and a half years... she was finally where she belonged. Right here with me, right here in my arms. In our home. It wasn't just memories of her in here anymore. She was here now, too. We had the chance to create more memories now. Together, as a family. With our son.

"You're finally home, angel," I whimpered.
She cried harder, shaking, clinging to me.

"I've m-missed you, E-Edward," she cried. "Don't let me g-go."

*Jesus Christ.*

"*Never,*" I vowed. Just the thought of letting her go made my insides churn. "*Never, angel. You're home now.*"

Needing to see her, I cradled her face.

My thumbs wiped her wet cheeks. The pain in her eyes brought more tears to my own eyes, which she in turn wiped away. It was us. The two of us. Comforting each other. Fucking finally together again.

*You're here, baby.*

"You and me," I breathed, resting my forehead against hers. "You and me."

I felt her nod. "You and me," she whimpered. "*Always.*"

*Always.*

Christ, she was really here.

Deep breaths. My lungs took the air in, filling up properly. Properly. In what felt like the first time in years. Because with her I could breathe properly. With her I was whole again. With her I had everything I needed in order to survive. She was the one I fell in love with all those years ago, and she was the one I married. It was her I woke up next to every morning, only to fall in love all over again thanks to something completely adorable and quirky she did. It was all her.

My lips brushed against hers. Tears still falling, I tasted the salt.
"I'm home," she whimpered, moving impossibly closer to me. "I'm home, hubs. I'm home. I'm home."

Unable to speak, I just kissed her again.

*You're home.*

I exhaled.

*She's home.*

I couldn't be sure how long we sat there. It could've been hours or just a few minutes, but we sat there. We sat there, holding, kissing, chanting, crying. She was home, I held her, I was with her, she held me. Over and over. I love you. I love you. Whimpering, crying, breathing. Just together. Supporting and comforting, being there.

That was how mom and EJ found us, and while mom tried to keep her emotions in check, EJ didn't. Mom quickly excused herself and left, and soon it was the three of us crying on the floor. We held onto each other. We told him it was happy tears and EJ... fuck, I only cried harder when EJ told us he had happy tears, too. Because the yellow house was real and his mommy was in it.

It took time. A long time, but when EJ had fallen asleep between in my lap, we made our way up the stairs. There was no walking around in the house on today's agenda. It was all about being a family, and when... *Christ*... deep breaths... When Bella and I had settled EJ between us... in our bed... we broke down all over again. It continued. It just... wouldn't stop. It was the three of us, our family, the Cullens... all gathered in our bed. For the first time. *Ever.*

Eventually exhaustion hit and we fell asleep, though only for a while. This was our day... and night. We rested, cried and held each other, never really speaking. And when EJ woke up, claiming that he was hungry, I
quickly ran downstairs, counting the seconds, ignoring the ache from being separated from them, and sent my silent thanks to my aunt and cousin, cause they had thought of it all. In the fridge waited turkey sandwiches, ready to be fucking devoured. Cherry Cokes, too. For me and EJ, cause he's like his Daddy in that department. And after quickly making sure that the sandwich was okay, according to Bella's diet plan, which it was thanks to the massive amount of vegetables Liz or Tanya had put in, I headed back upstairs. I assumed mom had let them know about Bella's diet. Otherwise I doubted I'd find protein shakes and specially made sandwiches in our fridge. But it was all there. Because my family kick ass.

Yes, I will reach out. We will need them all.

For now, though, in this moment, it's just me, my wife, and my son. Eating and drinking in bed... in our bedroom... in our house.

I could breathe again.

_They're both here. They're both here, they're both alive._

I breathed.

I watched the two people I loved most in the world fall asleep.

And then I fell asleep, too.

*O*O*O*

...Stop and stare

Walking down the road again for the better

Some peace

Jamming with my life
So everybody can hear that

I live on my street

On my street

Yeah, on my street...

...I will always be right here

I will always be right here

Here on my street...

~My Street by Kurt Nilsen – 2nd chapter song.

October 1st

When I woke up again, it was nearing dawn.

I watched, lying on my side, how EJ was snuggled against Bella.

His little Turtle-pajama clad butt was sticking up, making me chuckle silently as I fought against the umpteenth set of tears.

Everything was emotional.

I knew. I knew watching them would never get old.

And after a quick trip to the bathroom, I had every intention of returning to bed, but... something caught my eye. In the corner of the bedroom, I saw my guitar. Sadie. I hadn't seen it since... since... Christ, since the day I first saw EJ in Alice's classroom. And without realizing it, I walked over to it. I guessed Alice or maybe Jasper had brought it back, and as I picked it up, I felt a need to see what I had. I felt the need to see what I had, back in my life again. So, I darted downstairs, wrote a quick note to Bella and went upstairs once more, and left the note on my pillow- fuck... my
pillow. I didn't need Bella's pillow anymore, because she used it. She was here, able to use her own pillow. Never again would I need her pillow because I had her.

I took a deep breath, still feeling the satisfaction it brought. Then I dropped a kiss on her forehead before I grabbed the guitar and left the room.

Once I was outside, I placed the guitar on the porch swing before I pulled out a smoke, and I suppose I could feel guilty, but I didn't. One step at a time and this wasn't the time to quit smoking. Last time wasn't the right time, either. Fuck, I was far from ready. So fucking sue me.

I lit up, took a drag, and walked down the porch steps, not stopping until I reached the car.

I turned, leaned against the car, and just watched. The sun would rise soon, and I breathed, as I watched our house. Just watched it, and this time it felt good. So incredibly good, because I knew who was inside. Two people. My wife and son, right in there, sleeping in mine and Bella's bedroom. They were home again.

I breathed.

It was October now. One of Bella's favorite months in New Orleans because of the weather. October was warm and dry, promising many nights on the porch. I breathed. Inhale, exhale. They were here, home. Finally.

I took a drag, smiling to myself as the first sunrays reached the rooftop.

We were broken, yeah... no doubt about that, but... we weren't alone anymore.

We had each other.
It was all that mattered for now.

After stubbing the smoke out, I walked up the pathway again, this time choosing to ignore the porch swing. It wasn't my spot anymore. I had spent more than three years in that spot but... nah, that was Bella's spot. My spot was on the floor, and her fingers' spot was in my fucking hair. It was law, damnit.

I sighed, sitting down, and just held the guitar, watching it.

My fingers traced the wood.

I closed my eyes.

Inhaled deeply.

They're home.

Slowly, my fingers slid over the strings, and I half expected that the sound would throw me back to the time I spent without her. But it didn't. I was comforted, knowing that my family was right inside.

So, I tinkered a little.

My arm protested, and every time I slid my thumb over the strings, I felt it... everywhere, fucking tingling and... pins and needles, but... I just needed it for a little while. I just needed to hear the familiar sounds. For a minute, please.

I wasn't alone on the porch for very long, and I smiled softly as I heard the screen door open. I wasn't alone in my house anymore. Bella was here. Jesus, just a small thing like that. To hear others make sounds in the house you live in, proving to you that you're not alone.

"You saw the note?" I murmured, looking over my shoulder to see Bella, and a very tired EJ hugging her leg. "C'mere, you two."
Bella was... emotional, which I knew she would be. This was big.

"What you doin', Daddy?" EJ mumbled sleepily. "Mommy woke me but s'okay."

I chuckled quietly. "That's good, buddy. That it's okay."

Leaning forward, I allowed Bella to settle in behind me, and once she was sitting in her spot, I motioned for EJ to sit in front of me.

"You remember this, nugget?" I murmured, tapping my fingers on the guitar.

He nodded, one corner of his mouth turning up. "Sadie," he whispered, looking at Bella for confirmation, I think.

I think she nodded because I couldn't hear her, but EJ nodded in return.

He stared at it in awe as he sat down between my legs on the floor, and I dropped a kiss on the top of his head, murmuring, "Did you know that Mommy gave this to me?" I pulled guitar closer, silently giving him permission to touch it, because I had to smile as I saw his fingers twitch.

"Didn't know," he whispered, touching the strings lightly. "Did you give this, Mommy? I's pretty, Daddy."

I smiled, breathing him in. Another kiss in his hair.

"Yeah, I did, baby," Bella sniffled.

I couldn't wait to introduce the concept of gifts and special occasions to EJ, and I knew Bella felt the same. We had both been robbed of so much, and don't get me started on EJ. All the things he didn't know of...

As I felt Bella tug on my hair, I tilted my head back, looking up at her.
Emotions, sadness, love.

"Love you... so much," she breathed thickly, pressing her lips against my forehead. "Thank you."

"For what?"

Another kiss, and another.

"For this. This mornin'."

"There will be many," I replied quietly, tilting my head back even more to reach her mouth. "Kiss me."

She wiped her cheeks, smiled softly, and then she kissed my nose once before brushing her lips against mine.

You're really home, angel.

"I love you," I murmured, pecking her softly.

Another smile. Another kiss. It felt like sweet victory.

"I love you, too." Kiss. "So much." Kiss. "Now, play for me."

And there she is.

I smiled. "Any requests, Mrs. Cullen?"

She shook her head, eyes welling up again. "Anything's fine. I just wanna hear it. It's been too long."

So, I played. Actually, EJ and I both did. It was the most awful sound I've ever heard, and it was heartbreakingly beautiful. Whenever EJ played with the strings on the guitar, it tugged on my very own strings. Everything inside me melted together, because I was suddenly complete. The knot in
my stomach loosened, the black hole in my chest grew lighter, if only a shade lighter, it still did, and I felt it.

For a moment, everything was perfect.

EJ giggled like crazy as I goofed around with him and tried to teach him a few chords all while I made farting noises on his cheek, and... Bella's fingers were in my hair, making me shiver as she scratched my scalp.

We were home.

At last.

**Chapter 31**

...*Believe in dreams you love so much*  

*Let the passion of your heart, make them real*  

*And tell all the ones you love*  

*Everything about the love you feel*  

*I believe in dreams*  

*I believe in you...*  

~*Believe In Dreams by Flyleaf – chapter song.*

**October 1st**

**Bella Cullen.**

The house is quiet, I walk around. Slowly, just... absorbing.

I breathe it all in. There's a rise and fall with every breath, and it feels... satisfying, warm, and... good. I haven't felt good in so long, but as I walk around, slowly, in our living room, and as I take in the smiles in every
black and white photo that hang on the wall, I feel my heart swell. Our house is a giant book of memories – an album filled with shared moments and passion. I can hear it, feel it, and breathe it in. The walls... they hold secrets and love. They only speak to you and me because they were our moments. Only ours, and for those less secret moments, we have photos.

Barbeques with friends and family in our backyard.

They're all there. Tanya, Angela, Ben, Jamie, Rose, Alec, Eric, dad, Esme, Liz, even Emmett for when he visited New Orleans, and... you and me.

I breathe, remembering the smell of freshly cut grass and sunshine. Jamie or Rose by the grill, making our mouths water. With their secret family recipes, oh how I remember their seasoning, we could never get enough of their food. And you would give me your pickles, to which we always smiled secretly at each other, because we knew... we both thought of what I had named Pickle. It always made you shake your head in amusement. Or tap me on the nose.

I breathe, I touch my nose, remembering.

All the smiles, the laughs, the joking and... everything.

I always loved taking pictures, I always loved capturing an unknowing face. Those photos were real. Those photos would tell everything, and when I look at one photo in particular, most people see Angela showing off her muscles as she has Ben wrestled to the ground. God, all the smiles... but what I also see, what catches my eye most of all, really, in the background, is the loving smile Alec has on his face as he watches an oblivious Tanya. The two were always dancing around on their 'casual' relationship, and no one knew why. It was so obvious how they adored each other. It wasn't just Alec. The photo where Tanya has you in a headlock proves that, because I remember, hubs... I remember that she was so pissed at you for teasing her about Alec that words weren't
enough. Christ, I remember how Angela and I laughed. Tanya was beet red in the face and you just wouldn't let up... so, she showed you who was strongest, didn't she?

I breathe.

I close my eyes.

I inhale deeply through my nose.

I wipe my cheeks and smile through my tears as I hear you, dad, and EJ out on the porch.

Laughing, tinkering on the guitars.

He's already in love with your guitar, baby, and this morning, when I found that note on your pillow... I just knew. *Come outside, angel*, you'd written, and I just knew. I knew I would find you in your spot, waiting for me to take mine. Right behind you, for the first time in years. And this time we had EJ to share it with us.

Our morning couldn't have been more perfect, hubs. Then, when the sun rose higher and higher, we went back inside. We ate breakfast together at our kitchen table, in our kitchen. The three of us. Together.

It took time and I broke down often, but I always had you there with me, and as the afternoon morphed into early evening, we had walked through our house again. Our bedroom upstairs, the spare bedroom, and even the bathroom... then the kitchen, living room, and even the laundry room, downstairs. But there's one more surface, isn't there? Yeah... neither of us stopped by the door in between our bedroom and the spare room. We're not ready, are we? I don't think we are. Not just yet. Give me a day or two, please, before we show EJ his room.
I choke up, knowing that you were supposed to show me his room... that night... the night we lost it all.

You told me at the hospital, and it hurt, Edward. It hurt so badly.

"Bella?"

I look up, realizing I'm standing in the hallway now.

Esme, soft eyes, soft smile, I love her, I missed her so much.

"You okay, Sweet?" she murmurs softly.

My eyes well up all over again, and I nod. It's all I can do.

"Alright. I'm in here if you need anythin'," she whispers thickly, nodding towards the kitchen.

She's making dinner for us. A family dinner. You and me, EJ, dad and Esme.

I breathe, I walk soundlessly. Bare feet. A pair of light blue cotton shorts and one of your black hoodies.

I breathe, deeply.

You haven't changed a thing, baby. Everything in the house is... just as I remember.

I don't know whether I should worry about that or if I should thank you.

Perhaps both.

In the staircase I pass more photos and oh, that step still creaks. I snifflle.

Memories assault me but they don't hurt. They used to. When I was away... memories always killed a part of me. Not that that stopped me
from holding each memory close to my heart because it didn't. I needed those memories to keep sane, but... they still hurt. They still reminded me of what I didn't have anymore. But I do now, hubs. I'm home again and I breathe.

I can dream again.

I can believe in them, I can afford to believe in my dreams.

Tears stream down my cheeks, they're hot and reminding. They stand for much. But most of all it's relief. The relief is... so immense and I cry. Silently, reveling in the easy breaths I can take. I wasn't just physically restrained for years, I realize. My heart was locked up. My chest was heavy. My head was throbbing. But not anymore. Such relief. I'm free.

When I reach our bedroom, I take it all in... again and again. Everything. The scented candles that I can see haven't been lit since I was here last time. The rug, the bed, the drapes, the sheets, nothing's changed. The photos above the bed, I walk over to them. I kneel on the bed and my fingers trace the black and white photos from our wedding. White frames. Smiles and smiles and smiles. Family and friends, you and me.

The kisses you gave me, they were... magic. They could be chaste and say "hi," or "I just had to for no reason," they could be long and passionate and say, "I've missed you even though I was only gone for ten minutes," or they could say "I love you." There were kisses, frantic and urgent, saying, "I need you. Right here and now" or "I've had the worst day and only you can make it better."There were a few reluctant kisses, too. I smile and remember. We were like any couple, having fights but we always worked it out. We both hated arguing, so we always made sure to never leave the room before it was solved. We never went to bed without talking it out. We always kissed and the kiss could be... chaste and... reluctant, silently saying, "I'm still a bit annoyed, you know. But we'll work it out."
I breathe, in and out, I breathe.

Your kisses could be playful, there was nibbling and licking and farting noises. I could feel your goofy smiles against my skin. I touch my skin, remembering, I place a hand on my cheek. Tears, be gone. Please. I breathe.

With a kiss you can say much and you always do.

In the hospital... and now, in this situation, your kisses are sweet, full of longing and comfort, and... "I love you."

And now I miss you, I need you. Off the bed, I leave. Down the stairs, I crack a smile when that step creaks.

The sun is out and I stop in the doorway. Our door is always open when you sit out there.

My eyes sting and I squint a little.

"Edward," I whisper thickly, and I don't know why I'm whispering.

Thankfully you hear me and your forehead creases, you're concerned, please don't be.

"Nugget, why don't you play with Pops for a while," you murmur to him, he's in your lap. "I'm just gonna check on dinner."

I smile at dad. Tears, I hate you. "I love you," I mouth to dad.

His eyes shine, he nods once, I know how much he loves me.

Then you're in front of me in the doorway, softly your hands go to my waist.

I breathe. I shiver.
"How are you, baby?" you whisper. You kiss my forehead.

I can't speak, but you understand.

Without a word, you lead us to the living room, and I straddle you, you hug me, I hug you. My face is there, right there, in the crook of your neck. It smells like heaven. All you. I'm home.

I kiss you there and there. Below your ear.

You kiss my shoulder, I curse your hoodie, it's in the way, you know.

We have nothing to say. We don't need words.

I just need you. To hold me, to hug me, to comfort me, and you do. You always do.

But then I speak of the one thing I dream of.

"We'll grow old in this house." I sniffle. "Tell me we will."

Your thumbs are on my stomach, under the hoodie, rubbing circles on my skin for no reason, because we don't need reason. They just feel good, the circles, your thumbs. You feel good.

"Yeah," you whisper thickly. "We will, angel." Another kiss on my shoulder and then you lift your hands to cradle my face. And the thumbs are wiping away sadness. "We'll be old and grey." You're heartbreakingly beautiful when you smile. "You'll change my diapers, won't you?" And the pout, baby. You bring out The Cullen Pout. Shame on you.

You're trying to make me smile. You always succeed. Because I smile. And you smile.

Then you kiss my nose.
"If you change mine," I whisper, still smiling. It feels so good to smile, hubs. "And when I lose my fake teeth, you'll look for them, cause my eyesight is too bad." And now I'm really into this.

You notice. You smile wider. "What if my eyes are badder?"

That's not a word, baby, and you know it.

Anything to keep me smiling, huh?

"I love you," I say, cause I have to. It's been a while, you know.

"I love you too, angel," you sigh. Loving eyes, emotions. "You're my Bella."

I swallow a sob, it comes so quick.

"My Edward," I whimper.

Instead of throwing my arms around you, I kiss you. Hard on the lips, I have to. My hands follow, I cradle your face. I taste you, my tongue darts out, just the tip of it. Across your bottom lip, I taste tears. I love you. I love you. I love you. I believe you. We will grow old here.

Your breath hitches and I'm sorry for catching you off guard, but really I'm not. Because I need more.

As always, you understand.

"Bella." You moan quietly, and for the first time in years, I feel your tongue against mine, it's been too long. The emotions, the sensations, the tingling... They're all still there.

You give me tingling in the silliest places.

I feel our connection everywhere.
It's still there. Forceful and rocking through me.

It's a moan. "Fuck, baby." You push your tongue into my mouth, I taste it. I love it, I know we won't go far, we're not ready. But this... this I need. You need it, too. We kiss, kiss, kiss. Hard and passionately. We love this. We're still so good, hubs.


You smile then, into the kiss, and you growl playfully. "You make me lose my damn mind, angel."

I'm glad. My smile says so. It's sorta smug.

You watch me, our noses touch, I watch you too.

You watch, you smile.

I watch, I smile.

"Christ, I love you, baby," you whisper as you cradle my face.

I kiss your nose.

"I love you, too."

I believe in you. I believe in my dreams. We'll grow old together.

Then we hear him from outside, and we smile together, against each other's lips.

"Daddy, we gots to play Sadie!"

We're home.
"I think I'm in love," I sigh, taking yet another carrot stick.

They may be on my list of foods for my strict diet, but for me it's heaven. They're listed under vegetables with lots of fiber, and Esme doesn't exactly have to force me to eat it. Right now, before dinner, it's carrot sticks and one avocado for me, and like I said, I'm in heaven.

"That's good," she chuckles as she checks the oven. "If we're lucky, we can get my son to eat more vegetables, too."

I almost snort. "Good luck with that."

Sitting on the kitchen counter, I watch as Esme finishes dinner. It smells delicious but I'm not allowed to eat much at the same time. Instead I have to eat six to seven small meals everyday, which is why I'm eating already. That way, I won't devour the roast she's got in the oven.

We're a meat and potato kind of family. Through and through. Although, I used to love trying out new things. You can vouch for that. Sometimes we ended up going down to RJ's when I failed miserably, and sometimes I did so good that you came down in the middle of the night to eat leftovers.

I always caught you 'cause that step creaks, and you always forgot that during your midnight-missions.

"Did you take your pills, Sweet?" Esme asks.

I nod. "Yep, all four hundred of them."

Okay, not that many, but... yeah, many. They're for... everything, sorta. Magnesium, iron, Omega-something-something, all sorts of vitamins... the list goes on and on.
EJ thought it was candy and asked for M&M's, so you told him you'd make sure we had M&M's tomorrow.

We're gonna have a minor issue there, hubs. And you know it.

"Can I ask somethin', Bella?" she asks hesitantly, and I know it's about my time away from here.

I nod once, not feeling hungry anymore.

She walks over to me, that motherly concern in place. She takes my hands.

"Do you know why he didn't feed EJ with the same food he gave you?"

Her eyes well up, I see all the pain. I'm like her daughter, she's my mother for all intent purposes.

Hopping down from the counter, I just throw my arms around her.

I can't speak yet.

But I don't know. I wonder, too. I have no idea why Garrett fed EJ differently. I just know that I'm thankful that he did.

"I don't like seein' you so fragile, sweetie," she whimpers. "You were always the healthy girl, makin' sure Edward ate somethin' other than burgers and candy."

My tears spill over. I blink and blink but it doesn't work. So, I just squeeze my eyes shut.

Breathe, Bella. I breathe. I hug her harder. I love her so much. I've missed her.

"I'm so glad you're home," she cries.
I cry, too.

And then you're there, leaning against the doorframe, watching us with soft eyes and emotion threatening to spill over.

I love you both. All of you. My eyes say so.

I whimper as you walk closer, your tears fall. One by one.

Then you're here, hugging us both.

Esme cries harder, you kiss the top of her head.

I'm sick of this... this sadness.

But I know how much this matter to you and Esme. Christ, I'm not the only one who returned, and I'm not talking about EJ, you know this. You know that Esme finally has her son back.

As I look up, I see the pain on your face, hubs.

"I love you," I mouth.

You kiss me hard on the forehead, I know you can't speak.

At first you hold me tighter when I try to step back, but my eyes say it all. You need this time with Esme. Hold her, tell you love her, hold her tighter, comfort her, she needs her son. And you understand, reluctantly letting me go.

"I love you, mom," is what I hear you croak as I quietly leave the kitchen.

Wiping my cheeks, I head outside, thankful for the sunset.

I can be outside, I can soak it up.

I breathe.
"Hey, honey," dad says as I join them.

EJ sees me next, and the smile, hubs... God, the smile is yours.

"Mommy, look! I'm playin' music!"

I chuckle and sniffle, not a pretty sound, but I don't care.

"I can see that, baby," I murmur, taking my seat on the porch swing. "Will you and Pops play me somethin'?"

He smiles bigger. Sitting on the low coffee table with Sadie in front of him, he looks like the happiest kid in the world. Dad looks happy, too.

"Yea we play, Mommy," EJ says solemnly. "You play also, Pops," he adds, pointing at dad's guitar. "I count, cause Daddy's not here and he counts if he here but he's not here but he said how to do it."

I can only smile.

He's so alive, hubs.

"All right, Junior," dad chuckles. "Count and we'll play."

"Kay! A One... A two... A free!"

Dad and I exchange face-splitting grins, and... then they 'play'.

Resting my chin on my knees, I just sit there and listen. Breathing in the fresh air, enjoying the sunset with my dad and my son. And inside the house, I know you and Esme are holding onto each other like you need to.

In just a few days, we start our therapy with Anna, but until then... it's just about us. It's all I want. You and me, our little boy, Esme and dad. Reconnecting.

I believe, hubs. I believe we'll recover. As long as we're together.
I wanna be where you are

You carried me this far...

...I will follow you forever...

~Here With Me by Everyday Sunday – chapter song.

October 5th

Edward Cullen.

"Mornin'," Charlie said, walking up the porch steps. "You ready for today?"

I shrugged, exhaling smoke through my nose.

He took his seat in the rocker.

"As ready as I can be, I guess," I sighed, leaning back against the house wall. Not being a night person anymore made me a bit grumpy in the mornings, and today's events sure as shit didn't make it better. Our bubble was about to burst. The bubble we had lived in contently for the past few days. "What about you and mom? Are you guys okay?"

After all, it wasn't just about me, Bella and EJ.

The past few days had pretty much fused the five of us together, and I knew we all needed the closeness. Bella and I had our privacy every morning and night, usually with EJ, always in our bedroom. Whether it was talking or just... being... we had our privacy then and there, in our room. But then we had mom and Charlie here throughout the day. They always showed up after breakfast, and it was how we liked it. At least for now. Though today was going to be different. Today it wouldn't just be the five of us. First of all, Anna would be here in an hour. Our first session... or
whatever. She said she just wanted to come over for a talk... to fill us in, and... I don't know, tell us a little about the months ahead of us. And then tonight... shit, our family was coming over. Not all at once, but... Aunt Liz and Tanya were coming over for dinner, and then later tonight, after they'd gone home, Emmett was gonna stop by.

"All good." He shrugged, lighting up his own smoke. "Esme's nervous."

I nodded, already knowing.

Mom wasn't the only one. I couldn't say I was nervous. I was more... anxious and scared. But Bella was nervous.

"Where's Bella?"

"She's givin' EJ a bath," I murmured, smiling ruefully. "I think they're both obsessed."

Charlie said nothing, just nodding in understanding.

Over the past few days we had seen Bella and EJ spend a lot of time together, doing things many of us take for granted or see as chores. Taking baths, going outside, cook food... hell, even doing laundry. Just yesterday I found them in the laundry room, folding sheets and sorting socks. EJ was perfectly content, sitting on the dryer as he watched Bella work. And I found myself staring at them, realizing that this was them bonding. They were in a way reconnecting after spending days apart, but it was also a beginning for them after having Garrett deny them so many things.

"Two out of my three favorite boys," I heard mom say then, and I looked up to see her join us on the porch. "Where's my number one?"

I chuckled.
"I'm right here," I deadpanned.

She grinned crookedly, and I knew my own grin mirrored hers.

It felt good to see her smile again.

Hell, it felt good to smile for myself again.

"Nice try, kiddo," she said, taking a seat next to me. "But you know that grandkiddos come first."

I huffed.

Then I kissed her cheek. I couldn't really blame her, after all. My son was perfect.

"He's takin' a bath," I sighed, answering her earlier question.

"He oughta be the cleanest kid on earth by now," she chuckled quietly. But she stopped as I took a final drag of my cigarette. _Here we go._ "And when are you two quittin' again?" She cocked the mom-brow.

"When I'm ready," I said with finality in my tone. I had already talked shit over with Bella, and she told me there was no rush if I wasn't ready. As long as I didn't do it in front of EJ, of course. And I wouldn't do that. But the fact was that I wasn't ready. Who knew what she Anna would bring up during our sessions? No, I needed my nicotine, regardless of how bad it was.

"I'll quit when Edward quits," Charlie said, grinning.

Mom huffed.

I put out my smoke.

Because I could hear Bella and EJ coming down the stairs.
When Charlie heard it, he followed suit.

"I don't need shoes, Mommy," I heard EJ say. "Daddy don't have shoes."

Yeah, I grinned.

"So, just because Daddy doesn't have them, you shouldn't?" Bella asked.

"Feel better with no shoes."

"You tell her, nugget," I chuckled, to which mom slapped my arm. "Hey, what was that for?"

"You're both kids," she replied, shaking her head. But I saw the smile. "Bella will have a hell raisin' you two."

"A job I will enjoy," Bella said, walking out with a barefoot EJ on her hip. "As long as you'll help me, Esme, cause as God is my witness, I'll need it."

You're smiling, angel. Like, really fucking smiling.

"Look who decided to be funny," I murmured, sliding over to give her room. Cause I needed her here, dammit. "Are you clean now, nugget?"

Good thing I had functioning reflexes in one arm, cause the little dude jumped over to me as soon as Bella was seated. "Christ, you're a wild one, aren't ya?"

"Yea, good bath," he rushed out, throwing his arms around my neck. "Look, Daddy! No shoes like you!"

And that cracked me up.

"I can see that," I laughed. "And now that you're all clean, I might just eat them."

"Daddy," he said, looking at me like I was insane. "You can't eat foots."
"Are you sure?" I asked, keeping a straight face as I wrapped my fingers around his left foot. "Maybe we should just try."

"No, no," he gasped, shaking his head furiously. "Mommy, tell Daddy no."

"Hmm, I'll think about it," Bella replied, tapping her chin. And I was falling in love all over again. "The thing is, baby, your feet look very yummy."

I grinned, nodding at EJ. "Yep, they sure do look delicious." I leaned down as I brought his foot up, which just made him gasp and shriek, and then I started nibbling. The giggle-fit warmed my heart. I knew it was thawing up Bella, too. I felt her hug my bicep. I felt her lips against my shoulders. I felt it all.

"No, stop it, Daddy!" he squealed.

Then, out of nowhere, came Charlie. "I'll save ya, buddy." Which he did. And that was just plain ole annoying, cause EJ was no longer in my arms. "Tell your old man to eat some breakfast instead."

"Old man," I huffed, placing my arm around my wife. "What would that make you? Ancient?"

He didn't respond, though, cause he was busy goofing around with EJ.

So, I turned to Bella instead.

"Hello there, beautiful," I murmured quietly, kissing her temple. "You okay?"

She nodded. "Very."

Fuck, you're really beautiful.

It hit me then how fast she was healing. Physically.
I already knew she was gaining weight, but now I could actually see it. Her hair looked fuller and shinier, and her skin looked healthier. Bones less protruding.

"What," she asked, smiling curious.

Yeah, I was staring.

"Nothing. Just..." I trailed off. There was no word good enough.

So, I kissed her.

I knew she would understand. She always did.

Unfortunately our moment ended when Anna arrived.

After a couple more pecks, we both stood to greet her, and we spent the next few minutes making small talk about nothing as mom went inside to get us drinks. Honestly I wasn't really paying attention. Instead I soaked up the fact that Bella was having a good day. I mean, I could see that she was nervous as hell, and she refused to let me go, but she was also smiling and talking freely. And that felt indescribably good. It felt like we were getting better. It felt like we had already come far. It just felt good. Then after the small talk was over, Charlie and mom took EJ to the kitchen for a while.

"You be right here, Mommy and Daddy?" he asked once more.

"We'll be right out here, baby," Bella reassured. "You can come out whenever you want and we'll be here."

"Pwromise?"

It still hurt to see him so afraid.

I knew it would take time, though. A long time.
"We promise, nugget," I told him, kissing his forehead. "It's only for a little while, and then we can all go play in the backyard, okay?"

"Mmm'kay." He wasn't all that happy about following Charlie and mom but playtime convinced him. It was yesterday that we had shown EJ the backyard for the first time. EJ was sold, and Bella and I didn't have to speak out loud. With one look we just knew that we were going to make the backyard a fun place for him.

"So..." Anna said, smiling as Bella and I were settled on the swing. Anna sat in Charlie's rocker. "It's good to see you again."

"You too," Bella said politely.

I kept quiet. My mom always said it was wrong to lie.

Sorta kidding.

I had nothing against Anna but I wasn't eager to leave our little bubble.

But it was what it was.

"First, I just want to say that I know neither of you is ready to leave this house," Anna said understandingly. "And until you are, I was thinking we could have the sessions right here in your house." Bella breathed out in relief at that. As did I, and I tightened my arm around her. "Does that sound okay?"

"Very," I said.

Bella nodded.

"Good," Anna said simply. "Let's start with your physical recovery, shall we? How are you mending?"

I looked at Bella, nodding for her to start.
And then we spent the next half hour talking about diets, weight gaining, and physiotherapy. Bella explained that she enjoyed her diet, though it was hard to keep track on all the meals she had to eat and how different ingredients made her mood shift, and also that she dreaded the upcoming doctor visits where she would go through checkups to make sure her body was taking everything in. In turn, Anna offered advice that could help her, such as writing a journal where Bella could jot down her thoughts, especially when it came to her mood shifting, which I had noticed, if only a little.

"Your body is going through many changes," Anna had explained. "And it will take time for your body to get used to your new diet, which is very varied. Unfortunately this comes with mood changes."

I had no idea that food could change your mood. I mean, I'm not stupid. I guess you can feel healthier if you eat a fucking apple instead of chocolate, but I had no idea that it could alter your mood that drastically.

So yeah, Bella was gonna start writing a food journal.

As for my own recovery... eh... what could I say?

I was tender, especially below my ribcage, and my arm was still pissing me off, but I didn't need the damn sling anymore, and for that I was thankful, cause it was fucking annoying. Then there was the tingling, of course. My arm still tingled and felt like it had fallen asleep most of the time, and my fingers were weak. I noticed that whenever I wanted to grip something, such as a soda can, or even my guitar. It mostly just bugged me. But it wasn't anything I couldn't live with. I just kept doing the exercises the doctors had told me about and that was that. It would pass soon enough, and compared to Bella, I had nothing to complain about. Not that I was pushing my own pain away like I did before, because that wasn't it. I knew Bella was right; I needed to acknowledge the fact that I was a victim in this too, and I was getting there. No, it was about Bella
being my strength. I saw her strength, more and more for each day that passed, and in return it made me stronger. It was quite simple to me; as long as I had her, I felt able.

