



Stephenie Meyer owns Twilight

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## **Together**

**1.**

You're selfish.

You're selfless.

When you move on me, it doesn't matter. I'm what you need right now.

You're what I need, always. But I know it's impossible.

"Edward," you whisper. It's shallow, but full of need.

We're panting.

I'm hard for you, thrusting as you sink. You're wet and hot.

You're soft. A body that I'm in love with.

You're stone. A heart with walls you need to survive.

"Fuck," I exhale in a rush. You're close.

There's a knock on the door, but we ignore it. This is our moment, and I'll kill anyone for taking it away from me. You'll be gone soon enough. Back to your hell. And I'm sorry. Sorry for ever introducing you two...

A regret I live with everyday.

But then again... if you hadn't you met...

"I'm close, baby," I moan.

You fist my hair.

Our kiss... I hate it. I love it. I wish it was more.

I'm sorry, and I'm not...

Because I love her, too.

"Now, Edward," you whimper against my lips.

*Give me more, Bella...*

But you don't. You can't.

And when we're done, you return to serve coffee.

I stay in my office.

**2.**

The rain is pouring down.

You're not here, but... you haven't called in sick.

I worry about you.

I sigh when Rose knocks on the door. She knows my misery. She knows about yours even more, which is why she understands that I can't back off.

"She doesn't answer the phone," my sister tells me. Sadly.

Full of pity.

The pain is indescribable.

"I figured," I mutter.

And Rose goes back to the kitchen.

Time to open the diner.

When I come home that night, Kate has questions... concerns.

You're her best friend.

She'd kill me if she knew.

**3.**

"Where were you yesterday?" I ask as you close the door behind you.

"You didn't call..."

You don't answer.

But I don't need you to, because I see your arm then.

I can read you like an open book, but that's only because that *fucking* asshole displays the information there. On your body.

In all of my twenty-eight years on this earth, I've never been more conflicted.

"Come here," I whisper.

I pull back my chair and once you're on my lap, I hold you.

More for my benefit, maybe.

You're tired. Exhausted.

But what can I do?

"Make me forget, Edward," you breathe out.

Soon, we're a tangled mess of limbs on the little couch in my office.

**4.**

My vision blurs when my sister brings in a sleepy Sophie.

I haven't seen her in days.

That five-year-old little girl has me so wrapped around her tiny finger.

"Bella's here?" I ask Rose softly, already knowing the answer. I guess she has the early shift today. I smile at Sophie as she walks over to me, thumb in her mouth. "Hey, baby."

She yawns, making her eyes glisten. "Hi, Edward."

I pick Sophie up, positioning her on my lap, and Rose nods, silently answering my earlier question.

"Wanna stay in here with Edward while Mommy and I work?" she asks Sophie.

She just nods against my chest.

When it's just the two of us, I lower my mouth to her hair, kissing the dark brown locks softly as I breathe her in. I will never tire of it. Christ, I've missed her, and it's only been days.

"Everything okay, sweetheart?" I whisper.

She shrugs and says nothing.

It kills me. She's so incredibly aware of her surroundings.

"Edward?" she mumbles quietly a moment later. Looking up at me, I see the unshed tears. "I'm sorry I called you Daddy in the park."

## **5.**

"Don't ever apologize for that," I choke out, brushing my thumbs under her eyes. "It's okay, Sophie, I promise."

*I want you to call me Daddy.*

I hold her tightly as she cries silently, clinging to my neck.

That day, last week, when we had all gone to the park... and she had called me Daddy, I had all but beamed in pride. Fuck, I'd been so happy.

No one had heard, of course. It had just been the two of us in the sandbox.

She loves building those castles.

If only things weren't so completely fucked up.

In a perfect world...

I shake my head internally. *It's not a perfect world.*

When Sophie starts sniffing, I'm once again reminded of how far from perfect our world is.

## **6.**

"Has she been whiny?" you ask, sitting next to Sophie on my couch, tickling her. It's not often you smile, but when you do, it's for her.

"No," I murmur, watching the two of you.

I've gone through everything. All the papers, the books, the numbers...

I don't have what's needed.

I already know, but I still look. I still try to find a way.

"Edward and I stole two muffins!" Sophie gasps through giggles, holding up two fingers. "We just *stole* them! You and Rose didn't see!"

And I realize... that I've never heard you laugh, Bella. In the six years I've known you, you haven't laughed.

I notice because you just chuckle lightly. Like that's all you can do. Chuckling.

It's not the same as laughing, baby.

"Well," you say, tapping your chin. "It's kinda hard for Edward to steal when it's his diner, isn't it? Hmm?"

I smile ruefully. If only my diner was worth something.

Passed down through family. It used to be Nana Lizzie's.

I'm content with it – for myself, that is. I'll have a couple of twenties left over when the next paycheck arrives, but that's not enough for what we need, what *you* need. Nowhere near it.

**7.**

"I love you," she chuckles. "I love you. I love you." I poke her side, and she laughs. "I love you! There, is that enough?"

"Never." I grin, draping an arm around her. "I need to hear it thousands of times."

True. I really do, because I love her right back, and I tell her every chance I get.

"Okay, what movie are we watching, baby?" I ask, reaching for the remote.

She shrugs, mouth full of pizza.

Friday night.

I just wish my entire heart was present.

"Doesn't matter," she says.

Fine. My choice, then. "We're watching Face Off," I decide.

She grimaces. "That movie fucking sucks."

"Kate!" I exclaim.

**8.**

You ask something, dropping kisses on my chest. For some reason, you like my chest hair. Not that I have a lot. But what I have, you seem to like.

You like everything I have, though.

And I like everything you have. Or love.

But it's not enough to have more.

"Edward, did you hear me?"

"Hmm?" I respond lazily, watching my fingers as they trail up your arms. I'm mesmerized. The goose bumps... the way I affect you...

It's the same way you affect me.

"Does she suspect anything?" you whisper, chewing on your lip.

I sigh. I have no wish to think about that now.

"No talking," I murmur, flipping us over. I dip down and kiss you, wishing, hoping...

Always needing...

You.

**9.**

"Make me forget," I whisper, using your words.

Your brow furrows in concern, and I kiss the crease, smoothing it out.

No concern. Not now, baby.

Thankfully, you see what I need, and you get me hard in no time, kissing me, touching, stroking, fuck...

"Fuck me," you whimper.

Once I'm positioned, I push hard.

My abs tense, fuck... *everything* tenses.

"Goddamn, baby," I grit out against your shoulder.

Soon it's just the sound of skin slapping...

Moans...

Heavy breathing...

I slam into your wet pussy. My eyes squeeze shut.

"Oh, fuck," you moan.

I capture your mouth with mine. We swallow each other's breaths and words.

My thrusts are punishing and relentless, but you fucking love it.

You cry out right before you climax, and I follow, spilling my release deep inside of you.

## **10.**

Where are you?

You don't answer when Rose and I call you. You haven't shown up to work in several days, and... you're not home.

You've told me I'm not allowed to go near your house, but I'm fucking worried, Bella.

Is it Sophie?

Is it you?

Has he done anything?

"Take a breath, Edward," Rose tells me softly.

I rub my face, sinking down on the couch.

Elbows on my knees. I think, I think, I think. Where are you? My hands slide up my face, into my hair; I tug harshly, frustrated as hell. Scared shitless, worried, and angry. It's not supposed to be like this. We're supposed to have choices.

In a way we do, but... not really.

"This has happened before," she reminds me.

I know. It has happened too many times over the years.

When you first came in here six years ago, looking for a job, I never thought you'd change my life. But you did, and when you were late for work the first time, I didn't bark at you to get your act together. I didn't yell. I didn't even *softly* remind you to be on time.

Because I saw, even back then, that something was horribly wrong.

What I didn't know at that time was that things hadn't even begun to go wrong for you.

## **11.**

I remember that day so clearly. The day you walked in here... Into Lizzie's Diner for the first time...

Six years ago. You were only eighteen, and new in Chicago.

I was twenty-two and jaded.

But I remember thinking you were... cute. And pretty.

I'd hired you on the spot because there was something in you, reminding me of myself, and... since I needed help back then, I figured that maybe you needed it, too. So, I'd hired you.

Only two weeks later, I introduced you to Ben.

He was my friend.

I snort and roll my eyes at that now.

Fucker.

I could kill him.

I never thought you two would... I mean... I was just introducing you to some people, thinking... I don't know... that you could need more friends? You were new to the area, after all.

Well, that sure backfired when I found out that he'd asked you out.

Had I not been so fucked up back then, I would've asked you out myself, but...

Whatever. It doesn't matter now.

It is what it is, right?

**12.**

"You're in so deep, Edward," Rose murmurs, watching as I pace in the office.

Another day has passed, and you're still not here. Not a single word.

"You love her, don't you?"

Yes.

A small nod is the only thing I can offer.

You know that I love you.

I know that you love me, too.

But we've never said it. It wouldn't make anything better.

Or easier.

"And... how long have you been seeing each other in secret?"

I grimace into my hands.

So not a thing I wanna discuss with my sister.

I know that Rose is aware, of course, but I doubt she knows the extent of it. I doubt she knows just how long you and I have met here in my office.

"A year?" she guesses.

I chuckle humorlessly, bitterly, and shake my head.

"Try three, Rose."

She gasps. "Three years? Jesus, Edward!"

### **13.**

"What about Ben? What about Kate? What about-"

I cut her off. "Don't, Rose. I don't wanna hear about it."

*I just want to find you.*

"Well, I wanna know," she snaps. "Does Ben know?"

I roll my eyes. "What the fuck do you think? Of course, he doesn't know."

Unlike him, we're subtle. Not Ben, though, that ass. He screws around every fucking weekend. Truth be told, I don't give two shits about it since you and he don't have sex anymore, but... God, I just wanna kill the fucker. He may not sleep with you, but... but...

"Fuck," I whisper under my breath. My heart constricts painfully. The churning, the twisting... Just thinking about how he treats you...

"Wait," Rose says abruptly. "Three years..."

Ah, she's figuring it out. The trigger, or whatever I'm supposed to call it.

It's not really a secret.

"That's when Mom and Dad died," she whispers.

Yeah...

I'd needed a friend. And more. You became my escape, and I fell so hard... so fast.

"Was Ben... um..."

After her hell with Royce, I know why she can't even say the word, so I help her out.

"Yeah, Ben was abusive back then," I say flatly.

"Shit."

Pretty much.

"He started hitting her when we found out about Sophie," I admit with my heart stuck in my throat. "He blames Bella."

I'm not surprised when I see my sister's tears.

God knows I've shed more than a few.

**14.**

The phone shatters against the wall.

"FUCK!" I scream.

A week. A whole fucking week has passed without a word from you. I've called every hospital and every police station in Chicago. Nothing. Not a fucking thing.

You're not home.

Nobody is.

I drive by before work; I drive by after work.

Kate knows something's up.

But what can I tell her?

*Knock, knock.*

Rose enters right away. "I heard-" And she sees the shattered phone. She sighs, wiping her hands on the apron. "Still nothing?"

Unable to speak, I just shake my head.

I'm afraid he's taken you away.

I'm afraid you're gone.

I'm afraid my little girl is gone.

*Oh, God... Sophie...*

"Kate," I breathe out, abruptly standing up. Hell, I wasn't even aware that I had been in my chair. "I gotta go."

"Edward," she says, and I hear the warning in her voice. "Is that so smart? She'll know. I mean, look at you. You're a mess."

I don't care.

A second knock interrupts us, and Bree – another waitress – pops her head in. "Sorry to barge in, guys, but there's a man asking for Bella."

I frown in confusion. Bree's been here for years, and... she knows all the people that you know.

"Who?" I ask.

"He says his name is Emmett Swan."

Emmett Swan.

Father? Brother? Cousin? In-law? Oh, God... *husband?*

## **15.**

I leave the office, quickly passing the kitchen before I enter the diner, and what I'm met with is a big dude, looking exhausted as hell. He's wearing a black leather jacket, but instead of looking menacing or intimidating, he just looks drained. I've never seen him before, that's for sure. And...

Swan? You're from Washington. You don't have family in Chicago. You told me your family was dead.

"Mr. Swan?" I ask, walking around the counter, so that we're on the same side. Luckily, it's almost closing time, which means there aren't many customers left.

He's tall. A couple of inches taller than my 6'2".

The man looks up, eyes meeting mine, and... yeah, it's a relative. Same eyes, same hair color, fucking dimples. You have them, too.

So does Sophie.

"Um, I'm looking for Bella Swan," he says, looking over my shoulder as if you'd come, too.

I clear my throat. "I'm Edward Cullen, her..." *boyfriend? Lover? Person who makes her forget?* I sigh. "Her boss."

"Well, is Bella here?" he questions, looking impatient.

"No, she's not," I reply, anxiously running a hand through my hair. "She hasn't been in for a week. We don't know where she is."

There are circles under his eyes.

And his shoulders slump a little. I see defeat.

He sighs heavily. "I see."

*Do you? Because I don't.*

"May I ask how you are related?" I ask.

"I'm her brother," he chuckles humorlessly.

## **16.**

"And that's a bad thing?" I ask, wondering why the hell he seems bitter about that fact.

"No, but..." He shakes his head, eyes on the checkered floor. "Apparently, I wasn't reason enough for her to stay. She just left. I've spent the past six years looking for her."

I have *nothing* to say.

I'm... stunned.

I've known from the start that you have a past, but this is... I mean, why would you run from family, baby? Why would you tell me they were *dead*?

"Your parents, are they...?" I trail off.

He nods, evidently understanding. "Yeah, they died before she left."

Okay...

"She told me our house came with too many memories," he mutters. "She wanted to start over, but... Fuck, I didn't think she'd literally run away in the middle of the night, leaving nothing behind her."

Damn.

Still speechless.

**17.**

When I finally find my voice, I ask, "Was there any reason for her to run?"

Family is...

*Nothing* is more important than family.

I need to understand, Bella.

Because now I wonder... have you run away from me?

Would you be so callous?

And what about Sophie?

“Um, well...” Emmett hesitates, suddenly looking awfully uncomfortable.

“She had some boyfriend that...”

Fuck. No. Don’t tell me...

“What?” I grit out through clenched teeth.

Christ, baby... has this happened to you *before*?

“Look,” he says, noticing my glare. “I was in college four hours away. I had no idea what she was going through, and when I found out, I-” He swallows hard. His expression changes into one of sadness. “I was getting ready to kick that bastard’s ass, but we got a call... Our parents had died in a car crash.”

Jesus fucking Christ.

I rub my face tiredly.

I put the pieces together. “You dealt with the funeral, mourned... focused on that, and... the jackass-boyfriend was momentarily forgotten,” I sigh, filling in the blanks. It’s just my guess, but when Emmett nods once, I know I’m right. “And then she started talking about leaving?”

He shrugs. “She mentioned starting over. And then the weekend before I was returning to Seattle, she just left.”

“Well, you forgot to deal with the boyfriend, didn’t you?” I ask dryly.

He glares at me. “I had *just* lost my parents. I wasn’t exactly clearheaded.”

Obviously.

I know I’m being unfair, but... Well, let’s just say that I wouldn’t forget about how Royce treated my own sister. I *didn’t* forget it. Granted, I hadn’t just lost my parents, but...

Oh, hell...

We can go on and on.

But nothing matters if we can't find you, Bella.

**18.**

Diego closes the kitchen, and Bree and Rose close the diner while Emmett and I move to one of the booths. When Rose brings us coffee, I send a quick text to Kate.

**Gonna be late, baby. Call if you need me. Love you.**

"You sure you're just her boss?" Emmett asks me.