Some would call it weak – that I needed my wife to be strong – but that was always me and Bella. We needed each other. She had what I needed and vice versa. We never saw that as a bad thing, and I knew I never would. We were simply each other's rock.

"So... How's EJ doing?" Anna asked, and now we were moving on. I took a deep breath. "Is he sleeping and eating okay?"

Again Bella and I looked at each other. I shrugged, unable to come up with anything in that area that worried me. Bella shrugged, too.

"He's fine, maybe a little quiet?" I rather asked then stated, shrugging once more. "He sleeps well. No nightmares... that we know of. He eats anythin' that mom and Bella cook." I cracked a smile. "I think he prefers dinner, though, cause that comes with dessert."

"That's cause he's your son," Bella said, winking.

_Sweet Jesus, I love you, angel._

It felt incredibly good to see her spirit.

"Good thing he has your energy," I countered softly. It was true. That, and the fact that mom and Bella made sure to include fruits and shit like that with dessert. "He has a thing for runnin' a lot."

"That he does," she replied, chuckling as she faced Anna again. "We were thinkin' about fixin' the backyard for him." I grinned at her. "Maybe... I don't know, a swing set? Maybe a sandbox. So he can play."
I smiled, picturing myself building a sandbox for my son while he clung to me, asking a million questions.

It was a beautiful picture, and now I could finally make those dreams come true.

"That sounds very good," Anna said, bringing me out of my musings. "Boys his age need stimulation, and considering his upbringing so far, I can only imagine how happy he will be."

*Considering his upbringing so far...*

Fuck, he was so neglected.

He had nothing.

And that raised questions. "Um, Rachel mentioned somethin' about introducin' EJ to toys and shit like that slowly," I said, rubbing the back of my neck. "And uh..." I glanced over at Bella, who nodded encouragingly, knowing where I was going. Cause we had talked about this last night. "Would it work if we started doin' that when we show EJ his room?"

Bella and I were still having troubles when it came to that.

His room would without a doubt cause distress, but we knew it was time, and yesterday we had talked about showing him tomorrow or the day after. And maybe we could buy him a few toys before then, so he could slowly but surely fill his room as he chose.

"I think that sounds like a plan." Anna nodded slowly. "It's good that you're setting up goals like this."

Okay. Okay. Good.

"And..." she continued, pursing her lips for a second. "My advice is that once you show him his room, you limit areas in which he's allowed to play.
If he's only allowed to play with his toys in his own room, and... maybe out here or in the backyard, he might feel more eager to use his room, because I assume he doesn't like to be alone." She paused, looking down at her notes. "Hmm." While she did her thing, whatever it was, I lit up a smoke. And as I took a drag, I noticed Jazz and Alice across the street as they unpacked their car. I knew it was time to talk to them, too. And I was curious about the investigation. For some reason I knew Jasper would know something about Denali, at least. "Ah, yes, here." Anna grabbed my attention again as she looked up from her notepad. "Rachel told me about his experience in La Push where he went to daycare." She glanced at Bella for confirmation, and got it in form of a nod. "Right, well, my advice is that you try to talk to him. Encourage him into talking about likes and dislikes. Don't let him close himself off, and I was thinking that playtime would be an excellent time." Bella and I both nodded in understanding. I remembered from EJ's sessions with Rachel that he was more comfortable talking if he could play at the same time. "And from my notes, I understand that he enjoyed La Push Play," she continued, and once again Bella nodded. "So, start there. Play with him in his room, and talk to him, get him to open up."

I blew out a breath, rubbing my chest. Images of EJ's sessions with Rachel plagued my memory, and I knew right away it would be hard to find a balance. It would be so easy to go too far and make him either shut down or upset him.

"Won't-" Bella cut herself off, frowning in thought. "I mean... if we use his room... won't he end up dislikin' it? Maybe he will associate his own room with questions he doesn't like."

I kissed her temple. Just because.

"Not necessarily, especially if you're both in there playing with him," Anna replied, tilting her head. "Take things slowly. Very slowly. A question here
and there, and in the end he will be comfortable enough to talk freely and about anything."

I guess I could see her point. Maybe.

Then she proceeded to tell us about what to expect from EJ, or rather, how to prepare ourselves. Because it all came down to triggers. We had no idea if EJ was going to break down one day, or if he would casually start asking questions about Garrett and the life he lived with Bella. It was after all what he knew. So, as Bella and I were to slowly introduce him to things most kids took for granted, we had to remember that something could trigger him and make him wonder about his past. All in all, it was painful and nothing I looked forward to, but it still felt like we were ready to take this on. Granted, there would be bad days. Many of them, and Anna even warned Bella that depressions were very common in these situations — both for Bella and EJ — to which I nearly freaked out... fuck... digressing...

Anna simply prepared us. Gave us advice. Offered help.

For once, it wasn't hard to accept.

And in the end we decided that Anna would stop by three times a week, all to keep it relaxed and casual. We would stay out here, or maybe in the kitchen — whatever — and once a week, she would include EJ in the sessions.

There was much to cover, but Bella and I were both eternally grateful for the pace we all decided on. It was what we felt comfortable with.

*O*O*O*

"Wha's Mommy doin'?'" EJ whispered, looking up from his coloring book.
I chuckled as I opened the fridge. "I have no idea, nugget." Really, I had no idea. She had spent the past fifteen minutes, huffing and stomping around in the hallway, laundry room, and hallway closet. "Do you want somethin' to drink?" I grabbed a Cherry Coke for myself, then silently asked mom the same question. But she just shook her head with a smile before returning to the stove.

"Juice box?" EJ asked.

"One juice box comin' up," I said with a firm nod.

Just as I had given it to him, Charlie entered the kitchen, heading straight for the fridge for some Vitamin R. "Was that my daughter I passed in the hallway?" He popped the cap of a bottle. "Sure sounded like her with all that ruckus."

"I heard that, dad!" Bella shouted from the hallway.

"Well, I said it out loud," Charlie grumbled, rolling his eyes, which made me chuckle. "Women folk." And that earned him a bitch-brow from mom. "Gee, sorry, Es."

Things were... normal.

Every breath felt good and satisfying.

"I think I'll go check on my wife," I snickered, dropping a kiss on EJ's forehead before I headed out of the kitchen. And sure enough, Bella was there, rummaging through the hallway closet. Bent over... damn short, so short cotton shorts. I shook my head to clear it. "What are you doin', angel?" I asked her, approaching cautiously for some reason. But I could always read her, and I knew something was off. "Maybe I can help?"

She huffed, never looking up.
"I'm lookin' for my Don't-mess-with-me-boots," she muttered.

My eyes closed.

I took a deep breath.

Slowly my lips curved into a smile.

I felt warm.

For such a trivial thing.

"What's with the goofy grin, hubs?" I opened my eyes to find her staring at me in question. My smile grew as I walked towards her. "You find it funny that I got my period?" she choked, shaking her head. I gripped her hips gently. "You're weird, Cullen." It was a whisper now.

And I dipped down and kissed her.

"I love you," I whispered against her lips. I pulled her closer, not feeling apprehensive anymore. "I love you. My quirky girl." Her arms slid up my biceps, I deepened the kiss. "Everything... about you," I mumbled, softly meeting her tongue with mine. "And... I'm so happy to have my..." Her fingers twisted my hair. Shivers ran through me. "...beautifully scatterbrained girl... wife... angel... home." I breathed heavily, as did she, and I wasn't ready for my body to wake up, not yet, so I broke the kiss with a few soft ones. "And," I kissed her nose, "your combat boots are in the closet upstairs." Another kiss. "Where they have always been."

She smiled. Eyes glistening.

"I love you," she whispered.

"Ditto," I whispered back. I tapped her nose. "Ditto."

Then she headed up the stairs to locate her combat boots.
"So good to see you again, cus," Tanya whispered thickly as we hugged.

"You too," I replied, ruffling her hair for the first time in years, most likely. But shit felt right now. I was happy again. "You gonna soak my hoodie for long with them tears?"

"For fuck's sake, Edward," she huffed, releasing me to smooth down her hair. "We were havin' a fuckin' moment and you go and ruin it."

I grinned at her, pulled her in for another hug and dropped a kiss in her unruffled hair.

"I'm kiddin'," I chuckled. "In all seriousness, though..." I grasped her chin to make her face me. "...Thank you for all the things you and Liz have done." I kissed her on the forehead. "Really, T. You've helped out a lot."

She beamed at me. "See? Was that so fuckin' hard?"

Yeah, I let her go.

"Now if you excuse me," she said, motioning for me the get out of her way. "You're standin' in the way, and I didn't come here to see your ugly face."

"Lovely," I sighed, stepping aside so she could enter the house. Then it was Liz's turn. "She's so fuckin' crude, that one," I told her, pointing my thumb over my shoulder. "Does she kiss Alec with that mouth?"

"Oh shush, you!" she chuckled through her tears. "Gimme a hug, honey." I did, and it felt fucking good. "Good to see you again, kid."

"You too, Liz," I murmured, dropping a kiss in her hair. "Let's head inside, shortie, cause I have a feelin' you're not here to see me, either."
"Got that right." She grinned, smacking my chest playfully, as I draped an arm around her. "Take me to my girl. I've missed her like crazy and I can't wait to see your little boy."

Warmth. Just... everywhere.

As soon as we entered the kitchen, I wasn't surprised to see Tanya and Bella, crying their eyes out as they hugged the shit out of each other, and I was even less surprised to see Liz launch at them. They had all missed Bella. Nothing was the same without my girl. My girl who was now wearing her beloved combat boots once more. One of my t-shirts, cotton shorts, and combat boots. Only my wife.

"I's only happy tears, Mommy say," EJ told me quietly as he walked over to me in the doorway. "Mommy happy."

I swallowed hard and picked him up, positioning him on my hip.

"Only happy tears." I nodded. "She's happy to see her friend again."

EJ nodded slowly, as he was trying to understand, and I knew there was a lot we needed to explain to him about family, but this wasn't the moment. Not this night at least. It would all come soon enough.

"Love you, nugget," I told him, resting my forehead against his.

"I love you, Daddy," he giggled as he placed his hands on my cheeks and pushed them together. "So funny face!"

"I know," I heard Tanya say, and I looked over to see her approach slowly. "Your daddy has a very funny face."

I shot her a playfully scowl before I turned to nugget again, who was now shy and burying his face in the crook of my neck.
"EJ, baby? Can you say hi to Tanya?" I murmured softly. "She's Mommy's best girlfriend." I chose the words carefully, having already experienced one outburst from EJ when Bella referred to me as her best friend. It had triggered him, because during all time they were away, EJ was her best friend. Her only friend. And EJ was my son; he was protective and fiercely loyal. "And when she isn't annoyin' Daddy, she's my friend too," I added, trying to lighten the mood.

At least it worked on my cousin.

"She's a fwriend, Daddy?" he whispered in my ear. "Pwromise?"

"Promise, buddy," I whispered back. "And you know the cool Turtles blanket you have in bed upstairs?" He nodded, still with his face buried. "Tanya and her mommy bought them for you."

Yeah, that did it.

Slowly but surely, EJ faced Tanya. Still clinging to me, but he didn't seem scared.

"Mommy and Daddy only gots blanket with no Turtles," he told her, which made Tanya and I both chuckle. "Mine is funner. Right, Daddy?"

"Of course, nugget," I said with a straight face. "So, maybe you should thank Tanya for the funner blanket." I winked at him.

He tried to wink back.

"Dang, he's really your son, cus," Tanya snickered. "Good thing he got Bella's looks, though."

"Hey, he has my eyes," I said defensively. "And my smile," I added proudly.
"No, Daddy." EJ shook his head. "I gots my smile and my eyes. You gots yours."

Right.

Of course.

"And Bella's brains, thank God," Tanya coughed, though I heard her loud and clear.

And so our night continued. Or started. Liz and Tanya were back in our life. Bella had her friend back, I had my banter with my cousin, something I would deny to have missed. At least out loud. But I had. Very much. I had missed them both.

Though EJ clung to me and Bella during dinner, he was starting to relax ever so slowly as he watched us all interact like the family we were. A family reconnecting and becoming whole once more.

The dinner didn't last very long since we didn't wanna rush anything, or more importantly; overwhelm Bella. So, after a couple of hours we said goodbye to Tan and Liz, knowing that we'd see them soon again. And then we sat on the porch, the five of us, and mom had a sleeping EJ in her lap while I sat between Bella's legs with Sadie. I couldn't play very well, what with my fucked up arm and all, but it mattered little. Bella's fingers in my hair, however... yeah.

Last but not least, Emmett stopped by after his late shift, and though he didn't stay more than thirty minutes or so, it was still enough to exhaust Bella. Much like I was close to Tanya and... always bickered with her, Emmett and Bella had the same relationship. They hugged for a solid ten minutes. One of those bone crushing hugs, and I could see emotion rolling off both of them, but then... then they slipped. Right into comfort and old
ways. It was still emotional for Bella to see her cousin again, but again like Tanya and I, they couldn't help it. It was perfect the way it was.

But tiring.

So, with a promise to catch up tomorrow, Emmett said goodbye and headed to the house he had bought on our street.

I could hardly believe it was only three months ago Charlie and I had sat on this porch, strumming on our guitars, and him telling me about Emmett moving here. It seemed like another lifetime. That was just it, though. It wasn't a lifetime. It was a dead fucking time. Thinking back on it now, I could barely understand how I kept breathing. I was completely hollow.

"You have your thinkin'-face on," Bella commented, smoothing out the crease between my brows. "What's on your mind, hubs?"

I sighed contently, leaning over EJ's sleeping form to kiss her.

I longed to have her closer in bed, but... well, EJ could never decide, so he always ended up in the middle. And that was fine. For now.

"Nothin' much," I whispered. "Just glad to have you home."


I chuckled. "My quirky girl. I love you, too. Now get some sleep."

"Yes, sir." She mock saluted me.

Yeah, as long as I had her, we'd be just fine.

Or fucking perfect.
...Give us life again

'Cause we just wanna be whole...

~We Are Broken by Paramore – chapter song.

October 12th

Bella Cullen.

When Garrett first kidnapped me, I had all hope in the world. I was devastated and completely terrified but I had hope. I had faith. My father, my husband, my mighty cousin, my friends, somebody would come and rescue me. As time passed, I started losing faith. My goals were no longer about escaping and making my way back home. They were about surviving another day. And then as even more time passed, they were about surviving another day for the sake of my son. I stopped living for myself, and this was my life, if you can call it that, for a very long time. I'm paying for this now because I don't know how to live for myself anymore.

My first thought is EJ. My second thought is you. My third thought is dad... and so on.

I don't know what place I come in.

Anna noticed this, of course, because is there anything she doesn't notice? I doubt it.

It was last week, during our second session on the porch when she asked me a series of questions. They weren't odd or anything. Maybe a little random. But I answered and thought nothing of it. Until she flat out told me how I replied to most questions. It made me blink, and made you
blink too. We were both caught off guard, and... well, I... had nothing to say.

She was right.

In one way or another, I made questions that were about me end up being about someone else.

I started thinking about this, and I realized that I made everything about anyone but me. When Esme asked me what I wanted for dinner, I immediately considered EJ’s favorites or your favorites, and told Esme to go with that. When you asked me what I wanted you to play, I told you it didn't matter, as long as I could hear your voice and your tinkering. When dad asked me if he could catch a game in our living room, I didn't hesitate. I just took the photo album I was looking at and moved to the kitchen. Even if I really wanted some peace and quiet in my living room. And EJ... will I ever be able to say no to him?

So, Anna told me I have to think about myself.

Easier said than done.

But I'm trying.

I'm trying so hard, and it's not just about this. There's so much more. It's everything, really. All the issues and fears.

I refuse to leave the house.

I suffer from mood swings that piss me off.

I cry for nothing.

I feel suffocated and exposed at the same time.
I want to be alone with you, hubs, but I can't part with EJ or dad or even Esme.

I want to push myself and I want to hide.

I want to be normal, but was I ever normal?

You'd kiss my nose and shake your head with a tender smile.

You don't want me to be normal, you never did. You want me for who I am.

But for once, I wish I could just fucking function.

That's just it, though, because even though everything inside of me is raging, pulling and twisting, I still go through the motions. We make progress everyday, but a part of me is blind to see it.

For instance, I've seen both Tanya and Emmett a few times since the first time, same goes for Liz. But even as I sat in the kitchen with Tan, I felt like I was going nowhere. Instead of recognizing the fact that I don't recoil anymore, I grow frustrated because my body and mind won't obey me, which is confusing because half the time I don't even know what I want. At least not long enough to stick to it.

You notice of course, because you always do, and you comfort me and take me aside, over and over, reassuring me that we'll get there. One day, someday, we'll be able to do exactly what we want when we want it.

I hope you're right, baby, because I'm losing my fucking mind.

Thank heavens I have you.

You're my rock.

You're there when I need shelter, and you're there when I need a push.
But there's still more, isn't there? Yes. Like a few days ago, when you introduced me to Jasper and Alice. Well, I've already met Jasper once, but I hardly count that.

It was brief. We sat on the porch for an hour or so, just... chit-chatting.

Fun times.

No.

It was painful, and you know why. You saw how much I recognized myself in Alice, and the knowledge of not being that happy girl anymore is another thing I loathe. Okay, Alice is a bit more chirpy, which you pointed out, too. But I was like that once. Happy, carefree, always smiling.

Again you told me that I will be that girl again.

I fucking hope so.

*O*O*O*

"You ready?" you ask.

And I want to say no. But... "Yep."

Then we enter EJ's room.

It's still hard.

I still get choked up.

I watch the walls, the floor, EJ's name painted on the wall, the rocker, the... everything. And I think about the day you were supposed to show me this. The day everything on this planet fucked us over.

EJ didn't understand why we cried four days ago when we first showed him his room.
Flashback

"Just you and me," you whisper. I grip your hand tightly.

Yes, just you and me. EJ’s waiting downstairs with dad and Esme.

Then you open and the door, and I feel everything closing in on me. I see the blue paint you and dad used on the walls. I see our son's name, God, you worked so hard in here, hubs. But you never got the chance to see your son in that crib. Neither did I.

"Come on, baby," you breathe thickly.

I breathe, or I try.

In the middle of EJ’s room, we stand still.

You think.

I think.

Memories assault us.

I think about that phone call. Our last phone call where I told you... *I’ll be home soon, Edward.*

With your arms around me, I let go.

I let go of everything.

I cry, I sob, I try to get it all out. I want to heal, just heal. Get better. I want to enjoy my second chance. I want to see you and EJ in here, playing and talking boy-stuff. I want to be banned from this room because I'm a girl. I want to trip over toys and curse EJ for my stubbed toes. I want to mutter under my breath about boys never picking their shit up. I want to stand in the doorway while you read bedtime stories for him. And
when you see me, the two of you, you will both smile that crooked smile.
Last but not least, I want to fill these walls with photos of EJ's childhood.

Only... I won't get to do that. Ever. At least not from his first three years.

There's no photo of his first birthday. Or his second, or his third.

You hug me harder, I wonder where your thoughts are right now.

What are you remembering?

I sniffle.

You cry.

My mood shifts again, and I'm suddenly pissed and bitter.

It's Garrett's fault that you're crying right now.

And he's dead.

I can't hurt him for what he's done to us.

He got away too easily.

Nothing's fair.

My head hurts. It all hurts.

This room should be filled with memories already, but it's not. This is the first time we both set foot inside this room, and we will always remember this, hubs. Always will we remember that the first time we entered our son's room, we both ended up clinging to each other as painful memories brought us to our knees.

It's. Not. Fair.

"Hubs," I breathe.
You shake your head, not ready to talk yet.

End Flashback

I shake my head and sigh.

This has been our routine now since we opened the door four days ago.

You and I go into EJ's room a few times a day, just to get used to it again.

EJ's not impressed.

When we showed him his room, he didn't understand why he'd ever need it. He still doesn't. Solitude is the last thing he wants, and when he plays with the toys that we've ordered for him, he plays in the kitchen or in the backyard. Yes, he has plenty of toys now. Turtles, LEGO, cars, stuffed animals, and building blocks. He's over the moon.

But he refuses to go in here. Even when you and I are here, he doesn't like it, and only enters if he has to. He doesn't like the fact that all his toys are here, either. He'd rather have them in our room or downstairs.

"What're you thinkin'?" you murmur. A kiss on the top of my head.

We sit on EJ's new bed, I lean my head on your shoulder.

"Why EJ doesn't like it in here," I sigh.

You hum.

"I've thought about that, too," you say softly. "And... maybe Anna's wrong. I mean..." I look up at you. You lean your forehead against mine. "Hey, I wasn't happy about bein' indoors when I was a kid." I smile, because I remember. "I always wanted to be outdoors, ya know. And..." You shrug, I cradle your face. "Why push him? Maybe we should just let
him play outdoors if that's what he likes. We can try to talk to him outside instead of in here."

It makes sense.

And then...

I crack a smile.

A real one.

"We could also fix his room," I suggest, now looking around me. "We could have an outdoor theme, right? We could paint trees on the walls, and we could have a green carpet that's like grass... And... Oh! A tent where his bed could be. Like campin'."

When you don't cut off my rambling, my eyes find you again.

Your grin is wide, eyes are glistening.

I smile sheepishly.

"You're fuckin' amazin', you know that, right?"

I smack your arm playfully.

You catch it.

We kiss.

"I think that sounds good, angel," you mumble against my lips. "Really. We should do it together."

And yeah, I cock a brow, cause that's how my mind works.

"Get your head out of the gutter, Cullen," you huff, rolling your eyes at me.
You called me Cullen.

I smile.

But...

"Are you okay with redecorating?" I ask softly. "I mean... you and dad worked hard on this room."

You're already shaking your head. "Yeah, we did, but... it's too much to see this room this way, even for me. I think we need to change it. And who knows, if we like to be in here, maybe EJ will too."

 Forehead against forehead again, I love you so much.

"It can be our project," you murmur with a smile.

"Sounds good," I whisper. And it does. It feels really good. It's more than just to redecorate a room. It's about building something, it's about moving on, about creating something.

Together.

Something we can look back on later.

And something that can work as a distraction when we need to get away from our "healing process" that's always on our mind.

"If we involve nugget, maybe he'll like it even more."

Again I agree. I nod.

You're right.

This is what we can do together as a family. Just the three of us. It's time for that anyway. As much as I need dad and Esme close, it's time we did something just the three of us. And this is the perfect thing.
"Who knew you'd be so smart?" I half-chuckle and half-giggle.

"Hey, I resent that," you say, poking my side, to which I shriek.

Because you know how ticklish I am!

Before I know it, you're on top of me, tickling the shit out of me while I gasp for air and cry rivers. But it's happy tears. Well... believe me, there's frustration too! And I grunt, because holy shit, when did you get so fucking strong? Granted, you always were but damn, you just won't budge!

"Holy... Edward!" I all but scream.

"What's the magic word?" you chuckle and pin me harder to the tiny bed. "Gimme the magic word, baby."

I would if I could, but I can hardly breathe!

But I think I know how to make you stop.

The first word that pops into my head...

"DICK!"

Shit.

You freeze.

And I start laughing harder.

And harder...

That was really the first word I came up with?

Jesus.
"Did you..." You look down at me like I'm a freak, and you're very amused, and a bit stunned, I think. "Did you just call me a **dick**?"

"Mmmhfmmph," I whimper through laughs.

You just shake your head at me.

And wipe away my tears.

"You are so... weird, angel," you snicker. Then your eyes, they're so soft. Loving. "And you kinda take my breath away, you know."

My laughter dies down...

Just like that.

You know what I need.

Slowly you lower yourself, closer, closer, and we kiss.

It's different this time.

Slow but with... yes... I feel our fire. It's still there. Maybe it's even stronger, bigger, more powerful. It wouldn't surprise me. You always blow my mind after all, hubs. And now... now we're waking up. At last.

"I love you," you mumble.

I shiver.

"Love you, too."

We deepen the kiss.

You relax, you embrace, we savor, I think we'll want more very soon.

"Fuck, baby," you breathe. "I need..." I know, you need to stop.
We're not ready, and you don't like that your body is waking up.

'Cause you're silly like that. You're afraid I will take offense.

"I'm sorry," you sigh, rolling over and onto your back.

I giggle when you adjust yourself.

"Don't you dare apologize, hubs," I chuckle, feeling giddy about my properly kissed lips. It's been a long time, baby. "Do you hear me complainin'?"

In fact...

I scoot closer and rest my chin on your chest.

"I found it quite... pleasurable, Edward."

I grin when you avert your eyes to the ceiling, and mumble "Jezebel" under your breath.

"Hmm," I hum, and it's my turn to be on top of you. "But I'm your Jezebel. Your Tease... right?"

"Damn straight," you mutter gruffly, smirking a little. "But, my little pagan, I aint ready to succumb to your wickedness."

"Me? Wicked?" I try and fail to sound innocent.

You smile at me.

And tap me on the nose.

"God, I've missed you, baby," you sigh.

"I've missed you too," I reply simply, pecking you a few times.
I savor the moments I feel good. Who knows, maybe I will start sobbing uncontrollably for no reason in fifteen minutes. Or maybe I will shout and feel anger boil for the unfairness we live in. I never know, and until my body is at peace, all I can do is... just go with it. I have to accept that I have no control yet.

"We're such bad parents," I snicker, looking around us. "We're foolin' around like teenagers in EJ's tiny ass bed."

Ah, the Cullen grin of triumph. "Yeah, but you make me feel like a fuckin' teenager, angel. So... it's your fault."

"Nice try," I huff, planting my ass on your stomach, making sure I'm not close to your healing wound. Hovering isn't all that fun when you can actually sit. So, I sit. On you. "But you're not so innocent, Cullen."

"Sure I am... Cullen. I'm a true fuckin' gentleman. So there."

I laugh. "You're a sweet bastard with a foul mouth. Just ask your mother. Good thing I love you that way."

"I only heard "sweet" and that you love me-"

"Mommy!" You and I both look toward the doorway, and I don't know if I should laugh or cry at the sight. EJ looks absolutely adorable with his scowl. A scowl he's inherited from you, by the way. "Why are you sitting on Daddy, Mommy!"

Was that a growl?

Jeesh, little dude.

"Exactly!" you exclaim, shaking in silent laughter. I glare at you, to which you actually poke your tongue out. So mature. "You better get over here, nugget! Help me!"
And in flies EJ, eager to "save" Daddy.

But this was what I wanted, wasn't it?

Yeah.

I smile to myself as I get attacked by my two boys.

This is just what I want.

My two boys wrestling me, ganging up on me because... boys stick together.

We're already creating new memories...

We might still be broken... we really are, but... we're getting there.

And finally... I feel the progress.

About fucking time!

Internal fist pump for Bella Cullen!

God, I'm so weird.

Chapter 34

...Filled with hope, 'cause you're here in my life

And we've gone

From the edge of our souls

Made it back to a place we call home...

~All That You Are by Goo Goo Dolls – chapter song.

October 19th
Edward Cullen.

I tried to focus on Bella and Anna, but it was impossible.

Sitting on the porch swing, with my head between my knees, I tried to breathe properly; I tried to regain control. But that was also impossible. I suddenly understood what Bella was talking about when she said that she had no control whatsoever. Whether it was about her mood swings or... just whatever... she had no control, and I knew what she meant now, because this... this was awful.

I could barely breathe.

My chest hurt. Felt too tight.

"Breathe, hubs..."

We'd been doing so well this past week.

Our sessions made us feel better, made us feel the progress we were doing, and Anna helped us see what we couldn't. Regardless of what it was, she was there and talked us through it.

EJ was happier and more talkative. He also didn't feel the need to constantly know where Bella and I were. He couldn't be left in a room alone, but if Charlie or Mom was nearby, he didn't demand to know where Bella and I were going if one of us left the room. He knew we'd be back in a moment. He trusted again.

And Bella... my amazing wife, she had worked so fucking hard. She tried and tried, and when she broke down, she rode it out before she started all over again, feeling just a little bit stronger than before. She was growing more and more comfortable. I saw her smile everyday. She gained weight and looked healthier for each day that passed. She also invited Jazz and Alice over a few times, and it all felt like things were falling into place.
Hell, we even took the news about the investigation well. Not that there was much to know; Denali just told us that they were trying to find out about the places Garrett had taken Bella and EJ. They needed to know if Garrett was behind any more crimes. Like I said, there wasn't much to know, and Bella and I weren't all that involved with it. But still... we listened to what he said, and that was that. It didn't set us back.

We were going forward.

But this, this fucking sucked.

"Please focus, Edward... Squeeze my hand..."

I did. I blinked. I wheezed.

I was somewhat aware. I just couldn't control myself.

It had started out well. Anna said that we were ready to push more, and for Bella it was about leaving the house. Starting small, of course. Like, visiting Charlie next door, having coffee with Alice and Jazz at their house instead of here, and same for Emmett. We had many of our close ones nearby. That was Bella's next thing; to leave her comfort zone if only a little.

Then it was my turn.

"Maybe it's time you think about returning to work, Edward," Anna had said.

Yeah.

In an automatic response, I nodded and thought nothing of it. I knew it was time to get back there, anyway. Plus, the money I hadn't touched over the past three years was running out thanks to all the fucking medical bills. We were good for a little while longer, but it was still time to
think about returning. So, our session continued. Anna talked to EJ, making him open up a little about what used to be his life, and how things were different now. It was important to make him realize that things weren't going to go back to the way they were before. But the more they spoke about that, the more I started to realize that returning to work was going to be easier said than done.

My pregnant wife had been kidnapped when I wasn't there.

I couldn't save her because I wasn't there.

I had spent the past three and a half years all alone.

Alone in our bed, alone in our house.

I'd lost it all.

In a second, a life could change.

So, what if something happened again? And I wasn't there.

I wouldn't be able to live.

That was when I felt it in my chest. Panic and fear.

I squeezed my eyes shut, focusing on Bella's hands on me.

I breathed.

I kept my head between my knees.

Deep breaths...

*She's here.*

But for how long?

I hated feeling weak. I loathed it.
"Feeling better?" she asked softly, pushing hair away from my forehead.

I closed my eyes, reveling in the moments I had alone with my wife.

We were in bed. Just the two of us. Under the covers. Wearing comfy clothes. Hell, we were always in comfy clothes.

_Gotta love sweats and beaters._

Mom was downstairs with EJ, making dinner.

Charlie was talking to Anna.

"A little," I muttered. I could breathe properly but I was still scared shitless about leaving Bella and EJ. "I don't know how it's gonna work, baby," I admitted, keeping my eyes closed. "The thought of leaving you and nugget here in the house while I work..." I swallowed hard, feeling weak and pathetic.

She sighed and slid her arm under me, silently motioning for me to come closer, which I did. Always. And soon, I was resting my head on her chest. I could picture her, watching the ceiling, thinking about answers.

"We'll take things slow," she murmured in my hair. "Maybe just a quick visit, then you'll come back home?"

I hummed as she played with my hair, not agreeing or disagreeing with her.

Instead I tilted my head up and kissed her neck. She smelled like Bella again. No more filth, no more hospital smells. Just Bella. It was all I wanted. I was also starting to crave more. Closeness, connection. Most of all, time alone with her, and I knew it was time to kick the 'rents out.
"I love you," I mumbled, sliding my hand under her tank top. More kisses followed, right there on that spot below her ear. And my hand rested on her soft stomach. She still had plenty of weight to gain, but she was getting there. She was also working out a little in the backyard. Nothing complicated or too heavy. Just walking around with Mom, stretching and testing her limits a little. I loved watching her from the living room window. I loved watching her strength grow. I could see it in her eyes.

"I love you too, hubs," she whispered softly, hitching her leg over my hip. "And we'll work it out in our pace."

I smiled a little, reached up and kissed her soft lips.

"Our pace," I agreed quietly into the kiss.

My body was waking up.

As we deepened the kiss, my hand slid down, slowly feeling her skin against me, not really stopping. It was my wife, yet I felt like a pubescent teen. But then again, she always brought this out of me. So, I ignored the shaky nerves and kissed her properly, feeling her tongue against mine. And my hand... my hand continued until I reached her ass. My fingers flexed. I groaned quietly as she scooted closer. *Fuck*. The feelings rushing through me were almost too much, but I couldn't stop yet. I needed this. She did, too.

"God, Edward," she whimpered.

Legs tangled together.

I cupped her ass and pulled her closer.

She could feel me, I knew that. And I was hard for her. So fucking hard.

I breathed heavily, dropping openmouthed kisses on her neck.
Her hands were in my hair, pulling and twisting slightly, keeping me close.

Then I was hovering over her.

Frantic kisses. Hungry ones.

"Fuck, baby," I moaned against her neck. I shuddered. She was warm... and I was right there. "Stop me, angel," I mumbled, hoping to God that she would. And wouldn't. I hated the confliction. But I couldn't fucking stop, especially not when she moved with me. Goddamn. Heavenly friction.

"Not yet," she gasped, pulling me in for another kiss. A hard kiss, full of passion and longing. I felt it, she felt it. "Fuck, you feel so good, Edward..."

Christ.

I squeezed my eyes shut.

My cock ached against her; she was so fucking hot.

We were both panting heavily when we broke the kiss. Foreheads connected.

"Goddamn," I breathed.

There was a war raging inside of me. One part telling me I was ready and desperate to make love to my wife again. And one part that was petrified. Of what? I had no idea, but there was some fucking block in my head. I just couldn't. I was... I don't know... but I was scared of something. I didn't know, but... could it trigger something? Maybe... memories for her, and her past three years... Maybe closeness would be hard for her... That kind of closeness. Sex.

Nothing in my head made sense, not even to me.
"Relax, baby," Bella whispered. "Hey, look at me."

I blew out a breath, slowly opening my eyes. I already knew I'd see understanding in her. She always understood. But that wasn't the issue here. The issue was that I didn't understand.

"No rush," she said, caressing my cheek, and I... well, I felt like shit.

It felt like we were reversed. Shouldn't I be the one to calm my wife down?

*Whatever.*

I sighed to myself, giving Bella a nod, and that was that.

For now.

But I had to ask her...

"Are you ready?" I asked quietly, resting my forehead against hers again.

She shrugged once, pursing her lips. "Yeah," she replied slowly. "I mean... I miss you." Her smile was small and wistful. I knew that look. I felt it, too. But I was too fucking frightened. "Maybe I don't want to rush anything, but... I miss *us*, Edward."

I shuddered out a breath, feeling emotions wash over me; emotions I wasn't ready to deal with yet. I missed us, too. More than words could say, but I wasn't ready to voice my fears, though I knew I had to. And it was true. Undeniably so; I missed what we had before. We were... perfect together. The way we could read each other's bodies, the way we were both into the same things, the way we could be both playful and tender. There were times for sweetness and times for roughness, and it always came naturally for us.

I missed that, too.
So, I promised myself to speak up. I knew Anna was the one to talk to. Unfortunately.

"We'll talk to Anna," I murmured.

Again, she just understood. "Sounds good. Now, gimme some suga'.'"

I chuckled, in awe of my quirky girl. "Yes, ma'am."

*O*O*O*

"Ready, kiddo?" Mom asked.

I shot her a look, rounded the car and got in without replying.

No, I wasn't ready.

Three days had gone since Anna first approached me about working again, and things didn't feel much better.

But... whatever.

I had just spent two hours preparing myself to leave Bella and EJ for a three hour shift at the bar. I could leave the bar if I had to, of course, but I wanted to pull through. I wanted to be strong.

Truth be told, I had no issues when it came to leaving the house. We'd gone to the hospital for Bella's checkups, after all, and there was no problem there. For me. There was for Bella, but... No, my only problem was being without her and EJ. It didn't matter where we were; I had no issues with crowds, so to speak. Or locations for that matter. It was simply about not being able to see Bella and EJ with my own eyes. But now it was time. Not just for me, though. Mom was also returning to work. So, the two of us sped off, and I ignored the sharp, twisting pain in my chest. Tightening and tightening.
My hands were clammy.

There was a dull ache in my head.

I was tense.

The black Twilight-shirt felt like a prison. The dark washed jeans were uncomfortable. I missed my sweats, my beaters. I missed the comfort of home...

...And I had just left the house.

Wonderful.

The only thing I found comforting was that Charlie and Emmett were both staying with Bella and EJ. Two cops. Both armed.

"Bella took things well," Mom mentioned casually as I drove.

Casually. Like she wasn't paying attention to my bouncing knee, or how my fingers gripped the wheel, of how I clenched my teeth, or how my chest heaved.

But she was right. Bella had taken things well. Granted, she was worried and unsettled, but after comforting her, she stayed strong. I just wish I could do the same.

"EJ too," she added.

Also true. He had cried and refused to let me go at first – something that only twisted the proverbial knife deeper in my heart – but Bella and Charlie had managed to calm him down.

They were going to spend the night baking cupcakes with green frosting, then they were going to watch movies. Movies – EJ's newest poison. We had introduced him to Shrek and Ice Age a couple of days ago. Yeah. He
was sold. Thankfully, he still preferred to play outdoors, which Bella and I loved. We were both outdoorsy growing up. Obviously we were glad EJ seemed to take after us there. And it only solidified our plans to redo EJ's room.

We had started already. That was something we were both eager to do, because we wanted our son to feel comfortable in his own room. So... the walls in his room were now in four different shades of green; one shade for each wall. The ceiling was dark blue, and the floor was next on our agenda, which was going to be in dark wood, making it look like the ground... or whatever it was that she'd said. Last, there was going to be a thick rug in grass green... because it was to be grass, of course.

I had to admit, it was fun and incredibly fulfilling. It was just for me and Bella. The two of us working on something together. And as soon as we were done with the walls, floor, and ceiling, we were going to include EJ, too. But Bella insisted that we finished with the foundation first. And apparently that included painting trees and plants on the walls, as well as attaching glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling.

She was all in. I loved it. It was so her. She was always creative.

"Edward, please relax," I heard Mom murmur in concern.

Easier said than done.

I sighed.

I clenched and unclenched.

Then, Mom huffed and reached for the pack of smokes in my front pocket, brought them out, pulled one cigarette out, and... yeah, she lit one as she rolled down the window.

"Mom! Since..." when the fuck did you smoke?
After another drag, she handed me the cigarette and I took it wordlessly, rolling down my own window. But I needed a fucking answer. Mom didn't smoke for fuck's sake. That was just... **wrong**.

"I don't smoke," she replied flippantly, blowing smoke out the window. "I just lit one up for you. You clearly needed it."

"I call bullshit," I muttered, letting the cigarette dangle between my lips as I made the last turn for the bar. "Explain, woman."

"Manners, boy," she chastised, shooting me a quick glare. "I raised you better than that."

*Fuck.*

"Yes, ma'am," I mumbled. Believe me, I felt properly chastised. You didn't snap at Esme Cullen. "I'm sorry. But could you tell me what all that was about?" I asked quietly.

She sighed. "I don't smoke, kiddo. But I did once upon a time, but you know what?" I raised an eyebrow. She smiled sweetly. "I quit when I was expectin' you. Take the hint."

I narrowed my eyes at her after I had pulled in on the small parking lot behind the bar. Turned to face her as I exhaled some smoke. I didn't buy it. "Lemme get this straight, Ma. You want me to quit, and then you go and light one up for me? Oh, and also admittin' that you used to smoke? The hell?"

*Cue Esme Cullen eye roll. It's epic.*

"Yea, I want you to quit," she said annoyingly. "But I could see that you needed the fuckin' nicotine, all right?"

Now she was cussing, too?
Where the fuck is my Mom?

"You're weird," I told her and stepped out of the car.

As we reached the backdoor of the bar, she stopped me with a smirk.

"You're breathin', aren't ya?" She dared me to defy her. "I distracted you, and now you're not sweatin' bullets."

So there's where I got my cockiness from. My Mom.

I huffed.

I stubbed out the fucking smoke.

I entered the bar.

I hated that she was right. Because I did feel better. I just needed to make sure I was distracted enough; then I would make sure to pull this shit off.

"I'll be in my office, baby," she sang, passing me in the narrow hallway.

Shaking my head at her, I continued walking toward the bar, where I knew Alec would be already. Hell, we were already open, though it was too early for it to be busy. But Alec and Tan had assured us that there was no rush.

Before I rounded the last corner, I brought out my cell, needing to just check in. Real quick.

Just arrived. Everything okay with you? Love you – E.

I felt the anxiety build when she didn't reply right away, but I managed to keep my shit together, internally chanting about her safety. I knew she
was safe. Charlie and Em were there. Charlie and Em were there, and they were armed. Yeah.

Luckily, she replied before I could lose my freaking mind.

**We're fine. But missing you. You okay, hubs? – B.**

I exhaled.

I wanted to hear her voice, but I knew that if I called her now, I would cave and be on my way home before I could finish the call, and I needed to do this. We needed to move forward, so I took a few deep breaths before I texted her and told her things were okay.

And then I headed to the bar where Alec waited for me.

*I can do this. Fuck, I've been doing this since I was eighteen.*

Which was a half lie, because I had practically grown up in this bar. Mom still lived in the apartment above the bar, and I took my first steps down here.

"Cullen!" Alec bellowed, grinning widely as I joined him behind the bar. "Fuck, it's good to see ya again, man."

I chuckled, albeit weakly, but returned the man-hug, because I had to admit it felt good to see him again, too.

"How's my girl," he asked, smirking like the fucker he was.

I shook my head at him and threw a rag over my shoulder. "I don't know, Alec," I told him, then nodded in Tanya's direction. "You tell me. How is she?"

He grinned. "Touché."
That's right. 'Cause Bella's my girl.

"Are you done with your little moment?" Tanya asked dryly, dropping off an empty tray on the counter. I chuckled at her, leaned over as she did, and kissed her cheek. "Good to have you back, Edward. Too bad your better half isn't ready." She grinned cheekily. "You know, once she's back at Twilight, you'll be fendin' off them guys all over again."

Yeah, I flipped her off.

I didn't wanna think about that. Not that she wasn't right, 'cause unfortunately she was. When Bella worked here as a waitress, Alec and I had our hands full. Tanya and Bella knew how to work crowds. Fuck, back then, I was more of a bouncer than a bartender. Same went for Alec. But I couldn't stop myself from picturing it; Bella, back here where she loved it. Would she love it again? Would we work together here one day? Or was she gonna go back to school?

Ah, fuck. Too close to home.

That hurt.

I rubbed my chest, working on autopilot as I took an order from Tanya.

Maybe I would be able to handle something like that in the future, but now was definitely too soon. Just the thought of her, driving on the same road, passing that gas station... where she was once taken...

Fuck.

Deep breaths.

"Hey, you okay, Ed?" I heard Alec ask.

I dipped my chin, looking down at my wedding band.
God, I missed her. Ached for her. This was a fucking pain.

I blew out a breath.

Don't be a pussy, Cullen.

"I'm fine," I muttered, not knowing if he'd heard me over the music, but I didn't care. Instead I headed for the other end of the bar and started taking orders. I could do this. I could breathe, and work, and do this. Then, I could go home to my family.

"What can I get ya?" I asked a man. Huh, I... yeah, I recognized him, and judging by his expression, he recognized me, too. But I couldn't place him. He looked out of place, though. Wearing a fancy suit when the other patrons wore jeans and t-shirts.

"Edward Cullen?" he inquired, though he didn't show surprise or confusion. It was more of a statement, really.

I frowned and gave him a quick nod, folding my arms over my chest as I straightened up. Automatic response. "And you are?" I asked, cocking a brow.

"I'm Carlisle," he said, reaching his hand out. I didn't take it... yet. "Carlisle Masen. I was your son's doctor..." he trailed off.

Ah.

Now I shook his hand, feeling a bit stupid. "Of course," I said. "Good to see ya again, doc."

"You too, Edward," he replied, taking his fancy suit jacket off. "How is the little guy?"
A smile tugged in the corners of my mouth. "He's... good. Given the circumstances." And I wasn't very comfortable talking about that in a bar, so I changed the subject. "So... a beer?"

"Sounds good." He nodded firmly, averting his eyes for a moment.

Almost as if he was looking for something.

I had to admit I was a bit curious to why he was here. The hospital he worked at was close to Alice's work, and she worked an hour away from here. That, and the fact that he appeared to be more into fancy scotch and cigars, rather than beer and rock music. He looked... stiff. Especially in this establishment.

"Can I get you anythin' else?" I asked, setting the beer in front of him.

And now he was looking a little nervous.

Well, if that didn't put me on edge, I didn't know what would.

Again I found myself eyeing him in question, making sure he knew I wasn't one for bullshit.

"Uh, I kind of looked it up," he said. "This bar, I mean."

"And?"

He dragged a hand through his hair, and yeah, he was nervous. "You co-own Twilight, yes?"

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Cut the shit, doc."

He sighed. In defeat. "With your mother? You own this place with Esme?"

Fuck and no.
"What about my mother?" I gritted out. I knew his type. He wasn't the first. My Mom was a beautiful woman, there was no denying that, and this douche wouldn't be the first one I had gotten rid of. Pompous assholes looking for someone to play with when their uppity and prissy wives won't give it to them.

"Well, I uh... I was wondering if she was here," he said, swallowing audibly.

Fucker.

My eyes zeroed in on his left hand, and I noticed the lighter skin tone he had on his ring finger; where a ring had obviously been for a long time. Honestly, I didn't know whether to laugh or just punch him. How stupid did he think I was?

"Afraid she's not," I lied dryly. "Feel free to leave a message, though." I smirked. "I'll make sure she gets it."

It was a lie, and he knew it. I wasn't very subtle about it.

Instead of giving him a chance to reply, I just left.

"Trade place with me," I told Alec, slapping him on the shoulder.

So, that's what we did.

I spent the next few hours working Alec's side of the bar, and when the prissy doctor left, I threw away the napkin he'd scribbled on.

Please call me, Esme. I'd love to see you again. /Carlisle

His number. Figures.

And... see him again?
Fuck that.

I decided to talk to Mom about this shit tomorrow or something.

'Cause my time was finally up, and I wasn't one to waste time when it came to my family.

I drove home after telling Mom I was done.

*O*O*O*

It was unbelievable; the way my entire being relaxed when I parked the Volvo outside our house. Because there, on the porch swing sat Bella. Charlie sat in the rocker, as usual, and Emmett sat next to Bella.

I breathed deeply, feeling my eyes sting, but this was massive.

Never before had I felt this strongly.

For something so simple as having my wife waiting for me to come home.

It was something she often did, but it was different now, because I had experienced three years of coming home to an empty house. But that time was over now. And when she looked up, and saw me... I was a goner.

"Edward!" she squealed, running down the porch steps. "You're home!"

She ran.

Good thing my arm was feeling better, 'cause she fucking jumped.

I caught her.

And I laughed thickly as I hugged the shit outta her.
"Fuck, I missed you." I breathed her in, held her hard, loving the way she tightened her hold on me, too. Legs wrapped around me, arms locked around my neck. "Those three hours were hell, angel."

"I know," she murmured, and started planting kisses all over my face. "I tried to go to sleep-" More kisses. All over. "-but I couldn't until you were home."

Shivers ran through my body as we just stood there in our little front yard in the late October evening.

But the moment was pure fucking bliss.

"Is EJ up?" I asked, kissing her temple.

She shook her head, kissing my neck. "He's asleep in the livin' room."

"Then let's wake the little one up, so we can go to bed," I whispered. All I wanted now was to feel them close to me. "Or what do you say?"

"I say you're a genius, Cullen." She grinned at me. And gave me an Eskimo kiss. "Take me to bed," she purred.

_Fuck me._

"Jezebel," I whispered under my breath.

Yeah, I definitely need to talk to Anna about my hesitation.

_Cause as the good lord is my witness, my body's ready to ravish my wife._

"Good thing we'll have EJ between us," I chuckled, rolling my eyes. "Who knows what I would do in my sleep otherwise?" I winked.

She didn't miss a beat. "Bad, bad things?" she asked, smiling coyly.
No, there was no winning with this woman, 'cause she owned the flirting-game.

My Tease.

Chapter 35

'Cause everything you do and words you say
You know that it all takes my breath away...

~Two Is Better Than One by Boys Like Girls feat. Taylor Swift – chapter song.

October 26th

Bella Cullen.

"I'd say we punch the fucker."

I shake my head at you.

"I'd say we pay him a visit at the hospital. Threaten him a little."

I shake my head at Dad.

"Nah, we'll track down where he lives."

I shake my head at Alec.

"Yeah, good luck, guys. I'm pretty sure Esme and Bella will rip you to shreds."

And who knew Emmett would be the voice of reason?

"He's a smart one," Esme comments quietly, and I nod in agreement.
If only the men knew we were eavesdropping. From the kitchen window, we listen to you, Dad, Alec, and Emmett... talking about Dr. Masen. They sit there, on the porch, being men. Overprotective and irrational. Sure, I know how much they love us, and they've always been there. Especially when other guys have been less than gentlemanly, but this... this is uncalled for. I can't say I know Dr. Masen – or, Carlisle – but from what Esme's told me, he's a good man. Kind and sweet. So, what you're doing right now is just ridiculous, hubs. And Dad and Alec aren't any better.

When you told me about Carlisle – after your first shift at the bar – a few days ago, I was concerned, of course. Because you made it seem like this man was some kind of player. But he's not. I asked Esme about it the day after, and color me surprised, 'cause Esme was totally blushing. Yeah. Then, she proceeded to tell me about the man that had stayed with her at the hospital while you and I got better. He was simply a friend, a shoulder to cry on. But when you got a whiff of it, you immediately assumed that he was going to hurt Esme. You're sweet and adorably fierce, but... enough is enough, baby.

Though, I'm still glad some things haven't changed.

You and Alec were always the protectors when we were younger, and then... if Esme was involved, Dad also stepped in, seeing as the two are best friends.

"So..." Esme sighs. "Should I give Edward a piece of my mind now, or later?"

I snicker and turn back to the cucumber I was slicing.

"That's up to you," I tell her. "But you better do it before they follow through with the bullshit they're plannin'."

Because you would follow through. I know that.
"Make sure I'm there," I add, 'cause I wouldn't wanna miss that for the world.

She nods with a grin, and then we turn back to cooking.

It's our thing.

Since you started working at the bar again, we've kicked the parents out. It was time for us to be alone. So, now we only have Dad and Esme coming over for dinner everyday. It's perfect. And then, after dinner, you and Esme head on over to the bar, and you work for a few hours while I have Dad and Emmett here. But today is slightly different. We have Alec and Emmett staying for dinner, too, and it feels so good to have Alec here again. I've missed him.

"Mommy?" I hear EJ call from the living room.

I smile, internally grateful, and check the time. An hour. He's been alone in the living room, watching a movie, for an hour. That's progress.

"In the kitchen, baby!" I holler.

Soon, I have my little boy hugging my leg.

"Hey there, little man." I smile down at him, wiping my hands on a towel. "Is the movie over?"

"Yea, it was funny," he giggles.

Warmth spreads in my body whenever I see him relaxed and giggling.

"I'm just gonna go over to Charlie's to grab the steaks," Esme says, and I halt her, putting my hand on her arm.
You're doing progress, EJ's doing progress, and yeah, I'm doing progress too, but I need more. I've only left the house when you're with me, hubs, and I think it's time for the next step.

So, I say, "No, I'll do it."

I take deep breaths.

It's just next door.

"You sure, honey?" she asks softly.

I nod.

Then I pick EJ up and place him on my hip. It's time for him to leave the house, too.

A few moments later, I step out onto the porch and my eyes seek you out right away.

Your smile is always so wide when you see me.

"What's up, angel?" you ask.

You're playing poker, hubs. Do you still suck at it?

I'd giggle at myself if I wasn't so nervous. It's not that you're not good at the game, but your pokerface? Yeah, not so unreadable.

I swallow.

Another deep breath.

"I'm headin' over to Dad's," my eyes flicker to Dad, who sober instantly, "to get the steaks." Deep breath. "I'll take EJ with me."

"No!" you blurt out.
I freeze, and you look like you've seen a ghost.

"I mean... *fuck*..." Your knee starts bouncing. Hands go to your hair. "*Please*... not both of you, baby."

I draw a shaky breath, holding it for a while before I release it, and then I turn to Emmett. "Will you go with me?"

"Of course, cuz."

We need this, hubs. Both of us.

"Wha's wrong, Daddy?" EJ asks.

Your eyes are pained. I hate it, but... we really do need it.

"N-nothing, nugget, just..." You swallow hard. "*Jesus.*" You rub your face before looking at me again. "If you're not back within two minutes, I'm-"

"Don't worry, Ed," Emmett says, cutting you off with a hand on your shoulder. "We'll be back within two minutes."

My eyes are pleading.

*We can do this, Edward.*

"Okay," you breathe out. "Christ... okay, two minutes."

You're standing up, watching us as we leave the porch, down the steps, toward the street, and then we take the left turn, heading toward Dad's house next door. And I still feel your eyes on me.

"Where we goin', Mommy?" EJ whispers in my ear.

"To Pops' house," I exhale. And inhale. And exhale. We're walking. My feet are bare on the pavement. It's heated from the sun. My eyes are better, and I can handle direct sunlight for short amounts of time. Inhale. Exhale.
"You okay, Bells?" Emmett asks as we walk up the steps to Dad's porch.

I nod.

"There's Daddy!" EJ exclaims.

And I follow his gaze. Yes, there you are. On our porch next door. I'll be back in a flash, hubs.

"Can you wave to Daddy?" I murmur as Emmett opens the door.

"Hi, Daddy!" he giggles, waving like crazy.

The wave you return is weak, as is your smile, and I'm not surprised to see you light up a smoke.

Still watching us.

One hand in your hair, pulling roughly.

Deep drags.

"Ready?" Emmett asks, and yeah, I am.

With another nod, I follow Emmett into the house.

Dad's house. I've been here once or twice in the past few days, but always with you joining me.

Eager to get back to you, I head straight for the kitchen.

"Yellow house much prettier, Mommy."

I can't help it. Neither can Emmett, and we both laugh.

It feels incredible.

And I start to relax.
"Of course it is, baby," I chuckle, opening the fridge. "That's because Pops doesn't have me to make his house so pretty." I wink at him, then I pull out the steaks, handing them over to Em, and before I shut the fridge, I also take out a couple of beers. It's been three long years since I've had one, and I swear, tonight's the night.

"Tha's Pops and Daddy's drinks," EJ comments.

*O*O*O*

*Oh, if you only knew, baby.*

"Tonight it's Mommy's and Nana's drinks, too," I tell him, smirking a little.

"Uncle Em's, too," Em says.

"EJ's also, Mommy?"

"No!" Em and I laugh. "When you're older," I add.

"Then you can't play with my Turtles and LEGO," he replies, huffing. And yeah, he's your son, hubs. "Cause I'm little, and Nana say toys is only for me and little guys."

"I think we have a future lawyer here, cuz," Em chuckles heartily. "He's already makin' deals and settin' up rules."

"Hmph," is my reply, and then we leave.

To say that you're relieved when we return to the house is putting it mildly.

And me? I'm just happy, 'cause I fucking nailed it.

I didn't freak out.

*O*O*O*
"This is embarrassin', you know," you chuckle quietly, draping an arm around my shoulder.

I think you're wrong but you already know that.

So, I say nothing.

Instead we stay quiet, and I watch Anna and Esme, standing in the front yard, talking.

Anna does this every time she comes over; if Esme and Dad are here, she asks them how they're doing, how we're doing, and all that. She sure is thorough, that woman.

"You won again, Little Eddie!" we hear Emmett boom out. I chuckle, knowing that they're playing tic-tac-toe in the kitchen.

"I never liked that nickname, so why the hell would I approve of him callin' my son Eddie," you grunt.

I snicker. "No one ever called you little."

You cough.

I smirk.

Though, the nickname I gave your very proud member at one time is confusing size-wise. But I know, baby. I know that there's nothing little about the dick I once named Pickle.

"You're still blunt, that's for sure," you mumble, shaking your head at me before pressing a kiss against my temple. "I swear you're the only one able to make me – a grown man – blush."

Oh, I'm feeling so victorious.
"Don't you look smug," you chuckle.

"But of course I do... Pickle." I wink.

Your mouth pops open.

Then you close it, and huff a chuckle. "Weirdo."

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

"But you remember," you add softly.

And I nod, because of course I remember, hubs.

"And now we're going to talk more about Pickle," I tell you, nodding at Anna who's approaching.

You scowl at me, but like me, you can never hold it. The scowl, that is.

"Hey, Bella, Edward," Anna says softly, taking a seat across from us. "How are you today?"


"Ah, shut it, you," you say, nudging my side, which make me giggle. "It's a good day, doc. But wifey's bein' a pain my ass."

Look at us. Being funny and all.

Anna notices, of course, and smiles.

I can feel the progress. It's quite enveloping. A warming feeling.

"Feels good seeing you two joke around," she says, still smiling.

And you hug me to you.
"Now..." Ooh, ominous. You feel it, and you aren't as amused as I am. "I believe you two had something you wanted to talk about today?"

I nod and look up at you. _Should I or should you?_

You sigh. Before facing Anna.

"Intimacy," you mutter, grimacing a little. "We wanna move forward... ya know? And uh... somethin' stops me."

Anna nods thoughtfully, downplaying your discomfort. "May I ask how close you are now?"

You want me to answer this.

That's okay. We have nothing to be embarrassed about, but I know you don't want others to hear about it.

"We definitely have passion," I tell her. "And we easily get carried away, but it's when takin' the next step that he shuts down. So... we're still fully clothed, so to speak."

"I understand," she nods and faces you, "and you're afraid of something, Edward?"

I feel you shrug against me. "I guess. I mean..." More sighing. "I don't wanna trigger anythin', ya know? And... I don't know..."

I tilt my head. "But what could you trigger?" I ask.

Talking about things that makes you uncomfortable is like pulling teeth, but for once, you actually open up fully, and soon you tell us that you're afraid of how I will feel when we get closer. You don't know what I've been through physically during the time with Garrett, and you're afraid I will panic if you get too close. I admit, I'm a bit shocked. Partly because I never thought about that, and partly because I sincerely doubt we'll have
problems. Garrett never touched me, that way, nor did he threaten that he ever would. He always made it clear that I disgusted him, and it would take yours and Kate's death to make him want me again. He was insane, certifiably so, but that was the one thing I never had to worry about. So, I tell you this. I explain how reluctant he was to touch me, even when it was time for us to move to another state, and he was forcing me into the back of a car, he loathed getting too close to me.

And I'm pretty sure that EJ is my savior because the fact remains, Garrett became repulsed by me when he realized that I was pregnant. It was when he found out that I had "betrayed him" that he shut down. I was Irina to him, and had cheated.

I tell you everything.

I also tell you that I don't want to rush anything, because I'm not one to jump into things just like that. I just miss you. I want the next step, but I don't want to pressure you. However, I know that you want it, too. I can feel that, see that. You're ready, but it's for my sake that you hold off.

In the end, you – at least – begin to understand that there's no reason to be afraid.

"Mind if I suggest a few things?" Anna asks gently.

"Sure," I say as you squeeze my hand.

And then she presents us with pamphlets, and I admit, it feels like we're back in high school.

"Don't worry," she chuckles. "There's no tutorial." She winks. "Just a few pointers and ideas when it comes to reconnecting after a separation. Things such as showering together – just to get to know each others bodies again – kissing, touching, talking, finding comfort in each other, and so on."
"Yeah, uh, I don't think we'll have trouble in that area," you of all people say, as you look through one of the folders.

So, now you're waking up, eh?

"Glad to hear that, Edward," Anna laughs softly before turning serious again. "I want you to take this time to reconnect at your pace. Don't let anything rush you. Talk things through properly, and most of all; don't assume anything. Open up instead of pushing a thought down. The only thing I want to remind you of is that since you're married – and already have a child together – I can imagine that you know each other extremely well." She pauses. "What I mean is, there might be one conversation that you've had before, but things are different now, and you should have it again." I nod for her to continue. "Protection."

Oh. Right.

Yeah, I didn't exactly think about that. We never did, hubs. I mean... I was on birth control before, so we never had an issue.

Not that it stood in your way to knock me up.

And I'm smiling again. It's a secret smile but when you look down at me, you understand because there's no secret between the two of us.

"When the day comes and you're ready..." Anna trails off.

You and I, we both nod once. We understand.

Funny, after more than ten years together, this will be the first time we use a condom.

But it will do for now. Until my body can handle birth control again, but as it is now, I can't deal with any more hormones.

"Good. Any more questions?" she wonders.
We exchange a look, silently asking each other... was there anything else, baby?

But... nope. That's it for now.

"No, I think we're good," you tell Anna.

_The next day..._

Emmett and I sit on the kitchen counter, giggling behind our hands. Not kidding. Emmett's a giggler.

And you, hubs, are getting the ass-whooping of the year. Well, not literally.

Dad, too.

"Do you think I'm stupid?" Esme huffs, glaring at you and Dad, both of you sitting by the kitchen table with slumped shoulders. "I swear to God..." Her hands go up and she strangles air. It's quite funny to see. I wonder who she's strangling in her head; you or Dad? "And you, Charlie! I can't believe you! You're supposed to be the damn adult!"

Yeah, Dad. Bad, bad you.

"Hey, I ain't a fuckin' child, Ma!" you defend. "I was just protectin' ya! He's a fuckin' asshole, I just know it!"

Oh, you shouldn't have done that, hubs. No, you shouldn't have done that.

"Yeah, I agree," Dad says, nodding at you. "He sounds like a real player, Es."

Stupid men.
"I beg your pardon?" she growls. "Do I look like I need protectin'? Huh? Do I?"

Aw, you're quiet now, Edward. How come? Afraid of Mama?

"And for your information, he's fuckin' divorced!" Esme adds angrily. "Carlisle's a very fine man, and he's been a great support, which you woulda known had you only asked!"

"You go, Mrs. C!" Emmett howls.

"Yeah, you tell 'em, Esme!" I cheer.

When you glare at me, I blow you a kiss.

"Believe me, boys, you're gonna pay for this!" Esme seethes. "And when we get to the bar tomorrow, you be sure to give Alec the same message, Edward Anthony!"

Ooh, he middle named your ass.

You flinch. I understand. I would flinch, too.

"Yes, ma'am," you mumble.

"Good," she barks out. "Now. Get on with the apologizin'! I wanna hear you first, Charles Geoffrey!"

Burn! Another middle naming. S'gotta sting, eh, Dad?

"I'm fuckin' sorry, okay?" Dad exclaims, pinching the bridge of his nose. "But in our defense, we were only-"

Esme cuts him off with a mocking laugh. "Lemme guess. Tryin' to help? Well, try again!"

"She's fire," Emmett whispers to me.
I nod, 'cause yeah. She's cool like that.

"You're next, Edward. Apologize."

You sigh. Really fucking heavily. And face your mother.

"I'm sorry, Mom. It was stupid, all right?"

Poor baby.

Esme's about to say something else, but EJ informs us of another movie ending, so that sorta does it. Show's over, and you haul ass.

"I'm just gonna help EJ!" you holler, leaving the kitchen as if your ass was on fire. "Daddy's comin', nugget!"

I snicker.

"Well, that was fun," I muse.

Dad glares at me, but I just shrug, and then he leaves, stating that he has shit to do at home... like licking his wounds or something. Ugh. Male pride.

"Remind me never to upset you," Emmett chuckles at Esme.

"Don't upset me," she says, not missing a beat.

Gotta love Esme Cullen.

*O*O*O*

"Are you still grumpy, hubs?" I ask, poking my head through the bedroom doorway. You're on the bed, pretending to sleep, face buried in a pillow, with EJ next to you. EJ's asleep, though. I know, 'cause he's snoring. That's a Daddy-trait. Just saying.

"No, I'm sleepin'," you grumble.
Uh-huh. Sure. Of course.

"Well, everyone's gone home now," I say casually.

You say nothing.

On my tippy toes, I make my way toward you.

I have a question.

"I can hear you, Bella," you say flatly against the pillow.

Well, damn.

Anyway.

When I reach you, I dip down... and I whisper in your ear...

"Will you shower with me, hubs?"

**Chapter 36**

...And I'm telling you

These feelings won't go away

They’ve been knocking me sideways...

...Whenever you come around me...

~Sideways by Citizen Cope – chapter song.

**October 27th**

Bella Cullen.

"Will you shower with me, hubs?"
We take things slowly, you and I.

No speaking... because it's not needed.

I watch your Adam's apple bob a little as I undress for you.

In the bathroom we stand, facing each other, and we're nervous but not afraid. This is us, after all, and we rock.

This isn't to be sexy – me undressing. This is just to show you that I'm all here for you. I'm ready and showing you that I have nothing to hide. You know of my scars, both physical and emotional. You've seen it all. You've kissed them and touched them. They're a part of me, whether they're from Garrett or from falling on my bike as a kid. Each scar is me – a part of me – but we know that we aren't defined by them. Garrett wanted me weak and broken. He nearly succeeded. Hell, he did. But you brought me back and I don't have a scar to show for that.

"You're beautiful," you whisper, looking down at me so lovingly that my eyes well up. "You know that, right?"

I nod because I do. You've always made me feel like the prettiest and most beautiful girl in the world. Just like I make sure you feel the same. It's just that you and I aren't flaunters. What we have is just for us.

"So are you," I add quietly, taking a step toward you. You don't tense up but I see your hands in my peripheral. You want to touch me, so why don't you? "Relax, baby," I whisper, gently grabbing the hem of your wife-beater.

Slowly, I pull the beater off you, and you take over when I can't reach.
"Can I blame you?" you chuckle nervously. "You make me feel like a teenager, Mrs. Cullen."

I feel the butterflies, too. But you can't use that word, 'cause it's so girly.

So, I just smile and place a kiss on your exposed chest.

Just the tiniest smatter of chest hair.

Closeness. You envelope me in a tight hug, kissing the top of my head, and I feel you relax against me. It's pure contentment to be this close to you, hubs. I've missed it, I've missed you. So much. More than words can say, really.

"I love you," I sigh softly, looking up at you.

You kiss my nose. "Ditto, angel."

A few pecks. Kiss, kiss, kiss, lightly on my lips.

By the third peck, we're both grinning like the fools we are.

But then you surprise me by kissing me harder, with more passion, and this is us. One second we're light and casual, only to go for the biggest fire the next second.