I arch a brow at him, pocketing my phone.

And I decide that I don't care anymore.

"I'm in love with her," I tell him before sipping my coffee.

He looks down at his own cup.

"And now she's gone?"

"For a week," I say, refusing to believe that you've just left me. "No warning. I mean..." I sigh. "It's happened before. But never for this long. A few days, sure..."

My phone buzzes, and I pull it out of my jeans to read the text.

**Heading over to Alice and Jazz for a while. Love you, too!**

My heart clenches.

Kate. Fuck, I need to come clean...

"Anyway..." He clears his throat. "Do you think she'll be back?"

I laugh, quietly and bitterly. "I sure fucking hope so."

You better come back, Bella. So help me, God...

"But... there's a chance she hasn't left voluntarily," I admit, and I definitely have his attention. "Ben. Her... *boyfriend*." Nasty fucking word. "You could say that your sister doesn't have the best luck when it comes to men."

And now he's angry.

Well, join the club, man.

**19.**

"So, you two aren't...?"

I hesitate, but in the end I shake my head. What you and I have doesn't come first. Not in this case. "They've been together for almost six years," I tell him. "She'd leave if she could, though."

I know you would. I'll never forget all the times we've talked about what we would do if everything was fair.

"This guy, he's... forcing her to stay with him?" Emmett's pissed. I can't blame him. "If you love her so much, why don't you—"

"Do *not* finish that sentence," I warn him. "Believe me, I'd get her as far away from that asshole as possible if I could, but it's not just Bella."

"What do you mean?"

My heart hurts again. Just thinking about that little girl...

"She has a daughter," I say, and all my fire is gone. "Sophie. She's five years old."

"Shit," he breathes out. Eyes wide. No, he didn't see that coming. "Five years..."

I nod once, stiffly. "It wasn't a planned pregnancy. They'd only been dating for a couple of months. It was an accident." I shrug awkwardly, not liking that particular memory. Broken condom. Fuck, I'd all but keeled over with nausea when you told me. Not because you were pregnant, but because you were having sex with someone that wasn't me.

I know now that Ben was just a fling for you. You admitted that you liked me, which is why I still – to this day – regret that I didn't tell you about my own feelings. But again, I wasn't ready back then. I had too much shit in my life, and...

Yet again, Sophie wouldn't be here if you hadn't been with him.

And I love her as if she were my own.

## **20.**

"Sorry, dude, but I still don't get it," Emmett says, shaking his head. "If this Ben is..."

"Abusive," I supply in a monotone voice.

He nods, clenching his teeth. "*Abusive*... then why doesn't she leave with Sophie?"

And that's the million dollar question, isn't it?

Quite literally, too.

"Money," I answer, swallowing the lump in my throat. "She's-"

My phone cuts me off, and my heart starts racing because it's Bella's ringtone.

"Bella?" I rush her name out. "Are you there, baby?"

I feel my face pale when I hear her broken whimper. *"E-Edward?"*

I'm out of the booth in a flash. "Bella! Can you hear me? Where are you?"

I nod for Emmett to follow me, and then I rush toward my office. "Answer me, sweetheart."

*"I-I... I'm in Texas."*

## **21.**

I stop short.

"T-Texas?" I stutter. "As in... *Texas?*" Why the...?

*"Yeah."* She sniffles. *"I... I would've called sooner, but... oh, God, Edward... He knows... Ben knows."*

Chills go down my spine, turning me into stone.

"Where's Sophie?" I whisper harshly. "Tell me, Bella. I'm on the next flight."

Cold sweat.

Emmett's looking at me with a panicked expression.

I'm sure I mirror it.

*"She's in the hospital,"* she cries, and my heart stops. *"Ben's parents are here, too."*

I can't breathe.

"Bella-" I choke out.

Another whimper. *"It's worse, Edward."*

## **22.**

I function on autopilot.

I tell Rose.

I book four tickets to Houston.

I give Emmett the short version.

He's as pale as I am.

*"Emmett... Sophie was diagnosed with lymphoma when she was a year old. She was in remission, but it's back now. Worse than before."*

I'm sure those words are going on repeat in Emmett's head. It looks like it.

The words going on repeat in my own head are the ones Bella gave me before she had to hang up.

*"They performed a bone marrow biopsy. It's spread."*

*"They performed a bone marrow biopsy. It's spread."*

*"They performed a bone marrow biopsy. It's spread."*

"Kate!" I shout out as I open the door to my house. "Kate!"

The car is still running outside.

"Fuck," I curse, remembering that she's not home. After packing a small bag with the essentials, I lock the door behind me before returning to the car where Emmett and Rose are waiting.

"I'm just gonna run across the street. Kate's with Alice and Jasper," I tell my sister, handing her the bag.

"Who's Kate?" Emmett asks impatiently.

I'm already running.

**23.**

"Hey, Mr. Cullen," Jasper says after opening the door.

"Is Kate here?" I ask, skipping the fucking greeting.

"Um, yeah. Just a sec." He disappears, and I check my phone again.

Just to make sure, once more.

I read it twice, or... seven times – the details on where you are in Houston.

I have it memorized by now.

When Kate finally appears, I tell her to get in the car.

"I'll explain on the way," I add.

It's obvious that Rose has answered Emmett's previous question when I return with Kate.

She sits next to me in the passenger seat as I back out the car.

"Uh, how old is your brother?" I hear Emmett whisper to Rose.

Kate and I exchange a knowing look, having been through this *many* times before.

She stifles a giggle.

I kiss her hand, unable to smile.

"Twenty-eight. Twenty-nine soon," my sister tells him quietly. In the rearview mirror, I see the small smile on her lips.

And now for the next question...

"And the kid?"

There it is.

"Thirteen."

Silence.

Yeah, people always feel the need to do the math more than once.

**24.**

"Kate, this is Emmett," I tell her. "Bella's brother." Her eyes bug out. No surprise there. She didn't know about him either, of course. "And Emmett?" Our eyes meet in the rearview mirror. "This is Kate. My daughter."

I'd laugh at his expression if half my heart wasn't full of pain for you and Sophie.

No one's ready to become a father at fifteen. *No one*. You're a kid at that age. Literally. But when Maggie and her parents started talking about abortion, I was lucky to have my parents step in. It was a quick process, and after the birth, Maggie moved to Florida to start over. No hard feelings. Not for me, anyway. Silly school crush. I was more eager to lose my virginity back then. It just came with a Kate.

But my parents were there for me while I graduated high school. They offered to be there so that I could go to college, but I declined. I didn't want college. I wanted the diner.

We lived with my folks until I was twenty-one.

They supported me, loved me. Loved *us*. And it's thanks to them that I'm a parent today. Safe to say, their deaths hit me hard.

Dad was the victim when our local grocery store was robbed.

Mom had a fatal heart attack three months later.

Since then it's been me, Rose, and Kate.

At least when we're talking about Cullens.

Because there's also you and Sophie.

In my heart, I'm her father, too.

And she has to live, baby. She has to.

**25.**

"I think it's time for you to talk, Dad," Kate says when we arrive at the airport.

*Talk? I'd rather not, baby.*

She's gonna kill me.

I hesitate. She narrows her eyes at me. Her dark blue eyes. It's funny how she and Sophie share the same eye color. But Kate has my hair, though wavy, and Sophie has Bella's dark brown hair, but curly. They're both everything to me. You, too. My three girls. All of you equally perfect and beautiful.

Problem is, when Sophie was first diagnosed, Kate didn't take it well. At all.

"We can talk on the plane, honey," Rose tells her softly, draping an arm around her before we head to check-in.

When we're finally seated on the plane, Kate turns to me in her seat.

I know she won't allow me to get away now.

She's actually like you there, baby. Both so damn stubborn.

"We're going to see Bella and Sophie," I tell her quietly.

Confusion, of course. "In... Texas, Dad?"

I nod once. "I think... I think Ben took them there."

Kate makes a face. She's never hidden her dislike for Ben. "Hate that fucker."

*Jesus.* "Kate, for the love of God," I sigh and rub my temples. "You're thirteen years old. Clean up your language."

## **26.**

By the time we arrive in Texas, I've been called everything from jackass to liar.

She let me hold her when she cried, but... she's still livid. Furious, hurt, sad, angry...

Mostly, she's mad at me. A little at you, too.

I can't blame her.

We've known about Sophie's relapse for several months and have let Kate believe that everything is okay. Whenever she's noticed something about Sophie, we've told her about late effects from the treatments. And when she suspected something, I would always distract her.

Of course, she hates me now.

I'm the enemy.

"I hate you," she growls as we get into the cab. "You're the suckiest Dad ever."

"I know," I mutter before giving the driver the address to our hotel.

Rose and Emmett are quiet.

When Kate starts crying again, I hold her. I kiss her hair. She tells me she loves me, she tells me she hates me. She cries for Sophie, she curses

you... before she takes it back. You're her best friend, and you know why. You also know that she'd see you as a mother if that fucking asshole didn't stand in our way.

I want us all to be a family.

You want it, too. I've seen it. Everytime you hug Kate, I see it.

We belong together.

## **27.**

Kate puts up a fight when we arrive at the hotel, stating that everything sucks if we can't go straight to the hospital. She hates the world. I explain to her that we can't go to the hospital in the middle of the night. She locks herself into the bathroom.

I sit on the edge of my bed, face buried in my hands.

I wish I had more. I wish I had it all for Sophie. The money for all the surgeries and treatments... all of it. But now it's even *worse*. We knew that her cancer was back, but... we didn't know it had *spread*. Jesus, I just...

"Dad?"

I suck in a sharp breath, startled by Kate's voice, and before I turn around, I wipe away the traitorous tears.

"What, baby?" I murmur, looking over my shoulder.

She sniffles. Eyes brimming with tears, nose red...

She's wearing the only thing I packed for her. The pajama set in dark purple you gave to her last Christmas.

"Are you okay?" she asks, chewing on her lip. A trait I know she's picked up from you, Bella.

And no, Kate: I'm not okay. Not even close. I feel like I'm losing everything I love.

"I'm fine."

## **28.**

"Bullshit," she huffs, moving toward the bed. "You're not fine."

Perceptive.

"Language, Kate," I groan, standing up to remove the bedspread.

"Sorry," she mumbles.

I strip down to boxers and a t-shirt. Kate settles on the bed, watching my every move as I check my phone, as I fold my jeans, as I hang up my shirt, as I set the alarm, as I check my phone again...

"Get some sleep, Edward Anthony Cullen," she tells me sternly, causing me to do a double-take at her. "What?" She smiles ruefully. "Nana used to call you that when you annoyed her."

My eyes sting.

I release a breath.

I miss my parents. I miss you. I miss Sophie.

Had it not been for Kate...

"I love you," I say, so thankful for her. "You know that, right?"

She nods. "I know, Dad," she whispers. "I love you, too."

## **29.**

*She nods. "I know, Dad," she whispers. "I love you, too."*

Glad to hear it.

I quirk a brow at her. "Am I off the shit list?"

I try to lighten the tension. We need it. I can't go to bed with a heart this heavy. So, when I settle on the bed, I poke her side, knowing that it will make her shriek. Okay, the shriek isn't all that lovely, but the smile she gives me is.

"Not even close!" she whisper-yells, throwing my pillow at me. I dodge it, and she pouts before burying her face in her own pillow. "I'm so gonna get you for everything."

I hear the teasing, but there's also truth in her words. She's disappointed, I know. And hurt. I understand it all, but what she is too young to understand is that we did it to protect her. In case Sophie's condition changed for the better, we decided not to tell Kate. But of course, with our luck, Sophie got worse instead.

And so... the heavy heart is back.

Sleep doesn't find me.

### **30.**

My heart is stuck in my throat when we reach the hospital.

We don't even know if we can enter.

You warned me.

I didn't listen.

I had to be here, and now I am.

"Call her," Kate murmurs, grasping my hand.

I squeeze it as I pull out my phone.

For once, luck is on my side, and you answer after five rings.

It's a whisper. *"Edward?"*

I take a deep breath. "We're here, Bella."

And I hear the quiet cry you let out.

*"I'm so selfish for being relieved,"* she whimpers. *"I don't know how to get you up here, I... I... They..."*

"We'll wait," I assure her. "We're not going anywhere, sweetheart. Just send me a quick text when they go get something to eat or something."

Emmett looks like he's going to be sick.

*"Okay... okay... I'll let you know as soon as I can. I promise."*

I want to tell you that I love you.

It's right there, on the tip of my tongue.

*"Thank you for coming, Edward,"* she whispers thickly. *"Is... Is Katie here, too?"*

I swallow hard. "Yeah, we're all here." *Your brother, too.*

### **31.**

You bury your face in my chest as Kate and I hold you tightly.

It's just the three of us in the elevator. You, me, Kate.

Emmett and Rose decided it was best for them to wait.

Sophie's more important.

"I'm so glad you're here," you cry quietly.

I kiss the top of your head, and Kate hugs you harder.

We don't have much time.

You said that Ben and his parents would be back within the hour.

So, we hurry.

Once we reach Sophie's room, nothing can stop my eyes from watering.

She's so tiny.

Fragile.

"Edward," she mumbles softly. Her eyes light up when she sees Kate.

"Katie!"

"Soph," Kate gasps quietly before rushing over to her bed. "I've missed you so stinking much, sis."

I bite the inside of my cheek in order to keep quiet.

I have to stay strong.

I can't break down now.

**32.**

I kiss her hands, her cheeks, her forehead, her hair, her little nose.

Her giggle warms my heart.

"How's my princess?" I whisper against her cheek.

She just smiles softly.

My eyes sting for the umpteenth time as I take my seat in the chair next to her hospital bed.

You settle on my lap.

Kate is on the bed with Sophie.

We all see this as our family.

The four of us. No others. Not Ben, not his parents.

"I'm sorry I didn't call sooner," you whimper quietly in the crook of my neck. "I tried, but... they wouldn't let me..."

I squeeze my eyes shut, figuring it was something like that. But the pain is still indescribable.

"He found out?" I ask, needing to know how this all happened.

You nod minutely, resting your head on my shoulder. "And he told his parents," you mutter. "They were the ones who decided to move us here. For the hospital's reputation, and... so that I wouldn't be close to you."

I don't think it's possible to hate as much as I hate, but at the same time we need the idiots.

"How did he find out about us?"

You inhale shakily.

"He found a pregnancy test in my purse."

**33.**

I blink, more than once, as I let your words register.

Pregnancy test. Pregnancy test. Pregnancy test.

"I'm pregnant, Edward," you breathe out, and I think I die for a minute.

Bliss. Fear. Sadness. Pride. Joy. Longing. Panic.

The warming feeling of love courses through me, but the timing couldn't have been worse.

"I'm sorry."

I shake my head furiously. "Don't-" I choke out. I swallow hard.

I know it's my baby. *Thank God.*

You haven't been with Ben for years. *Thank God.*

But you're on the pill, sweetheart.

Never mind. I know it's not a hundred percent...

"Don't apologize," I tell her, tightening my hold on her. "I'm happy." It's the truth. *God*, it's the truth.

I just don't know how we're going to work this out.

"How far along?" I ask, heart stuck in my throat.

Another shaky breath. "Ten weeks."

### **34.**

Ten weeks pregnant. Ten weeks. That gives me... so little time.

But I *have* to... *someway, somehow...*

I won't have my third child grow up without stability.

"What are we going to do?" you ask hopelessly, and I have no idea.

We have too little time.

But, first things first. "Tell me about Sophie," I whisper.

Kate and Sophie are talking quietly on the bed, whispering, giggling, acting like sisters.