We both part our lips at the same time, and our tongues meet with eager and passion and love and it's perfect and you always make me want more. And you know, 'cause I'm such a hussy for you. I always was, wasn't I? Yeah.

"I want you," you breathe out, sending shivers through my body. My hands move from your biceps to your abdomen, only pausing for a beat or two, and then I go for your sweats. Tugging lightly. Our kiss deepens further and you stroke my tongue with yours as your hands move down,
too. Tentatively and slowly, but it's okay, hubs. I want it. I need it. Which I believe you know by now.


Can't help the giggle that escapes me. Sorry, hubs.

"What?" you murmur out of breath, smiling down at me. Noses touching. I grin and tug down your sweats further as I shake my head. Nothing, baby. You're just too cute for words, confessing that you've missed my ass. But don't worry, it has missed you, too.

"And here I was, thinkin' you were still my boob-man," I tease, dropping an openmouthed kiss on your neck. You moan and I drop your sweats, letting them pool around your feet.

"Maybe I'm an ass-man, too," you chuckle huskily, dipping down to kiss me again. And while we kiss, we let our hands touch freely. I push down your boxers, leaving you as naked as I am, and I feel you, hard and thick against my stomach. It drives me crazy with lust and need. My hands tell you as much. I cling to you. We moan and groan. You squeeze my breasts, rolling my constricted nipples between your fingers, and fuck... you've still got skills, baby. I moan, throwing my head back; you attack my neck. We're suddenly ravenous, and you were right. We won't have issues in this area – just like you told Anna – and though we won't have sex today, I think we both know that we need pleasure. Shit, I need it. It's been more than three years since I felt this. This... desire, this raw need, these feelings surging through me. It's overwhelming.

It's so welcoming.

"Shower, baby," I gasp as you suck on my neck.

I feel your shudder.
And then you walk me backwards until we reach the shower; you reach inside and turn the water on, and as we wait for it to heat up, you continue with your magic hands. Oh, how I've missed them.

"Fuck, Bella," you grunt when I hitch a leg over your hip. You get the hint; you pick me up. I kiss you hard, pushing my tongue into your mouth, and you moan again, I do too, and then we're in a frenzy, kissing madly and wetly as I roll my hips over your erection. It makes me whimper, because you're right there. The head of your cock rubs against my clit and you feel how wet I am for you.

Steam billows out of the shower and you walk us in there, not stopping until you have me pressed against the wall.

The hot water pours down, soaking us in no time.

"Jesus, you're sexy, baby," you groan, and I nibble on your neck as my hand travels lower. I need to touch you, hubs. I've missed your cock and what you can do with it. "Fuck!" I wrap my fingers around you, you're so fucking hard. I stroke you, making sure that you keep rubbing against my clit, and you buck your hips, sending waves of pleasure through me. Fuck. More. We moan. We find our rhythm. We always do. "God, baby... just like that..."

But I need more. This isn't enough.

So, I wriggle free and sink to my knees.

"Bella, baby, no... don't..."


The water gets in my eyes, so I lower my gaze again.
And I gently wrap my fingers around your cock again.

You inhale sharply.

I see the way you clench your fists.

I lean in.

One kiss. An openmouthed one. I taste you. Your desire.

You shudder violently.

I savor the feelings buzzing through me in a steady current.

"Christ," you exhale as I wrap my lips around your erection. "Your mouth, baby..." Mmm, I've missed this, too. The pleasure we used to give each other... We need that again. So, I continue. Slowly but surely, I suck you into my mouth. You moan when I hum around you. "So good," you whimper.

You're still holding back.

But Rome wasn't built in a day, right?

So, this will have to do for now.

You leave me in charge, even though I know you remember how I used to love it. We were a bit crazy before, hubs. I haven't changed, but... I know we'll get there. You'll let go one of these days. You'll grip my hair, you'll thrust, you'll fuck my mouth. And shit... I'm dripping just thinking about it. It makes me moan around you. It makes you moan, too. My name.

I swirl my tongue around the head, suckling it, and you grunt in pleasure.

Up your muscular thighs. My hands reach closer. More shivers.

I bob my head, taking you deeply.
"Oh, fuck, Bella!" you groan.

For a moment, I look up at you.

Into your darkened eyes, so full of desire and lust.

"Baby," you whisper hoarsely, and I think you start to understand that I love this... even now... after all these years. I told you, nothing's changed. I will always desire you. Your pleasure is everything to me, just like my own pleasure is your priority.

"You like it, angel?" you ask huskily.

There you are. Finally. My Edward. My dirty-talker.

I nod and suck you harder, hollowing out my cheeks.

"Jesus fuck," you moan, both hands pulling at your hair.

I cup your balls, massaging them, knowing that it will bring you closer.

Which it does.

You're panting.

Thighs tensing.

Your cock hits the back of my throat.

"C-... close, Bella... fuck, close..."

I already know.

With urgency in my movements, I make you understand that I'm not going anywhere.

It sends you over.
With a loud moan, you spill into my mouth and it's gross and I love it. What, I'm not one of those pretending to love the taste. But I do however love giving you this pleasure. In turn, it gives me pleasure. Immense satisfaction.

I lick you clean.

And because I'm your weirdo, I give Pickle one last kiss before you pull me to a stand, chuckling breathlessly – only because you could always read my friggin' mind. You most likely know I just referred to The Cock as Pickle in my head.

But you love me anyway.

"Amazin'," you mumble, then you kiss me hard, once again pressing me against the wall. "You're fuckin' amazin', wifey."

"So are you," I breathe out in between kisses.

More kissing. Both fiery and soft.

Loving and rough.

"My turn," you tell me, giving me a lazy grin.

I smirk.

I'm so fucking horny.

You know this.

But instead of touching me, or... well, anything, you turn off the water.

You step out, offering me a hand.

I take it, confused, and follow you out.
"Not in here," you say softly, wrapping a fluffy towel around me.

I mean... EJ's in our bed, so that's out.

And... the couch downstairs? Really, hubs?

But no.

After you've dried me, you pick me up and carry me to the guestroom. Huh. I hadn't even thought of that.

You place me gently in the middle of the bed.

The way you gaze down at me...

You always make me feel so sexy.

We're both naked. You hover over me, kneeling between my parted legs. There's a small smile tugging in the corners of your mouth, and... you lift up my right leg... You hold it up and start planting soft kisses on my foot. Hands caressing my calf.

I shiver.

Your eyes are glued to my skin. They are where you kiss and touch.

"Beautiful," you whisper. "Your skin, baby... fuckin' flawless."

Tingling.

You leave a trail of fire up my legs.

And you notice that my legs are smooth, to which you quirk an eyebrow at me.

I shrug unapologetically. Obviously, I fixed myself up some before this, hubs. Yeah, I planned this. While you were moping from Esme's scolding,
I shaved my legs, my armpits, trimmed one of your favorite parts on me, even plucked my eyebrows... I mean, duh. I want to look my best, of course.

You chuckle and attach your lips to my knee, but... I see that your eyes travel up my body, not stopping until you reach my pussy. Ah, curious, were you? I stifle a smile when your eyes widen. But then there's no smile to stifle because the look on your face is...

You're hungry.

For me.

"Jezebel," you whisper under your breath.

More touching and kissing.

The pads of your fingers trace my thighs. Up and up. Closer. You make me shiver.

You make me...

So...

Wet.

"Edward," I whimper quietly when you reach my hips.

Openmouthed kisses on my hipbones.

I feel your wet tongue, your soft lips, your scruff.

It rasps against my skin when you kiss me hard there.

And your hands, they're so close...

So close.
My eyes close... and then you're there...

Feathery kisses on my pubic bone, only to tease.

Is there a male Jezebel?

'Cause you're it.

"Damn," you exhale, inhale, exhale... and kiss me again. Right over my clit. Tongue darting out. Lips wrapped... You hum as you taste me.

I arch.

Deeper. You're eager, and your tongue delves deeper...

I moan.

It's indescribable.

When you add your fingers, I gasp in pleasure.

"So wet, angel," you mutter.

My eyes roll back as you push a single finger inside of me.

And yeah, we both notice it.

I'm tight.

"More, Edward," I plead, fisting the covers. "Oh, fuck... ungh..."

You give me more.

Two fingers, pushing and twisting, searching and finding.

I clench down.
It's surreal. My entire body is alive. Every fiber and nerve-ending... I feel it all...

"Taste so fuckin' good, baby," you moan against my flesh.

The pace of your fingers matches my breathing. Quick, sharp...

I'm panting, gasping.

Speeding up. It's so much.

And when you finger me deeper, I'm suddenly close. My body tenses, I stop breathing, my heart is pounding, I'm hot, blood rushes, making me flush... You don't stop. More and more, you give me, and then I'm climaxing... so hard... so violently...

I thrash on the bed, you moan and lap at me.

The intensity of my orgasm takes away everything expect focus on the insane pleasure. I can't see, I can't hear, I'm not aware... All I feel is the explosion within.

And I know... we're doing this again soon, hubs.

Because... Oh... my... God.

"Fuck!" I gasp, trying to catch my breath.

You hum against my skin, slowly kissing your way up my body.

Shudders.

"That was so fuckin' sexy, Bella," you breathe out, kissing my jaw.

Our chests heave together.

I think we've broken the ice, baby.
And I realize that I've spoken out loud when you answer.

"Abso-fuckin'-lutely," you murmur huskily.

Forehead against forehead.

"Love you." I'm still outta breath here, Edward. "So much."

"You, too... Jesus..."

Yeah.

**Chapter 37**

...*Breathing in the night*

*There's nothing else I'm needing now*

*The wind is at my side*

*And so are you*

*And together we will rise...*

...*Pass this line*

*That we're crossing here tonight*

*And together we will rise...*

~*Rise by The Frames – chapter song.*

**November 2nd**

**Edward Cullen.**

There was no describing how utterly ridiculous I felt, standing there...

Picking out condoms.
No. Seriously.

She was my wife, for fuck's sake. We'd been together for more than ten years, and... yeah, I was nervous, feeling like a virginal kid on the night of prom or something. The fact that said wife – and our son – was currently in the cereal isle just added to the pile of "you're ridiculous for feeling nervous." Oh, and Emmett was there, too, of course. You didn't think I'd leave my Bella and nugget alone in the cereal aisle, did ya?

Oh, but it got worse...

As some worker at the store walked up to me and... "Do you need help, sir?"

I arched a brow at the dude who couldn't have been more than seventeen.

"Uh, no," I told him. I'm very capable of picking out my own condoms. Now leave.

He went back to unpacking tampons.

Jesus.

I dragged a hand over my face.

But seriously, I was twenty-five years old, and... I had never done this before.

There were so many of them...


"Damn, poor girl," I muttered under my breath. Yeah, I was large, but... well, I wasn't big enough to break a girl if ya know what I mean.
In the end, I grabbed three boxes. One Medium, one Large, and one Magnum. 'Cause fuck if I knew.

I also grabbed a box of tampons for Bella, as she had asked me.

"Daddy!" EJ said, waving frantically as I reached the cereal sisle. "I wants this!"

He held up Oreo cereals, and... he sure was my kid.

"Good choice, nugget." I grinned, discreetly putting the condoms in the bottom of the cart, making sure other shit hid them. Not that Bella and Emmett didn't notice, 'cause they did. "Those are my favorites, too," I told him, ignoring Emmett's eyebrow-waggling.

Bella giggled behind a box of fibry, healthy, disgusting shit. Couldn't even call it cereal. Weetabix or whatever they were called. Horse food.

"Think this is funny?" I murmured against her temple, draping an arm around her. "Laugh it up and I'll put it all back."

Yeah, that was a lie, 'cause I was ready.

A week had passed since our first night in the shower, not to mention the guestroom, and... yeah, there had been many revisits. I couldn't get enough of her, which wasn't surprising, but what was surprising was the fucking beast she had woken up. Granted, I was still apprehensive about a few things, such as taking charge, but Bella was supportive and understanding.

We knew it would come back with time.

"Liar," she chuckled, placing her healthy horse food-cereal in the cart.

And I remembered that I still had her box of tampons stashed in the back-pocket of my jeans, so I added them to the cart, too.
"Dude," Emmett said, cocking a brow. "Picking out your wife's girly shit?"

I stopped, eyeing him like he was insane, which he was in this case.

"Have fun with that." Bella snickered, walking away with EJ in the cart.

She knew not to walk too far away, though.


And he shuddered in disgust.

Oh, please.

"Haven't you ever been in a serious relationship?" I asked. I hadn't really thought of that. I mean... we were all still young, and settling down wasn't for everyone, especially in our age, but still...

Though, I knew he had a thing for James' sister. Rose.

Whenever Emmett came down from Nebraska when we were kids, he and Rose would fool around, but that was pretty much it since he lived so far away. But now he lived here, and well, my wife enjoyed gossip with Tanya, so I might've overheard the two talking about a certain Emmett coming to RJ's often, and not for their fuckawesome burgers.

I knew that was the next thing on Bella's list when it came to venturing outside our house – to return to Rose and James' place – but for now she was satisfied with our street and the grocery store. The bar was also on her list.

"Of course I have," Emmett replied, bringing me back to now. "I even lived with a chick while I was at the academy."

I furrowed my brow. "So? I mean, if you lived together...?"
"Hey, she kept that shit to herself," he replied, pointing a finger at me. "Besides, women don't do certain stuff."

Okay, this was fun.

"Do tell, McCarty," I chuckled dryly, folding my arms over my chest. "What is that women don't do?"

He didn't even miss a beat. "They don't fart, they don't shit, and they don't piss. Oh, and they don't hair where it ain't wanted."

Wow...

I nodded slowly. "Right, so... this woman you lived with, she was imaginary then?"

Or maybe of the blow-up kind?

"Hate to burst your bubble, Em," I chuckled, slapping his shoulder. "But you're full of it. Women do all that." I paused. "And have that," I added, referring to the hair-comment. Now, I wasn't gonna lie and say that hairy legs were my thing, and the fact that my wife shaved was nice – really – but I was still a man who preferred real women. Hell, I remembered when I was a teenager and my pussy-experience came from bad porn. So, the first time I saw Bella naked and she was bare, I all but jizzed my pants. But now... Nah. I was thankful that both Bella and I had moved past that stage or whatever you could call it. Pardon me, but I wanted my woman to look like a woman.

"Whatever," Em muttered, moving us along. "And it's my cousin you're talkin' about. Shut it."

I laughed. "I've been married to that cousin of yours for seven years. We have a son. He wasn't immaculately conceived, ya know."
"I know how to shut you up, Cullen," he threatened.

I smirked and grabbed a box of Apple Jacks. "How?"

"Mrs. C is gonna fuck Dr. Masen."

I growled.

That was my mom he was talking about.

Uncalled for, asshat!

"Time to leave, baby!" I barked out to Bella, who was standing ten-fifteen feet away from us.

**November 4th**

"What's with the grin, hubs?" she asked, looking up from some interior design magazine as I plopped down next to her on the couch. We were rarely in the living room but for once, it was raining like hell outside, so no porch-time tonight. Had it just been drizzling, or if the wind had blown the rain in the other direction, we still would've gone out, 'cause we loved it out there. But it was literally pouring down, and we would've been soaked in two seconds.

"EJ's asleep," I replied, stilling smiling as I placed my arm on the back of the couch. "Took four comic books before his eyes drooped," I chuckled quietly, to which she smiled softly and rested her head on my chest.

"Thankfully no Turtles tonight, though."

We were both getting a bit tired of Turtles – Bella and I – and EJ lived for visuals, meaning; Turtles everywhere. A simple book didn't work, so we had bought comic books and a few children books with plenty of pictures, and of course he'd wanted Turtles. But tonight it was all about Batman.
"That's good," she murmured softly. "And now..." She looked up at me, smiling wickedly. "...it's just the two of us."

Um, yes.

Hard to focus when her hand went under my t-shirt.

Even harder was it to focus when she straddled me.

My abs tensed.

"And you're not workin' tonight," she added quietly, kissing my jaw.

I swallowed.

We'd decided not to plan the night we were having sex for the first time in more than three years, but we had agreed to settle on a night when I didn't work. So... did that mean...?

"Bella," I moaned quietly, as her nails gently grazed over my chest. "What are you doin', baby?"

With her nose sliding along my jaw, she whispered, "I want you, Edward..."


Was I ready?

Fuck yes.

As long as she was in charge, I was up for anything.

But I wasn't ready to go solely on her body language as I often did in the past. We could read each other expertly, but... fuck, I was still too scared that I'd set her off or something. I'd talked to Anna about it some more,
but she assured us that it would come as Bella and I grew more and more relaxed with being intimate again.

"Very sure," she whispered, dropping an openmouthed kiss below my ear.

It made me shiver.

"Upstairs?" I murmured against her shoulder. My thumbs caressed her soft skin under her tank top. "Guestroom?"

I kissed her shoulder...

Where shoulder met neck...

Then, her neck. Sensually.

"No," she whimpered softly. "Right here."

I didn't allow myself to question her. It was her choice, because I knew we didn't need a bed or candles or anything to make it special. That was never us, anyway.

Cradling her face, I captured her mouth with mine. I kissed her hard and passionately, showing her that I was confident in us. It was reassurance I knew she needed from me. And I was. The past week had proved that. We were still us, and our desire for each other never slowed or diminished.

"Love you," I mumbled, sucking on her bottom lip.

I groaned when she rolled her hips over my semi.

"You, too," she exhaled in my mouth.

Then she fisted my t-shirt, and I leaned forward so that she could pull it off.
I mirrored her move when I pulled off her tank.

There was no hesitation – thank God – and I immediately lowered my mouth to her left breast, sucking her nipple into my mouth as I gently palmed her right. I kneaded and worked her, feeling and hearing how she loved it. Fuck, I loved it more, I was sure of it. And I moaned against her flesh as she scraped her nails against my scalp. She arched into me. I switched, dropping kisses as I moved my mouth to her right breast.

"Clothes... off," she gasped.

I released her momentarily, and she pushed herself off me. My sweats and boxers were pushed down, and her tiny shorts... and...

"Commando, Jezebel?" I asked, arching a brow at her.

She pursed her lips and nodded at the coffee table.

Yeah, Bella was totally planning this.

The condoms were there.

"Get back here," I chuckled huskily, letting my head fall back against the couch. "Vixen," I mumbled as she grabbed one of the boxes.

Once straddling me again, she leaned forward and kissed me softly on the lips. "Only for you, Edward."

Damn straight.

"Shit," I exhaled sharply, feeling her fingers around my cock.

My eyes were glued to what she was doing.

Thumb brushing over the slit...
My hands went to her thighs, pressing firmly. I loved feeling her skin against me.

"Just like that, baby," I muttered. I watched as shestroked me. She was so close to me. "Fuck..." My head fell back again. Eyes closed...

Then, when she let me go, and I heard her opening the box of condoms, I denied myself to look. I knew it was going to make me nervous. It was both ridiculous and understanding. This was big for me. It was for Bella, too, but she was the sure one. She knew what she could handle, I didn't. I had no idea what she was okay with, and it was going to taketime for me to relax. But I was okay with that. I had to.

"Jesus," I moaned as she grabbed my shaft again. I heard the foil as she tore it open, and... yeah, she remembered this from Sex Ed. class.

It was a tight fit.

Felt surprisingly good.

When I looked between us again, I had a condom rolled onto my erection.

Bella grinned at me. "I took Large."

I huffed a chuckle, which quickly morphed into a moan as she started stroking me again, and this time I needed more. So, I sat up straighter, fully intent on bringing my wife the same pleasure that she brought me.

"Kiss me," I whispered against her cheek. She did with a smile, starting out softly and slowly, as if it was all about getting to know each other again, which... in a way it was. But still not.

While we kissed, my hands went up her thighs, not stopping until I reached her ass. I pulled her closer to me, never breaking the kiss. Instead I deepened it, brushing my tongue across her lips before she
parted them for me. Closer and closer. I held her close. And one hand snaked to her front again. She moved on me, still slowly, and we were both teasing each other. Close but not close enough.

"Touch me," she begged breathlessly.

I smiled into the kiss, and brought my thumb to her clit. I wasn't surprised to find her wet for me. When she was wet, I was hard. Always. Circling her clit, I drew out moans from her. Moans that made me throb in her hand.

_Christ, angel..._

Two fingers entered her. My thumb kept circling and rubbing. She arched, gasping softly into the kiss, and I started fingering her in the same pace she worked my dick. I was ready.Fuck, I really was. I wanted to feel her, wrapped around me... wet... hot... amazing...

"Bella," I grunted when she rubbed her thumb over the head of me. Sensitive even through the condom. "Baby, I want you..."

_I need..._

_I want..._

_Have to..._

"Inside me, hubs," she cried out quietly, dropping her forehead to my shoulder. "Please... now..."

Yes.

Slowly, I withdrew my fingers from her. I tasted her again, loving it...

And it was really time.
"Look at me, angel," I whispered, lifting her up. She did. Eyes boring into mine. Noses almost touching, as I oh so fucking slowly lowered her on my cock. Christ. She guided me in, and I paused every now and then. Inch by inch. "Holy shit," I gritted out, and my skin broke out in goose flesh. "You okay, baby?"

She nodded furiously, breathing coming out in quick pants.

"Yes," she breathed out.

Sweet mother of...

My eyes rolled back as our hips met.

The shudders rocking through me were nothing short of violent. They were visible through us both.

"Oh, Jesus," she choked out.

We stayed still for several moments, keeping our foreheads connected, and it was... new and old at the same time. Sweet reunion with my girl. Home. Sappy shit ran wildly in my head but it was all true. I felt emotional one second, only to chastise myself internally for being such a fucking girl, but... I blamed my wife for that. She was the one making me feel this way. But then, I just didn’t care. If anyone knew and understood, it was her.

"Edward," she whimpered, and in an instant I was there, kissing her soft lips with everything I had. I love you, baby. Harder, I kissed her harder and deeper, pushing down everything that stormed inside of me. Thankfully, she was on the same page, and when she started to move on me, I could see that we our feelings were the same. There was so much going on, and though we had no reason to bury any feelings, we wanted this to be simple and just the two of us. This was nothing we wanted to analyze. That would come later or never, but definitely not now.
"Fuck," I exhaled as she sank down on me. I gripped her hips, guiding her, and she moved her hands to my hair, pulling and twisting the way that always made me go insane for her. "Bella... fuck, don't stop..."

"Won't," she moaned, sinking faster and harder. "God, you feel so good, Edward..."

"Amazing," I mumbled through shivers.

We found a rhythm, no surprise there.

Kissing deeply, exchanging breaths, we moved. She sank, I thrust, I lifted her, she pushed up.

Over and over.

Our quiet moans filled the living room...

I love you...

Oh, fuck, hubs...

Right there, baby...

Yes, touch me...

Jesus...

Harder...

Goddamn, Bella...

She was tight and so wet around me, making each movement easy and effortless, but still giving fucking amazing friction. She squeezed me in the best ways, and I could feel as she got closer and closer how she tensed and constricted. Her breathing quickened further, as did mine, and we were both so into it that we barely registered changing our position. But
we did, and soon I had her under me. Her on her back, me hovering over her as I pushed into her.

Harder...

And deeper...

I buried my face in the crook of her neck, panting hotly.

She clawed at my back, arching her own.

Muscles tensing, legs tangled together.

"Close, Edward!" she cried out, digging her heels into my ass. "Oh... Yes..."

I pulled out slowly and my mouth latched onto her neck, then I slammed into her, muffling my own groan as I sucked on her salty skin. How she could be both sweet and salt, I had no idea...

And again. I pulled her close with one hand under her ass, and with another thrust she started to fall apart underneath me. My eyes squeezed shut as she convulsed. Tighter and tighter, there was no way I could hold off my own orgasm, and with a couple of more thrusts, I let out a guttural groan and rode out the heaviest orgasm I'd felt in years. It pushed me down, making it close to impossible to keep my bodyweight off of her. Jesus. I shuddered and rocked against her.

"Christ, Edward," she panted. "That was..."

Unable to speak, I just nodded against her neck.

Incredible...

I was still shivering minutes later when I had her back to my chest, both of lazy and thoroughly comfortable on the couch.
The only moment of dissatisfaction – that I'd never experienced before – was actually leaving my comfortable spot to get the fucking condom off and disposed of. Seriously, that was a drag. Before, it was always cozy downtime after sex, but to actually use your legs after an orgasm sucked balls. *Just saying.* But I got the shit done and then I was back on the couch with Bella. So, it was all good. Plus, I brought sodas and blankets. And Oreos.

"Muncher," she chuckled sleepily in front of me.

"Shush," I said, reaching over her to grab the remote to the TV. I put it on, zapping my way to a movie channel. "I'm king now, baby. Ain't nothin' ruinin' my mood."

There really wasn't.

I was relaxed. Oh, I was *relaxed*.

I was spooning my naked wife under a blanket.

I had double stuffed Oreos and Cherry Coke.

And damn... "Look at that, wifey," I said, grinning lazily at the TV.

*Die Hard.* Fuck yeah. The best one, too. The third movie.

"Mmm, Simon says..." Bella quoted from the movie.

We loved *Die Hard. Loved.*

"Love you," I murmured, kissing her shoulder.

This night couldn't get better, I was sure of it, and as Bella snuggled closer to me, I knew she felt the same. We loved parties and barbeques but *nothing* could beat a good movie night.
Especially after making love.

She sighed contently. "I love you, too, hubs." Then she snatched the Oreo in my hand.

Women, eh?

"Wanna sleep down here tonight?" I asked, grabbing a new cookie from the box. "We could always set the alarm and make sure we're upstairs before nugget wakes up."

That was next on our agenda; to get EJ to sleep alone. That was going to be a long process but we were up for it, and the truth was that we weren't completely ready to have him in his own room, regardless, so slow worked for us. Partly because his room wasn't quite finished, but mostly because we all loved sleeping together. That was the best part for me – waking up before Bella and EJ, just watching them sleep.

"Sounds good to me," she hummed. "I'm gonna take a nap now. Wake me up when the movie's over."

I furrowed my brow. "It's close to midnight, baby. Kinda late for nap-time, don't ya think?"

And she rubbed her ass against me. Yeah. "Won't there be a round two soon?"

*Maybe I could marry her again...*

"Yes, ma'am," I told her very seriously.

There was a round two a couple of hours later.

A round three, too.

But come morning, the combat boots were out as EJ and I ate breakfast.
Just our luck.

Bella got her period.

It didn't bother me one fucking bit, but it always bothered her a little.

I just chuckled at her, though. Hell, I could survive without sex for three or four days. I'd survived without it for three and a half years before, after all.

I told her as much.

And she stuck her tongue out at me. Said, "Yeah, but what if I can't survive?" 

Gotta love the horny missus.

Chapter 38

...My home

This will always be my home...

~Home by Ellie Goulding – chapter song.

November 16th

Bella Cullen.

"We're outside but inside!" EJ laughs, running around with his arms up. He's clearly an airplane.

I'm just grinning like a fool, standing in the doorway.

His room is finally done.

It's perfect.
EJ loves the outdoor theme. The walls, green up to my waist, sorta, and then blue. Ground and sky, of course. There are flowers and clouds painted. Embellishments, too, to get more effect. In one of the corners near the window, there's a massive plant. On the other side of the window is his new bed. You brought out your fixin'-skills for that, hubs. The bed – painted in dark green – has a ceiling that's made out of a tent. I smile at the memory of you cursing the damn thing. You'd stood in the middle of the room, getting the kiddie-sized tent up, and then you had to cut off the entire bottom of it, since the bed was going to be the bottom. And you had a minor conniption fit when the tent wouldn't stand without its floor. So... you brought out the motherload of glue. You went crazy with the glue, Edward. But... damn, it turned out perfectly. And now, when EJ goes to sleep in his new bed, it'll feel like he's camping. Well, so far he's only agreed to take his naps in here. He's still with us during the night, but I think nap-time is a perfect start for him to spend alone-time in his room. You think so, too.

"What do think of the floor, nugget?" you ask, sitting on said floor. With your back against the wall, you sit and watch him, just like I do from the doorway. Oh, and your grin is sexy as hell. Had to be said. "Mama did good on the floor, eh?"

I chuckle.

You're trying to turn our boy into a real southerner, hence starting with the "Mama" instead of "Mommy."

You're too cute for words.

"I love it lots, Daddy," EJ says, plopping down on the floor in front of you. "Is it from the outside?"

I laugh, I can't help it.
You do, too, and ruffle his hair.

"It's not real grass, baby," I chuckle, walking further into the room.

I settle in the rocker, next to his dresser, both of which are now painted in dark brown.

"It's pretend grass?" he asks, scrunching his face in confusion.

I purse my lips before speaking. "I guess you can say that." I nod slowly. "You can also call it 'fake' grass. It looks like grass, and it feels like it, but it's not..." real... Damn, I want to avoid that word. "But it's not like the grass in the backyard."

He chews on his lip, obviously thinking about it, and I turn to you, silently asking... how do I explain this right?

Thanks to Garrett, our son won't have it easy when it comes to what's real and not. To him it's either real or pretend, and if it's pretend, it doesn't exist. Pretend is imaginary to him, but that's not correct, and now we have to make things right.

"Did you know that real can be two things, nugget?" you ask him gently.
My turn to bite my lip. You're actually going for the real explanation, hubs. I hold my breath and EJ looks at you in question. "Okay, um... Do you remember our game?"

And I relax.

I shouldn't have doubted you.

You're amazing.

"Yea," EJ replies, smiling. "I touch your nose and it's real 'cause I can touch it."
"Exactly," you chuckle. "Well, you feel this grass?" you ask, running your hand over the synthetic grass that covers the floor. "It's both real and pretend."

"How?" EJ asks, and I walk over, settling next you by the wall.

"It's real because you can touch it," you explain, and EJ feels the grass between his fingers, nodding in understanding. "But it's pretend because it's trying to be like the grass in the backyard." You're amazing. Truly, baby. "Like when you pretend to be a Turtle," you wink and EJ giggles, "You're not a real Turtle, but you play pretend."

I squeeze your thigh, silently telling you that you're doing so well.

You kiss my temple.

Then we just watch EJ for a little while as he lets the information settle.

.

.

"Do you understand, sweetie?" I ask him carefully.

His eyes are still on the grass.

"Um... this pretends to be real?" he mumbles softly. "And i's also real 'cause I'm touching it?"

Yes.

I beam at him.

"That's exactly it, nugget," you tell him. "You can say that this grass is like your Turtles, too. They're real 'cause you can touch them, but they're still toys."
"Toys isn't real," EJ says, understanding. "But I still play wiv 'em."

"Exactly," I murmur.

He understands, hubs.

"The grass is the same," you finish.

And EJ grins. "Hmm. Kay. I gots it."

*O*O*O*

"You were amazin' with EJ earlier. You know that, right?" I breathe heavily, staring up at the ceiling.

You chuckle against my neck.

Also breathing heavily, as you pull the covers over us.

"Seriously, Bella..."

"What?"

Kiss, kiss, kiss.

I think EJ's waking up from his nap soon, but...

Gah, I'm insatiable.

"I was just inside of you..."

My body is alive.

I hum. "I know."

Under the covers, I straddle you. You're eyes are smiling.

I kiss you.
"And the first thing you say..." You chuckle. "Is about EJ?"

Oh.

Well.

I shrug. "Sorry. Forget what I said." I tap my chin. "This is what I'll say instead." You grin. "That was spectacular, baby."

"Better," you murmur, grinning widely into the kiss. "Now... wanna shower with me?" You waggle your eyebrows.

"Damn skippy, I do." I nod firmly. "But wait... hmm..." My turn for the eyebrow-waggling. "How 'bout a bath?"

"Bella..." You snort. A snort? Really, hubs? "The bathtub is fuckin' tiny."

I smile coyly. "Never stopped us before, did it?"

And then I'm off you, walking toward the bathroom.

Oh, I hear you following me, big boy.

So, I shimmy a little.

You groan.

Once we're inside, I turn on the water while you get rid of the condom. I smile when you grimace.

And I'm totally watching your ass while we wait for the tub to fill up.

Our eyes meet in the bathroom mirror.

"Checkin' me out, wifey?" You smirk.

I smirk right back, baby. "Fuck, yes."
To which you start ogling my twins.

Dirty boy.

And when you get that predatory look on your face, I feel it...

There...

There...

And there.

Body, mind, and soul.

*O*O*O*

You're right.

The tub we have next to the shower is friggin' tiny.

But we're good. 'Cause I'm on your lap. My back against your chest.

The water is hot...

So are your breaths against my shoulder.

And your openmouthed kisses...

They drive me insane.

"When does your shift start?" I breathe out, letting my head fall back on your shoulder. "You won't work for too long, right?"

'Cause I need more...

And more...

Of you.
"I start at five," you moan quietly, cupping my left breast in your skilled hand. "I'll be back around ten."

Oh, God... your hands, Edward...

When you lift me up, I understand right away, and soon I'm settled on your lap again – same position – but I have your erection nestled in between my legs. I stroke it, making you moan as I rub you against my pussy. And I feel it everywhere. You. I feel you everywhere.

Your mouth, wet and hot on my neck.

Your left hand... fingers... squeezing my breast...

Right hand...

I moan.

Two fingers... slipping inside of me...

You moan.

"So wet, angel..."

It's a hot breath. "More..."