I keep my eyes on them as you fill me in about Sophie's condition. You mention that Ben's parents chose this hospital for its reputation in the oncology field and their lymphoma experts. You tell me about the treatment plan, and you tell me that Sophie will need stem cell transplantation. Her cancer is so aggressive. As you talk, my heart keeps

hurting. The walls are closing in on me, and I'm overcome with anger, grief, and despair.

We knew that her cancer was back, but we didn't know how bad it was yet.

Now we know and... it's horrifying.

All I want is for us to be together, and as it looks now, it's unachievable.

### **35.**

Our time is up for now.

"You will come back?" she rasps softly.

I blink back tears. "Of course, Sophie." I drop a kiss on her forehead.

"Katie and I will be back soon."

"Kay," she mumbles.

"I love you. You know that, right?"

She nods. "Love you, too, Da- Edward."

I smile wistfully and caress her reddening cheek. "You're cute when you blush," I murmur, giving her a wink, at which she blushes harder. After I make sure that you and Kate can't hear, I press my forehead against Sophie's. "Not Edward, baby," I say softly.

I hate that Ben is a lousy father to this angel, but I'm selfish enough to feel blessed about it, too. Because to me, she's mine.

"Not Edward?" she asks quietly, chewing on her lip as her big eyes meet mine. I shake my head. "D... Daddy?"

*Christ.*

"It's our secret for now, yeah?" I whisper thickly.

She smiles hopefully. "Can I tell Mommy?"

"Yeah," I chuckle. "I'll see you soon, okay?"

We'll be a family. I'll make sure of it.

### **36.**

After the hospital, we head over to a restaurant across the street, and while Kate and I are subdued, Rose and Emmett are aching for information. So, once we're seated, I fill them in about Sophie's condition. My sister understands how serious things are when I mention that Sophie's now a Stage IV patient.

We pause while Rose is in the bathroom to calm down.

One look at Emmett, and I see that he's close to exploding. I've known the questions were coming, and I'm a bit surprised he's waited this long.

"Ask away," I tell him, nodding in thanks when the waitress comes with our food. "I gather my sister hasn't filled you in."

I knew she wouldn't. She hates talking about it.

"I'll go check on Aunt Rose," Kate murmurs.

"Okay, baby."

When it's just Emmett and me, he doesn't waste time.

"I still don't understand why Bella is with Ben. The only thing Rose told me was that this... Ben is a clueless fuck-up."

That's putting it mildly.

### **37.**

"He is," I say bluntly. "But we're stuck with him."

Emmett nods for me to continue, so I do.

“He was okay with the pregnancy after a while. He got used to it and even got a little excited.” I grimace. “But he didn’t exactly think about Sophie. His thoughts never went further than the pregnancy itself. In other words, when Sophie was born, he didn’t think about the diapering, the nightly wake-up calls, the constant watching, and the feeding.” I pause. “Ben’s always been a party guy. He likes to drink. This escalated when Sophie was a couple of months old. He said it was to escape the noise.”

“Fucker,” Emmett mutters, looking out the window.

I go on. “By the time Sophie was diagnosed with lymphoma, he was already an alcoholic, and he started hitting Bella. He blamed... *blames*... her for Sophie being sick.”

“What?” he spits out. “That can’t be Bella’s fault, can it?”

“No,” I shake my head, “it’s not her fault. But Ben is – as my sister said – a clueless fuck-up.”

### **38.**

“All right... then what?” he asks, urging me to continue.

I shrug. “It’s quite simple. To the Cheneys, it’s all about image. Ben doesn’t particularly care for Sophie, but he still wants her to be healthy. Same goes for Ben’s parents. His dad is the worst. He thinks they should just leave Bella and Sophie behind, because he never approved of their relationship in the first place. To him, Bella’s trash. To Ben’s mother, Sophie is a way to *improve* their image in society. She hosts charity dinners and benefits, which is good, I suppose, but she does it for the wrong reasons. It makes her come off as caring and giving, and that is what she’s after.”

“So, they’re rich,” he states.

I nod. "They pay all the medical bills. But not without conditions."

**39.**

"And what are the conditions?"

My smile is bitter. "That Bella and Ben pretend to be the happy couple, of course. The Cheney's wouldn't accept a breakup when a child is involved. It would harm their image. They even want Bella and Ben to get married."

You told me they know of the pregnancy, sweetheart...

I'm worried about Ben's parents' thoughts. How far will they go to uphold their image?

"So, they don't care that their son is beating my sister?" he asks angrily.

"They don't believe her," I reply, not missing a beat. "They can't believe that their son would abuse his girlfriend. They chalk it up to clumsiness on Bella's part."

"Jesus." He rubs his face. I can hear the deep breaths he's taking in order to calm down. God knows I've done the same many times. "Okay, so if Bella doesn't stay with Ben, no one will pay the bills."

"Pretty much."

"What about Ben? Doesn't he have money?"

"No," I chuckle humorlessly. "His parents may not believe Bella about the abuse, but they know about his drinking, not to mention his gambling addiction." I sigh. "They give him a fucking allowance. In other words, Ben's parents control it all. Everything."

**40.**

When Rose and Kate return from the bathroom, our food is cold, and everyone is close to falling apart. But we still eat, though. We're not made of money, and we need to eat.

Kate and Rose are quiet, lost in thought... tears rolling down every now and then.

Each tear feels like a stab to my chest.

I don't have what it takes to keep my family happy.

And I have another child on the way.

My chest feels tight.

Breathing becomes hard.

But I push it down.

We pay the check, and then we make our way back to the hotel.

On our way there, Emmett asks, "So, it all comes down to money?"

I nod tiredly.

"Nothing else," he presses. "If we had money for Sophie, Bella wouldn't have to be with Ben."

Another nod. "Yes. If we had money, the Cheneys would have no hold on us. We could basically tell them to fuck off, and they wouldn't be able to do a thing. I mean, there's no way a court would grant Ben custody."

If only we had the money...

**41.**

I sit in a chair next to the bed.

The hotel room is quiet.

Kate's asleep.

I watch her while clutching my phone in my hand.

Will I be able to see you tomorrow, baby?

There are so many thoughts running wild inside my head. Always the same things really... With one new addition.

Your pregnancy.

Then the usual... Money. Your well-being. Money. Sophie's disease. Kate. Money. Work.

Had I been home right now, I would've locked myself into my office again, only to go through the numbers once more.

I don't know how many organizations I've turned to. Or how many insurance policies I've gone through. Or how many support lines I've bombarded with my questions. But it all comes down to the fact that Sophie's biological father comes from money. There's no extra relief to receive. And I'm not Sophie's dad, which means there's nothing I can do.

You've looked, too. I know. You've spent hours and hours, trying to find a way. But as long as Ben's parents provide the best care for Sophie, you won't leave him. And I understand. I would suffer through abuse for my child, too.

**42.**

I sigh. Two AM and still no sleep.

I'm tempted to get a drink from the mini-bar, but I know the prices.

So, I stay in my seat.

It sucks, you know, because I've never had money issues before. I still don't. I mean, not really. Bills get paid, Kate gets her allowance, we have

food on the table, we can afford to order in every once in a while, when we need clothes, we buy clothes. I have a car. I have a house. It's not big, but it's enough. And we take a weekend trip at the end of each school year.

But when we bring in Sophie to the equation, it's suddenly awful on the money front.

I feel terrible. I want to help her. I want to be the one, Bella. I want to be able to put a smile on your face. Most of all, I want us four to be able to go through this pain together.

*Knock, knock.*

I frown instinctively, wondering who the hell it can be at this hour.

The answer...

"Emmett?" I blink a few times from the harsh lighting in the corridor.  
"What's up?"

### **43.**

"I can't sleep," he says, rubbing the back of his neck. "Can we talk?"

Confused, I nod, but then I remember that Kate is asleep, so I tell him to wait for me in the hall. Then I walk over to the nightstand on Kate's side of the bed. I find a notepad there, and I scribble a note to her, telling her that I'm downstairs in the bar if she needs me.

The bar is empty, to no one's surprise.

"One Jack, please. Make it a double," Emmett tells the bartender.

"Same here," I say, reaching for the wallet in my back pocket.

After we've paid for our drinks, we sit down in one of the booths.

The burn feels good as I take a big swallow of my drink.

“So...”

I quirk an eyebrow. “Yes?”

He nods. To himself, I think. “Let’s talk money.”

**44.**

“Money,” I say flatly, wondering if he’s serious.

He nods again. “I wanna know how much we need.”

We need. How much we need.

A part of me is relieved that he considers himself as a constant now.

I hope he is.

I hope this isn’t just a quick visit before he returns to Washington.

“Hit me with a number,” he says, and I shake my head. *It’s not that simple, Emmett.* “What? How much can it be?”

“A bit more than pocket change,” I respond dryly. “Let’s just say that even if I sold my house, my business, and we moved in with Rose in her apartment above the diner, it still wouldn’t add up. Especially now that Sophie’s condition is worse.”

I admit I’m a little surprised when he *doesn’t* seem surprised. I expected his eyes to widen or something when he realized the amount we were talking.

So, I take a deep breath before starting over. “First of all, she’ll be hospitalized during her stem cell transplantation. She’s too weak to be home... with her weight loss, her immune system...”

“Then, chemo or radiation therapy will follow – probably both – and, considering her state, she’ll be in the hospital for that, too. We’re talking months, Emmett. And then there are years of check-ups and monitoring after that. This won’t go away overnight. We have a long process of rehabilitation. Medication, a strict diet... you name it.”

He sighs heavily. He drinks. He stares at the ceiling for a while.

I drink, too.

“Even with health insurance...?” he trails off.

I nod slowly. “Yeah. Even with insurance, we’re looking at a fortune.”

**45.**

We’re quiet for a long while before he speaks again.

But when he does, I hear determination.

“Okay. Here’s the thing. I work in real estate.” I nod for him to continue.

“And I have a few condos in Seattle that I own. It won’t cover all of it, at least I don’t think it will, but it’s a start, right? I mean, if I sell what I have there...”

I inhale slowly and deeply, making sure that I keep myself in check. I don’t know how many times I think I’ve stumbled onto something that could possibly fix everything, only to have it blow up in my face. I can’t afford to get my hopes up now. I refuse.

“I’m not staying in Washington,” he adds firmly. “Bella is all I have left, and now that I’ve found her, I don’t exactly plan on letting her go.”

I chug the rest of my drink down.

*Stay calm, Cullen. Don’t get your hopes up.*

"You're moving to Chicago? Or... shit," I mutter, running a hand through my hair. I haven't even thought of this... Fuck, are you permanently living here in Texas now, Bella?

There's no way I can leave Chicago. It's impossible. Even if Kate was on-board...

I have my only source of income in Chicago. I can't afford to start over someplace else.

#### **46.**

"I don't care where I end up," he says, and I can see that he means it. "I also don't care if we all have to shack up together to get through this. As long as we get Bella and Sophie away from Ben and those parents of his."

I smile ruefully.

I gotta say I approve of your brother, sweetheart.

"First priority is to get the best treatment for Sophie," I say softly. "That's mine and Bella's only demand. And so far, Ben's parents have been the best providers. When there's something the insurance doesn't cover, they still pay, because they can. For instance, I know that the insurance doesn't cover her stay in Texas."

He nods, understanding. "But I think we can make sure she gets it – the best treatment – even without those fuckers, and in Chicago. Not here."

Math was one of my favorite subjects in school. Math and music. But for the past few years, math has been my enemy, never allowing me to get what I want. The numbers have never added up, but now... Now, I'm itching to go through it all.

Is there a possibility?

#### **47.**

"There's also our parents' house," he mentions before downing the last of his drink. "After Bella left, I never got rid of it."

I purse my lips.

We order new drinks.

"It's not worth much, but it's something."

I nod slowly, seeing numbers flash before my eyes. I can feel myself growing hopeful, much to my chagrin, but there's no stopping it. I want this so badly. And truth be told, I don't care if we all have to live together, either. That's the least of my concerns. Hell, it's not even a concern in the first place.

"So, what does that leave us, Edward?" he asks. "I have three condos, my own apartment, and our parents' house. There are a few loans, of course, but..."

I exhale.

"I only have my house and car, but there's no mortgage," I say quietly, internally thanking my parents for what they left me and Rose. "The diner is my source of income. It's also Bella's workplace. Same goes for Rose."

"So, we'll sell the houses and the condos. We'll rent a place nearby the diner, and that way we won't need two cars. I can sell my truck."

"You make it sound simple," I tell him.

"I know it's not."

Christ... Can this work?

**48.**

I need to change the subject before I rush over to the hospital and kidnap you and Sophie.

"How did you find Bella?" I ask.

He chuckles quietly, and I sip my drink.

"It wasn't easy," he mutters. "I spent years looking, but there was no Isabella Swan. It wasn't until a couple of weeks ago when I was cleaning out our parents' house..." He sighs. "I was gonna rent it out – the house. And when I got to Bella's room, I found a shoebox labeled 'Chicago.' There were work-ads and little notes." He shrugged a little. "Apparently, she had planned her move for a while. That's how I found your diner. You had put an ad out." I nod, remembering. "She had it all saved in that box. There were thirty-four ads from different restaurants and coffee shops. So, I pretty much packed a bag, flew to Chicago, and started checking off the list as I went through it."

"Christ," I mumble into my glass. "Long shot, man. She could've been gone by then."

"Yep. But it was what I had. I knew she wasn't going to return on her own." He shakes his head, eyes downcast. "I found out later about that idiot she was with back then. Christ... Not only was he on drugs, but he was involved in some heavy shit. I can only imagine how he scared Bella."

I clench my jaw and avert my eyes.

And I need to steer back to where we were before I lose it. "How many establishments did you go through before you reached mine?"

He smiles ruefully. "About twenty. No one had heard of an Isabella or Bella."

"And then you walked into Lizzie's," I finish quietly.

**49.**

The next morning, I feel nervous as we arrive at the hospital.

I call you, and... this is it, because you tell me that now isn't a good time, but you say that you're coming down. And... your brother is right here.

"Nervous?" Kate asks Emmett.

He nods.

And when you exit the hospital, you see him.

Resting my chin on the top of Kate's head, I watch as your wide eyes water.

I watch as you fly into your big brother.

I watch you hug him hard.

Rose turns away for a moment, and I see her wiping her cheeks.

We're all so incredibly invested in our closely knit family.

I think Emmett is a good addition.

"I've missed you," I hear you cry to him.

"Missed you too, sis," he replies, voice thick with emotion.

I drop a kiss on the top of Kate's head. She turns in my arms, silently crying against my chest. Blinking back my own tears, I hug her tightly.

And you start blubbering through your tears about that old boyfriend of yours, and that you needed to get away because he was hurting you, threatening your life. You panicked and left in the middle of the night. It's painful to hear, baby. I can't even imagine how painful it is for you. And then... *Jesus Christ*... then you met Ben, and he's not much better.

"It's okay, Bella," Emmett comforts, but you shake your head.

You want to explain why you didn't contact Emmett.

"We can talk about this later," he tells you firmly. "All that matters right now is that I'm not going anywhere. And you're not running off again, are you?"

The corners of my mouth tug a little as you chuckle quietly, wiping your tears away in the process.

"No. I'm not running off," you croak, hugging him again. "So good to see you, Em."

## **50.**

"Hey, pretty girl," I say, smiling as she makes room for me on the bed. "I don't know, Sophie... Are you sure?"

"*Very* sure."

I chuckle quietly and sit down at the edge of her bed, careful not to get too close.

But Sophie is like you, stubborn and persistent, and sitting on the edge isn't enough. She isn't satisfied until I'm on my side and she's snuggled into my chest. A blanket covers us both, and I kiss her hair as she plays with the buttons on my shirt.

"Don't fall asleep, Dad." Kate snickers, sitting behind me in a chair.

You, Emmett, and Rose are somewhere behind me, too, talking quietly.

They're filling you in about our plan.

"I'm not making any promises," I mumble as I wink at Sophie. "This bed is awfully comfy."

"I sleep lots and lots," Sophie says softly.

I kiss her on the forehead.

"Are you tired now, baby?" I whisper.

She shrugs. "A little."

It doesn't take long before she falls asleep with her beautiful face buried against my chest.

I revel in having her close.

After you and Emmett reunited two days ago, we have spent all our time here. Not necessarily in this room, but on hospital grounds. And as soon as Ben and his parents have gone for lunch or dinner, we've been up here.

I've smiled whenever Sophie's whispered "Daddy" to me.

## **51.**

"Do you think this will work?" you whisper against my chest.

And I nod, because I do believe it. "It will work, baby."

You nod, too, and then we're quiet, enjoying each other for a moment.

It's the first time in weeks we've been alone.

Well, alone... *Almost* alone.

Rose, Kate, and Emmett are down in the cafeteria, and Sophie's asleep in her room.

And we're hiding out in the bathroom. Like we're kids or something.

But it's what we have.

"I love you, Edward."

I close my eyes.

I shiver.

I exhale slowly.

I feel warm.

"You said it for the first time... while we're in the bathroom, sweetheart," I chuckle into your hair. "You're so romantic."

"Shut it," you mumble, tilting your face up. I kiss you softly. "It was about time I told you."

Another kiss. "I agree. And I love you, too." Kiss, kiss, peck, peck. "So much, Bella."

## **52.**

"Now, Edward," you breathe out. I kiss your neck, and you hitch a leg over my hip. "Please, I need you..."

You don't have to ask me twice.

I pull off your t-shirt as you unzip my jeans, and you push them down while I cup your breasts. It's been too fucking long. I dip down. I kiss, nibble, and suck. I'm driven by a forceful need. It's frenzied, and nowhere near enough, but we've always been good at taking what we're given.

"Fuck," I groan as you wrap your fingers around my cock. Shivers run through me. "Are you ready for me, baby?"

"Always," you whimper, and I help you pull off your jeans.

Against the wall, I thrust into you.

"Oh, God," you choke out against my shoulder.

I still for a second, feeling you pulse around me. It's hot, wet, and home.

Familiar, yet always exhilarating and new.

My lips are firmly attached to any part of your body that I can reach.

Same goes for you as I push hard.

I need it. You need it. As long as we're quiet.

Your arousal coats my erection, and we both watch as I slide in and out of you. Then we're back to kissing. Quiet moans. Breathless whispers.

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

"I love you," I repeat, panting against your neck.

Your legs are wrapped around my hips.

I pound into you relentlessly.

"I love you, too."

My tongue darts out to taste your skin. My lips follow, and I always need more of you. But soon, baby... Soon I will have it all.

"I promise you, Bella," I moan. Closer and closer...

"Yesss," you hiss, followed by fierce constricting... You're so fucking close.

My thoughts travel as my hand does, and close doesn't begin to describe it as I place my hand over your belly. Our child is in there, and I kiss you hard, deeply, passionately, silently conveying... everything.

You know, you always do, and you feel what I feel. You feel it all, and you start falling apart.

I squeeze my eyes shut.

My thrusts become irregular and even more urgent.

"*Fuck,*" I exhale shallowly, feeling everything inside me tense up before I climax. Surging, rushing. I come hard, feeling you squeeze the hell outta me, and it's always this way with us.

We'll have more soon.

**53.**

"I'll see you soon, sis," Kate says thickly, hugging Sophie.

I rub my eyes with the heels of my hands as I sit in the chair.

It's just a temporary goodbye.

*Man up, Cullen.*

I take deep breaths, blinking back tears. Then I walk over, joining Kate and Sophie by her bed. Because it's time to go. I can barely look at you, Bella... knowing that you're gonna be here alone for... I don't know how long. But at least... a few weeks. Most likely more. Through her stem cell treatment, as well as her first few cycles of chemo. But I'll be on the first flight if you need me. You know that. I've told you a million times since the day before yesterday.

"Be strong for us, Sophie," I whisper, dropping a kiss on her forehead.

"Can you promise me that?"

"I promise, Daddy," she whispers back, trying but failing to send me a wink. She's too cute for words. Everyone hears Sophie's whispers, and I stifle a smile when I hear chuckles behind me.

But we don't have to hide anymore. She's my girl.

"Good," I reply. I kiss her again, needing another Sophie-dose. Much like you and Kate, there's a distinct scent that makes you all... you. And I'm addicted. "Love you, baby," I murmur into her hair. "See you back in Chicago soon, okay?"

She nods, and her eyes glisten as she yawns. She's always tired.

She has to live.

With my heart stuck in my throat, I turn to you, and I'm met with another pair of watery eyes.

I wonder how much pain a man can take before he crumbles.

**54.**

"I love you." I cradle your face. I kiss your tear-strained cheeks. "I love you." Your nose and your mouth. "I love you."

You sniffle. "Love you, too." And you force down a sob as I hug you to my chest. "Christ, Edward, what if..."

"No," I say quietly but forcefully. "This will work, baby." You have to believe me.

You fist my shirt.

You look completely broken.

With your eyes squeezed shut, I can see that you're fighting another breakdown.

My insides churn, because I have to go.

*It's killing me, sweetheart.*

But you'll have Rose here. She's staying with you, and she's dying to have her go at Ben and his parents. Remember, the only hold they have is the money. And that hold is gone. There's nothing they can do now, and you know Ben won't touch you in a hospital. Rose will give them hell, I promise you. You two will stick together while Emmett and I get started back home.

"Tell me again, Bella," I plead hoarsely.

You do. You tell me through whimpers and quiet cries that you love me, that you believe me.

Then I leave half my heart behind as Emmett, Kate, and I leave Texas.

## **55.**

"Will you behave, ladies?" I ask with a tired smile.

Kate and Alice nod, but not before exchanging a look that has a father scared.

In this case: me.

I really, really don't wanna leave them alone on a Saturday night, but I'm needed at the diner. The first thing we did after returning to Chicago three days ago was to expand the hours. We're now open around the clock. We just don't have the employees for it, so I'm pitching in. This leaves Kate alone with her packing. Yes, it's time to pack up the house. Luckily, she has her friend with her. Alice is as troublesome as Kate is, so my worries aren't based on nothing. 'Cause they've reached *that* age. It's all about boys. And I know that Alice already has a boyfriend. Jasper, the kid who practically lives with the Brandons. His parents are far more concerned about alcohol. But that's another story, and I have too much shit on my plate to get involved. I'm just happy Alice's parents do.

"You'll find boxes in the living room," I tell Kate, still standing in the doorway to her room. "And money for pizza-"

"On the kitchen counter," she fills in. "I know, Dad. We'll be fine."

I say nothing for a moment. I'm worried about her. Since Texas, she's been different. Sad one second, pissed the next. I know it's not easy to be

a teenager, and I also know that she misses you like crazy. You've been the go-to girl for her. But it's worse now. Everything's been magnified.

"I love you," I say quietly.

She nods, standing in the middle of her room. "Love you, too," she mumbles, looking down at the floor.

I've never been so reluctant to walk out the door.

## **56.**

With the next couple of weeks, a new routine is created.

I get up at five for a quick run before I drive to work. After a couple of hours in my office, I take a shift in the kitchen with Diego. Then a shift alongside Bree. With Rose in Texas, we're swamped. Thankfully, Bree and Diego know our situation and help out as much as they can. Emmett does, too, and it turns out that he's good in the kitchen. He calls himself the Burger Flipper. I'd laugh if I was able.

Apart from flipping burgers, he's looking for a job in real estate here in Chicago. He's also dealing with the selling of my house.

The house that is currently full of boxes, which brings me to the next thing I have on my to-do list. After I come home, around ten PM, I take a few hours to pack. Soon, we're gonna take the essentials to Rose's apartment above the diner. The rest goes to storage. Well, there's some shit we're gonna sell. The Salvation Army will get their share, too.

Then, around midnight, I crash in my bed, usually after a conversation over the phone with Rose or you.

Guilt consumes me because Kate's asleep by the time I get home at night, and she doesn't get up until seven for school. But I'm already at work then.

I hate that there's only one of me.

## 57.

I'm incredibly relieved to hear that your morning sickness is over. I know it's been a lot for you. You assure me that everything is fine with the pregnancy, for which I'm glad. I just wish I could be there. But I can't be everywhere... as much as it kills me.

"How's Sophie?" I ask, cradling the phone between my cheek and shoulder. I'm not very good with food, so it's another night of mac and cheese. We're cutting down on pizza. It costs too much. Kate's not happy about it. She's not happy about a lot these days, so I'm glad that I was able to take tonight off work. I need to talk to her.

*"She's okay, considering,"* you answer thickly. *"She's responded well to the treatment so far, but she's so weak. Her immune system-"* You choke up.

I squeeze my eyes shut.

Deep breaths.

I change the subject before I break. "Anything about Ben and his parents?" All I know is that everything is out in the open. They know about our plan to take over, and there's nothing Ben's parents can do about it. The threat, really, is Ben. And he's more bark than bite. He curses up a storm before he's thrown out.

After checking the pasta, I pull out a couple of sodas along with some lettuce and cucumber. Vegetables are important, you tell me.

*"They're nothing we can't handle,"* you sigh heavily. *"Rose is having fun yelling at them when they try to argue."*

I crack a small smile. "I can imagine."

*What the...?* I frown as I turn in the direction of Kate's room. "Bella, can I call you back?"

*"Um, of course, baby."*

After ending my call with you, I turn off the stove before heading straight for Kate's room, and I hope to *God* that I'm wrong. But I know that I'm not. I can fucking smell it.

"Kate?" I call, giving her door a sharp knock.

*"Just a second!"*

Fuck that. I push the door open... just as she closes the window.

Her room reeks of cigarettes.

She's... she's thirteen... years old. Thirteen.

I've never felt like more of a failure.

**58.**

I just stare at her. In disbelief.

She looks scared, nervous... caught.

"Dad, it's not what you-"

I shake my head, cutting her off.

"Don't," I choke out. I swallow the lump in my throat.

I can't believe it.

My thirteen-year-old girl. Smoking cigarettes.

I'm not stupid, which probably doesn't work in my favor. Because if I were stupid, I wouldn't know what this is about. But I do, and I know that this

is a cry for attention. I know that I've fucked up royally. I know that I've neglected her. I know that I've failed.

Not wanting my daughter to see me fall apart, I leave her room, walking briskly to the bathroom next to my bedroom. Once inside, I lock the door before I sink down on the floor. My back against the door.

My eyes sting painfully.

I pull my knees up, resting my elbows on them as my fingers tug harshly at my hair.

It doesn't take long before I can't keep myself together anymore. Ugly sobs rip through my body, making me feel pathetic and weak.

This isn't how it's was supposed to be. We're supposed to be together. All of us. Now... now we're all scattered around the fucking country, and there's jack shit I can do about it. I can't take care of my own daughters. Not even the one who lives under my roof.

**59.**

*"Dad, please open the door!"*

"Not now, Kate!" I bark out hoarsely. Jesus fucking Christ, it's like opening the floodgates. I wipe at my cheeks, only to have another wave of tears running down a second later.

*"Daddy, please!"* she cries.

"Fuck," I whimper. I don't want her to see me this way. I don't. I don't. I don't. But I move away from the door, because hearing her cry is just like twisting the proverbial knife a little harder, a little deeper.

As soon as I've unlocked the door, Kate barges in, seeing me sitting on the floor.

I'm beyond exhausted, and when I see the tears streaming down her face, all I can do is motion for her to come to me, which she does.

"I'm sorry," she sobs, throwing her arms around my neck. "I'm so s-sorry, Daddy."

I can't speak. It's impossible, so I just hold her.

And I'm the one who's sorry.

I manage to tell her this as soon as I've calmed down. I tell her over and over how sorry I am.

I'll do better. I have to, for the sake of my family, for the sake of my heart, and for the sake of my sanity.

**60.**

"Do I have to go to school, Dad?" she yawns, sitting down on the couch next to me.

Ever since my breakdown in the bathroom four days ago, I've worked from home until Kate's left for school. It's just paperwork anyway, and there's nothing wrong with our living room for that. Plus, it means I get to see my girl a little bit more.

Putting my calculations aside, I lean back and drape an arm around her. "Pretty sure school's important, baby," I murmur, dropping a kiss on her temple. "But look at it this way, there's just a month left before school's out for the summer."

She grimaces, but says nothing.

For a while, at least.

Then she does, with her eyes on the coffee table. "What's all that?" She points at a particular stack of envelopes.

My turn to grimace, only I do it internally.

“Medical bills,” I respond quietly.

It’s official. Ben’s parents have backed off.

You called me yesterday and told me that they’ve even left Texas.

But for the medical bills to reach me this fast, Ben’s parents must’ve stopped paying as soon as you and Rose told them about our plan to do this without them. And this pile of bills was what welcomed me when I dropped off a few boxes at Rose’s place two days ago. It’s your official address now. Same goes for me and Kate.

“There are so many,” she whispers, looking troubled.

I exhale slowly, and it’s true. There are many. One bill for each treatment, each service, each fucking pill. It’s ridiculous. What they charge, even with insurance... Fuck, all the administrative work behind each goddamn invoice. Some shit is straight-out laughable. There’s one bill for a few fucking painkillers. Three hundred bucks. I haven’t even opened the ones for Sophie’s hospital stay. We’re talking thousands of dollars, especially since her insurance doesn’t cover the hospital she’s staying at. It wasn’t a problem for Ben’s parents, ‘cause they have the money. But we don’t, so we really need to get her back to Chicago as soon as possible.

We haven’t sold the house yet.

Fingers crossed for Emmett. He’s currently in Seattle. Two couples have moved out of two of the condos he owns, and there’s a potential buyer for one of them.

**61.**

“You need to shave, Dad,” Kate tells me as I approach her table.

"What a lovely greeting," I say dryly, dipping down to kiss her cheek. I'm glad to see her here. For the past couple of days, she's come to the diner straight from school, opting to do her homework here. "How was school?" I ask as I sit down across from her.

She replies while she digs through her backpack. "Same old, same old." And soon the table's covered with notepads and books. "How's work, Mr. Waiter?" She grins cheekily.

I shake my head in amusement. "Oh, it's just swell," I deadpan. She cracks up a little, and I give her a wink. "Are you hungry? I make a mean burger."

"Yes, please and thank you." She winks back.

As if on cue, Bree tells me I'm needed in the kitchen again.

I stand up. "No pickles, right?"

"You know me so well," she chuckles. "Can I have a Coke, too? Extra ice?"

"You got it," I say, ruffling her hair a little before turning to leave.

"Thanks. Oh, and Dad?"

"Hmm?" I look over my shoulder.

She hesitates, averting her eyes for a moment, which makes me close the distance between us again.

"What is it?" I question, squatting down next to her.

She sighs. "Um, I was thinking..." Much like you, Kate chews on her lip. But it's from you she gets it. "I can make cupcakes, you know," she mumbles. "And pies."

I chuckle... in surprise, I think. That was definitely not what I expected to hear. Not that I know what I expected.

"I know," I say slowly, not really knowing what she's getting at. "Your blueberry pie is my favorite, remember?"

That's actually very true. My daughter is kick-ass when it comes to baking.