You give me more by nudging me legs. I settle my feet on each edge of the tub and all of the sudden I feel more. So much more, and you finger me deeply... so deeply... The moans you draw from me... Such a hussy I am...

"Fuck," you exhale. "I need to be inside of you, angel."

I'm a goner.
I tilt my head back, and you kiss me so hard, pushing your tongue into my mouth, as I guide you inside of me. Reverse cowgirl... Your hands are firm on my ass. You move me on you. Gasps and moans... Our names...

"Fuck..."

It's so hot, Edward...

"Touch yourself, Bella," you grunt, pushing me down on you.

Shivers run through me.

I quiver and moan...

When I rub my clit.

Just as you said.

"Christ... You feel so fuckin'..."

"Yees," I moan.

The water splashes around us a little, because you speed up, and I speed up, and we're insane... frantic... kissing wildly... The need so evident... And soon... too soon... I'm climaxing around your cock...

"Bella," you whimper... "I'm gonna..."

Oh, God...

Yes.

Please...

"Come, Edward," I whisper breathlessly, feeling the late effects of my orgasm coursing through me. "Please..."

You curse into my mouth when I reach down and cup your balls.
I clench down tightly around you, and you... you tense fiercely, not breathing...

Eyes squeezed shut throughout your own orgasm.

And like in the bed earlier, we're left panting.

Then it's more bliss.

Lazy kisses.

Soft sighs.

That ache that feels so good...

Tired limbs. Slow roaming.

Humming.

"Did you hear that?" you ask sleepily.

"Hmm... no..."

You hum against my neck, and I turn in your arms, to which you groan as you slip out of me...

"I think I hear EJ wakin' up," you murmur. "The baby monitor."

Dang. "That means you're off to work soon." I give you the pout.

You kiss it.

That works.

And I smile, because I remember now that Alice is coming over with Dad and Emmett. We're gonna make red velvet cake for you. Well, I am. She's gonna make apple pie for Jasper.
I like Alice. Now that I feel better, I can enjoy her spunkiness, because I'm almost the same.

"Let's wash up," I sigh softly.

And now you pout. Such a baby.

"Five more minutes," you say.

Yeah, okay.

Chapter 39

...I'm falling apart

I'm barely breathing

With a broken heart

That's still beating...

~Broken by Lifehouse – chapter song.

November 30th

Edward Cullen.

I leaned back against the counter, watching Bella and EJ at the kitchen table. Alice was here, too. It had been Anna's suggestion to get started on EJ's future. A future that was drawing closer and closer. Not that we were anywhere near ready to send him off to preschool, but we were ready to let him have what most kids his age knew of. For that, we were eager. So, Alice was here with a few children books, building blocks, and supplies for drawing.

It was a slow process, of course. With EJ, you couldn't just tell a story, because he didn't have visuals to go with it. Granted, he had been at
daycare before, which was a good thing, 'cause it was bad as it was. Really bad. For instance, Alice couldn't tell a story about going to the zoo, because EJ didn't know what a zoo was – he didn't know of elephants or giraffes or monkeys. So, to each story there were now pictures, stuffed animals, and video-clips on the laptop Alice had brought.

She was a godsend – Alice. She knew what she was doing, and she loved EJ.

For EJ, it was a new world that came with a million questions.

I chuckled into my coffee mug when I watched EJ figure out the damn blocks. The square block went into the square hole, the triangular block went into the triangular hole, and so on. He looked like the perfect mix between me and Bella. My scowl for when he got annoyed, Bella's lip-biting, my frown, my lopsided grin for when he got it, and Bella's quirk. And he was quirky, because he did a victory-lap around the kitchen, which just screamed Bella. She was always weird like that when we grew up. Wrestling matches, water balloon fights, football... Name it. If she won, there was a victory dance that came with it. One of the many reasons I loved her.

But as my eyes found her, my amusement was gone. Replaced with worry.

She'd been feeling a bit off. Not for long, but... a couple of days, and I was always a worrier. Especially when it came to my wife. Hopefully, it wasn't anything big. Anna was coming in a few hours, so I knew we were gonna talk about it. Well, I was. Bella was brushing it off, thinking it was another change her body was going through, but I wasn't too sure. This seemed different than one of her hormonal adjustments. She had gone through many of them, and I knew the signs by now. When new foods were introduced to her, her body reacted. Understandable, of course, but those changes were noticeable in her moods. She could go from happy to sad in
a second, only to be furious in the next. But this was different. This was more... on the surface, I suppose you could say. Physical. And I could read Bella like no other. Besides, we hadn't really bought anything new in the last couple of weeks. Her diet was still very strict, and though I could find her snacking on a couple of crackers or cookies every now and then, she was still standing firm when it came to her eating habits. She was careful with carbohydrates as it made her feel worse, and she was religious when it came to her protein shakes. She ate plenty of vegetables and fibers. Same went for her intake of calcium, fats, iron and magnesium. Eggs, milk, avocados, spinach, chicken... The list was long.

We'd even started running together. Nothing big. We just ran up and down the street a couple of times together every morning. The three of us. EJ sure loved it since he usually spent that time on my back, and he could wake up the neighborhood with his laughter. It warmed my heart each time I heard it. But yes, Bella was growing stronger, and apart from a couple of Oreos, she followed her diet plan flawlessly. And I seriously doubted a few damn cookies could mess things up.

*Something* was wrong, though, and I hoped we could figure it out soon. Perhaps the day after tomorrow at her check-up at the hospital. There hadn't been many of them, but I was thankful for the monitoring.

Even if it was pricey as hell. Sweet Jesus. Good thing I was back to work, 'cause our savings where literally gone.

Not that it worried me, and not that it wasn't worth it – it definitely was, if only to calm my worried ass down – but it was a good thing that we didn't have much hospital shit left in our life. The only thing left – apart from Bella's monthly checkup – was our sessions with Anna, and she gave us discount after becoming attached to us. It was mutual, I had to say. And Charlie and Mom paid the rest. Although, Charlie was probably more attached to Anna than my mom was. Yeah, I'd seen him.
All I knew was that once Mom found out, she was gonna go apeshit on him. Not for Anna, of course, ’cause Mom liked her, but because of the drama we caused when we found out about the Masen dude my mom was seeing. He was still a fucker in my book, even if I hadn't seen him after that first night at the bar. But that was me. And Charlie for that matter. We were a bit protective of the women in our life.

"Daddy?" I heard EJ call, bringing me back to now.

"What's up, nugget?" I asked, walking over to the kitchen table.

He was giggling, barely able to sit still in his seat, and I could see that a video clip was playing on the laptop.

Farm animals.

I chuckled and squatted down next to his chair.

"Alice say they're cows," he laughed and pointed. "She also say we gots milk from cows. Funny name. Cows," he giggled.

"We do get milk from cows, buddy." I laughed through my nose. Bella and Alice were giggling like girls, though I could still see the emotion in Bella's eyes. I felt the same, but we were learning to just go with it. "We also get damn good meat from 'em," I added under my breath. Only the ladies heard me, and both glared at me playfully, to which I shrugged. It was true, after all. Gotta love a good barbecue. "Anyway." I cleared my throat and grinned at EJ. "What else have you learned, baby?"

He lit up. "Mama gots eggs from chickens!"

Um. Sorry, but... all I heard was "Mama."

Oh, my grin was so fucking wide when I looked over at Bella, who was conveniently rolling her eyes at me.
"You heard him say it," I told her, still grinning. "He said it, angel. He fuckin' said it."

"Daddy, bad word!" EJ scolded.

Shit.

"Sorry," I said sheepishly, ruffling his hair as I stood up.

Bella stuck out her tongue at me when EJ wasn't watching, and I waggled my eyebrows in return.

What, she did amazing things with that tongue.

"You two are insatiable," Alice chuckled, understanding my eyebrow-waggling. "How often do you pawn off the little one to Nana and Pops so that you two can get your freak on, hmm?"

"Never," I replied seriously, before grinning. "EJ takes naps," I added. "Let's just say that my wife and I don't nap then."

"Oh, shut it, you," Bella said, trying to scowl. Emphasis on trying.

I shrugged.

I wasn't exactly going to apologize for craving Bella, especially not when she was the nymph. Damn woman could wake me up in the middle of the night and tell me to meet her in the guestroom. Not that I was complaining. At all.

"I wanna see the dogs again, Alice," EJ said, obviously bored with the grownup-talk. "Can I, please?"

Polite little man, my son.

December 2nd
I pocketed my phone after texting Charlie.

I was conflicted.

Worried.

And proud.

We were at the hospital, currently waiting for Bella's test results to come back. The pride came from her doctor's words about my wife's progress. She was healing at a steady pace, growing stronger, becoming healthier...

But I was also worried, because we didn't know what caused her nausea and headaches.

This morning, I woke up to the sounds of Bella throwing up in the bathroom again.

The same thing had happened yesterday.

When Anna had visited two days ago, we had gone through Bella's food journal, but there was nothing odd there, and Anna advised us to ask the doc today, which we had. So, we were waiting.

"Quit bouncin' your knee, hubs." Bella's soft voice brought me back to now, and I looked over at the hospital bed were she sat with EJ. Another thing that worried me: she had a bed now. For the other checkups, there hadn't been a bed. "And since when do you bite your nails?" she asked. I looked down at my thumb, realizing why she'd asked. But I only shrugged. I was nervous as hell. She sighed. "It could just be a bug, baby."

I knew that.

Anna and her doctor had told us the same.
"I wonder why they gave you a room with a bed," I mutter, leaning forward on my knees. I scrubbed my hands over my face. "For other checkups, they've given us a small room with a pallet. Now there's a bed." I shrugged. "It worries me."

It made me wonder if the doctors suspected anything, but didn't tell us yet.

And I was trying to track back...

They had gone through the weighing...

They had measured her...

They had taken her blood...

They had checked for fever...

They had checked her eyes...

They had checked her ears...

They had asked questions...

They had checked her muscle mass...

They had taken a urine sample...

Nothing out of the ordinary. They did this every time. They checked for infections, they asked about her vitamins and intake of medication for anxiety and depression. She didn't need those anymore. Anna had given them to her, but Bella had stopped taking them after three or four weeks – after consulting with Anna, of course. And this was a good thing, that she didn't need that anymore. But it made me wonder if she was healing too quickly. Maybe she was pushing herself, and testing her body's limits.
Perhaps this was a setback – a way for her body to tell her to slow down. I didn't know. I didn't have a fucking idea, but there was *something* wrong.

And I remembered that we'd been shown to this private room after the doctor had taken Bella's urine sample.

"Sweetie, please calm down," I heard her murmur.

I sighed.

I breathed.

I rolled my shoulders, trying to relax.

"Wha's wrong, Daddy?" EJ asked from Bella's lap. He was like me in many ways, especially now when he was playing with Bella's hair. I loved doing that. "Do you miss yellow house and Sadie?"

A small chuckle burst through my lips.

And just like me, EJ didn't like leaving the house.

"A little," I chuckled quietly.

"Me also," he said, nodding.

He was about to say something else, but Charlie popped in her head then, and I guessed he'd received my text. I could tell that he was instantly worried, as well.

"Hey, guys," he said carefully, entering the room fully. "Got your text." He frowned at me in concern, eyes questioning. "I thought this was a normal checkup."

*Me too, old man...*
"So did we," I sighed. "But they showed us to this room after the checkup." I swallowed. "We're waitin' for the results, and I figured you didn't wanna wait in the car."

"Somethin' wrong?" he asked, taking the seat next to mine.

"It's probably nothin','" Bella said, smiling at EJ. "Maybe I have a bug."

She was lying.

I frowned at her. She caught it, and shook her head at me, silently telling me... *Not now, hubs.*

But I understood. She was worried, too, but trying to keep calm.

"How was she this mornin'?" Charlie asked me quietly.

I'd told him, of course, about how I had found Bella yesterday.

"I can hear you, Dad," Bella said, rolling her eyes.

"Same," I told him, ignoring my girl. "Nausea and headache."

*Don't scowl at me, angel. You can't hold it, anyway...*

I winked at her.

Her scowl melted.

And then there was a knock on the door before Bella's doctor entered.

I was instantly on high alert.

"Bella, Edward," she greeted softly. "And little EJ, of course." She smiled at him. She was another doctor that Bella thankfully felt comfortable with. An older woman, reminding her of the doctor she'd had in Memphis. "I have your-" And her eyes found Charlie. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't see you.
I'm Dr. Kirk," she introduced herself, and I couldn't have cared less. I was more interested in the results.


The doc nodded and turned back to Bella. "I have your results, Bella," she said gently. I noticed the frown, which made me tense up even further. "And I was hoping we could talk in private." Her eyes went to EJ, silently conveying that the news wasn't for his ears.

"That's okay," Charlie said and stood up. "I can wait with Junior right outside."

"We be rights back, Mommy," EJ promised as Charlie picked him up. "Right, Pops?"

My eyes were glued to the doctor. I couldn't figure out her expression.

"You bet."

"Daddy?"

"Hmm?" I looked at him. "What's up, baby?"

He was chewing his lip, eyes downcast. No words.

But I got it.

He still loathed being without me or Bella, even if he pulled through just fine. But he did want something to hold onto. So, I unzipped my black hoodie, shrugged out of it, and walked over to him.

"Wanna take care of this for me for a while, nugget?" I asked, holding up the hoodie. He nodded with an eager smile that I had to return. He was too fucking cute. "You can keep it warm for me," I murmured, helping him to put it on. "Arms up." I smiled, he did, too. And I rolled up the
ridiculously long arms of the hoodie. "You're not drownin' in it, are ya?" I chucked.

He giggled and shook his head.

"Okay, good." I kissed him on the forehead. "Mama and I will see you in a little bit."

"Promise?"

I nodded firmly. "Promise."

After Charlie and EJ had left, I walked back to my seat.

Bella reached out for my hand. I was there in a flash.

"All right," the doc sighed softly. "I don't want you to worry." Too late. "But I thought this was better to discuss in private."

We nodded for her to go on.

"Right." She eyed Bella's chart. "Since I know that you're not on any type of birth control, I would like to ask if you're being safe."

I blinked.

Safe?

"Um. We use condoms," Bella answered, tightening her hold on my hand.

"And you know that they aren't a hundred percent-"

"Whoa, whoa," I said, cutting the doc off. "Cut the bullshit, will ya? What are you sayin'?"

A part of me felt it.

But the other part refused to admit.
She sighed, and... replied softly. "You're pregnant, Bella."

Preg...

Um.

Pregnant.

"The urine gave us a weak positive, but the blood result confirmed..."

I tuned the doc out.

Pregnant.

My wife was pregnant.

I should have felt nothing but bliss. I knew I wanted this. I knew this was a good thing. I knew this was a dream come true, and a small part of me recognized that fact, but...

All I felt was horror.

Fear.

"Just don't be mad, okay?" she mumbles, and I frown in confusion. "I know it's early, and... but..." She huffs. "For the record, this is all your fault. Unstoppable fucking sperm." My eyes widen, and I'm not really sure how to react. But she aint done. "I mean, I'm shocked as hell but... now I'm sorta... or really... and truth be told, I can't wait... You know?"

Um, no, baby, I really don't. Know, that is.

So, I give her the tell-me-before-I-lose-my-mind look.

"Right... sorry," she mumbles quietly, and then she retrieves something from the pocket of her pajama shorts. "I asked T and Angela to get it for me. I wanted to be sure..."
I'm looking at it.

That. Stick.

I think I know what it is.

I'm, yeah... I think I know what she's holding up.

Hmmph?

"Edward... I'm pregnant."

Right.

Uh-huh. Sure.

I get it.

I don't get it.

"Please say something, hubs."

In a minute, angel. I'm busy here.

She's... so, she's pregnant.

That means... what does that mean, exactly? I mean, really.

I stare at the stick. The test. There's a smiley. A smiley smiling at me.

Yeah. Back atcha, buddy.


Shit, she's pregnant!

Christ, that means we're gonna have a baby!
A baby. We're gonna have a baby. Together. Bella and I. We're having a baby. Oh, fuck! I'm gonna be a dad!

Bella's gonna be a mom.

My eyes find hers instantly.

We're gonna be parents, angel.

"I don't know, Edward... I don't know if I should be afraid but... you're smiling. Does that mean you're happy?"

Uh, yeah. Cause we're having a baby, Bella.

Maybe I should man the fuck up and actually open my fucking mouth.

Yeah, let's try that.

"We're havin' a baby," I breathe out, and just like that, my vision blurs. "Holy shit, angel, we're havin' a baby!"

I pressed the heels of my hands against my eyes.

I couldn't believe it.

She was pregnant again.

Four months. That was how long I got to experience my wife pregnant the last time.

And then she was ripped away from me.

For more than three years.

I look around me, but I can't see her. "How'd you know? Are you close?" I ask her. I mean, I heard her shut the engine off but I figured she'd reached the gas station or something.
"No," she laughs, and I relax back into my seat. "But I hear the guitars. You and dad playin'?"

Oh. Shit. Well... now what? Am I supposed to tell her?

I mean, Charlie's here all the time but I'm afraid Bella's already suspicious and she knows he's helping me with EJ's room...

"Maybe," I reply slowly. "You should just come home and find out." And then I add, "Cause I sorta miss you, you know."

It's the truth after all.

Charlie chuckles again, but I pay him no mind.

I focus on Bella and Sadie.

I can't wait to play her EJ's lullaby. It's finally done.

"I miss you, too," she murmurs softly, and I sigh in contentment. "Cause I sorta love you, you know," she adds, mimicking me from before.

She's teasing me. I love it. Always witty, quirky, and fucking adorable.

"Love you more, angel," I murmur back, playing the first chords of the lullaby I wrote to Bella all those years ago... Christ, that makes me sound old. And shit, now I really fucking want her to come home. "So, I'll see you soon?"

"Yes," she tells me, and I smile. "I'll see you soon, Edward."

But I didn't see her soon.

Not even close.

I rubbed at my chest, barely registering the fact that I wasn't holding Bella's hand anymore.
Oh, God...

Pregnant.

"Your... Your wife is Isabella Cullen?"

I heard defeat in his voice.

I inhale shakily and fold my arms across my chest.

My body goes rigid.

I nod. Only once.

"I'm afraid I need you to come with me... down to the station."

I clench my teeth.

Why the station? Why a police station?

Why not the hospital?

"Scott, you better tell me," I hear Charlie demand. "That's my little girl you're talkin' about so skip the fucking protocol and tell us."

I hold my breath.

Angel. For fuck's sake, you're scaring me.

My vision's all blurry again, cause I'm looking at the officer, and he's got this expression.

It's not an accident. She hasn't been in an accident, has she? She's not lying in a hospital bed with a couple of fractured ribs, is she?

"I'm sorry, Chief Swan... Mr. Cullen, but... it looks like Isabella's been kidnapped."
I was brought back to present when I heard Bella's strangled cry.

"B-Bella?" I stuttered breathlessly, turning to face her.

Her eyes were wide, her chest was heaving, and she faced me...

All I saw was her, and how she disappeared right in front of my eyes. I witnessed the change in her eyes. I watched in horror as she retreated, how her spark slowly but surely diminished.

"Bella," I said firmly, standing up. I placed my hands on her shoulders. "Baby, listen to me."

She didn't.

She just shook her head, chanting, "No, no, no, no..."

She was slipping.

Dread filled me.

"Please step back, Edward," I heard the doc say, and suddenly I noticed that we were far from alone in the room. "She's having a panic attack."

There were three other doctors.

I was in shock.

And then I was pushed to the side as the doctors started... doing whatever they did.

I couldn't get a grasp on anything.

"What's wrong? I heard-"

I looked up in a daze to find Charlie and EJ in the doorway.

I couldn't speak.
I could barely breathe.

It felt like I was breathing through a straw. Nothing was enough. My chest tightened, my throat closed up.

"NO! N-nooo!" Bella choked out. "Garrett! Let me g-go!"

My stomach dropped.

Garrett?

"Breathe, honey," doc said. "Bella, can you hear me?"

I swallowed.

"Daddy?"

Oh, God...

My eyes found EJ, and I saw the way his lip trembled.

But I was still frozen in spot.

It was too much.

"Edward!" Bella cried, and I snapped out of it. "Edward!"

"Bella!" I choked out, trying to get to her, but a fucking asshole stopped me. "Let me get to her!"

"You need to step back, Mr. Cullen."

I couldn't see her. I tried, but I couldn't. Too many people were suddenly in the way, blocking me.

"Bella!"

She screamed. "Let me go, Garreeeeett!"
I heard her thrashing.

Followed by EJ's crying.

Over and over, she screamed out his name. I heard the fear and gut-wrenching pain in her voice. She thought she was back with him, and every time I heard her bloodcurdling scream it felt like a stab to my chest.

"M-Mommyyy!" EJ sobbed. "No G-arrett! NO!"

I turned to Charlie who was also frozen in shock. "Get him out of here, Charlie!" I shouted.

"You need to get out, all of you," a doc said, and I was ready punch the fucker in the face.

"Forget it," I snapped. "I'm not goin' anywhere!"

I was losing it.

Everything was falling apart.

"Stop touching her!" I screamed. "Bella!"

They were touching her.

They were... they were in the way...

Blocking me.

No. No.

It was all slipping through my fingers.

Crying. Everywhere. EJ out in the hallway.

Bella... screaming and thrashing...
And my hands were held behind my back...

Security.

"Get him out of here."

My insides churned.

Nausea.

"Bella-" I choked. I couldn't breathe.

I couldn't save her.

She was back with him.

I heard his name over and over.

I tried to break free.

"Stop!" I begged through tears that I wasn't even aware of. "Stop..."

Please don't touch her...

I had to fight.

I couldn't lose her to a man that was dead.

But I was.

And then I was pushed out the door.

Chapter 40

~Dear My Closest Friend by Flyleaf – chapter song.

December 7th

Bella Cullen.
"I love you," you whisper against my forehead.

I nod, snuggling closer to your body. "You, too," I breathe out.

Under the covers it's just the two of us.

EJ's napping in his room.

I feel awful.

I have to remind myself where I am.

Constantly.

And I try, I try so hard, to be a good mom to EJ, but... I can't stop the flashbacks. They come too often. I can't control anything in my life anymore, and each step forward we've taken...

All the progress...

It's just gone.

"I'm here, angel," you murmur, and you're reminding me, too.

Sucks that I need it.

It's been days since I left the hospital.

Shouldn't I be better by now?

"Wanna talk about it, baby?"

I squeeze my eyes shut, feeling all air being sucked out of me.

I start to talk.

To myself.
I have to, because the silence is killing me. Being on edge is also killing me. Being locked up is killing me.

Everything...

You're gonna save me, right?

I don't know how long I've been in this room but... it has to be weeks.

Weeks away from you, hubs.

How long will it take for someone to find me?

"I miss you, Edward," I whimper, clutching my belly.

I'm in the corner of the little room... No escape.

A mattress. Filthy.

I cry all the time.

I'm furious and scared.

Scared of that delusional bastard outside.

Garrett.

And I'm shaking...

"Bella!"

You're shaking me.

I gulp and fist your t-shirt.


Deep breaths.
More crying.

I hate it. God, I hate it...

I miss my strength.

I miss being in control.

"You're here, Bella," you tell me hoarsely.

I breathe you in, soaking your shirt with tears that makes me feel weak and pathetic.

"Tell me," I beg.

You never hesitate. "You're here. We're home... Believe me?"

And I do, because I feel it all. I feel how close we are, I smell your scent... the scent of our home... I feel the covers... I inhale the scent of our detergent... And I know that I'm here. But I'm still being ripped away from reality.

Pregnant.

The word has gone on repeat for days.

I'm pregnant.

"Talk to me, angel," you breathe out.

I swallow. "I'm here." Another gulp.

Still, it feels like only half of me is here. It feels like I have one foot in reality, and one in my nightmares. And... I'm being pulled. Small things trigger me constantly.

When four words are spoken, it's like I only register two of them.
"Do you want me to get EJ?"

And I shake my head. I don't want to scare him anymore.

We've... you've... worked hard to make him feel better.

"Mama is just sick. It will pass. She will rest a lot and talk to Daddy and Anna. It will get better, nugget."

You've been so amazing, hubs. You're everywhere.

You're there for EJ, 'cause I can't.

"Christ," I croak, resting my forehead on your chest. What would I do without you?

"You with me, baby?"

I nod. "Yeah. I just..." hate it all. "Hate feelin' so weak."

I hate taking those fucking pills.

I hate taking steps backward.

"Hey, look at me."

And here you go again, always eager to make me feel better.

Resting my chin on your chest, I look up at you. You brush your thumbs under my eyes.

"You're not weak," you tell me firmly.

To which I disagree, hubs.

Because I'm crumbling.

"You're already gettin' better, Bella. You know it."
No, I don't.

"We're gonna fix this, angel..." You swallow hard. "We're Cullens, remember?"

I avert my eyes.


*O*O*O*

After my shower, I walk down the stairs. Slowly.

It's both emotionally and physically draining to be... like this.

Your scent helps me, though, if only a little. I'm wearing a pair of your boxers and a black hoodie. I'm practically drowning in it, but I need it like a life jacket.

Not that it saves me, because when I reach the third step... the step that still creaks...

I fall.

And I scream.

*I gasp breathlessly, trying and trying to get air down my lungs.*

*The pain...*

*Oh, God... It hurts...*

*A contraction hits and I'm still alone.*

*In the room. On the filthy mattress.*

*Then I choke when I hear a creaking sound...*
He's back, and I hear screaming. So much screaming.

"Shut the fuck up!" It's Garrett, of course, but... Fuck, who else?

When the door opens, I watch through a blurry vision as Garrett shoves a woman inside the room.

"Deliver the fuckin' baby!" he growls before shutting the door again.

She looks like a nurse.

Another flash of pain rips through me, and I cry out.

For you.

You're not here, hubs.

And I'm in labor.

Our son, Edward...

"Pl-lease!" I sob. "I c-can't..." The pain is too great...

"She's comin' around."

She looks terrified, and I know. I know that she's been taken, too.

"Edward!" I wail.

"Listen to me, angel. I'm here... Open y-your eyes for me."

Then I'm enveloped by you.

I breathe through my cries.

"Don't touch her, Mom. I've got her."

Closer, I need closer.
"Edward, honey, I wasn't tryin' to-"

"Don't. Just leave us alone."

Greedy gulps of air... I need your scent.

Against you neck. I inhale.

I try to convince myself.

And you cradle me in your arms.

We're on the floor... in the hallway...

"Wh-what," I choke out.

"You fell," you whimper, hugging me even tighter.

My knee. I scrubbed my knee.

Christ...

"I'm okay," I exhale shakily. "It was just..." I breathe. "From the third step."

Right here, I'm safe. In your arms, surrounded by you.

"Should... should we go to the hospital?" you whisper thickly into my hair.

I shake my head against your neck. "No. No people. I'm fine."

And you nod.

But I know that you're concerned about... about...

Fuck.

The pregnancy.
I'm pregnant.

"Stay with me, Bella. Breathe..."

Yes. Breathe. I'm here.

*O*O*O*

I'm quiet and still, resting with EJ on the couch in the living room.

Your clothes and EJ's giggles keep me sane for now.

He's watching a movie, holding my hand tightly.

And you're making us sandwiches in the kitchen.

Even though it doesn't take long to make them, you check on us every other minute.

We're doing so much wrong.

We're shutting everybody out.

You only allow Dad and Esme to enter the house, and if they're here, you don't leave my sight. And when we talk to Anna on the porch, I'm on your lap.

The problem is that I let you.

You refuse to let me go, and I don't want you to.

"You sleepin', Mommy?" EJ whispers.

I smile against his hair. "Nope. Waitin' for Daddy to bring us food."

"Me also," he giggles, and then he's back to watching his movie.

I focus on the scents. They're so important.
To me they represent reality.

"Here's lunch," I hear you say.

And soon it's the three of us on the couch, eating sandwiches and drinking sodas.

Well, I'm drinking my protein shake and water.

EJ inhales his food. Much like you do.

I love watching you.

You notice but say nothing.

And I'm waiting... waiting to feel like I'm a part of it all again.

But I still feel so separated from you. Both of you. Of this, our life.

"Anna's comin' by soon," you say quietly after a while.

Anna. Can't say I look forward to it. All we do is talk about my time with...

It's all we do. She wants me to get it all out. As much as possible, with as many details as I can...

Every day. She comes by everyday now. One or two hours of talking about my time... away from home.

I nod and look down at my food. I pick at it. Little pieces.

I've lost a little of my appetite.

Doesn't help that I have... um, morning sickness.

I sigh.
It's hard to wrap my head around the fact that I'm pregnant again, and I know you want us to talk about it. Anna wants it, too, and I know that we need to talk about it. But it's easier to avoid, hubs. Talking about it would make it real, and I'm not ready for that.

The last time I was pregnant...

"Bella, stay with me."

I look up, noticing your eyes on me. You read me so well.

I bite down on my lip.

My eyes sting.

"Is Mama gonna be sick again, Daddy?"

And I squeeze my eyes shut.

"Maybe but you remember what Daddy said?" you ask him quietly but hurriedly.

One foot in reality.

"Yea, it only is for a little bit then she all better."

One foot in my nightmare... my past.

Sometimes I'm pushed into a memory...

And sometimes I feel them pulling at me...

Like now. I can feel myself being in that room.

The one I spent almost five months in...

Waiting. Crying. Hoping...
Giving birth.

*The air... stale and... It reeks.*

*Edward...*

*And... our little boy...*

*It's just the two of us. He's only two days old...*

The screaming...

The heartbreak.

"Stay with me, Bella." You're closer. I feel your hands, your arms, and I'm on your lap. "I'm here... So are you." Whispers in my ear, hands caressing. I'm still stuck in between. Please... "Open your eyes, angel. Open your eyes for us."

No, no, no, no, no...

I... can't...

"Mommy?"

I choke.

"Nugget, could you go get some toys for Mama?"

"I don't wants her to be sick again, Daddy!"

*I pace in the room.*

*I cover my ears.*

*He won't stop screaming. I've tried everything.*

*I'm failing. I'm a horrible mom.*
"Please, please, please," I chant through my tears. "Pl-ease stop crying, EJ."

I don't... I don't know what to do, hubs. What if he's sick?

I'm nauseous.

Don't ask me when I last ate.

God, the crying...

I pound on the door, screaming for Garrett.

More pacing.

I can't do this. I can't do this. I suck at being a mother.

"I'm sorry," I whimper, walking over to EJ again. "I'm so sorry, baby..." He doesn't stop crying. He just... doesn't stop.

I'm sweaty and covered in... I don't even know what.

Since the birth four days ago, I haven't showered once.

Vomit, blood, urine...

The smells...

The scents...

"That's it, baby," I hear you cry quietly. "I'm here, Bella..."

I try to breathe in through my nose but I end up sobbing...

Clinging to you desperately.

"Edward," I cry, and I'm so fucking sorry. "Where-" I cough.
"Shhhh, baby, just breathe..."

I shake my head furiously, and I finally manage to open my fucking eyes.

"EJ," I choke out.

"He's in his room, gettin' you some stuff..."

Okay. Shit... Deep breaths.

I sniffle and blink away tears.

You do the same, and I hate seeing tears in your eyes.

I'm sorry for not being able to control myself.

"I love you," I whimper, resting my forehead against yours.

"I'm not lettin' you go, angel," you say firmly, voice full of emotion.

"You're here, all right?"

I exhale.

And inhale.

Exhale. "Yeah..."

I'm here.

For now.

Chapter 41

~Hallelujah by Jeff Buckley – chapter song.

December 14th

Edward Cullen.
Hearing Bella talk to Anna about her flashbacks was indescribably painful, but seeing her talk to Anna about them was worse. Because I knew my wife. Every look, every facial expression... She was in so much pain. Reliving it all. Her first pregnancy. Those months when she was locked up... And then, as an outsider, to see her get sucked into her nightmares... It was awful.

I had no idea how many times I had seen it now.

Right in front of my eyes, I could see her disappear.

I saw her eyes go vacant.

The trembling.

The words she cried out.

The despair flashing across her features.

The devastation I knew I was never going to be able to comprehend.

The pure hell she'd been through.

And now it was back, taunting her. Wiping away all the progress.

I could still see her strength, even if she didn't. But I saw it, and I held onto it, hoping that we'd get outta this fucking mess. There was no way I'd let a dead motherfucker haunt us this way. Just the fact that he was still able to cause her pain was enough for me to throw up. Which I had. I had no idea how many times I had excused myself to "calm down". I probably threw up more than Bella did, and she was the one with the morning sickness. But I just hated it. I hated not being able to take the pain away. And the fear. The fear was almost worse. To see your wife scared, even in her own home... As a husband, that hurt. It was wrong, I knew, but I couldn't help but feel like I was failing her.
I had talked to Anna about it, because I knew how vital that was now, and she had told me that my thoughts were understandable. Of course, she also told me that I had no reason for seeing myself that way, but that meant little when I in the next second saw my girl getting sucked back into another nightmare. Because there was literally nothing I could do. I murmured soft words to her, I held her, I told her that she was home... but it only worked after a while. Parts of her flashbacks were strong enough to hold her fast.