"Right." She dips her chin. "Well, can't I make pies for the diner?"

**62.**

I stare at her blankly for a few seconds.

And then... "Could you hold that thought, baby?" I murmur. "I'm just gonna take care of a couple of orders, all right?"

She nods, and I drop a kiss on her forehead before I make my way back to the kitchen.

I work on autopilot, flipping burgers, frying bacon, preparing more vegetables. I check the fries, I load up another box of buns, I grab another pile of clean plates. I prepare orders. Pickles. Tomatoes. Salad. No pickles on that one. Extra cheese on another. The fries are done. More dressing. Mashed potatoes. I crack two eggs in a pan.

*Fuck.* She shouldn't have seen the bills. I shouldn't have had them there.

Now she's worried. That's why she wants to make pies. Fucking shit! My fist slams down on the counter.

Kate knows how tight it is with money. She shouldn't know. I'm not saying she should live in total darkness, thinking everything is perfect, but...

At the very least, she shouldn't worry. She shouldn't offer to... *work.*

She's just a kid.

"Edward?"

I look up to see Bree standing in the doorway. Concern.

"I'm fine," I lie. "Tables three and five are ready," I add, voice devoid of emotion.

After handing her the three plates, she leaves... but pauses before I can return to my hell.

"Diego will be here in a few minutes," she says softly.

I nod. Which means my first shift is almost over. But then I have another one where I work the fucking register while Bree works the floor.

People are getting off work, and the next couple of hours will be busy.

Good for business, of course. I'm just tired. Completely drained.

It's impossible to run a diner with only three people.

But I can't afford to hire.

At the same time, I can't have Bree and Diego working double shifts the way they do, and I sure as hell can't work around the motherfucking clock.

Christ, Rose better get back here soon. You and Sophie, too.

## **63.**

"One burger, no pickles," I say, placing the plate in front of Kate. "And one Coke, extra ice."

Diego shows up then, and after exchanging a nod in greeting, I sit down across from Kate again. Time for a five-minute break.

"Thanks, Dad."

"No problem." I sigh and close my eyes for a moment. Five minutes. Yeah, that'll get me well rested. Sure. "Wake me up in five," I joke, dragging a hand over my face.

"Funny," she drawls. "But I haven't forgotten, you know. You told me to hold the thought about pies, and guess what. I held the thought."

Damn.

Placing my right elbow at the table, I rest my chin in my palm. "I don't think it's a good idea, sweetheart," I sigh quietly, hoping she'll understand. My free hand reaches out the cover hers. "Not that I'm not thankful, because I am. But I don't want you to worry, okay?"

She bristles. "But I do worry, Dad. And I'm not talking about working like some fucking kid in China." I arch a brow in warning. "Fine," she huffs. "I'm not talking about working like some *effing* kid in China. Better?"

I'm too tired to argue.

Kate's on a roll. "I just don't see the harm in baking a damn- a dang pie every now and then. Maybe on the weekends. And you can sell it with coffee of whatever. Just like you do with the pies and cookies you order. It won't make millions, but it might bring in a few extra bucks, ya know?"

Deep breaths. I don't like it. The thought of... No. Just... no.

She narrows her eyes at me. "Is this about male pride?" My eyebrows shoot up. "Yeah, I've heard all about it. I may be young, but I'm not stupid. Just let me help, for crying out loud."

"You have a smart kid, Edward." And welcome to the show, Bree. Jesus, she just came outta nowhere. "You can think of ways to thank your daughter for being so considerate while you march your ass to your office, 'cause you have Emmett on the phone for ya."

Bree and Kate high-five each other, and I'm beginning to wonder who's boss around here.

"This conversation isn't over," I tell Kate. Then I make my way to my office, praying that Emmett has good news.

**64.**

"Lizzie's Diner, this is Edward Cullen speaking," I say into the receiver.

*"So formal,"* Emmett chuckles tiredly.

Yeah, we're all tired.

"Habit," I reply, leaning back in my chair. I roll my shoulders. "What's up?" I yawn. "Got any good news for us?"

*"I do, actually."*

I can practically hear the grin over the phone, and I'm suddenly very awake.

*"I have buyer for one of my condos, but what's even better is that I have a buyer for your house, too. That one will close sooner."*

Oh, thank God...

Tears well up in my eyes, and for the first time in... I don't know how long, it's all relief.

"Thank fuck," I breathe out, pressing my thumb and index finger against my eyes. Damn stinging. "You have no idea how good that sounds, Emmett."

*"I can only imagine,"* he says quietly. *"The thing is; it's a couple from Florida moving to Chicago 'cause of the husband's work. How soon can you move out?"*

I bark out a laugh. "Is yesterday good enough?" Fucking hell, this feels good. "No, but seriously. A day or two if I have to. Everything is pretty much packed, and I only have some painting to get done. That's it."

*"Good to hear. I'm on the next flight out, and then I'll meet the Newtons at your house tomorrow morning."*

Holy... something. "That's... fast. But how... I mean, they haven't even seen it yet. How can they already know that they want it?"

Am I getting my hopes up too fast again?

*Emmett's turn to laugh. "They arrived yesterday and found the ad I placed online. Apparently, they had been at a viewing at another house in your neighborhood, but they didn't get it. And now they're eager to find a house quick before returning to pack their shit in Florida. I'm already drawing up the papers."*

I can barely believe it. "Who the hell makes an offer on a house they haven't seen?"

*"It's not unheard of, especially considering how detailed the ad was. I know how to do my job, man." He snickers. "Plus, it helps that your house is in good shape. Oh, and the fact that they're in a rush to move."*

"Christ..." I'm still in disbelief.

*"Pretty much. Now, I spoke to Bella this morning. She told me the bills are starting to roll in."*

I sigh. "Yeah, you could say that."

"Well, you're the math whiz. The Newtons offered what you asked, and we should know within the next couple of days if the check clears, so..."

*"We're coming home, Edward-"*

"We sold the house-"

I suck in a breath.

I almost drop the phone.

"Did you just say..." I breathe heavily. "You... You're coming home, baby?"

Unable to stand up, I sink down on the couch in Rose's living room. Well... *our* living room. We moved out of the house yesterday, and after going back and forth for a while, we've decided that you and I will share the spare bedroom with Sophie. We'll put up dividers in the living room, which will give Kate some privacy. And Emmett will share Rose's bedroom with her. It's crowded, it's inconvenient, but... we'll be together, at least.

It's also temporary. We'll have to rearrange when the baby's born.

"Yeah," you chuckle through tears. My own tears start falling, too.

*"Sophie's just finished her first cycle of chemo, and... we've cleared everything between the hospitals and the insurance company. We'll be back in Chicago the day after tomorrow so that Sophie can start her radiation treatment, too."* You snuffle, and I can barely comprehend what you're saying. It feels like it's too good to be true. You're finally coming home, sweetheart. *"We're coming home, Edward,"* you repeat in a cry.

Home. You're gonna be here, right where you belong.

My head falls back against the couch. Relief surges through me.

"Fuck, I miss you, Bella," I croak. "Can't wait to see you."

*"Same here,"* you whimper as I wipe my cheeks. *"And... you sold the house?"*

My turn to chuckle through my tears. "Yeah. It all went off without a hitch, and..." Jesus, the past few days have been exhausting. "We're at Rose's now. I talked to her a few hours ago, and we went over everything." I wanted to talk to you then, but you were with Sophie. "I'm surprised she didn't tell you."

*"She's been busy,"* you chuckle. *"As soon as the doctor gave us the green light, Rose started organizing the flight home. I just got off the phone with the insurance company, and Sophie's transport has been cleared. They will cover it."*

Good. That's so good.

With the money from my house, we've been able to pay all the current bills, and we have a good buffer for the next round. Thankfully, it won't be as much now that Sophie's coming back to Chicago. The money will disappear quickly as it is, but hopefully it will last six months or so.

## **66.**

One house sold.

One condo sold.

One truck sold.

Emmett's good. He's also good with investing.

With you, Sophie, and Rose coming home tomorrow, Kate has decided that she's in charge of the apartment. Currently, she's upstairs cleaning and making sure everything's ready. She knows Sophie's going straight to the hospital, but like me, Kate needs something to do. She can't sit still and do nothing. In the meantime, Emmett's interviewing for a job across town. He knows real estate, and with the smile he had on his face this morning, I have a feeling he's gonna get it.

As usual, I'm at the diner. Thank fuck, Rose is coming tomorrow. Diego and Bree are in desperate need of a rest. Hell, so am I, but... I'll rest when I have you here.

And I will have you with me tomorrow, Bella.

It will be our family at the hospital. You, me, Kate, and Sophie.

We're also going to tell our girls about your pregnancy.

Rose knows, of course.

And I've told Emmett.

You're almost fifteen weeks pregnant...

There's no way I'm missing out on anything else.

**67.**

"Hold these," Kate gasps, thrusting the container into my hands. She made cupcakes.

"What-" But she's already running across the parking lot.

Looking up, I see the reason. Rose is standing outside the hospital, and Kate's running for her.

As I approach, I see exhaustion mixed with both sadness and joy in my sister's features.

With Kate attached to her, I skip the hug and drop a kiss on her forehead.

"Good to have you back, little sis," I murmur, squeezing her hand.

"Feels good to *be* back," she croaks. I wipe away her tears, hating seeing the girls in my life crying. "And you," she releases Kate to face her, "aren't you supposed to be in school, missy?"

Kate chuckles through her tears. "Dad let me skip today so we could come here."

"Okay," Rose whispers thickly, pulling her in for another hug. "God, I've missed you, Katie."

After a couple of minutes, Kate tells us she's gonna wait inside. She takes the cupcakes from me before heading in, and she knows that I need a minute or two to catch up with Rose.

"You wanted to talk?" I say as we sit down on a bench. As much as I'm aching to go upstairs, Rose had sounded rather urgent when she asked to speak to me.

"Yeah." She wipes her cheeks, taking a few calming breaths before facing me with a serious expression.

## **68.**

"Ben and his parents won't be a problem anymore," she tells me.

Then she pulls out her phone.

And there's a video. Of Ben... and he's completely hammered.

I recognize it. I can see that it was taken outside Sophie's hospital room in Texas. There's yelling... You're on the video, too, as you block Sophie's door. A couple of nurses are there, as well.

"I sent this video to his parents this morning," she explains, and my hands are shaking. This is what we've wanted for so long. "I told them that if Ben doesn't back off, I will make sure this video reaches their circle of prissy bitches and fat cats."

I can only hug her to me.

Over and over, I swallow my emotions.

This is something we've wanted to do before. To catch Ben doing something stupid wouldn't have been too hard, but it wouldn't lead us to anything good. Ben's parents would just use their money to threaten us. If we had tried to blackmail them in the past, they would've stopped paying the bills. But now... Christ, there's nothing they can do. For once, we actually have control of our own lives.

"Thank you," I say hoarsely into Rose's hair.

She snuffles. "Thank Bella. It was her idea."

"I'm thanking you *both* then," I tell her imploringly. "I hope you know how much you've done, sis. So, thank you." I wink. "Take some fucking credit."

And she finally smiles.

This is when Kate decides that we've talked for too long.

"Okay," Rose sighs, standing up as I do. "I'll see you at home later?"

I nod.

"Um, Edward..." She looks down for a moment, and when she looks up again, she smiles wearily. "Give Kate a warning before you enter Sophie's room."

My heart clenches.

"She's changed a lot in the past five weeks," she clarifies through a new round of tears, but I understood from the beginning. "She's fatigued and... she's lost a lot of weight."

Unable to speak, I give her a quick nod.

**69.**

Seeing you and Sophie again...

It's indescribable, sweetheart.

Both good and bad.

Rose wasn't kidding when she said that Sophie had changed. She's too thin, too pale... too breakable.

And you've changed, too.

While Kate and Sophie are on the hospital bed, hugging and whispering, I have you on my lap. In the chair next to the bed, I hold you, and... God, you've changed, baby. I see the good... the hope... the relief shining in your eyes, your miniscule smile, and I feel one particular change as I place my hand on your belly. It's small, but I feel it, sweetheart.

Unfortunately, there's bad, too. You're completely drained. Circles under your eyes, weariness, sadness, and grief.

You haven't had a good night's sleep in years, I know, but... it's been weeks since you were in Chicago, and every night in Texas, you stayed with Sophie.

Have you slept at all?

When you sigh against my neck, I hug you harder. The tears fall silently. I'd say on all of us. I see them on Kate, too.

We don't speak... you and I. There's nothing to say, anyway. Because we're not okay. So, there's no point in asking.

Though, there is one thing I can't tell you enough.

"I love you," I whisper.

You drop a soft kiss on the spot below my ear. "Love you, too, Edward."

Tilting our heads closer together, I kiss your lips softly.

I thread my fingers through your hair, needing to feel you... needing to make sure you're really home, maybe... and you are. Perhaps you have the same need to make sure as you brush your fingers over my jaw, my cheek... my neck. Foreheads connected, we keep kissing gently. It's... *unbelievably* comforting.

**70.**

"Mommy and Daddy look nervous," Sophie giggles sleepily.

Mommy and Daddy *are* nervous, Sophie.

"You're right, sis," Kate says, narrowing her eyes at me. She's being playful again. I love to see it. I also love to see my girls acting like the sisters they are. With Sophie snuggling in Kate's arms, you and I are at peace, Bella. I feel it. You feel it. But yeah... we're nervous.

Kate and I have spent the entire day here, and it's time to fess up before we go home. Unfortunately, we can't all stay the night. But we'll be back tomorrow morning, I promise. There's nothing keeping us away now.

"Okay... The thing is, girls," you say, and I squeeze your thigh in encouragement. "Before Texas... Daddy did something to me."

"Hey!" I exclaim. You little traitor!

"And what did *Daddy* do?" Kate asks amusingly.

I throw her a playful glare, but she just sticks her tongue out at me, which makes Sophie giggle again... so, I can't really reprimand Kate.

You're having fun with this, too, aren't you?

"Maybe I should push you off my lap," I grumble into your hair.

"You wouldn't," you chuckle, and you're right. I wouldn't. You smile at me... then you turn back to our girls. "Daddy put a baby in my belly."

I choke on... nothing, really.

**71.**

"Oh, Dad," Kate sighs. "You just couldn't keep it in your pants, could ya?"

My jaw drops.

How... she... I mean... My God!

"Katie, that wasn't wise," you tell her, but I can fucking see your smile, Bella. "To the world, you're a teenager, remember?" Kate grins and nods. "Right... Well, to Edward you're still five."

Yes. Pretty much.

She... and... knowing... right?

What I mean is... she shouldn't know about sex!

"You're five like me!" Sophie whispers in excitement.

"Yes," I say, agreeing with Sophie. "You're both five." I point a finger at them for good measure. "For the sake of my sanity, stay five."

"Uh-huh, back to the point," Kate laughs softly before turning to you. "You're pregnant?"

She doesn't say your name anymore, sweetheart.

She doesn't say Bella.

And I know why.

I think you do, too. Yeah, of course you know. You smile, and I know that you're going to talk to Kate soon. Much like I talked to Sophie about calling me Daddy, you're going to tell Kate that you want her to call you Mom.

Speaking of moms... You give me the mommy-look. Which means I'm up.

Fine.

"Yes, she's pregnant," I murmur, facing Kate and Sophie. "Are, uh..." I push down my nerves. "Are you okay with that?" Fuck, that sounded lame. Judging by Kate's laugh, Sophie's giggle, and your chuckle, I'd say we're all in agreement.

"I'm gonna have a little brother or sister?" Sophie asks, and I smile at her enthusiasm.

"We are, Soph," Kate corrects, grinning crookedly. "We are gonna have a little brother or sister."

I blink back tears.

"Baby brother," you tell us all of the sudden. "I have a feeling it's gonna be a boy."

I shake my head. "No way. It's another girl."

I'm sure of it.

"Can't you find out?" Kate smiles curiously. "Don't they have some kind of wand that shows? Or is it too soon? How pregnant-"

I cut her off. "All right. That's enough, Ms. Cullen." Fucking hell. She shouldn't be this aware, should she? Maybe I oughta go through her school books, see what they're teaching the kids nowadays. "You're five, remember? Go play with Polly Pocket."

"I love Polly Pocket," Sophie sighs softly.

"So does Katie," I say firmly.

**72.**

Leaning my elbows on my knees, I watch my three girls by Sophie's bed. Their hands are on your little baby bump. It's very little, but the girls see it and can't hide their excitement.

"I also think it's a girl," Sophie rasps softly.

I wink at her. She winks back.

Kate shakes her head. "No, I agree with... I think it's a boy."

Your watery eyes meet mine, and I see the question in them. You want to do it now, I can see it. And for some reason, you ask for permission. Don't you know how happy this makes me, sweetheart? Christ, there's no describing it. But if you want permission...

I give you a subtle nod, trying to hold back another round of tears. I've done enough crying for now. Emmett's gonna think I'm a woman.

"Katie, can I talk to you for a second?" you ask her, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear. Kate nods in confusion, and you grab her hand. "We can go outside."

Once you and Kate have stepped out, I move over to the bed.

"What're they gonna do, Daddy?" Sophie whispers tiredly. I kiss her hand, careful not to get too close to her IV. "S'not nice to have secrets."

I smile. "Didn't you and I have a secret not so long ago, baby?" Her eyes widen when she remembers, and I have to grin when I see the little frown on her face. I can practically read her mind. It's okay for her to have secrets, but it's so not the same for Kate. "Don't worry, princess," I chuckle. "It's not a secret."

"Then tell me, please?" She pouts and bats her lashes. That's just... mean.

I purse my lips for a moment. "Remember what our secret was about?"

She nods as I caress her cheek. "So, I could call you Daddy."

"And you know how much I love that," I murmur for no reason. But with Sophie's smile, there's suddenly reason. "Well, Mommy's talking about the same with Katie now." She furrows her brows. "She's asking Katie if she can be her Mommy, too."

And screw Emmett. I'll be a happy woman. Just let me cry, for... crying out loud.

After years of crying out of sadness, anger, and despair, it's about time tears of happiness fell.

"That's good," Sophie says firmly, and I agree.

We're finally together as the family we want to be.

### **73.**

Eight weeks pass and we find ourselves exhausted but happy in August.

We work hard.

You and Kate spend all your time at the hospital.

Sophie responds well to the radiation treatment, as well as the chemo. It's not easy to look past the side effects, but we try. The hair loss, the fatigue, the nausea, the muscle aches... It kills me whenever I go to the hospital, only to see my little girl vomiting and crying. And we don't ignore it, not in any way, but we do try to make things easier and better for her. I'd say Kate's the best sister Sophie could ever have; I don't know how many times you and I sit on the sidelines to watch Kate work her magic. She's amazing with Sophie, distracting her, playing with her, telling stories, bringing toys and photo albums from home...

"What are you thinking about?" you whisper.

I sigh in contentment, feeling your fingers in my hair. I'm sitting on the floor between your legs as you sit in a chair. This is heaven after a long day at the diner. And as I tilt my head to the side, I feel a nudge or two coming from our baby girl. Oh, I'm so fucking smug. Not to mention excited.

Sophie and I were right.

It's another girl we're having, and I couldn't be happier. I would've been just as happy about a boy, of course, but girls are my forte. I love and live for my girls.

"My family," I murmur.

You hum and drop a few kisses on the top of my head. "I love you."

"You say that lots and lots," Sophie comments, and I open my eyes to see her sitting on the bed, applying eye shadow to Kate. They're both so girly, it makes me chuckle. It's a good thing I can handle princesses, since I have another one on the way.

"You can't say it enough," I tell her softly.

## **74.**

In the middle of September, Ben's parents contact us.

To protect their image, they don't want people to know about Sophie. They don't want any trace of her. No link, no connection, no nothing. Now that they aren't in her life anymore, they want to wipe her away.

I contain my rage, because it would only get me arrested if I unleashed it.

They're cold and vicious when they tell us that they have told Ben to give up all his paternal rights.

Apparently, Ben didn't put up a fight.

But it works in our favor.

We want to put them in our past where they belong. And with them paying their way through the system of paperwork and signing, they don't just delete Sophie from their lives. They delete themselves from ours.

That's what matters, and I will make sure all my girls carry the same last name soon enough.

## **75.**

"Sorry I'm late," I sigh, entering Sophie's hospital room. "Traffic was a..." I glance over at Sophie, and I see that she's asleep. "A bitch," I finish, because it really was. People are shopping for Halloween, and it's insane out there.

I arrive just as the doctor leaves, but as I see your blinding smile, I barely acknowledge her before rushing over to your side. I can see it in your eyes. The doctor gave you good news, didn't she?

"Tell me," I breathe out, giving you a quick kiss before I pull you down in the chair.

"We're going from intravenous to injections next week," you tell me through tears, and I can barely believe it. God, this is what we've been hoping for. Not having to receive chemo through an IV will give Sophie more room, not to mention... Oh, shit. My eyes search yours, and you nod, silently answering my unspoken question. "Yes. She will be able to leave the hospital."

Unable to speak, I almost crush you in my hug.

"They will still need to monitor her closely," you cry quietly. "But she'll be home on weekends."

"Thank God," I whisper thickly, peppering your face with kisses. "You're coming home, baby. Fucking finally."

## **76.**

With the baby due in little over a month, Emmett and I find ourselves rearranging in the apartment the day before you and Sophie come home.

As much as we need to be close to both the baby and Sophie, Sophie also needs peace and quiet. So, much to the girls' excitement, we decide that they can share half the living room, because the baby will obviously share with you and me.

We move the dividers, making the living room area smaller... and Kate and Sophie's area larger. Then we place the bed we've bought for Sophie next to Kate's. We've also bought baby monitors so that we can hear Sophie from our room.

"Dude, can we talk for a moment?"

Well, thank fuck. Emmett's weird silence has put me on edge all day.

I'd be nervous as hell if I wasn't the one monitoring our money. But I know we're good for another six months, and there are still two condos, Emmett's apartment in Seattle, and the Swans' house to sell. And if things get really tight, there's also my car, and... the apartment we're living in. That's only a last resort, though, but if it came to that, we would sell this place and move into a rented apartment.

"Sure thing," I reply, using the sleeve on my t-shirt to wipe off some sweat. Moving is fucking exhausting. "Let's grab a beer, eh?"

With a nod, we head to the little kitchen, and as soon as we're seated at the table, he speaks.

"Yeah, I'm in love with your sister."

Good thing I hadn't taken a swig of my beer yet.

Being the big brother that I am, I go through the mandatory shock and rage, but... Well, I know this guy. He's the one making all of this real. Had it not been for him, I don't even wanna know where we would be now. Plus, I'm in love with *his* sister, so...

"Treat her right," I say simply but firmly.

"That's a given," he replies quietly.

Yeah, for men like us it's a given. But both you and my sister have gone through shit with motherfuckers who don't deserve to live. Emmett already knows all of this, though, so there's no reason to remind him. My sister's lucky to have him, I know that.

"It's, uh... mutual, then?" I guess, trying to come off as casual. I fail. There's only acceptance in me, but that doesn't mean I wanna discuss this. I mean... it's my sister.

He chuckles nervously. "I hope so. Nothing's happened yet, but..."

"Got it," I cough out. No need for details. But... while we're at it. "With that outta the way, I guess it's my turn."

He cocks a brow, and I clear my throat.

Here we go. "You're in love with my sister?" He nods once. "Yeah, well, I wanna marry yours."

The fucker smirks. "Like I didn't already know that." Then he turns serious, but only for a moment. "Treat her right."

"That's a given."

**77.**

I feel your forehead against my back, and I know that you're overwhelmed, sweetheart.

So am I.

We're finally home.

With Emmett and Rose cooking dinner in the kitchen, it's just the four of us in the living room.

"We gonna share our room, Katie!" Sophie whispers in excitement. If she weren't so weak, I know she'd be bouncing in my arms. Instead, she settles for tightening her hold on my neck. "We gonna share our room!"

They already knew, of course, but now we're actually here. The girls are excited to see it for themselves.

"Do you like it, honey?" I ask her softly, and she nods furiously. Kate joins me, and I secure Sophie on my hip before draping my free arm around Kate. "You know we'd give you more if we could, right?"

Kate shakes her head, smiling up at me. "This is great, Dad."

Yes and no. I agree because I know that Kate loves being close to Sophie, and she's amazing at making her little sister feel better. But I disagree because they deserve so much more than this. They deserve their own rooms. Instead, they have this. Half a living room. Kate's bed is next to the wall that separates the living room from your and my bedroom. Then we have two nightstands separating Kate's bed from Sophie's. The dividers that Emmett and I put up are on the other side of Sophie's bed. Last but not least, we have Kate's desk at the foot of her bed, and we've placed Sophie's toys in boxes under hers. It's far from enough, but I'm happy that we all see being together as our number one priority.

"Where are my dolls, Daddy?" Sophie asks softly.

"Under your bed," I answer, kissing her temple. "I'll show you."

Sitting down on the floor between their beds, I position Sophie on my lap. Then I pull out the boxes from under her bed. Being somewhat handy, I've attached wheels to the boxes, making it easier to pull them out.

"See this one?" I ask, tapping the lid of the first pink box. She nods, smiling. "This is full of dolls and clothes," I explain, showing her the label with "Dolls" attached on the side. Kate decorated the boxes a few days ago. Something called, um... scrapbooking or something. Each box is now covered with stickers, flowers, and rhinestones. "Then we have your princess stuff and makeup in this one," I say, tapping the next box. She giggles, eyes shining. "In the last box we have your coloring books, brushes, glitter glues, paints... you name it."

"Then you have your books and CDs over there," I add, pointing at the small shelf under her nightstand. "And as you can see, your stuffed animals are on the bed."

"I can have all my teddy bears when I sleep?" she asks hopefully.

I chuckle. "Yes."

"I love it, Daddy," she whispers, throwing her arms around me.

Oh, for the love of...

One might think I was the one who was pregnant.

"I'm glad, baby," I manage to choke out.

## **78.**

It doesn't take long before Sophie's too tired to stay awake. The excitement of the day has taken its toll, so you take her from my arms, deciding that she can rest in our bedroom for now.

It gives me the perfect opportunity to talk to Kate.

"I'll be right back," you murmur before I stand up from the floor. "In the meantime, you can talk to Katie, yeah?"

And I guess we're quite synched, aren't we?

"You read my mind." I wink.

When it's just me and Kate left in the girls' "room", I sit down on the edge of her bed. "C'mere, Ms. Cullen." I pat the spot next to me. She grins and plops down next to me. "Everything okay?"

Nodding slowly, it's obvious that she's thinking about her answer.

"Yeah," she finally says. "Considering." Yes, that's always there. The considering part. "But the room is great like I said... if that's what you meant."

I sigh. "It's not great, baby." I run a hand through my hair. "But it's just temporary..." In a way. We don't know how long it's going to be like this, but it's for more than a year. Probably two, so maybe that's not temporary enough for a teenager.

Teenager. But not thirteen. No, she's fourteen now. We celebrated her birthday last week, and it was hard for me to put that fourteenth candle on her cake, I gotta say.

"Stop beating yourself up, Dad," she chuckles knowingly, and I smile sheepishly. She can read me well. "I just want Soph to get better."

"Ah." I nod. "That's the reason I wanna talk to you." She tilts her head, eyeing me in curiosity. "You have to focus on yourself, too." Great, the Kate Cullen Eye-Roll. It's famous. "Stop doing that," I tell her seriously. "I'm not joking around here, Kate. As much as it infuriates you, you're still

a kid." She scowls at me. I raise a brow. "You are. You're fourteen years old, and I refuse to have my daughter grow up too soon."

"I'm fifteen soon," she mutters, looking down.

Grrr. "In a year," I retort, knowing very well that next year will come too fast. "Besides, at fifteen, you're still a child." Shit, I'm getting off track. "My point is... It's not all about Sophie." My voice softens, and I grab Kate's hand. "We're not three adults and one child. We're two adults and two children, okay? And... it's been a lot now... with Sophie."

"Dad--"

"I'm not done," I say softly as I squeeze her hand. "It's been a lot to deal with... now with Sophie; with her treatment, the hospital visits, getting her settled in and... everything." I release a breath. "We're all worried." She nods, looking down again. "But I'm worried about you, too, baby."

"Why?" she asks, facing me.

She's serious. She actually doesn't know why I worry.

**79.**

"Because I'm afraid you're gonna feel left out..." I trail off. And I'm not the only one worrying. You worry, too. Constantly. You've told me, for instance, that you hate seeing so little of Kate. The summer worked well, in a way, because Kate was with you and Sophie so often, but...

"I don't feel left out, Dad," she murmurs. "I promise. Maybe I did before, when Soph and Mom still were in Texas, and you worked so much..."

I kiss her hand, remembering those weeks.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, pulling her close to me. I don't know how many times I've apologized, or how many times Kate has told me to stop apologizing, but as a parent it's not easy to let go of something like that.

"It's better now, though," she says softly as I kiss the top of her head. "It was just the time in between. The time before we got everything settled, ya know? There will be more time now that we all live together."

I smile into her hair. "How'd you get so smart?"

"I'm not gonna be all cheesy and say that it's from you I get it." She huffs playfully. "I think it's a combo. Mom, from when she came into my life... Nana, 'cause of the genes we share, and... Aunt Rose, of course."

"Good thing I love you, kiddo," I chuckle.

She grins up at me. "Fine. You're smart, too."

Sighing *really* dramatically, I retrieve the little box I left under Kate's pillow earlier. "You know," I hold the gift up, "you're gonna think I'm *the* smartest person alive after this."

Her eyes light up. "You bought me a present?" Then she frowns. "But can we really afford-"

"That right there," I say abruptly, turning serious as hell. "Stop that, Kate. I swear to God..." I take a deep breath, calming my irritated ass down. "I don't wanna hear a single thing about money from you, are we clear?"

"Fine!" she groans in frustration. "I'm just worried, all right?"

"Don't be," I tell her simply, holding up the gift for her again. "Trust me, please."

In my periphery, I see you, sweetheart.

"Accept the gift like the kid you are," I say and kiss her temple.

"Quit calling me a kid like that," she mutters. But I see the smile when she takes the little box. "In some cultures, I'm ready for marriage-"

"Not in the American one," I cough out. Fuck other cultures.

I hear you then. A quiet chuckle.

Kate hears it, too, and soon you join us, taking a seat on the other side of Kate.

Behind Kate's back, we thread our fingers together before returning our attention to a girl who is now looking a little shocked.

'Cause she's opened her gift.

"Oh, my... Dad?"

"Hmm?" I grin.

"You... you..." She looks up at me. Then at you. Then at me again. "You're giving me an iPod?"

"Well, I know how much you love to listen to loud music, and that's gonna be hard now that you share with your sister," I murmur. "I figured you could use this."

"And I have this for you," you pipe in softly, presenting her with a slightly larger gift. "It goes with your dad's present."

With a wide smile, she tears open the giftwrapping.