As for the memories, I knew they mostly centered on her time in Arizona. That was where she spent her last five months being pregnant. Even the damn birth... Christ, she told me... and Anna, how Garrett had pushed in some nurse or midwife he'd kidnapped. We already knew, but... this time around it was so fucking detailed. Bella's flashbacks were like movies playing in her head, as she explained. And it made her believe that she was really back to... there. That time. With Garrett.

I did what I could, which wasn't much.

Then when Bella went to sleep at night, I found myself staring at the ceiling, unable to get even a little rest.

I was constantly on high alert.

Waiting for sounds. Cries from Bella, or... EJ waking up.

I often checked on him.

He slept in his own room now, and though he usually ended up in our bed some time during the night, there wasn't many problems. He enjoyed his new room, and I knew he felt safe. He liked his bed, and as long as he didn't fall asleep alone, he didn't mind being there. So, Bella or I always stayed until he'd fallen asleep. Still, when he woke up in the middle of the
night... or maybe... a few hours before sunup, I could hear his little feet as he came to us.

These were the sounds I stayed awake for.

Anything, really, but after a few weeks of this, I knew what to expect. EJ's feet around three or four... Bella's nightmares...

Tossing and turning.

EJ was a heavy sleeper, for which I was glad.

Bella, not so much.

Always restless.

It left me exhausted, but I couldn't relax. It was impossible.

I supposed it was the protector in me.

But wasn't it my job to make sure my family was safe? And felt safe?

Of course it was.

*O*O*O*

"Cold?" I murmured, looking over at Bella.

The temperature had dropped, but we still used the porch a lot.

Bundled up with blankets and hot chocolate, we sat next to each other on the porch swing. The floor was too cold for me to sit on now. It was mid-December, after all, and though the winters here were mild, it was still chilly. The air was particular crisp tonight.

"A little, but I'm fine," she whispered, resting her head on my bicep. "Keep playin', please?"
I cracked a small smile and dropped I kiss into her hair.

Then I went back to strumming lightly on the guitar.

Over the past few days, Anna had focused on finding things that helped Bella stay in... reality, basically. And things that helped her not leaving reality at all. Me playing the guitar was apparently one of the things. Bella said there was nothing more like home than this. Us sitting on the porch, and me tinkering on the guitar.

I agreed, because this couldn't be more us. This was what we spent many nights doing in the past.

"It's very quiet tonight," I mentioned softly. Not that we lived too close to the city noise, but there was still usually an air of life around here.

She hummed. "Feels good."

I kept playing softly, not really paying attention.

My exhaustion was getting to me, but I knew it would get better as my wife did.

That was just how I functioned.

And if the sounds of Sadie helped, then I wasn't going to stop.

I knew my scent helped her a lot, too.

Same went for EJ. Bella found it easier to relax if EJ and I were close, and she was now always wearing my clothes. She looked so fucking adorable.

"I've been thinkin'..."

"Hmm?" I hummed, letting her know that I paid attention.

It was all I did, paying attention to her.
She took a sip of her hot chocolate before continuing. "Um, tomorrow… Anna wants to talk about uh… the…"

When she started taking calming breaths, I knew she was on the edge.

My entire being went rigid.

I was always prepared these days.

"Keep breathin', angel," I murmured, making sure I kept playing. "I'm here, remember?"

On the outside I may have seemed calm.

But on the inside, there was a storm brewing.

Nausea, fear, nerves, dread, sadness, anger.

"You're right here, baby," I reminded her softly. I leaned in and kissed her hair. I breathed her in. "We're all home…"

I bit back my emotions.

They were trying to escape me constantly.

But I managed to push it down for my sleepless nights.

"EJ's upstairs sleepin'," I whispered, still dropping a kiss here and there. "And you're here with me, right?"

Over and over, she took deep breaths.

Inhaling deeply through her nose.

She brought the sleeves of my hoodie that she was wearing up to her nose.

Because she actually needed it.
As my eyes stung, I realized that I had started playing the song I'd written for her.

Years had passed.

I'd written it before Bella gave me Sadie.

That was my twenty-first birthday, but... it felt like centuries ago.

Another lifetime, really.

"Are you with me, angel?" I whispered thickly.

She nodded minutely before clutching to my arm. She buried her face against it and pulled her legs up, curling into a little ball. It made her look so fucking fragile. Again the pain was too great for words, and it got even worse when I felt her shoulders shaking. She cried silently, and soon I felt the tears through my own sweatshirt.

"Keep goin', hubs," she whimpered when I paused on the guitar. I just wanted to wrap my arms around her. "Please... I just..." Deep breaths. "Gimme a minute?"

I swallowed hard, ignoring the churning in my stomach.

Minutes passed and all I wanted was to hold her, but if she needed the strumming...

I kept going, blinking back my traitorous tears as I played quietly.

I had a good idea of what she wanted to bring up earlier, and I had to admit that I was scared. Or petrified. Take your pick.

The pregnancy. That was what Anna wanted us to discuss tomorrow.

Bella had avoided it for days.
But it was time for us... or for Bella... to make a decision.

It wasn't up to me. There was no way I could make a decision like that, because my wife's health came first. And if she felt it was best to...

Fuck.

Yeah, I was scared. Scared that she was going to choose abortion.

A small part of me wanted it, but only if it would guarantee that Bella started feeling better.

There was no such guarantee, though.

And I had no idea what she was going through emotionally.

So... the decision was absolutely hers.

I'd be there no matter what.

After all, we were still young. Very much so. Only twenty-five, and this pregnancy sure had the worst timing ever. For me, though, the thought of abortion...

Not being able to sleep at night had given me a lot of time to think, and the pregnancy was often on my mind.

She was about eight weeks pregnant.

Still very early, but after missing out on so much during her last pregnancy, I found myself wondering... hoping... wishing...

Longing.

I was just so fucking wistful.

But I couldn't help it.
I remembered the feeling of coming home... seeing her little baby bump...

The sense of pride that surged through me, just because I was going to be a dad.

I always knew that I would never be like my own dad. The mere thought of walking out on my child... Vile, inhumane, unfair. You just didn't do that crap. And honestly, I couldn't believe how one was actually physically able to leave. For me, the connection was too strong. Even from the very start. It would be impossible to leave that behind, and I never did.

During those years that Bella was missing, I always had EJ on my mind, too. And I didn't even know if he'd ever been born. There was no knowing, but I still felt so fucking attached.

And I'd be a liar if I said that I wasn't already attached to the little thing growing inside of her now.

Was it another boy?

Or was it a Sadie?

Then there was EJ to take into consideration. How was he going to react to a baby brother or sister?

I had started to think about all of it.

Those sleepless nights didn't leave me with much else.

Just the constant worry.

And thoughts about the future.

It made me wonder if Bella saw it as a baby, or if she just saw it as... the situation itself. Did she think farther than the pregnancy? Was there a baby on her mind? Was she wondering about the sex of the baby, too?
I doubted it, really. Yeah. She had too much going on as it was.

I sighed heavily, resting my cheek on the top of her head.

Her crying had subsided, and for that I was thankful, but I could still hear her sniffling and breathing hard. I knew she was fighting.

While I was doing nothing.

*O*O*O*

I flushed the toilet.

I threw back a glass of water, letting it rinse my mouth before I repeated the procedure with mouthwash.

In the mirror, I saw the circles under my eyes.

It was in the middle of the night. Around two AM, I guessed.

And I had just calmed Bella down after another nightmare.

She'd woken herself up with a blood curdling scream.

The sobbing and gasping for air followed.

As did EJ, who had woken up, too.

Half an hour later, their cries had settled, and they fell asleep again.

I didn't.

I couldn't.

After spitting out the mouthwash, I flicked off the light in the bathroom and returned to the bedroom.

The light was off, but the moonlight filtered through the closed blinds.
Bella was asleep on her side.

EJ next to her.

I could still see wetness on their cheeks.

With a sigh, I sat down on the edge of the bed.

I scrubbed my hands over my face, resting my elbows on my knees.

How long could we go on like this?

Mid-December. I wanted to see my wife going nuts over all the Christmas decorations. I wanted her to turn the kitchen into a warzone as she made Christmas cookies. I wanted EJ to experience his first Christmas and thinking how magic it was. I wanted there to be Christmas music. I wanted us to go out and buy a fucking tree.

I wanted what we used to have. Only, now we had EJ, and I wanted him to be in on it all.

Bella always loved Christmas. I did, too. So much. I remembered waking up early, only to find out that Bella had already been up for hours. I'd always find her in the kitchen with recipes... Ingredients all over the place. A trail of flour on her forehead. Chocolate on her nose or something.

And she'd have this goofy grin when she found me in the doorway watching her.

"Daddy?"

I tensed at the sound of EJ's whisper, and I wiped at my cheeks, feeling yet another set of tears...

*Fuck, hold it together, Cullen.*
I cleared my throat.

"What's up, nugget?" I whispered back, turning half my body to see him sitting up. "Can't sleep?"

He shook his head and made his way over to me, settling on my lap.

I kissed him on the forehead.

"How long Mama gonna be sick?" he whimpered.

_Sweet Jesus._

I swallowed my emotions. "I don't know, baby," I murmured thickly. "But she's gettin' better, I promise." He looked down, fidgeting with the hem of my wife-beater. "The past few days have been a little better, haven't they?" I asked softly, running my fingers through his hair.

"Only little," he mumbled, eyes still downcast. "Don' like when she cry lots."

I inhaled deeply, letting it out slowly.

"Me neither, buddy," I murmured against his forehead. "We just gotta keep doin' what we're doin'. And you remember what Mama said, don't you?"

He looked up at me, giving me a miniscule smile. A lopsided one. "Yea, give lots and lots of hugs."

"Exactly." I Eskimoed him a little, which earned me another smile. "Wanna know what she told me last night?"

"Uh-huh."

"She said that her favorite was an EJ-hug and a drawing from you."
"Mama say that?" He tilted his head.

I nodded firmly. "The picture you drew of the house is on the fridge downstairs," I grinned, "and she told me she loved it so much."

He giggled quietly behind his hands. "I can make more, Daddy. Many, many. How many she wants?"

"So many," I replied as my eyes widened. "Can you make a thousand?"

I smiled when his eyes widened, too. "How many's that?" He held up his fingers. "Like this many?" he asked.

"Yeah," I chuckled thickly. "You think you can make that many?"

"I can," he said solemnly. "Im'a make thousanded."

"But don't forget the hugs," I reminded, bumping our foreheads together. "The hugs are the most important."

He grinned. "Squishy hugs?"

"Very squishy. She loves those."

"'Kay," he yawned, and I chuckled quietly.

"Time for bed, nugget."

He nodded and yawned again. "Love you, Daddy."

"Love you more, EJ."

It didn't take long for EJ to fall asleep.

I felt his little hand on my stomach as I stared up at the ceiling.

I covered it with my own as I kept the other one behind my head.
And I was nervous. About tomorrow.

As usual, sleep didn't find me.

*O*O*O*

"Would you like to take a break, Bella?" Anna asked softly.

"No," she croaked against my neck.

I stroked her hair.

She was on my lap. I couldn't help it. I felt too anxious during sessions. I needed her close. Even when it came to Mom and Charlie, I felt stiffer, more prepared, more ready for a fight. I couldn't really understand it. All I knew was that when Anna was around, Bella was on my lap.

"Want some water or somethin'?" I murmured quietly.

She shook her head. "No," she whispered brokenly. "I'm ready."

I drew a shaky breath.

For an hour, we had talked about her most recent flashbacks.

Now it was time to broach another subject. The pregnancy.

"Just remember to think about yourself, honey," Anna reminded her, smiling in concern as Bella lifted her head from my neck. "Don't base a decision on what's right or wrong. Only what makes you feel better, all right?"

I nodded slowly, agreeing wholeheartedly with Anna.

Bella's well-being was priority.

I miss you, angel.
"I just..." She shrugged dejectedly, and I brushed my thumb under her eyes. I kissed her cheek, too. "I don't how..." I could feel it coming, even more so when she started taking calming breaths again. I steeled myself to hear it. She was going with abortion. "I don't know how I can do this," she whimpered. "I'm so sorry..."

My stomach dropped.

"Don't apologize, baby," I choked out. *Fuck*. It hurt. "You're what I care most about. You and EJ. So, don't ever apologize, okay?"

I was so fucking torn. Sadness and resignation pulled at one end, determination and the love for my girl at another end. She was my number one, along with EJ, and I hoped... God, I hoped this would make her feel better. I hoped this would take pressure off. I hoped this could help her relax and start healing again.

"What are you thinking about now, Bella?" Anna asked softly.

I reached over to grab the box of tissues from the coffee table.

"Here," I whispered.

She sniffled and took a couple. "I don't know really," she said hoarsely. "I just feel... so fuckin' detached from it all. I'm just watchin'."

Anna nodded in understanding, and that woman had an answer for everything.

"You mean you feel more like a spectator?"

"Yes," Bella breathed out, nodding. "And I feel stuck. Like... I'm just waitin' for the next flashback." She exhaled shakily. I kept stroking her hair, her back, her thighs. "Feels like I can't move on, you know?"
"That could be because you haven't made a decision until now," Anna answered. "In one hand you have your episodes," she explained softly. "And in the other you have a reality that you're afraid to deal with – a decision to make that you have no wish making."

*But the decision's been made now.*

I ignored the churning in my stomach.

"I want you to take a week or two to let this settle," she continued. "Try to look beyond this. Focus on Edward and EJ. And then we'll talk about this again to see if you still feel detached, all right?" Bella nodded and looked down. "If you feel that it's easier to look ahead; to move on, then you know that the decision you made to day might strengthen." She paused. "What I'm saying is that you have some time now to make sure that your decision feels right."

But it didn't feel right.

At least not for me.

I knew, though, that if I saw improvement in my wife, I would feel better.

That was all I could hope for now.

"Okay," Anna said, straightening in her seat a little. "I think that's enough for today – you look like you could need a rest, sweetie."

With another nod, Bella stood up to hug Anna. They spoke quietly for a little while. Words of reassurance. Comfort. I heard Anna mentioning Bella's medication and stuff like that. And in the meantime, I leaned forward on my knees and lit up a smoke.

It was going to take a while to let this settle.
A part of me understood, of course. The last thing her body needed now was more changes, and I knew enough about pregnancies to understand that it would be hard for her. Both physically and emotionally. After being home for less than four months, she didn't need to go through all that now. All the hormones, the nausea, the mood swings...

But the rest of me was unable to take it in.

I wasn't a woman. It wasn't possible for me to get it.

I could only see it from my point of view, and I was... in a way... messed up. A bit heartbroken. Because she was ending this. There wasn't going to be a boy or a girl in seven months.

Not this time.

Again, I tried to reason with myself. We would get another chance. Later, when she was ready.

I sighed.

I took a deep pull from the smoke.

Exhaled slowly.

"Edward?"

Looking up, I saw that it was just Anna here.

"Bella went upstairs to rest," she answered my unspoken question. "Mind if I sit?"

I shook my head, though I thought the session was over.

"How are you?"

I huffed a humorless chuckle. "Terrific."
She smiled ruefully.

"When was the last time you slept?"

The question didn't catch me off guard.

You could see how fucking spent I was.

"It's been a while," I muttered, exhaling smoke through my nose.

"And how do you feel about Bella's decision about the pregnancy?"

"Like shit," I answered bluntly.

I looked down at the floor, still resting my elbows on my knees.

"But she comes first," I added quietly. "I need her to get better."

Fuck.

I rubbed my chest.

And when Anna started talking about how "we both came first" and how I "needed to be honest with Bella", it just hurt more. There was no way I could tell Bella that I wanted the baby. It would only cause her more
harm. She would feel guilty, and her getting better was truly my number one priority. So, no... I couldn't tell her.

"But what if it's not the right decision?" she asked, tilting her head.

By now, I was on my third smoke.

"What if she hasn't allowed herself to think of the baby growing inside of her?" she continued. "That's where you come in, Edward. Make her see both sides. Make her understand that you're with her, regardless. But for her to make a decision without regrets, she needs to see it from your perspective, too."

I ran a hand through my hair as I leaned back in my seat.

"But won't the pregnancy be too hard on her?" I mumbled.

"It's possible that it will be difficult," she replied pensively. "But it could also help her move forward. We really don't know until she's absolutely certain."

I blew out a heavy breath.

"I don't want her to feel more pressure," I said, feeling that fucking stinging behind my eyes again. "I just..." Fuck. "Want her to get better." I leaned forward again, squeezing my eyes shut. "I miss her."

Deep breaths.

"I know you do, honey," she sighed sadly. "It's not going to go away over night. But... isn't it better to go through it all now?"

I furrowed my brow, but before I could look up, she continued.

"What if she had the abortion, only to live with the regret afterward? I'd say that's a lot harder to recover from."
"There's only so much pain one can handle at once. I already feel like I'm losin' her all over again." I breathed out harshly, feeling emotions fighting to surface. "I don't know if she can handle my... perspective, too, as you put it."

"But we have to try."

Right.

"And what you're doing to yourself isn't making things better, either, Edward."

Now I looked up.

"You're not taking care of yourself," she said pointedly. "And you keep saying that she comes first, and I understand that. I do, but would Bella agree? Does she know that you don't sleep at night?"

I grimaced and put out the smoke.

Of course she didn't know.

"I've tried, but..." I trailed off, feeling helpless. "I can't fuckin' relax."

She nodded slowly. "Again, that's understandable. But maybe it would be easier for Bella to move on if you did." I arched a brow in question. "She's not the only one standing still. You do it, too. And you're both focusing so hard on her episodes. What you need to do is look forward. Which I believe you should be the one to start with. She will see it. And who knows, maybe it will help her follow. Maybe it will help her see beyond this, as well."
I chewed on my bottom lip, thinking about what she was saying.

"Don't close yourself in, Edward," she murmured. "Let your family into your everyday life again. Make plans. Start with something small... like Christmas. Have you made any plans for that?"

I shook my head.

There was no plan other than making it through the day.

It felt like everything was hanging by a thread, and to take a step too far would make it all fall apart.

"Think about what I've said," she advised me. "Give it a couple of days, all right? Then we can talk more about this when I return on Friday."

*O*O*O*

I watched her as she slept.

It wasn't peaceful.

And when she woke up screaming, I was there all over again.

Everything went on repeat.

I held her.

She gasped for air through heartbreaking sobs.

EJ woke up.

More crying.

I was losing it.

This couldn't go on.
We’d all fall apart.

In the bathroom, I went through my routine. I emptied my stomach. I cried. I was hiding. I flushed the toilet. I rinsed with water and mouthwash. I saw the dark circles under my eyes.

I returned to staring at the ceiling.

Still unable to sleep.

I had to do something.

Chapter 42

~Wintersong by Sarah McLachlan – chapter song.

December 17th

Bella Cullen.

I sit on the couch in the living room, my chin resting on my knees.

Four in the morning.

The house is quiet.

My eyes are focused on the Christmas tree you bought the day before yesterday.

There, in the corner, lit up and decorated. Esme did it yesterday. EJ was watching in excitement.

Now, as I watch it, it feels... peaceful.

My breaths are steady and not as heavy as I'm used to.

Tilting my head to rest my cheek on my knees instead, I keep watching the tree. It fills me with something else, too. Something that's almost the
opposite of peacefulness, but... it's not a bad feeling. It's restlessness. But a good kind. The kind that makes me want to do something. Something... I look up when I hear the third step creaking, and soon I see EJ in the doorway. Dressed in one of his many Turtles pajamas. Hair ruffled from sleep.

"Mama?"

"Why aren't you sleepin', honey?" I whisper.

He shrugs a little and pads over to the couch. "Daddy turnin' lots when he sleep. It woked me."

I sigh. Guilt washes over me.

It's my fault you can't sleep, hubs.

I'm so sorry.

But I'm going to fight. I promise.

"Can you tell me more 'bout Christmas?" he mumbles, smiling at the tree. "Nana and Daddy tell me stories yesterday."

I remember.

I remember the wistful smile on you, Edward. You told our boy about how I used to be up before sunrise to bake. You told him how you'd wake up to the smells of ginger, saffron, oranges, cinnamon, and Christmas tree. You told him about gifts. EJ's excited about that the most. You also told him about the songs. Christmas carols.

Suddenly I know. I know what I have to do.
"Instead of tellin' you, how about I show you?" I ask softly, weaving my fingers through his dark brown hair.

"Show me?" he replies, tilting his head.

I nod, feeling something fluttering inside me. Something that tells me I'm on the right path. "Come on," I whisper, taking his hand.

When we reach the kitchen, I switch on the lights.

Yes. This is right.

Enough with the storytelling. We're supposed to show him.

"Wanna know Daddy's favorite Christmas candy?" I smile down at him.

His eyes light up. "There's special candy for Christmas?"

A girly giggle escapes me, and it feels... so good.

Liberating.

"Yes."

My eyes well up. For no reason, really.

"'Kay, wha's his favorite?" he asks, and I pick him up to position him on the kitchen island. I remember dreaming about this when I was little. I was gonna have a bunch of babies, and when they grew up, they were gonna watch me cook and bake. They were also gonna be my helpers when I decided to decorate and redecorate. I had quite the future planned out. But you know about all of this, hubs, don't you? 'Course you do.

"Pretty sure child labor is illegal, angel," you'd joke.

I would try to scowl at you.
You would kiss my nose, and I would lose.

Now that I have my EJ here, it's about time I showed him how I operate in the kitchen. For real. Not the way I act when Esme is around, but the way I act when I'm alone. I'm your hurricane. You once called me Katrina. I kicked you in the shin for that.

"Fudge," I tell EJ, feeling my mouth turn into a grin. "Daddy's favorite candy for Christmas is fudge."

And now we're gonna make it. It doesn't require a lot of ingredients, so we have to do something else, too. Otherwise, there won't be a mess in the kitchen by the time I'm done. We need the mess.

"Want to help me make it for Daddy?" I ask.

"Yes," he whispers, still so damn excited for something so little.

"Okay. Sit still, all right? I don't want you to fall down. I'm just gonna grab the stuff we need."

After nodding in understanding, I walk over to the cupboards...

And I see my medication.

Fuck.

I squeeze my eyes shut, feeling my past pull at me.

Reminding me, haunting me.

"Not now," I breathe out, pleading.

Not now.

"Mommy?"
EJ.

I'm home. We're all safe.

"Can you keep talkin', baby?" I whimper, placing both my hands on the counter. "Tell me a story, please?"

"I don't give a shit, Irina!" he snaps. "He's probably just whiny."

Whiny? He's got a fever, you ass!

"Please, Garrett, let me take him to the doctor!" I cry out.

"No! I bought him the fucking Tylenol. That'll do."

"You gonna be sick, Mommy? Don't get sick, don't get sick!"

I grind my teeth together.

Stop. Just... stop.

"Shut the fuck up, Irina!"


"He's dead," I whisper under my breath.

Jasper killed that bastard. He won't ever return.

"Baby, tell me what you want for Christmas," I choke out. "I'm fine, Mommy just needs to hear you."

I keep my back to him, hoping, wishing, fighting internally.

For some reason, one of my hands moves to my stomach.

Protectively.
"Um, I... um... I-I dunno, Mommy... Are you better now?"

I release a breath.

Focus, Bella.

"You don't know what you want for Christmas?" I force out.

Breathe in through your nose, Cullen.

Deeply.

Hold it.

Exhale.

"I want a guitar like Daddy's," I hear him mumble. "Are you okay now? I don't want you to be sick, Mama."

Me neither.

"A guitar, that's good," I breathe out. My eyes sting, my muscles tense. Keep breathing, Bella. I'm home. It's almost Christmas. EJ should know what it's all about.

Exhale.

Inhale.

The scents. Hold onto the scents.

Instinctively, I dip my chin and bring the hoodie I'm wearing to my nose. It's yours, of course. I only wear your clothes. Always the same kinds. A hoodie and a pair of boxers.

"You're in yellow house, Mommy," EJ reminds me, and I want to laugh and cry at the same time. "Daddy tell me you get sick in dreams and you
don' remember you're home." He's just like you, Edward. So perceptive. Such a savior. "You don' hafta dream now, 'cause dis is the kitchen."

I smile and whimper at once.

And I start to relax.

Looking down, I notice that my hand is still placed on my stomach.

"Mommy? You still sick? I can yell for Daddy."

"No, I'm fine," I exhale, reveling in the truth of those words. "You helped me, baby." I breathe in the shirt, eyes still focused on my hand. Baby. A baby. A part of you, a part of me.

Christ.

"I help good?" he asks hopefully.

With a watery smile on my face, I turn around again. As soon as I reach him, I hug him to me and start peppering his face with kisses. "You did so good, sweetie," I murmur thickly. "You and Daddy are the best, you know that? You always know how to make me feel better."

His grin is filled with pride, and his giggle melts my heart.

"Can we eat fush now? Before breakfast?"

And I laugh. It feels more liberating than anything I felt earlier.

"You mean fudge," I reply, tapping him on the nose. "And we have to make it first."

*O*O*O*

EJ's eyes are wide as they scan the kitchen.
I'm sorta proud.

It will be a bitch to clean up, but it's worth it.

We made fudge, raisin cookies, and cinnamon buns.

Two hours of destruction. Flour everywhere. I think there's still a raisin or two in my hair. EJ's cute as hell, trying to get the fudge out that's stuck to his teeth.

"You have that on your nose," he giggles, pointing at the bag of flour on the kitchen island.

I huff playfully. "Yeah? Well, you have flour and powdered sugar everywhere, little dude."

"Tha's okay," he shrugs, "I love baths."

I smile and kiss him on the forehead. "I know you do, baby."

Baby.

I sigh.

"So, shall we wake up Daddy?" I ask.

It's not even seven AM, which means you'll be grumpy as hell. But that's just fun.

"Yea, wiv fush. I mean..." He scrunches his face together. "Wha's it called?"

I grin. "Fudge."

He nods. "Fushjj."

*O*O*O*
With a finger over my lips, I motion for EJ to be quiet.

He giggles behind his hand, and then we tiptoe into the bedroom. I hold the plate of cookies, and EJ holds the bowl of fudge. It's completely dark, so I leave the door open, allowing the light from the hall light up the room a little.

Silently, slowly, we crawl onto the bed, not stopping until we're on either side of you.

You're such a snorer, hubs.

And I hate the dark circles under your eyes.

I'll make it better.

"Now, Mommy?" EJ whispers, holding the fudge up.

I nod, smiling.

Then I watch as he places small pieces of fudge on your face.

Your nose twitches when I hold a freshly baked cookie under it.

"Ummm..."

EJ and I stifle giggles and laughs.

Soon, you have fudge on your cheeks, your forehead, your chin...

And you're waking up.

Your hands move, and your brow furrows when one of them reaches my thigh.

Didn't expect me here, did ya, hubs?

"Wha...?"
You're so confused when you finally managed to open your eyes. First, you see EJ. He's grinning goofily, boyishly. Then you find me, on the other side of you. *Hello*. I smile, too. But my smile morphs into a wide grin when you drag a hand over your face.

"What the..." You found the fudge, I see. "Um."

"You gots candy on your face, Daddy," EJ laughs.

You chuckle, still confused and sleepy. "Uh, I see that. Um."

Oh, enough with the ums.

"Um, um, um, um," I say, teasing you as I dip down to kiss you on the forehead. I snatch the piece of fudge there while I'm at it. "Dang, they turned out well."

Then, when I look at you again, you have this soft smile playing on your lips.

It's beautiful, Edward. I've missed it.

I guess you're not grumpy, eh?

"You have flour on your nose," you whisper, brushing your thumb over my bottom lip. I kiss the pad of your thumb, and your smile widens. "I've missed that look on you."

Oh, I grin so widely.

"You should see the kitchen," I tell you, winking at EJ.

I swear, your eyes light up.

Yes, hubs. I'm fighting. I won't quit.

"Jesus, I love you, baby," you sigh softly.
"I love you, too," I whisper, dipping down to kiss you. Once, twice, three times. Softly, slowly. I love you so, so much. "C'mon. It's time for breakfast. You two can eat fudge while I prepare."

"Yesss, fushjj!" EJ hisses in triumph.

**December 18th**

"Enough is enough," I say, wiping my hands on my apron.

Esme and EJ hear me, but you don't. And how could you? You're practically asleep at the kitchen table.

"S'Daddy gonna nap?" EJ asks, already nodding like it's what he think is best.

Well, our boy is a smart little man, hubs.

"Yes, he is."

Yesterday was a good day. I only had two episodes, one of which I managed to fight off with EJ's help. We spent the day, just the three of us, making candy and cookies. Well, I did the making. The boys handled the eating. And today... it started out the same. Only, I haven't had an episode yet. Esme is here, 'cause we've decided to have a Christmas dinner here on the twenty-fourth. Which means preparations, preparations, preparations. And I love it, because I need the distraction. I want to move on, I want to live.

But you're hovering.

Understandable, but you need to sleep.
"Take a break, honey," Esme murmurs. "Spend some time in the livin' room. EJ and I can handle things out here."

"Okay," I sigh, smiling in thanks. Then I walk over to you. "Edward, wake up." I kiss the top of your head and you startle awake. "Well, hi there."

"I wasn't sleepin'," you lie, wide eyed.

Uh-huh. Sure you weren't.

"No, you were just restin' your eyes," I reply, playing along.

You nod solemnly, wrapping your arms around my waist. "Exactly," you mumble with your face buried against my stomach. It makes my breathing hitch. And not in an unpleasant way, which I expected. "Don't make me go away, baby."

Baby.

Baby.

Baby.

A part of you, a part of me.

"You need to sleep, hubs," I whisper in your hair. "Come on. I'll stay with you."

"Promise?"

"Yes."

"Yeah, okay," you agree with a sleepy smile. "But not upstairs. The smell is better down here."

Men and food.
"Do you want me to hold a cookie under your nose while you sleep?" I tease.

"Could you?"

Problem is, you're serious.

"Let's go, you goof," I chuckle, tugging on your hand.

A few moments later, you have your head in my lap. On the couch, I drape a blanket over you, and you turn around to face my stomach. When you kiss it, my mind starts spinning. I know what you want, Edward. Trust me, I'm working on it. I... I think... I think I want it, too. Maybe. I want to want it. I think I already do, but I'm worried, you know? I mean, what if I'm not strong enough?

"I love you," you yawn.

I relax.

"Love you, too."

You hum when I thread my fingers through your hair.

It doesn't take long before you're asleep.

But even in your sleep, you hold me tightly. One arm around my midsection.

I promise. I'm not going anywhere.

You're my rock, remember?

And...

"Christ," I whisper softly. I close my eyes, letting my head fall back against the back of the couch.
It's your child I'm carrying.

Baby.

Baby.

It's a child.

It's life.

I'm so freaking terrified, though. But... now, when I think of it as a baby, how could I ever go through with the...

I swallow hard, not even able to think the word anymore.

I have to talk to Anna.

December 19th

"And you think he can help?" I ask, chewing on my lip.

Esme nods, squeezing my hands. "He will be happy to help, I'm sure of it."

I breathe out.

I'm still terrified, but I don't have a choice anymore.

I can't erase life.

Not after losing so much of it myself.

"How are you feeling?" Anna asks softly.

I'm not sure.

"A part of me feels lighter," I admit. "But I'm scared."
She nods in understanding. "Good thing you have Edward and the rest of your family here for you."

Yeah.

You better be prepared, hubs, 'cause I'm gonna need you.

"So... tomorrow?" Esme murmurs.

And I nod.

Tomorrow is my check-up at the hospital.

I'm doing it then.

"Okay, I'll go call Carlisle," she breathes out, and I see the relief in her.

December 20th

I hate waiting rooms. I hate hospitals.

"You okay?" you ask, kissing my hand.

"Yeah." I nod slowly. I'm fucking nervous, but I'm okay. Truly.

I didn't think I was going to be okay, but I stand corrected.

I can't let a dead son of a bitch rule my life anymore.

This is for me, for you, for all of us.

"Do you mind if Esme comes with me instead?" I ask as she approaches us in the hall. I know she's just talked to Carlisle. Good thing he's a pediatrician, 'cause he knows people in the right department. I'm going to meet with an obstetrician who he recommends, and I won't bring you the first time. I need to do this on my own. I need to test my strength. But I
promise, hubs, you won't miss anything else. At least you've gone through this before.

"Um, why? I mean, I'm usually the one to go with you," you reply, and I see that you're growing anxious. But I promise I won't be gone for long.

"I need it," I tell you, pleading with my eyes. "It won't take long, hubs. But I need to start doing things on my own." This is true, but it's not exactly why I can't bring you along this time. "Please."

You don't want to agree, but in the end you do.

*O*O*O*

Unfortunately, the check-up took a bit longer than they usually do. Well, the check-up went fine, and didn't take long, but afterward we had to go to another part of the hospital where I met with Dr. Hale. Funny, 'cause I already knew her. Sorta. She's Rose's aunt.

Anyway, the ultrasound... I'm glad you weren't there, hubs, 'cause you'd freak out. I cried like a little girl, you know. And you would've mistaken them for tears of sadness.

But they weren't.

And I pulled through.

My cheeks are still strained with tears when I return to you in the waiting room.

You're pacing, and I'm so sorry that I worried you.

I will make it up to you, I promise.

"Fuckin' finally," you breathe out when you see me. "You told me it wasn't gonna be long."
I'm sorry.

When you almost squish me in your hug, I allow myself to smile. I smile so widely, Edward. You can't see it, but you will soon.