And you're smiling, Bella. I love that.

"Oh, these are so cool!" Kate gasps, holding up the new headphones.

They're so pink... I'd say. But... Kate's a girl's girl. Pink iPod, pink headphones.

"Thank you, Mom," she whispers before throwing her arms around you. I push down my inner woman, 'cause she's one crying little bitch. But every time I hear her call you Mom... Yeah, that does it for me.

"Your welcome, sweetie," you murmur.

Then... fucking finally... it's my turn for a hug.

"Thank you so much, Dad." I kiss her cheek. "Love you."

"Love you, too, baby," I return softly. "And remember what we talked about, okay?"

She releases me, smirking. "Fine. I'll stay a child for a while longer."

"Oh, thank God," I sigh in relief.

## **80.**

Later that night, we all have dinner together in the kitchen.

All of us, around the kitchen table.

You have Sophie in your lap as we eat the tacos that Rose and Emmett have prepared. I'm sitting next to you, an arm draped on the back of Kate's chair. Rose blushes like a damn schoolgirl when Emmett leans in to whisper something a big brother doesn't wanna hear about. Kate and Sophie giggle when you mistakenly take the hot salsa instead of medium. And by the time you're gulping down ice water, your brother fills in with his own laughs. With a wink, I offer you some of my beer, knowing that I'm gonna receive a sexy glare... which I do. You're too cute for words when you try to keep that glare on your face. But it doesn't work. You're too happy to be mad, baby. I am, too, you know. Even though we have so much pain ahead of us, we can face it together now. In a way, that's like winning half the battle.

Then when Emmett accidentally spills the whole bottle of Tabasco on his food, he looks so torn. Like he can't decide whether to eat it or not. Like he's weighing the options. But do you know what I'm focusing on, Bella?

You.

Because for the first time ever, I hear you laugh.

Rose notices.

Kate, too.

Even Sophie.

We all notice it, sweetheart, and it makes me shiver.

I need to hear that beautiful sound often.

"You're laughing, Mommy," Sophie marvels.

A moment of emotional silence washes over the kitchen, but before our first dinner can get spoiled by seriousness, Sophie fixes it.

With a giggle. "Do it again, Mommy!"

We all sorta crack up at that.

## **81.**

For a long while, I never thought we'd be here. Together. Sharing a bedroom, sharing a bed.

You don't hear the words I whisper against your stomach, but you still know. You know that I'm promising the little angel in there that I will always be there, that I will always make sure we stay together. You know, sweetheart, because you promise me and our girls the same thing everyday.

"Edward," you whimper quietly, arching into me as I cover your body with mine. I wrap my lips around your nipple, moaning quietly at the feeling and taste of you. So damn addictive, so damn beautiful, so fucking mine.

As my mouth and tongue tease your sensitive breasts, I slip two fingers inside of you. Already so wet and ready for me, baby. I can't wait to have you, and you know this. God, how you know. I let out a low groan when you reach down and swipe your thumb over the head of my cock. I need

you, I hope you know. I hope you know that I have to take you tonight. I hope you want the same. But there's no reason for me to wonder, because I already know.

"I won't go slow, baby," I whisper in a voice full of need. Need to finally have you in a bed, need to finally have all of you, need to... need to claim. I won't apologize for it, either. You know how I am, don't you? And I know what you can handle.

"Please, Edward," you moan.

After thrusting my fingers into you once more, I pull them out to taste you.

That sight always makes you flush.

"I want you on your side, Bella," I command quietly.

When I'm positioned behind you, I pull your leg up slightly. You hold it there, and I coat my erection in your arousal, teasing us both for a moment. But we're not in the mood for teasing, are we?

"Now," you breathe out, pressing your delectable ass against my abdomen, and it's my turn to gladly obey you. I line myself up, and in one quick thrust, I fill your pussy.

"God," I grit out through clenched teeth. You envelop me so fucking hotly, so fucking wetly... "I'm staying inside of you, baby," I say... only half joking. "*Jesus*, I love your pussy..."

You moan and throw your head back, giving me access to kiss and taste your neck and throat. Which I do as I start moving in you. In and out, hard, deep, and slow. Slow to savor, hard because you have the same fucking need for more, and... deep because I can't get enough. We move together, and I look down to where we're joined, sure that I've never been this turned on before. To have you here, moaning and writhing...

pregnant with our child, and fuck, the way you look. My hand goes to your stomach, and I can already feel the tightening in my abdomen.

I almost lose it when you swivel your hips just as I reach your deepest spot.

"*Bella*," I moan, pushing harder. Dropping my forehead to your shoulder, I focus on feeling. My hand goes to your pussy, and I rub your clit between two fingers. Thrusts become harder, and we both speed up in our movements. "Oh, fuck." It's a whimper that escapes me, because I fucking see you, Bella. I watch you as you cup your luscious tits, as you pinch your nipples, as you play with yourself. My mouth waters and I start sucking on your neck. I can't tear my eyes away from you.

"Close," you breathe out, reaching back to twist my hair between your fingers. "Oh, yes..." I pull out slowly before sliding in quickly, burying myself to the hilt. I start to come undone. Now I just need you to do the same, so I redouble my efforts. "*Fuck*, Edward." There we go. Come on, baby.

"Let go, Bella," I grunt. In, out, I hear how wet you are as I push in... out... in... "Come for me."

I screw my eyes shut... My breaths come out in hot puffs against your skin. Closer. I press down on your clit, and I feel my body tensing. Thankfully, you clench down on me, signaling your own release. We let go, and you squeeze me so fucking hard that it feels like I'm seizing as my orgasm hits. Your breathy moans and my own strangled groans are all I hear when I come in one... two... three... four streams.

*Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

I'm almost trembling as I fall back on my pillow. It causes me to slip out of you, and I grimace while you whimper. Jesus Christ, still panting.

"Get over here, baby," I breathe out.

You hum when you drop your head on my chest.

This is how it's supposed to be.

I revel in the familiarity of your fingers drawing lazy circles on my chest.

But it's still new, because we share a home now. No more hiding.

"I love you," I whisper, placing my hand on your belly again. That bump is one hell of a magnet, you know. "You're so damn beautiful..."

You smile lazily, tilting your head up for a kiss that I'm happy to give you.

"Mmm, I love you, too," you sigh softly.

## **82.**

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of December, we find ourselves in a new part of the hospital.

It's the day we welcome Ava Elizabeth Cullen to the world.

You know that I can't love you more, right?

Maybe you didn't give me Kate, but you're still her mother. You're the mother of my three girls, and I know that nothing can top that. Nothing.

And if you love me, you won't tell Emmett that I almost passed out in the delivery room.

Thank you for slapping me, by the way. It brought me back.

Plus, you totally enjoyed it in your moment of excruciating pain.

I didn't enjoy that particular part, though... hence my nausea and... almost passing out. Well, the part when I saw the head... um, yeah. That was... ummph... Can't even find a word to describe how messed up that was, sweetheart. I mean, I was there when Kate was born, but... I never, um...

looked down, and... I still don't know how you survived that pain. But you did, and now you're sleeping in your hospital bed. Sophie is right next to you, all snuggled up in your arms, also asleep. She calls Ava her birthday present since Sophie turned six yesterday. To say that she's been excited all day would be the understatement of the year. That's why I'm not surprised to see her sleeping now. It doesn't take a lot for her to get tired, after all.

Kate's also excited... and is currently outside, calling all her friends.

And I'm sitting in the chair next to your bed, eyes on the little baby girl in my arms.

I breathe her in, already so incredibly in love with her.

### **83.**

I wake up in the middle of the night; the lamp on your side is lit, and I see you breastfeeding Ava. That's a sight I'll never tire of. I've watched you do your mommy-stuff for weeks now, and I'm absurdly addicted. Whether it's breastfeeding, bathing, or cuddling, I'm there to watch. If only shit didn't smell, I'd probably watch when you change her diapers, too, but... Yeah, I get enough when I'm the one changing.

But none of that is what woke me up now. It was the baby monitor.

"Do you mind helping her?" you whisper, and... I hate the sadness in your eyes, sweetheart.

"Of course not," I whisper back, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. "I'll be right back."

After dropping a kiss on your temple, I drag my exhausted ass outta bed before pulling on a pair of sweat pants.

Kate is asleep, but Sophie is not.

"Hey, baby," I murmur softly, placing my hand on her forehead. She doesn't feel feverish, thank God. "How are you feeling?"

"Not good," she whimpers, tears welling up in her eyes. "Gonna be sick, Daddy."

Having gone through this many times before, I know the drill. But that doesn't take away the pain. I pick her up, careful not to touch her stomach, and then I carry her into the bathroom.

It's the fucking chemo.

Both her treatments are thankfully doing more good than harm, but it's awful to see her suffer through the side effects. Her nausea is the worst, and she rarely sleeps a full night without getting sick. The only thing that's good is that we're home. It was after Christmas that her doctors gave her the green light to be home more often, and now she's only at the hospital two or three days a week. Those are the days they give her extra nutrition through an IV, as well as solid food. She's still too thin, which is a big concern.

While she throws up, I sit next to her, gently rubbing her back. I have her glass of water next to me, too, and she manages to drink a little before she's hit with another wave of nausea. It kills me, but there's no other option than to keep going, to keep fighting. She's the one living through it all, not me.

"Feel better?" I ask quietly, offering her more water. She nods a little before taking a sip or two. "Time for some crackers?"

"Yes, please," she croaks.

Once I've helped her rinse her mouth, I carry her to the kitchen where I set her down on the counter. This is a must for her. After being sick, she doesn't like being left alone, so she always stays by my side when I

prepare her midnight snack. Same goes for you, of course, when you're the one with her.

"Not so much cheese, Daddy," she tells me as I bring out the ingredients from the fridge.

I nod in understanding, but I won't take any less than I normally do. She needs it. Six to seven smaller meals a day, and lots of fluids.

Unfortunately, she only eats one or two of those meals without complaining. It's always too much of something. Her appetite is barely there, but we refuse to relent. She loves crackers, though, so we usually save them for the nights when we need things to go as smoothly as possible.

"Can you drink a smoothie, too, princess?" I ask. She doesn't have to, and they're not delicious, trust me, but they do have a purpose. We want her to drink at least two of them each day because they're rich in vitamins and fiber. However, she's already had two today, so I won't force her tonight.

"They taste like trees, Daddy," she whines, shaking her head.

That settles it. "Fine, but if you drink one tonight, you only have to drink one tomorrow." I have to give it a try.

"Two tomorrow." Stubborn. So stubborn. I hand her the plate of crackers with cream cheese on and ask her what she wants to drink. "Thank you. And, um... water, please. Oh, can I have some blueberries?"

I smile. Blueberries are good. I've learned a lot about nutrition, and I tend to think in numbers and stats. Blueberries: high in carbs, antioxidants, and Vitamin K.

"Absolutely," I reply with a nod. "With some ice cream?" I know she's torn now. Her throat is often sore, which means she likes ice cream a lot, but

she also thinks it's too "fatty". She barely likes any type of dairy products right now. The cream cheese on her crackers is probably the only thing she loves in that category. But we keep asking her, because no one is more eager to get more calories in her than you and I are.

"Ummm..." She rubs her stomach, thinking about her answer. My girl is damn smart, I gotta say. I love that she's listening to her body in cases like these, because the ice cream could very well work both ways now. While it gives her fat and calcium, it can also cause her more nausea, especially in the middle of the night. "No ice cream."

"Gotcha."

By the time I've grabbed some ice water and a handful of blueberries, she has eaten one of her four crackers. Far from optimal, so I hope the blueberries work.

"How's the tummy?" I murmur, kissing her on the forehead.

"Little better. I don't feel sick."

That's all that matters. "Wanna sleep with me and Mommy, or do you want me to carry you back to your bed?" I tuck a piece of hair behind her ear, loving that the silky locks feel slightly fuller nowadays. She never lost much of her hair, but it thinned out a lot. "If you sleep in our bed, we can put on a movie for you, but then you have to eat two more crackers."

I love that we have a little TV in our room, 'cause it's often used as a bargaining chip, and one of Sophie's favorite things to do is watch movies while she's cuddling with Ava.

"Is Ava in her crib?" she asks, popping a blueberry in her mouth.

"I don't know," I chuckle quietly. "Mommy was feeding her a little while ago, so maybe Ava's still in the bed with her."

She grins. "Then I wanna sleep with you."

Like I didn't already know that. It's all about Ava for Sophie and Kate.

"Promise to eat two more crackers then?" I ask.

She pouts. I arch a brow. She sighs. I grin. She nods. There we go.

Time to get some sleep, 'cause I have to get ready for work in three hours.

## **84.**

One day in late February, I take out an additional thousand dollars with my salary.

We deserve this, so I refuse to feel guilty.

All current bills have been paid, and I've waited long enough.

Kate's a bit surprised when she sees me waiting for her outside her school, but she catches on pretty quick. She already knows what I want, and she's been keeping quiet for quite a while.

"You're finally gonna propose, aren't you?" she asks, smiling hopefully as she reaches me. I don't move too close, knowing how un-cool it is for a teenager to be seen with her dad. Okay, not seen, but display of affection is a big no-no.

"I am, and now I need your help," I tell her, matching her crooked grin with my own. "Care to be your old man's shopping partner?"

She snorts. "Old man. You have a few months 'til you're thirty. Do you know that a few of my friends have the hots for you? So gross."

Don't really know how to respond to something that ludicrous, so I just don't.

Besides, I don't wanna think about fourteen or fifteen year olds having the "hots" for *anyone*, much less me. But my steps falter when it hits me.

This year... I'm turning thirty, which means... Kate's turning fifteen. And what did I do when I was fifteen?

"Shit," I whisper under my breath.

"What's wrong, Dad? I thought we were going ring shopping."

Yeah, in a minute. Holy fuck.

You gotta talk to her, Bella. I swear to God, if Kate comes home one day...

"Dad, you look a little pale."

Oh, I bet.

I mean, I won't ever regret having my daughter, even at that age, but it's not something I want for her.

"You can't date until you're twenty-five," I blurt out.

Kate eyes me like I've grown a second head, and I can't really blame her.

I sigh. "I was just thinking about..." I clear my throat. "You know... age."

Tilting her head, she studies me for a while. She's good at that.

"Ah." She nods. She can't possibly understand already, though, can she?

"You turn thirty this year, I turn fifteen, and when you were my age, you were thinking with the wrong part of your body."

It's official. My daughter is smarter than I am.

"Not wrong part... in that sense," I correct quietly. "One early mistake ended up giving me something I couldn't love more, you know that."

She grins. "Don't worry, Dad. Mom had the sex-talk with me a long, long time ago."

Then she walks.

I think I whimper.

"C'mon, Dad! Let's buy that ring!"

**85.**

"That won't work," I mutter, shaking my head. "Ava will grow out of her bracelet in no time. Same goes for Sophie."

Kate places her hands on her hips, and I wanna die.

After finding your ring, sweetheart, Kate and I agreed on finding something for the girls as well, but now I wanna crawl under the bed and hide. This shopping thing isn't for men.

"It'll work if you buy link bracelets," she tells me flatly. "Then you can just add links as they grow up."

Hmm. I s'pose.

"All right," I say slowly, running a hand through my hair. "And you said something about charms?"

She grins. "Yeah, it'll be perfect. Since there's a sapphire in Mom's ring – which is her birthstone – I was thinking you could add birthstones to our bracelets."

Uh... Right. Stones. Got it. "I don't understand. Whaddya mean about sapphires? That's Bella's...?"

I'm not completely oblivious – I hope – because I do know about birthstones. But I didn't know that sapphire was your birthstone. Kinda fitting, though, since I did choose a ring with a sapphire in it. But that was

just because I know that your favorite color is blue. Same goes for me, actually, and I know it's gonna look beautiful on you.

"Yes. Mom's birthstone is sapphire. Mine is topaz, and Sophie and Ava's December stone is actually also topaz. Only, theirs is *blue* topaz. But November just states topaz, so we can go for the same charm, really."

Headache. "Okay, so... three of those charms... with a topaz... thingy."

She rolls her eyes at me, and she's clearly amused.

I am not. I'm very confused.

"*Thingy?* It's a gemstone, Dad."

I frown. "I thought it was a birthstone."

She leaves me there.

## **86.**

By the time I catch up with Kate, she's already talking to a saleslady about three link bracelets in silver. And when I hear her saying something about topaz, I figure she's picked out three of those charms, too.

She obviously knows what she's talking about, so I stay on the sidelines and let my eyes wander a little.

That's when I see another set of charms. Perfect.

When I show them to Kate, she agrees with a blinding smile, so we add a second charm to each bracelet.

"Now what?" she asks when we exit the store.

This is where I breathe out in relief.

I'm picking up the ring in two days, and I have the girls' bracelets. I'm done.

Now I'm hungry. "McDonalds?"

"Sounds good. Maybe I can help you work on your proposal." She winks.

I snicker and drape my arm around her. "Thanks for the vote of confidence, baby," I murmur against her temple.

She laughs. "Can't help it! I'm just afraid you're gonna say something like... 'Woman, I love you. Now, lemme Cullenize you'."

I bark out a laugh at that, but then... hmm... *Cullenize*...

"Don't even think about it, Dad!" she shrieks.



87.

~\*Bella\*~

"Breakfast is ready!" I holler.

I smile to myself as I plate up the scrambled eggs, pancakes, and toast. I add a few muffins, too, 'cause Emmett's not home, which means he's not here to eat them all. Pretty sure he's smiling too, though, because I know how much he loves taking the first shift with Rose at the diner on Saturdays. I'm sure he eats more down there than he cooks, but... it's Emmett we're talking about. Much like you, he loves food.

"Do you need help with Ava, Edward?" I add, opening the fridge to grab the milk. A smoothie for Sophie, too.

"No, I've got her, Mom!" Kate responds from the living room.

Another smile. I doubt she knows how much I love that girl. I may be only eleven years older, but in a way it brings us even closer.

"Need help with Sophie, then?" I ask.

What I hear in return isn't a loud call or a yell. It's you, standing in the doorway to the kitchen like you often do when I cook. I just know, baby, even without turning around.

"No, I have her right here," you murmur.

Sophie's giggle follows, and I spin around to see her on your hip. God, how I love you all. After everything we've gone through, we're finally fighting our battles together. You're my hero, you know that?

And I love how we can just stand like this, grinning like fools.

Things are picking up, and we revel in it.

"All right, I'm starving," Kate says, entering the kitchen with Ava in her arms.

You wink at me, and soon we're all seated around the kitchen table.

Kate hands over Ava to you, and I make a plate for Sophie. If she prepares her own breakfast, she won't eat much.

I'm usually quiet when we eat together, because I never had this.

Now, I'm a happy spectator.

"Not another smoothie, Mommy," Sophie whines as I push her seat in.

"Soph," Kate whispers, sitting on the other side of her. They exchange some weird look, and all I know is that Sophie trades in her pout for a grin.

I shrug it off and grab a muffin for myself, and then I turn to face you.

"Want me to take her?" I gesture at Ava who is blissfully asleep with her beautiful face on your shoulder. "Might be easier for you to eat if you don't have her hogging you." I grin.

"Nope, I'm good," you say lightly.

Looking around, I wonder what's going on. Sophie can't stop giggling behind her hand, Kate's trying to hide a smile – and failing – and you... you have this odd look, baby. Sorta... secretive. But before I ask anything, my mind registers what I just caught a glance of on Sophie's hand. Or rather, around her wrist.

Then I see it on Kate, too.

"What's that?" I ask curiously. Obviously, it's a bracelet. But I've never seen it before.

"Oh, this?" she responds casually, holding her wrist up. "Dad gave it to me this morning." She reaches her hand out over the table, allowing me to look closer. "Cool, huh?"

I smile, inspecting the beautiful bracelet with two charms. A blue gemstone of some sort, and of course... the C. A charm, shaped like a padlock with the letter in the middle of it. C for Cullen.

"That's gorgeous, sweetie," I murmur. And I wonder why you're giving out presents without letting me know, Edward. 'Cause whenever I wanna give them something, you say no. You say that I already spoil our girls with baking and stuff like that. Which is all crap, 'cause Kate and I bake for the diner together. It has nothing to do with spoiling, so you better have one helluva excuse, Mr. Cullen.

"Ava has one, too," you say quietly, holding up her hand from your chest.

I see it. It's the same, only smaller. The blue gemstone and the C for Cullen.

Beautiful but... humph.

"Me too, Mommy!" Sophie giggles, and yeah, there's the same bracelet.

Though...

"Let me see," I say softly, wrapping my fingers around her wrist. I frown... because there's the same letter. But Sophie was never a Cheney. She's a Swan. So... why is there a C?

"S'my birthday rock!" she exclaims.

You and Kate laugh softly.

"You mean birthstone, princess," you murmur.

Kate chimes in. "Topaz – in general, I suppose – is my birthstone. And *blue* topaz is for December. So, we just went with blue for all of us. Which is good, 'cause blue is the theme," she chuckles.

I'm confused.

"They're lovely," I offer, dropping a kiss on Sophie's hand before I let her go. "And what's the occasion?" I ask, arching a brow at you.

You look casual. On the outside. But don't forget that I can read you, Edward, because I can, and I see that you're nervous.

"Well, I was buying something for you, and I thought I should get the girls something, as well." You glance over at Kate for some reason, and she nods... like she's assuring you... or maybe *reassuring*? "Right. I have something with your birthstone, too."

Without another word, you return Ava to Kate.

And you retrieve a small box from your pajama bottoms.

C... for *Cullen*.

I gasp quietly, covering my mouth with my hand as my eyes quickly flicker to Sophie's bracelet.

C for Cullen.

Through blurry vision, I find you again. Your smile is soft, your eyes are shining, and I'm pretty sure I know what's going on.

"Three Cullens and two Swans," you say softly. "As beautiful as that sounds... I speak for myself and Kate... and Ava," you grin boyishly, "when I say that five Cullens sounds better." The tears in my eyes roll down my cheeks, and without looking away from you, I grab Sophie's hand. I know that we both agree with you, Edward. "So... it would be our honor if you two carried our name, too. And... it would be my honor if you married me, sweetheart."

I sniffle and blink back tears. There's nothing stopping the smile taking over my face.

And there's *really* nothing stopping the tears either, especially when you open the box... and get down on one knee.

After releasing Sophie's hand, I turn in my seat to face you fully.

"Isabella Marie Swan, will you be my wife?" you ask, just above a whisper.

Yes.

"Yes," I breathe out. Yes. "Yes."

"Oh, thank God..." Was there really any doubt, baby? "You're gonna be my *wife*."

And the ring, you slide it onto my finger. It's so beautiful. White gold, and... I giggle through my tears like the love-struck girl that I am, because I see the sapphire. Surrounded by little diamonds, the sapphire... And it's my birthstone.

"Yay!" Sophie cheers. "Mommy loves you, Daddy!"

We all chuckle thickly. It's not a pretty sound, but who gives a shit?

And when you pepper kisses all over my face, I know that you've completed me. Fuck the past, because you're my future.

"I love you," I mumble against your lips.

"I love you, too," you sigh in contentment. "You have no idea how happy you've made me."

I could say the same.

I doubt you know, Edward.

I couldn't have done any of this without you. Same goes for Sophie, Kate, Rose, Em, even Ava. We're all in this together, playing big parts.

"Daddy's smiling sooo big," Sophie giggles.

You are, love. Sooo big... and I am, too.

"Oh, crap. I know that look. Don't say it, Dad," Kate warns, and I have no idea what she's on about now. But you seem to know, because your loving smile turns into the goofiest grin. "Don't say it!" she laughs.

"Say wha-"

You cut me off. "I have to, Kate," you chuckle. "It's priceless!"

Kate is very amused, so the glare she's trying to kill you with is all kinds of soft.

And you face me again, barely able to hold in your laughter.

"Baby," you snicker, "I'm gonna Cullenize you."

"Ugh, Dad!"

**88.**

*Complete remission.*

*Complete remission.*

*Complete remission.*

"Breathe, Bella," I whisper thickly as I cradle your face. I should follow my own advice, of course. But it's hard. Tears are streaming down our faces, and had it not been for the mile-wide smiles, one would think disaster had struck.

But it's the opposite.

We sit on Sophie's hospital bed... Me in the middle, you on one side and Kate on the other. Ava's oblivious as she sits on Kate's lap. The tears won't stop, and for once we don't try, either. They're tears of relief and happiness. After months and months...

Sophie's with Dr. Young, saying a temporary goodbye to the friends she's gained here. Because the next time we come here, it will be when she wants to visit them.

Or for a check-up.

But that's it. No more nights here. She will have weekly check-ups for a long time, but we're out of the woods. No more chemo, no more radiation. She finished her last cycle six weeks ago, and today...

Christ, the words still echo in my head.

Complete remission.

We've been growing more and more hopeful with each scan and each test result that have returned, but... to actually hear it now, to have it confirmed...

"She's gonna make it," you choke out.

You're shaking, and I tighten my arm around you. I do the same to Kate when she cries harder. It's so much relief.

"She's gonna make it, baby," I whimper.

Months of rehabilitation will follow.

And years of check-ups.

But she's gonna make it.

"Dada!"

Loosening my hold on you, I wipe my cheeks before Kate lets Ava bounce over to my lap. She's all smiles and giggles, which just makes the moment feel even lighter, better, more definite... in a way.

"Hey, baby," I breathe out. I sniffle and clear my throat. Sophie should be back any minute now, and we're gonna go out to celebrate. We have a lot to celebrate.

Sophie, fighting her cancer. And winning.

Rose and Em's engagement.

And we're gonna start planning our wedding, sweetheart. We both agreed... seven months ago when we got engaged, that we were going to wait to have the wedding until Sophie was better, and she is now. Thank God... she's finally okay. My shoulders sag with relief as I hug Ava to me.

Granted, with Sophie's aggressive cancer, it can take years before the doctors declare her cured, but... that doesn't matter right now. We will follow the doctor's orders religiously and go to each and every check-up, but we will also allow ourselves to believe that our little girl is finally okay.

Sophie won.

We *all* won.

**89.**

"Juice box?" I ask, positioning Ava on my hip.

I love tickling her. It makes her green eyes glisten. That's it, though, the green eyes. Everything else, she got from you. And she couldn't be more beautiful, I swear.

"Yes!" she squeals.

"Okay," I chuckle, walking toward the kitchen. "And I guess Uncle Emmett wants a beer?"

He hears me, of course. "No, thanks."

Whoa.

Yeah, my steps falter, and I turn around slowly.

"You heard me," he sighs heavily.

But... it's moving day. What the hell is moving day without beer?

Money is still tight, but we can finally afford to move. There's even a condo left that Emmett still rents out in Seattle. There's also your parents house in Forks, which is also rented out. So, bills get paid and there's no concern, but that doesn't mean we splurge. Check-ups, rehab, swimming lessons, counseling, parking at the hospital, and healthy foods aren't free.

Anyway. Money doesn't grow on trees, but like I said, it's time to move. Well, Emmett and Rose are moving to an apartment down the street. I'm staying put right here with my family, and we're actually very fine with that. It doesn't matter that you and I are gonna move out to the living room. Kate will have her own room – Rose and Em's old one – and Sophie will share with Ava. It will work just fine until the little ones are too old to share.

"Dude," I say.

He rolls his eyes. "Rosie says I'm not allowed to drink alcohol while she's pregnant, 'cause it's not fair to her since she can't have any."

Yep. That sounds like my sister.

"I can take Emmett's beer," Kate says casually. She's sitting on the living room floor, wrapping old newspaper around photo frames and knick-knacks, and I could kill her right now. Kill her dead. I honestly don't know why she's so eager to grow up. When she turned fifteen in November last year, I thought I was gonna have a fucking heart attack. Why can't she just stay five? Like Sophie. On paper, she might be seven, but... Nah, she's five.

There's no way I'm even responding to Kate's stupid, *stupid* comment, so I march my ass to the kitchen again.

One beer for me.

One juice box for Ava.

And you, my beautiful Bella, are sitting at the kitchen table with Sophie, looking awfully amused. I'm sure you heard Kate. "I don't wanna hear a word, wifey," I warn. Ava plants a sloppy one on my cheek for the juice box, so my mood sorta shifts, but I'm still gonna stand firm in my own home. Christ, it's just me now. Me and four girls. Awesome.

Knowing my sister, Emmett's gonna have his hands full, too. Oh, yeah, they're also having a girl. So... two men and... *six* girls.

Gotta love it, eh?

## **Epilogue**

**90.**

You think this is hysterical.

Rose feels the same.

Me... not so much. Thankfully, I don't have to put on a brave face, 'cause as it turns out, Emmett is as emotional as I am. When his little Grace was born, he also turned into a woman. So, fine. Call us pussies if you want, but this is a day to mourn.

I'm very proud, mind you, but... I'm losing her.

Her. Right up there, on the podium, accepting her diploma.

Kate's high school graduation.

You and my sister are beaming with pride, but you still have time to giggle at Emmett and me.

Not cool.

After the summer, she's... she's...

"Oh, shit," I breathe out, blinking back tears.

"Bad word, Dad," Sophie sings.

"Not say shit, Daddy," Ava scolds.

Yeah, yeah.

But Kate's *leaving* us.

College. Full scholarship. Fucking New York. Fancy-schmancy Ivy League. Columbia.

I can't believe how torn I am. Proud and devastated all in the same package.

"Here," Emmett croaks, handing me another tissue.

Our wives shake their heads at us.

Mean women.

Don't they understand it's the end of an era?

Come fall, it won't be the five of us, sweetheart. Kate will be in New York, and it will just be you, me, Sophie, and Ava. And you know what? They're gonna grow up, too! Just look at Sophie. She's nine going on nineteen. A ball of life and fire. Smart. Funny. *Cured*. Happy. Amazing. Soon she'll leave us, too. Then my little Ava. She's three going on thirteen. Which means she'll be a teenager soon. She's my little lady, Ava. An old soul. Wise beyond her years, but still a little jokester.

Maybe we should have more kids, baby. We're still young, after all, and I'm not ready to let go. You're only twenty-nine... well, thirty soon, and I'm almost thirty-three. Though, around you, I'm seventeen.

So, whaddya say, I? Can I knock you up? I can beg.

Oh, here she comes.

"Katie!" you exclaim. "You were so freaking beautiful up there, sweetie. I'm so proud, you know that, right?"

Me... I'm just bawling like a kid. Good thing Emmett's doing the same thing.

"Oh, Dad," Kate sighs softly. "Crying again? You know I love you, but you have got to stop. You too, Em."

"I got something in my eye!" Emmett says defensively... lying through his teeth. His eyes are as bloodshot as mine, for fuck's sake.

After hugging Kate for what feels like only a second, she's whisked away by her friends for a while.

So, I turn to Ava.

I sniffle. "Never grow up, all right? Can you promise Daddy?"

She tilts her head. "No, I wants to be a big girl, Daddy!"

It's official. The world hates me.

What happened to staying *together*?