"Did everythin' go well?" you ask, releasing me to watch my face. "You've been cryin'. What's wrong? Is it somethin' with your weight? Your vitals? Tell me."

I silence you with a kiss.

Everything went wonderful, hubs.

**December 25th**

On the couch, I sit in between your legs.

EJ's very busy unwrapping his Christmas gifts by the tree.

"You didn't have a flashback yesterday," you murmur against the top of my head. And you're right. I didn't. I almost had one this morning, though, but you and EJ helped me. I think I know why I don't have them as frequently anymore.

Two reasons.

One, I spent yesterday living. Same goes for the past few days before that. Esme and I were busy in the kitchen all day, and then we had dinner with Alice, Jasper, and Emmett. Esme and Dad, too, of course. I can't remember when I last smiled so hard. You noticed, of course. You smiled a lot, too. I was weary in the beginning of the dinner, and you hovered a lot, but we were able to relax when our friends and family didn't come too close to me. I mean, there were many, many hugs and stuff, but it's being caught off guard that freaks me out. A hand on my shoulder or back could easily kill me. Okay, maybe not, but... yeah.
And two, I have a gift for you that I'm now eager to give you.

"I feel better," I murmur back, tilting my head up. Kiss me, dammit. You do, and I love it. Your lips are so soft. They taste like cookies and milk.

"Look, Mama!" EJ gasps. I grin when I see the kiddie guitar. You bought it for him, and it looks just like Sadie. "Daddy, we can play together now!"

"We sure can, nugget," you chuckle softly.

After running over to hug and kiss us, he returns to unwrap more gifts.

It's a perfect morning.

"Can I give you my present now, Mrs. Cullen?"

I hum, turning and squirming until we're chest to chest, and I kiss you on the nose.

"Nope, I'm first."

You pout, and dude, just stop it.

"What am I wearin'?" I ask you, reaching up to turn that pout into a smile. With the tips of my index fingers, I nudge the corners of your mouth.

I totally succeed.

Victory!

"Hmm," you hum-chuckle. That's a new one. Then your hands are on my ass. Such a man. "You're wearin' a pair of shorts. Your own, for once."

You wink, and then you feel it. You see, I knew you were gonna feel me up, hubs. "What's that?" You pat the back pocket of my shorts. That's why I didn't grab another pair of your boxers this morning. 'Cause they don't have pockets.
"Your gift," I tell you simply. I also have a new guitar case, a red velvet cake, and a few shirts for you, but those gifts aren't as important.

My fingers are still tracing the lines of your gorgeous face. But I'm not allowed to call you gorgeous, or beautiful for that matter. I'm only allowed to say sexy, handsome, and fuckhot. You prefer that last one.

"My gift, huh?"

I nod, smiling at your boyish grin. "Grab it."

You grab my ass. You squeeze it, too.

Funny you.

"The gift, baby," I chuckle. "Grab the gift. Or... take it."

"Hey, you say grab, I grab." You snicker. "Such a lovely ass to grab, too."

You're so... you.

When you're done squeezing my ass, you finally pull out the little piece of paper.

Only, it's a picture.

I see the exact moment it dawns on you.

I nod when I see the question in your eyes.

"Yes?" you whimper.

Unable to speak, I just nod again and rest my forehead against yours.

"You're keepin'...?"

Another nod. My tears spill over, as do yours.
"You're sure-?"

I'm good at silencing you with a kiss, so I do that again.

"I'm so sure," I mumble against your lips.

Chapter 43

~Angel by Jack Johnson – chapter song.

March 2nd

Edward Cullen.

"I'm just gonna head on over to my house and grab us a few beers," Charlie said, setting down his guitar on the wooden floor. I cocked a brow, watching in silence as he walked down the porch steps, and I knew... I just fucking knew. 'Cause we had beers here, too, you know? Yeah, so I knew exactly why he decided to go to his place.

"We gonna follow?" Jazz asked, looking up from the notepad. He also pocketed his harmonica, most likely knowing my answer already. I nodded, 'cause hell yeah, we were gonna follow. Then I put my own guitar down.

It was Saturday, and ever since Alice found out that she was pregnant – about five or so weeks ago – Bella, Mom and EJ had spent Saturday mornings there, talking woman-stuff. But it was good, 'cause it wasn't too far away – just across the street – so, it was easy for me to check on them. And then there was the fact that I was writing and playing again. Bella couldn't be here for that, 'cause I was currently writing a song for her. Which Jazz and Charlie were helping me with.

We only had a few hours a week, 'cause our lives had started up again. Slowly, but surely.
I was working again. Mondays to Thursdays from six PM to midnight, and then Saturdays from eight PM to two AM. And I definitely preferred Saturdays, 'cause Bella and EJ came with me to work then. It was partly so that Bella could return to a life where she didn't fear crowds, but it also gave them a reason to leave the house.

I fucking loved it. Bella would hang out with me and Alec behind the bar, even pitching in with mixing drinks, and EJ would be with Mom, either in her office or up in her apartment above the bar. He sure loved it upstairs; he could watch movies there. And Mom spoiled him rotten with candy when Bella and I weren't around. That pissed me off a little. I mean, she could at least have the decency to bring me some candy, too, right? Exactly. But she rarely did.

"What's the score so far?" Jazz asked, grinning at me as we walked toward Charlie's house.

I smirked. "3-1 to me." Yeah, I was fucking proud. "I'm willin' to bet it's gonna be 4-1 now, though."

The topic was smoking. Charlie and I had quit shortly after Christmas. Bella had made my day... or rather, my life... when she told me she was keeping the baby. So, after New Year's, I stubbed out my last smoke. Of course, I dragged Charlie with me, too. If I was quitting, then so was he. But it wasn't easy, and I was the recipient of the mother of all scoldings one weekend when I sparked up a smoke. It was after a barbecue... and a few beers... I thought I was being sneaky. Charlie and I both thought we were, actually, and we had stood behind his house, inhaling like our lives depended on it. Fucking sad, really, but breaking a habit ain't easy. And yeah, Mom and Bella caught us.

Mom was the one who shouted at me. Bella was surprisingly understanding. I mean, I'd been smoking for years. Messing up was
bound to happen. Which it had. But only once for me. Charlie, on the other hand... if he was smoking now, it'd be four times.

I had been with him the first time, and Bella had caught him once, then Anna had caught him the third time, which was a couple of weeks ago.

We were counting on Anna, really, since she was a permanent fixture in our lives now. Apart from the three sessions she had with Bella and me every week, she was also sorta-dating-definitely-not-but-kinda-seeing Charlie. Yeah, it was a bit weird. I mean, it was fucking obvious to the rest of us that they were together, but if you asked them, they would deny it or dodge the questions as if they were flying bullets.

Oh, hell.

I breathed in through my nose as we reached his house.

"I can fuckin' smell it," I complained quietly. He was definitely smoking, that asshole. Patting the back pocket of my jeans, I made sure that I had my disgusting chewing gum. Lords knows I'm gonna need 'em. "He's probably out back," I muttered, jerking my chin in the right direction. Jasper nodded, smirking, and followed me silently as we headed for Charlie's backyard.

Sure enough, there he was. Smoke surrounded him as he puffed for dear life. Ironic, since that shit shortened your life.

"Charlie," I said flatly, and he spun around, eyes wide and a cigarette dangling between his lips. "The fuck do you think you're doin'?"

He coughed. Terrific. And Jazz and I mirrored each other's positions. Arms crossed over our chests, eyebrows cocked, and feet tapping quietly on the lawn.
I knew I could look threatening, and I fucking did, but the Major standing next to me was downright lethal.

"Uh hey, boys," he muttered, and fuck me if his ears didn't get pink. He was almost fifty years old, and he was still blushing. That made me hope Bella would do the same when she was fifty. It didn't happen often, but sometimes I could see a faint blush gracing her cheeks if she'd done something bad. Like eaten all my cookies or something. Which tended to happen now that she was pregnant.

_But I love it, angel. You know that._

"You want a beer?" Charlie asked, stubbing out his smoke with his foot. I chuckled wryly and shook my head. He huffed. "Fine, what's it gonna be? You ain't gonna tell Anna or Bella, right?" Then he paled a little. "Shit, don't tell Es. She gonna whoop my ass if she finds out."

_Oh, you bet._

Mom was with that fancy doc now – I was still working on accepting it all – and Charlie was with Anna, but... After almost twenty years knowing each other, Mom was the threat to Charlie. Those two were best friends, sorta, and acted like siblings. Though, it was hard to decide who was older. Actually, they were both each other's older sibling. Both protective, and both a bit overbearing. Regardless, Charlie was right in fearing Mom and not Anna or Bella. 'Cause he was correct about the ass-whooping. She definitely would.

" Sounds mighty fine to me," I drawled, smiling lazily. "What do you say, Whitlock?" I looked at him. "I'm thinkin' we could get first row seats to the finest ass-whoopin' in the state of Louisiana. Sound good?"

Jazz grinned, facing Charlie as he spoke. "Sure does. Esme's gonna beat you up real good, Charlie. Real good."
And Charlie was officially petrified.

This was fun.

"I'll do anythin'!" he blurted out. "But don't tell Esme!"

I snickered and arched a brow. "Anythin'?"

"I solemnly swear and shit!" he vowed.

And that was how Jasper and I got the upper hand on Charlie Swan.

"We'll collect one day," I promised. "Now, let's get back to the writin'. I want that song ready this decade."

*O*O*O*

I chewed on my lip, tapping the pen against the notepad. Charlie kept tinkering with the part I was struggling with, and Jazz filed in with the harmonica at times.

Leaning back in my seat, I positioned the guitar on my lap again. "Can we run it through?"

They nodded, and I started over from the beginning.

Singing quietly, mostly to myself, we slowly made our way to the bridge I needed to work on. "...I've got an angel..." Charlie joined in. "...She doesn't wear any wings..." Jasper cocked an eyebrow in question, and I nodded at him, silently telling him to start. "...She wears a heart that can melt my own..." I chuckled under my breath, not caring how fucking sappy I came off as. It was all Bella's fault, anyway. "...She wears a smile that can make me wanna sing..."

When we reached the second part of the verse, I could hear EJ's giggling, and at first I feared it was Bella walking with him, but when they came
into view, I saw that it was only Mom. So, I gave Charlie and Jazz a nod to keep playing.

"...She gives me presents..." I sang quietly as EJ hopped up the porch steps. I grinned at his boyish smile. "...With her presence alone..."

"Hi, Daddy!" he whispered excitedly. "Can I listen?"

I nodded wordlessly, giving the seat next to me a pointed look, and he wasted no time running over. "...She gives me everythin' I could wish for..." Once he was seated – *all while swinging his legs off the edge, of course, 'cause he can't sit still* – I dropped a kiss at the top of his head. "...She gives me kisses on the lips just for comin' home..."

"He's singin' 'bout Mommy, Nana," EJ told Mom, who took a seat on the last porch step. "Right, Daddy?" When he looked up at me, I gave him a wink.

Then, as we reached the bridge, I took a deep breath, focusing intently on the guitar.

I hummed the lyrics before being able to form the words, but once they came, it finally felt good. "...you're so busy changin' the world..." I smiled to myself. "...Just one smile can change all of mine..."

After that, we played through the song a few more times before I decided that it was done. Maybe a few minor changes would follow, but I was satisfied.

Which was good, 'cause Bella joined us shortly after, and I reminded EJ to be quiet about the song I was working on. He giggled behind his hand and nodded solemnly in understanding.

"Hey, guys," she said softly, walking over to us. Charlie and Jasper greeted her quietly, but kept playing. EJ quickly settled on her lap when
she offered, and much like me, his hands went to her belly. Well, I kept
tinkering on the guitar – on another tune, of course – but I usually went
for her belly. But it was EJ's turn now, so... yeah.

She was due August 2nd, so she was only four months along, but we had
officially reached the time of her pregnancy where I was a beginner.
Around this time, when Bella was expecting EJ, our lives changed for the
worse. Luckily, we had Anna to talk to whenever we needed it.

"When's Sadie bug comin', Mama?" EJ whined, and I grinned.

We had recently found out the sex, but I'd been sure that it was my little
Sadie in there from the start. And since I had a nickname for EJ, I
definitely needed one for Sadie. So, she became "bug", 'cause Bella
thought "peanut" was too common. And, evidently, EJ took after yours

"Like ladybug, but Sadiebug!" he'd exclaimed proudly one day.

I hadn't even thought of it that way.

Maybe my son was a genius.

"Remember what we talked about, sweetie?" Bella murmured, ruffling his
hair. "She's not ready to come out yet."

EJ didn't like that answer.

Following Anna's advice, Bella and I had told EJ very early on about the
pregnancy. We had also made sure that EJ felt included and very much
needed. After all, he was used to being alone, either with just Bella, or
now, with both of us. And Anna had told us that it was common for
children in EJ's situation to be upset and even go so far as to resent the
new sibling. But we were lucky. After talking a lot about the baby –
explaining things best we could – we told EJ about the role of being a big
brother. Now he couldn't wait to step into his big-brother shoes and show his sister everything. It had also become EJ’s motivation to keep learning when Alice came over a few nights a week with books, toys, educational movies, and CDs. The more he knew, the more he could teach Sadie.

The next step was obviously to register him in preschool, but we weren’t there yet. After discussing it at great length, we had all agreed to look into it after the summer when Sadie had arrived. That would give us enough time to adjust... I hoped. Because it wasn't just me getting used to working again, or EJ catching up with the other kids his age. It was also about Bella finding her life again. That was another thing we had talked about, and though she had told me that she couldn't predict the future, she did know that school didn't appeal to her now. It did before, and I remembered how excited she was to become a kindergarten teacher. But she didn't want that anymore. At least, it wasn't a blip on her radar as it stood now. I was satisfied with that, knowing that being a teacher wasn't the only dream she had. She had always loved the bar, so I knew she wouldn't be miserable working there. In fact, it was something I was pretty sure she was looking forward to. But that was another thing we had decided to wait on. We were going to enjoy the spring and the summer – the rest of Bella's pregnancy – and use this time to just be.

Things were coming together slowly, and as long as we had patience, it was all going to work out. Yeah, it still killed whenever Bella had a flashback, but thankfully they didn't come often, and it had gotten easier for her to fight them.

*O*O*O*

"What can I get y'all?" I asked a group of men at the end of the bar. "Luke, you want the usual, yeah?"

Luke – a regular – nodded, and I sent Bella a wink. She knew what Luke drank. Much like riding a bike, this was something Bella didn't forget.
"Good to see you with the missus again, boy," Luke said, sounding like he had smoked for fifty years. Which was probably correct.

"Feels good," I replied with a nod as I grabbed a couple of beers for his buddies. Sliding them across the bar, I said, "Here you go, guys." And after ringing up their purchase, I went to grab a soda for myself.


It felt so good to see her growing more and more confident.

She still stayed behind the bar, but she mixed drinks and talked to regulars without any problems. As long as she had the bar separating herself from the guests, she was her old self. Chirpy, quirky, and happy.

"Thank you, doll face," Luke responded with a wink, and I realized I was staring at them. But it wasn't my fault. I loved seeing her smile.

Twenty minutes later, both Rose and James entered. Emmett, who was sitting on Alec's side of the bar, sure perked up. He was nuts about Rose.

"Bella!" Rose called out, rushing around the bar. Emmett pouted, and I grinned at him... to which he flipped me off. And in the meantime, Bella and Rose were hugging and whispering.

Women.

"A beer?" I asked, bumping James' fist. He always wanted the same after a shift at the diner.

"Sounds like heaven," he chuckled. He sat down on the stool next to Emmett while I got started on his Guinness. "Where's the little guy, Cullen?"

Oh, yeah. EJ owned them all.
"Upstairs with Mom," I told him with a smirk.

He harrumphed. "Guess I'll just be seein' him tomorrow at the barbecue, then."

"Guess so." I laughed through my nose and slid his beer over the bar. "By the way, don't forget the burgers."

And he gave me a look that said I was stupid.

I probably was. James was the grill master. He never forgot.

_Don't laugh, Edward. Don't laugh._

"Sorry," I said, holding my hands up. "Beer's on me."

That loosened him up.

With a last grin, I left James and Emmett. Rose and Bella were still whispering by the register, so I knew I should stay away, but...

Yeah, I didn't.

Instead, I snuck up behind her, snaking my arms around her waist, and I caught the last few words before she jumped. Something about tomorrow morning. Huh.

"Jebus, you scared me, baby," she breathed out. I quickly searched her eyes for panic, knowing that I should know better than to sneak up at her like that. Luckily, it was just surprise. No fear.

"I'm sorry, angel," I muttered, rolling my eyes at myself. "I should know better. Are you okay?"

She nodded and dropped her forehead to my chest. "Yeah, I'm good."
"You sure?" I murmured against the top of her head. She nodded again, and then tilted up her head. I smiled and dipped down to kiss her. That earned us a few catcalls from the patrons, but it sure as shit didn't stop us. "I love you," I mumbled, sliding my hand back to cup her neck. She nibbled on my lip, making me chuckle. But then she pushed her tongue into my mouth, which shut me up real good.

Fuck. She was heading into dangerous territory when she slid her hands down into the back pockets of my jeans. My little Jezebel loved teasing me. Though, she always told me that it wasn't teasing when she planned on following through. And she always did.

Granted, it had taken a while for us to get back to that stage. It wasn't just Bella. I had hesitated for a long while, too, and more than one conversation with Anna had been necessary. But in the end, Bella and I made it. All it took was work and determination. Plus, we were Cullens. We didn't give up. And now we were making love without worrying about anxiety.

"I love you, too," she responded breathlessly, breaking the kiss.

I couldn't speak. Not yet.

Then, when I finally could, I asked, "What happens tomorrow mornin'?"

And Bella Angel Jezebel Marie Cullen smirked. "Were you eavesdroppin', hubs?"

I smiled innocently as I caressed her baby-bump. "I only caught the last part." I kissed her nose, just 'cause.

She looked damn gorgeous in her Twilight t-shirt, by the way.
I loved seeing her in my bar. I also loved that working here wasn't just my dream. After practically growing up here, Bella loved this place as much as I did.

"For me to know..." She kissed my cheek. "For you to find out."

_Ugh. I hate them secrets, angel._

"That's what I'm tryin' to do, you know," I told her pointedly.

She laughed. "And you will. Tomorrow mornin'."

That was the moment Alec chose to interrupt. "Hey, Cullens! Get back to work!"

Yeah, yeah.

"Just a few more hours," I sighed wistfully.

As much as I loved the bar, coming home with my wife and son was better on a whole other level. A level nothing could compete with. Tucking EJ in at night, sitting on the porch with Bella, standing in the doorway to the kitchen and watch her cook, teaching nugget to play the guitar, catching Bella with her hand in the cookie jar now that she was pregnant...

Our life was far from glitz and fuckin' glamour.

When we were home, we dressed in sweats and t-shirts. We ate home-cooked meals. We sat on the porch. We enjoyed the peace and quiet. We always had. It was our idea of perfection, really. It was what we wanted. The only ruckus we craved came from EJ... and soon enough, it would come from Sadie, too.

**Chapter 44**

..._Marry me_
Today and every day

Marry me...

...Promise me

You'll always be

Happy by my side...

~Marry Me by Train – chapter song.

March 3rd

Bella Cullen.

I love watching you sleep.

Does that make me creepy?

If it does, then I don't care. I can be the wife who stalks her own husband. As long as I can keep staring.

I remember telling you that I find you fascinating to watch, and you asked me if I saw you as a circus act. Funny, funny you. And then you kissed my nose.

It's Sunday today, hubs. The sun is filtering through the drawn blinds.

You're on your stomach, using an arm as a pillow. Sheets tangled with your legs.

Black boxers.

Your back is slowly rising and falling with each breath.

On one bicep, I see my name tattooed. On the other, you have EJ's name.
I love you for holding us close to you.

My fingers itch to touch, so I support myself on my elbow. Then I trace the curve of your spine. I watch your face as I do this, smiling when your brows furrow together. And that pout, baby. It kills me. So fucking adorable.

You make me smile.

You made me smile twenty years ago when we met, and you've never stopped.

When I didn't have a mom, you offered me yours.

I offered you a dad in return.

I smile, remembering the times I wanted to play with my doll. You wanted to play with your turtles. They were much cooler, you said, when you were five. Still, we're not naming our daughter after a turtle, are we? No, we're naming our daughter after my doll. And your guitar, of course, since you insisted on naming it that.

Again with the smiling. It feels so good, baby.

It'd be a shame to let the three and a half years I spent in hell erase all those smiles, wouldn't it?

I think so.

Plus, I want your smiles, too. Not just my own.

Speaking of smiles, I hope I can make you smile this morning.

I don't have a speech, but I don't think I need it. It's not who we are, anyway. We just... do. Without much preparations.
I chuckle under my breath, reaching up to smooth out the crease between your eyebrows.

God, how I love you, Edward. Through thick and thin. The big things that no one can miss. Like... how handsome you are, or what a loyal and kind man you are. A hard worker. I smile. A sore loser.

But it's the little things... The things I know better than anyone else. Because I'm the one married to you. I'm the one who gets to see every side of you. For instance, someone may call you a romantic guy for the songs you play on the guitar for me. Or how you never forget an anniversary, or that you open doors for me. And sure, I'd call you a romantic for these things, too, but there are other things...

Nope, not fancy dates. That's not us. Same goes for flowers and expensive chocolates. Not us.

Instead...

When we walk outside... on the sidewalk, you always make sure to put yourself between me and the street.

When we're in the car, I get to pick the music.

In the grocery store, you make up stories about the strangers around us, just to make me laugh.

Sometimes, out of the blue, you will pull me close. You will whisper in my ear – even though we're alone – and tell me that you love me. That I'm beautiful. That I'm your quirky angel. That you love my knee socks that come in odd colors and patterns. And you'll smile this cute, secret smile, like you're lost in a memory.

The list is endless, hubs.
And it's time to wake you up.

"Edward," I whisper, reaching forward to kiss you on the forehead.

I kiss your cheeks next, and you let out this weird little noise. A little whine, a little grunt, a little please-don't-wake-me-up-just-yet, a little sigh, and a little hum... because you like it when I kiss you. So, I continue kissing you.

"Wait," you grumble so, so sleepily. Still with your eyes closed. A small frown. "Is it tomorrow mornin' yet?"

And I laugh softly, quietly. You're so impatient when it comes to secrets.

Last night – at the bar – when you found out that I had a secret, you tried with the pout. But I still didn't tell you, 'cause this is what I want. I want the two of us... lazy Sunday in bed... the sun filtering through...

Yeah, this is perfect, hubs.

"Tomorrow mornin' is tomorrow," I tease.

"Ugh." You scowl, but I kiss it away. "You ain't funny, angel." Cracking one eye open, you peer up at me. "Y'gonna tell me the secret already?"

I give you a small nod, but my smile is wide.

'Cause I'm proud of myself.

It's only been little over six months since I returned to you, but we've come a long way.

"'Kay, spill the beans, baby," you groan as you stretch and roll over onto your back. I chuckle; you look like a cat when you stretch and yawn like that. "I wanna know and I've been waitin' forever."
Overexaggerate much, why dontcha?

"Um," you sniff the air, "is that food I'm smellin'?"

Well, no one ever accused you of not being a man.

Rolling over, I reach for the plate on my nightstand. A chocolate chip muffin and a cup of coffee.

"Want some?" Okay, silly question. Your look tells me as much, and we both sit up, leaning back against the headboard. Then you say, "Gimme, gimme," and I do. "So..." I sigh. "It's not so much a secret," I admit, watching you as you shove half the muffin down your throat. You're so sexy right now. Pfft. "I just have a question for you."

You tilt your head, and I have your attention.

With a sip of your coffee, you chase down the muffin. "Ask away."

Okay. "Marry me?"

You're surprised, and you give me a strange smile, showing both curiosity and confusion.

"Angel," you say slowly, "we're already married."

For emphasis, you even flash me your left hand, showing the wedding ring in white gold, which you've worn proudly for years now.

Trust me, hubs. I know that we're married. But I want to get married again.

"Marry me," I say again, crawling over to straddle you. "Marry me again."

You chuckle, still smiling with a slight crease in between your brows, and you set down the muffin and the coffee on your nightstand. Then, with
your hands sliding up my thighs, you lean in and kiss me. That always works, but I'm gonna need an answer, you know. "Marry you, you say," you whisper, kissing my nose. I hum as your hands reach my baby bump. "What brought this on?"

And this is it... "Because I love a good barbecue," I tell you, and I reach into the back pocket of my cotton shorts. "And..." I exhale, looking you in the eye. "I want to celebrate somethin'."

That's when I hold out my closed fist in front of your face, and I open it, letting the necklace with my two rings spill out. It dangles from my fingers, and your eyes are glued to the rings.

Swallowing hard, you look up at me again. I wonder if you understand what I'm saying here.

"They fit," I whisper, smiling even though my stupid eyes fill with tears. Sorry, I can't help it, but I'm so happy, hubs. My rings fit for the first time in two and a half years. I've finally gained my weight back, and it means a lot to me.

"They do?" you croak quietly, and your eyes well up, too. Only a little, but still.

"I tried them on a few days ago." I sniffle. You brush your thumbs over my cheeks, and you understand. "They fit." I take a deep breath as our foreheads connect. "So... marry me, hubs."

"Well, yeah," you say matter-of-factly, fiddling with the chain. "I'll fuckin' marry you again, angel." You wink at me. "It'll be my honor. But you're wearin' the rings from now on. No waitin' and shit."

Of course.

"Perfect fit," you whisper, sliding both rings onto my finger.
It's where they belong.

Your smile is all kinds of beautiful.

"Marry me," I say again, and I laugh at your face. I'm just asking because I love hearing your answer.

"Yes." You snicker. "Always."

"Marry me." I kiss you. "Marry, me, marry me, marry me-"

You shut me up by kissing me harder.

I let out a really girly giggle when you roll us over. With me on my back, you kiss me stupid.

Sensually. You taste like coffee and chocolate.

We're a perfect fit.

"I'll marry you, baby," you whisper, trailing kisses across my chest.

Without questions, we slip out of our clothes, and then it's just the two of us under the sheets.

You kiss me softly. "I'm so proud you, angel."

I couldn't have done it without you.

"I love you."

"Right back at'cha." You grin at me.

And you're gone, kissing your way down my body.

Starting with my stomach... Quiet whispers to our girl.
"EJ's gonna be up at any moment, you know," I murmur, reminding you a little.

Yeah, so you stop whispering to Sadie.

"Hi." Nose to nose.

Cheesy fucking smiles.

"Hi," I chuckle.

We're back to kissing.

Touching.

You know my body. We move together perfectly. Practice makes perfect, remember?

When you kiss and lick my nipples, you make me arch into your touch.

When I lift up a little, you know that I need you right away, so you grip your erection and guide it inside of me.

"Fuck," you exhale against my forehead. After pulling out, you push in again, and I meet your thrusts.

It's always so good.

One minute, it can be slow and gentle. Tender. Sometimes it's because you're close, and sometimes it's because we focus on touches and kisses.

The next minute, it can be needy and hard.

"Deeper," I moan, and you hook your arm under my leg. Then, when you slide in again, I feel it everywhere. "Oh, Christ..."

"Yeah... perfect," you mutter breathlessly.
Soon, I have my leg thrown over your shoulder, and you're pushing into me over and over.

We kiss hungrily, tongues mingling, teeth sometimes clashing together.

"Always so... fuckin'... Oh, God..."

"Edward," I whimper.

You touch me, fuck me, kiss me, love me.

Forehead against forehead, we're both in that place, that spot, right before we come.

Hot breaths.

Skin slapping.

Wet sounds.

Hooded eyes.

You lick your lips, accidently licking mine, since we're so close.

And I kiss you.

I flush...

You groan...

Harder, erratically, almost there.

I tense, I bite down on my lip, I screw my eyes shut, I hold my breath.

Then I'm falling, taking you with me as I contract around you.

"Bella..."
You take my damn breath away, hubs.

In the most delicious ways.

When I return to reality, I'm panting.

You collapse next to me, and it's just the sounds of our breathing for a while.

And the goofy smile is back, you know, because while we're catching our breaths, you're tracing the metal of my rings.

*Here come the waterworks.*

Damn pregnancy hormones...

I'm such a girl.

Sorry, hubs.

"Hey," you say softly, leaning over me. Concern. "What's with the tears?"

I shake my head and wipe at my face.

Don't mind me. Really.

"Oh, are these tears you can't control?" you guess, and I cry harder just 'cause you understand. You get it. So, I give you a nod and bury my face against your chest. "Well, at least it's not 'cause I'm bad in bed or anythin'," you drawl.

Teasing me. Lightening the tension. Making me smile.

*Okay, Bella. Get your shit together, will ya?*

I snuffle and clear my throat and breathe deeply to inhale your scent.
"Want me to make you laugh?" you offer, playing with a strand of my hair.

"Yes, please," I reply, sniffling.

You hum, thinking, thinking, thinking, and you pull the sheets over us.

A kiss on my nose.

"Knock, knock."

God, you're such a goof, Edward.

But here I go, laughing. Though, it's at you.

"Who's there?"

"Sadie!" you tell me with wide eyes.

I crack up. "Sadie who?" Gigglesnort. Attractive, eh?

"Say'di sun is shinin', ain't it?"

Uh... what?

Sadie... *Say the sun is*... Oh, oh! "I get it!" I exclaim proudly, laughing again.

You just roll your eyes at me. "You're slow."

I smack you playfully in the chest.

Then you tickle the shit outta me, all while making farting noises against my skin.

This is what wakes up EJ, and we're suddenly in a hurry to put some damn clothes on.
The laughing never stops.

"My tank-top!" I whisper-yell as you squirm your way into your pajama bottoms.

"Mama?"

"He's almost here!" I squeak and you finally throw me my top.

"Daddy?"

"Just a second, nugget!" you whimper, trying to hold in the laughs.

Okay, okay, okay. The top is back on, as are my shorts.

There. Deep breaths.

I nod at you.

"Come in, EJ," you tell him.

A few seconds later, a disheveled looking EJ bounces over to our bed.

"I'm up now," he says, giving us that lopsided grin. Green eyes happy and full of life. "Is Sadie bug comin' today?"

I'm patient. Yes, I am. "Not yet, sweetie."

He settles on your lap, and you kiss his hair, letting your lips linger as your chest expands with each breath.

"Know what, nugget?" you murmur and he looks up at you. "Sadie bug's not comin' until after your birthday."

Something constricts inside of me – it's painful – but I squish it down. His fourth birthday will be the first one we'll get the chance to celebrate. We can't wait, of course, but it's also a reminder of what we've been robbed
of. Not that we're going to let that drag us down, though, 'cause we refuse. We've lost enough.

"I'm gonna be four fingers," he tells you, holding up five. I smile, remembering the day Alice taught him about birthdays. It had gone surprisingly well, and we had hardly had to rely on Anna's help for when EJ asked why Garrett wouldn't let him have a party.

"That's right, baby," you chuckle, folding his thumb back. "That's four. One, two, three, four."

I watch the two of you. As you talk, as you goof around, as you cuddle, as you talk to Sadie. But I don't feel left out anymore. I don't feel like I have one foot in reality, the other in my nightmares. Instead, I'm right here. Watching my two boys.

Our lazy Sunday continues.

Chapter 45

~Boogie Thing by James Cotton – chapter song.

July 7th

Edward Cullen.

"Daddy!" EJ shrieked, stomping his foot. My eyebrows shot up, and I had to say it was fucking hard not to laugh at the little man. "S'my birfbay! Mama say I'm boss today!"

His glare was impressive, focused on Jasper and Emmett as they ran back and forth through the house. Mom and Bella were in the backyard, setting up for the party, and Em and Jazz were bringing over garden furniture from Charlie's place. Which meant they were passing the kitchen – where I watched EJ – with each piece of furniture they carried. They could've
taken it around the house, but we had sealed that off so that EJ couldn't sneak out back. Nah, he wasn't happy about being banned from the backyard. Hence the minor tantrum.

"Just a little while longer, nugget," I told him...again. That earned me the glare. "Ah, c'mon, baby," I chuckled, squatting down in front of him – the doorway behind me. Seriously, I had to actually block the doorway, 'cause EJ had already tried to sneak past me twice. "They're just settin' up for your party."

"But..." He stomped his foot again, scowling at something behind me, most likely Emmett or Jazz. "Mama say I'm boss!"

"I know." I smiled, unable to help myself. "But don't you want the coolest birthday party ever?"

He hesitated. I knew he wanted a cool party, though he wasn't exactly a demanding little fella – he was too humble for that – but he was getting sick of waiting. For two days, the backyard had been off limits for him, which was a fucking travesty in my son's book. He loved playing out there; sometimes it was hard to get him to bed at night. But it was going to be so worth it in an hour or two.

"I..." He sighed. "Yeah, I want a cool party, but..." And another glare was sent to someone behind me. Judging by the chuckles, I'd say it was Emmett passing through the hallway. "S'takin' too long, Daddy," he grumbled. Then his eyes lit up, still focused on something behind me. "Mama! Can I go out now?"

And I heard Bella's soft laugh. "Not yet, sweetie. I'm just gettin' more stuff from the fridge."

As I stood up, I picked up EJ, too. If Bella had joined us in the kitchen for something she needed, it meant I had to cover EJ's eyes. That was
another thing off limits for him – the fridge. He wasn't allowed to open it, 'cause there were goodies, ya know.

"Not again, Daddy!" EJ complained when I clamped a hand over his eyes.

"He's just like you, hubs," Bella chuckled, opening the fridge. I shot her a playful scowl, refusing to admit that she was right. I dealt with secrets, surprises, and gifts with fucking grace. "Oh, don't you give me that look, Edward Anthony."

"Quit middle namin' me, woman," I mumbled when she winked. "You're not Mom."

"She's Mama," EJ pointed out, squirming in my arms. "Ugh. Can I see now?"

"I don't know. Can you?" I teased.

He responded with a frustrated grunt.

It was hard to grasp. My son was four years old today.

"Ah, ffff-" Bella stopped there, and I immediately walked over to her. I knew her back was killing her, but according to my all-knowing wife, resting would kill her more. Her words. Not mine. And you don't argue with a pregnant woman, especially not one who is eight months along.

"You okay, baby?" I asked quietly. I wanted to rub her back but that was hard since I was still covering EJ's eyes. Not wanting her to carry anything else, I called out for Jasper who happened to pass the kitchen. "Could you help Bella with that?" I asked, pointing – with my damn elbow – at the cake Bella had just taken out from the fridge. "And tell my mother to make sure Bella rests."

"Sure thing," Jazz replied with a grin.
Bella, however, was not grinning. "Don't have to talk about me like I ain't standin' right here."

I ignored her. "You know what? You can take EJ for a little while now. I'll help out there."

I'd been holed up in the kitchen for two hours now, if not more. The only reason I allowed Bella to help Mom was 'cause I didn't want my sweet wife to hang me by the balls. She enjoyed threatening me with just that if I used the pregnancy as a reason for her to relax.

*I know. I'm so out of line, right?*

There was no way I'd tell her how ridiculous she was, though. Balls, remember?

Still, enough was enough. "You need to rest," I told her pointedly as Jasper left the kitchen. That meant I could uncover EJ's eyes, which I did, much to his joy. Not that the joy lasted, 'cause he still wasn't allowed to leave the kitchen. "So, you stay here, and I go outside."

She huffed and glared but said nothing.

I gave her a wink and then I was gone, leaving EJ with Bella.

*O*O*O*

"Everyone's ready?" Mom called out, and all talk stopped in the backyard. James nodded and said his "yes" by the grill, Rose standing beside him. Jasper and Emmett nodded, too, as they hung up the last of the balloons. The food was almost ready, the music was on in the living room, and with the door and windows open, it was perfect. Last but not least, Alice, Charlie, Anna, Alec, Aunt Liz, Tanya, Carlisle, and a few others gave their go-ahead to Mom. "All right, Edward, you can go get Bella and EJ now." She was beaming, standing with her camera.
"Yes, ma'am." I chuckled and swiped another potato chip through the dip before I went inside.

I could hear EJ's complaints as soon as I entered the living room, which were followed by Bella's "Soon, sweetie. Soon."

"Not soon," I countered, appearing in the doorway to the kitchen. EJ's eyes went wide. Anticipation. "Now!"

"YES!" he cried out, fist pumping the air. He ran toward me and I caught him as he jumped. "Finally!"

I laughed and ruffled his hair. "Yeah, finally, nugget." Bella smiled, waddling over to us, and I draped my free arm around her. "C'mon. Let's get this shindig started."

By the time we reached the terrace door in the living room, EJ was bouncing on my hip. I seriously wondered if Bella had been feeding him sugar, but I knew that wasn't the case. This was just EJ, finally getting to celebrate his own birthday.

"There's Nana! And Pops!" EJ started rattling off all the guests who were standing in the backyard, wearing party hats with Turtles on 'em. "Can I have a hat also, Daddy?"

Bella was one step ahead, and as soon as the words had left EJ's mouth, she reached up and put a hat on his head, tilting it a little.

For the next ten minutes, EJ was engulfed in hug after hug while Bella and I stood in the middle of it all. I rested my chin on the top of her head and my hands on her protruding stomach. Fuck, I could barely believe it. Only a month to go now, and then we'd have Sadie with us, too.

"When do you think he'll notice?" Bella whispered, lifting her head to face me. I smiled and dipped down for a kiss. "He's seen the table of gifts..."
I hummed, sucking gently on her bottom lip. It was true; he had seen the big table that was full of gifts, but they weren't so hard to notice with all that colorful wrapping. The other gift, though...he'd yet to seen that. It was something that really stood out in the backyard, but I figured it was just too big, and he was currently busy being hugged.

"Soon enough," I mumbled, swiping the tip of my tongue over her lips. "By the way..." I kissed her nose and winked. "Mighty fancy knee-socks you have today, angel."

They were checkered. Bright yellow and light pink. And they ended above her knees. Seriously, only my wife.

"Why, thank you kindly, sir," she replied sweetly, almost pulling off a perfect curtsy. "Fuckin' coordination skills," she muttered under her breath as I steadied her. Poor Bella. She was definitely having troubles with Sadie. With Bella being both short and slight, her belly sure was noticeable. "Good thing Mama loves you, honey." She patted her stomach.

Yeah, life was pretty damn perfect now. Granted, there were struggles. There would always be struggles, but we would also always be Cullens. And Cullens didn't fucking quit.

"Daddy, too," I murmured, dropping a kiss on Bella's forehead as my hands covered hers. I smiled when I felt my little girl kicking for all she was worth. "Jeesh, baby. Don't hurt your mama."

Said mama laughed, but it was cut off by a scream.

A scream that belonged to our son.

"About time, hubs," Bella giggled and turned around. "He's as slow as you are."

"Now, now, today's not a day to be mean, Mrs. Cullen," I chided playfully.
Glancing over at Mom, I saw that she was taking pictures, for which I was glad. This was a moment to capture.

"Daddy! Mommy! Look!" EJ screamed. He ran toward us, but he was pointing at his gift behind him, and he almost tripped in his haste to get to us. "Mama! Look, look, look!"

And look we did.

At EJ's very own tree house.

After planning and designing for two months, Charlie and I built the damn thing in two days. That was the reason EJ hadn't been allowed to be in the backyard.

It looked much like Bella's old tree house in Charlie's backyard. Only, this one was – of course – yellow. White shutters and a green door. It was perfect. A miniature of our home.

"I's a yellow house, Daddy!" He was frantic, not really knowing which was up or down. I chuckled and picked him up, deciding to head on over to his little house. "Yellow house," he whispered, clinging to my neck. I remembered this was how I reacted to meeting Santa when I was a kid. I screamed and cried at the same time as I cheered and bounced around. You wanted to go closer, but you were also afraid for some reason.

"It's yours, baby," I murmured against his cheek. His wide eyes met mine, and I was scared that he'd explode. "Just like Mama's tree house in Pops' backyard." Whenever he was over at Charlie's, he always played in Bella's tree house. The very same tree house where we shared our first kiss. The tree house where I proposed. And now EJ would have his own. "This is just for you," I told him, securing him on my hip as I reached up and opened the door. There was a ladder, of course, but a grownup didn't exactly need it. The house's foundation was built about five feet off the
ground, and big enough inside for Bella to stand up straight without hitting her head in the ceiling. Then again, she was only 5'3". I and my 6'3" wasn't very comfortable in there. Good thing Bella did the decorating.

"Wanna go inside, nugget?" I asked.

His eyes were still huge, now focused on the room that made the house. It wasn't much, but it was perfect. It was what it was supposed to be. One little room, walls painted in white. There were tiny curtains hanging in the two windows – which was more for Bella's enjoyment than EJ's, I was sure – and the floor was filled with pillows, a foam mattress, and blankets. There was also a small table, a stack of my old Turtles comics, and a box of toys.

"My yellow house?" he finally whispered.

And I nodded when he faced me. "All yours, EJ."

I cringed internally when his bottom lip started quivering.

"Do you like it, sweetie?" Bella murmured, appearing next to me.

Oh, he liked it, all right. So much that he started crying.

Even if they were happy tears – tears because he was overwhelmed – it still killed me. It was also about time I checked to see if I still had my balls, 'cause...you know. I was a grown man, for heaven's sake. It was okay for Bella to get emotional, but...

"Oh, come here, baby," Bella said softly, holding out her arms. EJ flung himself into her arms, and I used my hands to steady them both. "Do you want us to go with you for a little while?" she asked him as she threaded her fingers through his hair. My boy was a Cullen through and through. Fucking loved when Bella had her hands in my hair, and EJ was the same.
"Yes, please," he whimpered against her neck.

After a bit of struggling, I managed to help both Bella and EJ into the little tree house. One look was enough for me to back off and leave them alone for a moment or two. For three years, they'd only had each other. It went without saying that they shared a special bond. It was nothing to be jealous of. There were things only Mama was allowed to do, and there were things only Daddy was allowed to do. And this was clearly a Mama moment. Simple as that.

So, while they spent some alone time together, I headed over to Jasper, Alec, and Emmett.

_Beer. I need a fuckin' beer._

"Is the cooler next to you, Jazz?" I asked, sitting down in at one of the tables.

"Yep, right here," he replied, reaching down to grab me a cold one. "EJ okay, man?"

"Yeah, just overwhelmed." I nodded in thanks for the beer, and then I leaned back in my seat, resisting the urge to kick up my feet on the table. I had a feeling Mom wouldn't like that very much. "Fuck, this is good," I sighed. Sun was shining, the beer was cold, the smell of James' hamburgers filled the air, the music was on... "I sure could get used to this."

"I'll drink to that," Alec said.

"I would if I could," Jasper grumbled, and Emmett and I laughed. Poor man wasn't allowed to drink no beer. Alice had put a stop to it, 'cause she was jealous. If she wasn't allowed to drink, she didn't think Jasper was either. Didn't matter that Alice was the one carrying their child.
"Only a couple of months left, buddy," I chuckled. "Ready to become a father?"

"Hell, yeah," he responded with a firm nod. Like I knew he would. He was pushing forty, after all. Well, he was thirty-six now, and Alice was twenty-six. If I knew her, which I did, this was only their first kiddo. A couple of more young'uns were sure to follow, so it was a good thing he was ready.

"I just didn't know pregnant women could be so all over the place," he whispered and looked around, making sure Alice couldn't hear. And yeah, the rest of us stifled our smiles, 'cause that was when Alice appeared behind Jasper. "I mean, all the cryin' and..." He leaned over the table, trying to be subtle, not that it worked. Alice also leaned in, of course. "She...she smacked me last week. Right in the kisser," he complained in a whisper.

Emmett was biting the inside of his cheek to control the laughter, but I didn't need to do that. 'Cause, you know, I had experience with Bella as a pregnant lady. It was best not to laugh.

"Why, uh...what did you do to deserve that?" I asked quietly. I gave myself a mental pat on the back for the phrasing of my question. That was the deal. The woman was never wrong.

"What makes you so sure I did somethin' wrong?" he hissed.

I rubbed the back of my neck, giving Alice a glance. She had the bitch-brow cocked, silently telling me not to alert Jasper to her presence.

"Just tell us what you did," I muttered.

He glared at me, but then he turned sheepish. "Well...I didn't know Alice was so sensitive. And you, you...you called Bella 'fatty!'"

*Oh, dear lord.*
I rolled my eyes at him. Sure, it was true. I was calling my beautiful wife "fatty", but that was different.

"Don't fuckin' tell me you called Alice that," I groaned, hoping like hell he hadn't.

"It was meant to be a compliment!" he said defensively. "And you call Bella that all the time!"

"Not the same thing!" I whisper-shouted. "Bella takes it like a fuckin' compliment 'cause she didn't have the option to be healthy durin' her last pregnancy!" And for the fucking record, I didn't start! Bella was the one who came downstairs one day and said that she was all fat. At the time, she was also beaming like the brightest sun. She felt normal, for once, being able to snack and eat plentifully, which she wasn't able to do with EJ. Now, her hair was all shiny, her skin looked so healthy, and her features were perfectly rounded and soft. She looked like a goddess to me. Anyway, she was the one telling me to call her that. Not kidding.

In my book, there was a difference between fat and pregnant, but if it made Bella feel good, then who the hell was I to argue? She embraced her weight gain like no other, and I could hardly blame her.

"Did you actually call Alice 'fatty'?" Emmett fucking giggled.

Jasper groaned and banged his head against the table.

"I mean...what'd you say, exactly?" Alec continued. "'Hey there, fatty. Lookin' mighty fat and fine today'?"

Yeah, I cracked up at that. "Ah, man. No wonder she smacked you, Jazz!"

Alice was grinning proudly.
"I didn't say that, Alec!" Jasper snapped. "I just...I said, 'Mornin', fatty. I love you'. And then she whooped my ass."

I doubled over, trying to catch my breath. But it was difficult, I laughed so damn hard!

"The sex is spectacular, though!" Jasper blurted out right then, and Alec and I almost fell outta our seats. I doubted I had laughed so hard in years! "God's honest truth, fellas!" he continued, seemingly unable to just quit while he was ahead. Then again, with Alice still standing behind him, a few comments – compliments – about their love life might actually fix things. 'Cause if there was one thing I knew about pregnant women, it was that flattery took you far. Hell, with Bella's hormones, flattery often got me laid. Like...almost every day. Just sayin'. "She's...she's..." He whispered the last words behind his hand, "freaky and insatiable."

"Okay, I might just love you," Alice said, making Jasper jump in his seat.

His eyes grew huge, flicking between Alec, Emmett, and myself. Then he turned to accusing. "You knew she was standin' there!" he cried out, pointing at us guys.

Emmett, Alec, and I were too busy laughing and wiping tears away to reply.

*O*O*O*

"Ready, set, go!" Bella shouted, and all the men dug into their burgers.

We each had four of them on our plates.

Jasper, Emmett, Alec, Charlie, Carlisle, James...and EJ had four mini-mini burgers. Together, they were the size of one burger, pretty much, but he needed to play, too. This was a fuckin' barbecue, after all. I had already shared my Cullen secrets with him. For instance, the way Emmett and
Carlisle shoved burgers down their throats would just send them to a bathroom real quick. And the way Jasper overanalyzed – always the army man, that one – took too much time. Only James and Charlie ate like EJ and I did. We knew this. It was all about finding a balance. Oh, and the fact that many of them were chugging beer at the same time...what a mistake.

"More iced tea, please!" I hollered, and Bella rushed forward. I kept devouring, and when I found damn pickles in my burger, I threw a glare at James. He knew I loathed them pickles. He laughed at me. Prick. "Here, angel. Want my pickles?" I held them up and used my free hand to pick up my third burger.

"Oh, you know I love Pickle, hubs," she whispered seductively.

I almost choked.

Still couldn't believe she'd named my cock that. All those years ago.

Was I whipped or what?

"Not helpin', Jezebel," I coughed.

She smiled innocently.

You're a tease of epic – biblical – proportions, angel.

"Come on, Jasper!" Alice cheered.

"Daddy, I'm almost done!" EJ cried out in triumph.

He had the biggest cheer squad.

"Atta boy, EJ!" Anna praised.

"Go, EJ!" Tanya and Mom squealed, clapping their hands.
"You're s'posed to cheer for me, Tan!" Alec bellowed, clutching stomach. Idiot's been eating too fast. He groaned. "Oh, man."

EJ and I snickered and kept eating our way toward a Cullen victory.

"Come on, baby, you can win this!" Bella was definitely on Team Edward... Junior.

A few moments later, I pretended to be too full to finish the last of my fourth burger, which, admittedly, wasn't very far from the truth. And we all let EJ shine in his win as he chewed the very last of his mini-burgers. There was a lot of fist-pumping going on, and laughs followed as EJ ran a victory lap in the backyard.

*O*O*O*

About three hours after our massive dinner, it was time to crank up the music. Charlie and I brought out our guitars, Jasper stood ready with the harmonica, and somewhere down the road, Alice had allowed to him to drink beer. That probably explained his goofy fucking grin and slightly glazed-over eyes. But that shit only made our late afternoon/early night more fun.

"Here you go, Daddy!"

I looked over my shoulder, and without time to react, he shoved a handful of chips into my mouth. Dip and all. Gotta love sour cream.

"Mama said you wanted," he told me solemnly, making me chuckle.

"All right, folks!" Charlie called out, taking a seat next to me with his guitar. "Let's show the neighbors how we do it around here."

You could hear crickets.
"Eww, Dad."

At Bella's comment, most of us cracked up, but Charlie remained oblivious.

It was for the best.

Then we played. We played to the music on the stereo, 'cause it wasn't much of a party with only two acoustic guitars and a harmonica. And we wanted it to be a party. It fucking was, too. Bella and Alice – with their two pregnant bellies – were giggling like crazy as they danced with EJ. Everyone was barefoot, everyone had smiles on their faces, everyone enjoyed the summer. And with each song that passed, the music got louder, faster. I watched as Alec twirled Tanya around on the grass, laughter filling the air, and I was glad they'd finally come to their senses. Like me and my wife, Alec and my cousin belonged together. Begrudgingly, same went for Mom and Carlisle. He made my mom smile every day.

When I woke up this morning, I prayed for a day without flashbacks for Bella. She didn't have them every day anymore, and it was a lot easier for her to fight them off nowadays. But then I realized that it was best to just take it as it went. If she had a flashback, we'd deal with it. Simple as that, and then we'd return to enjoying. That was what we did. We refused to let the past drag us down. So far, though, no flashback today.

"Okay, time for me to show off my skill, boys!" Jasper announced when a new song started on the stereo. I grinned, recognizing the song right
away. James Cotton. This was the fuckin' South. *Perfection*. So, Charlie and I took the opportunity to get fresh beers.

*It's a boogie thing*

*It's a boogie thing*

*It's a boogie thing, boogie all night long*

"Look at that, son," Charlie said, nudging me. I followed his gaze and spotted Bella and EJ together. They were...yeah, they were boogieing. An indescribable sight. Their smiles were everything for me. My son's giggles as Bella showed him the steps... "Can you believe that a year ago, it was just you and me?"

I pushed down the sharp bolt of pain that made my chest squeeze and heart thump uncomfortably.

And no, I couldn't really believe it.

"How the fuck did we cope?" I muttered, tipping my beer bottle back.

The answer was simple. We *didn't* cope. We were nothing.

*Hey, everybody, come gather round*

*Let's get together and boogie on down*

*We're doin' the boogie that can't be beat*

*You just clap your hands and stomp your feet*

"Never again, old man," I said firmly, giving Charlie's shoulder a squeeze. We closed the subject and let the twinge of anxiety wash away as EJ ran toward us with a cheesy grin on his face. Lopsided like mine.
"Pops, you dance with Anna!" he ordered before grabbing my hand. "And, Daddy? You wanna boogie wiv Mama?"

"I sure do, nugget," I replied and let him tug me along. When we reached a smiling Bella, EJ magically disappeared to go play with his new toys. "Hey there, pretty girl." I offered my hand to her. "May I boogie with you?" I finished with a wink.

"But of course, hubs," she laughed softly as I pulled her to me.

It's a boogie thing
It's a boogie thing
It's a boogie thing, boogie all night long

"Don't let me fall!" she squealed when twirled her around. "Edwaaard!"

I laughed hard, causing my abs to tense fiercely. It was a day to remember.

"Never," I told her seriously...and then I twirled her around again.

Anything to hear her laugh, anything to see the way her eyes lit up.

Went to a party the other night

The boogie band was out of sight

The music was funky and the band was tight

So, we boogie, boogie, boogied 'til the broad daylight

It was twilight.

And when Mom switched on the twinkle lights in the trees, my eyes were on Bella, more intently than before. It felt like déjà vu when she looked up
at the lights. She wore the same expression on the night of our wedding. We danced to some cheesy pop song that Emmett had picked out – "Kiss Me", I remembered it was called – and it was perfect. So much had changed since then, but our love sure as shit never changed. Well, it grew stronger, actually, but...

"It's a boogie thing"

"It's a boogie thing"

"It's a boogie thing, boogie all night long"

"You ready, angel?" I asked, grinning mischievously.

Like I mentioned, we had danced to this song before. When we were kids.

"Oh, I'm ready, hubs," Bella returned with a wink. "Do your worst."

And we did. All of us.

Jasper owned the backyard when his solo began, and we were all clapping and stomping out feet to the music.

Catcalls, whistles, cheering.

Sweat beaded on our foreheads.

We rocked this little spot of New Orleans.

Mom and Aunt Liz took so many photos. Photos I knew my wife already had plans for.

Our lives had been interrupted. For a long time, the air in our lungs didn't satisfy for shit. But we were putting ourselves together now, and moments were meant to be captured. Moments that were supposed to be displayed in our house for years to come. In a way, our house was like an
album. One step into the house – the house I bought the summer before Bella and I got married – and you could feel the warmth, the memories, the comfort. Pictures told many stories, but so did the walls of our home. Only, they spoke to me and Bella. No one else. Every item – almost – came with a memory. There was no way we'd ever let that go.

The night was far from over.

We danced, drank, laughed, told stories, goofed around, created more memories.

It was the first birthday party we held for our son.

The first of many.

And now we had two yellow houses. I had a feeling EJ was going to enjoy his just as Bella and I had enjoyed hers.

Which put me in Charlie's shoes. Huh, I never thought of it that way. But it was true. Charlie watched us grow up. At first, we used Bella's tree house to play. Then it was about sneaking off to steal kisses. Lastly, it was when I proposed. Now it was my turn to watch EJ go through it all. Thank God EJ's my son, though. I could only imagine how hard it was for Charlie to go through that with his precious daughter.

Shit!

Sadie bug.

Girl. Daughter.

Oh, lordy, have mercy on me.

Epilogue

~I Knew I Loved You by Savage Garden – chapter song.
One year later...

Edward Cullen.

"Do you think he's nervous?" Bella whispered.

I hesitated. The truth was...yes, he was most likely nervous, but...if I told Bella that, she would just freak out. Hell, I was trying not to freak out myself. Then again, I was a shitty liar. But...the truth – and the fact that it was Bella's time of the month – ugh, it could get ugly.

She didn't wear combat boots for no reason, you know. They were there to show her fiery temper. That was always how it had been. Good thing I was the master of saving my own ass during those three days.

I sighed, still watching EJ from the doorway to the kitchen. He was oblivious to us, instead focusing on Sadie, who Mom was feeding breakfast to. Oatmeal, seriously. Disgusting. But my Sadie bug loved it.

"I can only speak for myself," I replied quietly, draping my arm around Bella's shoulders. "And I was a bit nervous when I started kindergarten."

At the time, I had also thought kindergarten was stupid. I wanted to stay home with Mom instead, but that was before I met Bella. I sure did a one-eighty that day. Mom dropped off a scowling little shit, and when she picked me up later that same day, I was grinning and so, so eager to introduce her to my new friend.

Even if said friend was a girl and had cooties.

And judging by EJ's experience with children, I knew he was going to love it. We started easing him into the "real world" as soon as Sadie was born a little over a year ago. It definitely brought some anxiety to us, but mostly Bella and me. EJ was a trooper. Shy at first, but that went without
saying, and he still preferred interacting with one or two friends, as opposed to playing in a large group.

Alice was a godsend when we started, and even though EJ had missed out a full year, he was allowed to be in her class a few days each week. And Bella was there, too. It was all about threading the damn needle. In the beginning, Bella stayed a full day, helping Alice with her class, which gave EJ a security blanket, so to speak. Then, after that, Bella left the class for short periods of time. She told EJ that she had a few errands to run, but that she would be back real soon, and that was how EJ got more and more comfortable being without Bella and me. He simply needed to know that we'd return for him. When he finally did realize that, he was able to relax and focus on being the child he was. He gained a few friends, and he became more sure of himself.

And now...now he was starting kindergarten. The very same one that Bella and I attended some twenty years ago.

"Hi! My name is Bella. What's your name?"

_The girl is smiling. Really big smile and stuff. She is missing a tooth. I also lost a tooth, but it came back. A new one._

"Hello. I'm Edward Cullen," I mumble.

_Should I tell her she gots peanut butter on the cheek?_

_Mama always say I should tell the truth._

"Okay. Wanna be my friend?"

_But...she's a girl. Don't wanna make her sad, though._

"I dunno. I guess so?"
"Oh. You better come find me when you're sure, then. I'm gonna play with Sadie now."

She runs away.

Just...runs.

I don't like it one bit.

So, I run for her.

"Bella!" I call, running fastest in the world. "I'm sure now, Bella." I catch up, 'cause I'm super fast. "Who's Sadie?"

"My doll, silly. Her name is Sadie, and when I'm a big girl I want my baby to have that name."

"Eww, you want babies?"

I chuckled at the memory and left Bella in the doorway. I knew she was nervous, but she was just being the perfect mother she was. Worrying came with the job.

"Hey, Daddy," EJ said, giggling as Sadie made a mess around her chair. Mom laughed, too. "Sadie bug's not hungry, maybe."

"Or maybe..." I dipped down and kissed the top of his head. "...you're distractin' her with those funny faces of yours."

"But she likes them," he responded simply. "She laughs lots when I do them."

Well, of course she did. EJ was her damn hero. He was the best brother Sadie could ever wish for. Much like EJ was a true Mama's boy, Sadie was Daddy's little princess. But EJ was still the one she dragged her little butt to when she wanted a good laugh.
Speaking of my little princess, she was...odd. Yeah, she had totally inherited her mama's quirky personality. She was Bella through and through, apart from her hair and eye color. For instance, she refused to walk indoors. No lie. She crawled, rolled around, and used her hands to get anywhere. Unless she was outside. In the backyard, she loved to run barefoot, especially if she was chasing EJ. She stumbled and tripped like no other, but with a small grunt of frustration, she picked herself up off the ground before taking off in a run again. Then there was music. Only music could make her use her feet inside the house, 'cause she was a little dancer. Another thing she'd gotten from Bella was her love for bright colors. The word "match" didn't exist, and probably never would. She wanted colors, and she wanted many of them. The dress she was wearing today, for example, was pink with purple butterflies on it. Her cotton shorts were yellow with black polka dots.

She was perfect.

And she was currently wiping off her sticky hands on my t-shirt.

Great.

"Aw, what're you doin', little bug?" I complained. "Daddy doesn't want oatmeal, you know." I grimaced and headed over to the sink, all while Sadie bounced in her chair...giggling at me.

"Dada, Dada, Dada!" She was also good at squealing.

Bella reached me then, and I surrendered the dish rag to her, but she didn't use that to help me with my shirt. No, no, that wasn't good enough for her. Apparently, you needed something cleaner than that. Pfft. We were parents to two little rugrats. Stains came with the territory. Plenty of them.
"Feelin' better?" I asked softly, kissing her temple as she cleaned off the oatmeal from my shirt.

"Just nervous," she admitted with a rueful smile. "Milestone, ya know?"

I did know. Our boy was growing up. Kindergarten was just a short step from high school. Well, to a parent, it was.

"We'll both be there," I reminded her quietly. With Bella now working part time with me at the bar – except for the few times Charlie and Anna couldn't watch EJ and Sadie – we had made plans to take a few days off every now and then, just so that we could pick up EJ from kindergarten together. It wasn't because we desperately needed it – we made sure family always came first – but it was because we wanted it. We didn't exactly live large, and as long as we had food on the table, the bills got paid, and our savings account grew – no matter how slowly – we had no intentions of working harder.

"Can I tell you somethin'?" I whispered in her ear. I saw the goose bumps, I heard the intake of air, I felt her nod. "You look beautiful in your combat boots." I kissed the spot below her ear before backing away to see her face. "And I love you. Did you know?"

She sighed softly, contently, and smiled serenely. "You make sure I feel it all the time, hubs," she whispered back, and I kissed her tenderly on the nose. "I love you, too. Did you know?"

"Every day."

"Always."

*O*O*O*O*

I did not cry after we had dropped off EJ at kindergarten.
I did not cry when he practically skipped off without a care in the world.

"Here," Bella croaked, sniffing, as she handed me a tissue.

I shook my head, keeping both hands on the steering wheel.

"I just got somethin' in my eye," I muttered defensively.

We were still in the parking lot at EJ's new school.

"Hubs..."

"I'm fine."

"Edward."

"Fine!" I groaned, grabbing the damn tissue.

_Don't understand why I would need a fuckin' tissue. It's not like I'm crying. I'm not a girl or anything._

I was fine. Everything was...fine.

_Peachy._

I was Edward Fucking Cullen. King of "fine". In every way.

**EJ Cullen.**

"Hi! What'cha drawing?"

I look up from my picture and scratch my forehead with my yellow crayon.

"Um, my house," I mumble to the girl.

She gots jelly on her cheek. Like Sadie bug also always gots food on her face.
"That's a pretty house," the girl says, smiling really big. "My house is white."

That's the same color as Pops and Grandma Anna's house. And also Uncle Jasper and Aunt Alice's house.

"My mama wanted to paint our house yellow, 'cause it's a happy color," I tell her.

"That's so cool," she giggles, and I smile just 'cause. "Um... my name is Mina Grey, by the way. What's yours?"

I put down my crayon and stick out my hand, just like Pops says I'm supposed to say hello to new people who are nice. "EJ Cullen," I say quietly, and she shakes my hand, still smiling. "My real name is Edward, 'cause it's just like my daddy, but everyone say EJ."

"Like a nickname?" she asks, pushing some hair away from her face. Her hair is really, really long. Even longer than Mama's, but it's the same brown color, sorta.

"Yeah, EJ is Edward Junior."

"Cool," she says, laughing a little. "This is my doll." She holds up a girl doll by the arm. "Her name is Josephine, but I call her Josie. That's also a nickname."

I smile really big. "My little sister's name is Sadie, but Daddy and I call her Sadie bug."

"That's funny," Mina giggles. "So... can I color with you? Coloring is my favorite in the whole world."

"Mine, too!" I gasp.

So funny we both have same favorites.
"I think we're gonna be great friends, EJ," she whispers.

And my cheeks are all warm now. "Okay," I mumble real quiet.

"Only if you want-

"I do," I promise, nodding.

She gives me another smile, this one bigger than the others.

*O*O*O*

"C'mon, Mina!" I say, tugging on her hand. "We can see when my mama and daddy gets here." I want them to meet my new friend, and Miss Sarah told us that our parents would be here soon to pick us up.

Then we run, but I keep it a little slow. Daddy says I'm like the fastest in the world.

"You run so fast, EJ!" Mina laughs as we run across the playground.

I grin at her. "I'm super fast."

When we reach the fence, I breathe a little heavy, but that's okay.

"My big brother also play with Turtles," she chuckles, pointing at my t-shirt. "You like them lots?"

I nod and I'm serious. "Very. They're so cool."

"EJ?"

That's Mama's voice!

I spin around real fast, and I look through the fence. "Mama! Over here! Daddy!"
Mina looks a little shy now, so I give her a big smile, 'cause everything is okay. My parents are the best.

"This is my friend," I tell Mama and Daddy as they stop on the other side of the fence. Mama's smiling, but Daddy looks weird. His eyes are really big. "Her name is Mina and that's her doll and it's called Josie." I remember.

"Uh..." That's Daddy.

"Very nice to meet you, sweetie," Mama says to Mina, and she sticks her hand through the fence to greet Mina. "My name is Bella. And this," she elbows Daddy, and I think she did it real hard, 'cause he makes a weird noise, "is EJ's daddy, Edward."

"Hi," Mina says quietly, and she shakes Mama's hand before letting go real quick. Yeah, I think she's shy. But not for me, 'cause then she moves a little closer to me, and I like that.

"Right..." Daddy coughs. "Good to meet ya, Mina."

I lean in and whisper in her ear. "Mama already likes you."

And that makes her smile bigger.

Mama always say that smiling is important.

"Time to go home, honey," Mama tells me softly. "But you'll be back tomorrow."

That's real good, 'cause I like kindergarten.

And I have my friend here.

"I will see you tomorrow morning, EJ," Mina whispers, and then she kisses my cheek!
My eyes are so big now as I watch her run back inside.

And Daddy's coughing again. Lots and lots.

"Hubs, for the love of..."

"What? Did you see-"

"I saw, and I know exactly what you're thinkin'".

"How can you be so calm, Bella?"

Mama and Daddy talk quietly on our way to the car, but I can still hear them.

"Because I'm happy, Edward."

"It's just like..."

"Us."

"Yeah..."

I chew on my lip, thinking lots about Mina. I hope she doesn't live far away. If she lives close, maybe we can play at home. Maybe I can show her my tree house! That's the best idea ever.

"Mama?" I ask from the backseat.

She smiles and looks back at me. "What's up, baby?"

"Can I show Mina my tree house?"

Daddy lets out a whining sound. "Oh, heavens..."

And Mama giggles. "We'll see, EJ."

That always means "yes".
"So..." Daddy clears his throat and looks at me through the little mirror in front of him. "Do you like kindergarten, nugget? Or maybe you wanna wait a while? Stay at home?"

I shake my head quick. "I like kindergarten so much."

"Figures..."

"Hubs."

"Sorry, angel. I... I love you?"

"Nice try."

I laugh behind my hand and look at Mama and Daddy. They're so funny sometimes.

"I'm gonna tell Charlie, though."

"How very mature of you, hubs."

"Hmph. He's five, you know. Five."

"How old were you when you when I showed you my tree house?"

"That's..."

"Hmm?"

Daddy huffs. "So not the same thing."

I really don't get grownups at all.

The End